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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 February 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I will make a few remarks before proceedings commence. It is two years since our former Principal Deputy Speaker, Mr Stalford, passed away. He has been heavy on my mind over the past two weeks, but, today in particular, our thoughts are with the Stalford family.

I will make a few brief remarks. Upon my election, I emphasised how important it was to have the Assembly back, given the work that has to be done. In my role, that means upholding the ability of the Assembly to carry out effective scrutiny. Today, therefore, I will record a few points. First, while we understand the context in which the Budget Bill is going through the House this week, I have underlined to the Minister of Finance the fact that, in future, the Assembly will expect to have proper time to consider such legislation.

Secondly, a number of Members have asked when private Members' Bills can be submitted. I intend to ensure that Members can submit proposals for private Members' Bills. However, Members will have noted the scale, level and pace at which private Members' Bills went through the previous Assembly. That did not always create the right conditions for effective scrutiny. Therefore, I will take some time to review the arrangements to ensure that, as much as possible, they encourage robust, well-developed legislation.

Finally, I am pleased that Question Time will begin today, at an earlier point following the appointment of Ministers than is normal. Question Time provides an opportunity for the Assembly to scrutinise the Executive and hold Ministers to account. I will encourage Ministers and departmental officials not to rely on routinely long answers. It is my hope that Question Time will be more interactive and free-flowing, so that more questions can be tabled by Members and more questions can be answered. I will rule on preambles, if they become the course of Ministers' responses,

because we do not need long preambles; we need answers to questions. I will monitor that over the next few weeks. There will be a provisional period, but, once that time is completed, I will clamp down on any long-winded answers.

Members' Statements

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

Casement Park

Mr Baker: I welcome the fantastic news that enabling work will begin on Casement Park this week. It is a positive step towards developing a first-class, state-of-the-art sporting facility for Ulster Gaels. Casement Park will be a real economic driver for West Belfast, creating jobs and hosting thousands of people who visit the city to attend games. The news has created a real buzz in my house. My children have played Gaelic football, hurling and camogie with O'Donovan Rossa GAC — the best club in Belfast, I should add — since baby fundamentals. They have never known Casement Park, and, like all young Gaels, they cannot wait not only to watch games but to participate in playing and winning championships for their respective clubs in Casement. To think that a major soccer tournament will be hosted in Casement in just a few years is beyond many people's wildest dreams.

I was lucky to experience a great Irish soccer moment in 2016, when I was in France to witness Ireland beat Italy 1-0 and progress to the next stage. It was a Robbie Brady 85th-minute goal. The atmosphere not just inside but outside the stadium made it special, and we all have that to look forward to. It is important that the Irish and British Governments and the Executive continue to work with football associations and the GAA to get this flagship project over the line quickly and on time.

Car and Home Insurance

Mr McCrossan: The soaring cost of home and car insurance is a critical issue that is having a significant impact on families in West Tyrone and across Northern Ireland. I am sure that many Members have heard from outraged constituents, particularly those who have not made a previous claim but whose insurance is going through the roof. Recent reports have shown a disturbing trend of insurance premiums skyrocketing, placing an immense financial burden on many households. Many

families struggle to comprehend the substantial increases that they face in their insurance costs. Some have seen their premiums rise by hundreds of pounds compared with the previous year. The cost-of-living crisis and inflation are already squeezing wallets, and such exorbitant insurance hikes only add to the financial strain experienced by ordinary people in our constituencies. In my role as an advocate for West Tyrone, I have witnessed at first hand the distress and frustration of individuals who are grappling with such unjustifiable cost escalations.

While energy companies and corporations enjoy significant profits, the ordinary citizens whom we represent bear the brunt of the escalating costs of insurance premiums, heating bills and groceries. It is imperative that the Economy Minister, the Finance Minister and the Executive intervene to ensure that insurance customers are not unfairly exploited. I urge those who face difficulties in meeting escalating insurance costs to be informed about their rights and to explore the options to secure the best possible deal. It is crucial to remember that insurance companies are bound by regulations that prevent them from charging existing customers more than new ones. There are also provisions in place to assist those who are struggling to cope with the financial burden of insurance costs.

The stark reality is that the rising costs, particularly of car and home insurance, are outpacing the average inflation rate in the UK. The motor insurance annual inflation rate has soared to 43.1%. That is shocking exploitation. It is evident that urgent action is needed to address the disparity. I will read some figures: AIG paid out its highest dividend since 2007 this year; Allianz's operating profit jumped by 5.7% to €14.2 billion; Aviva made £715 million, up 8% on the previous year; AXA was up 23%; NFU Mutual made £220 million in profit; QBE made \$475 million; RSA made £55 million; and Zurich made £1.76 billion on the backs of ordinary people. Those companies are raising our insurance costs and making huge profits, and they cannot explain it. The only response that I have had from them, which is shocking, is that their costs have increased. They cannot explain or justify it. We must ensure that the consumer is protected and that those costs are questioned. We have a responsibility to do so.

World Aquatics Championships: Daniel Wiffen

Mr Butler: I associate myself with the thoughts that you are passing on to the Stalford family,

Mr Speaker. Christopher was indeed a fantastic parliamentarian, but I know that as a father — a dad — and a husband he will also be sadly missed.

Today, we have some good news. Many Members will have been made aware of the great success at the weekend of our own Daniel Wiffen from Magheralin. He achieved a quite astounding feat over the past six days by winning two gold medals, in the freestyle swimming 800 metres and 1,500 metres. I am sure that every Member will want to wish him great success in his future endeavours, whether in the Commonwealth Games or the Olympic Games.

I was in the Lisburn LeisurePlex yesterday. I went to a birthday party for a six-year-old. It was a bit crazy — there were a lot of cars — but the crowds that were there yesterday were the families, friends and supporters of the many young people who were there as part of a swimming gala. What struck me was not just the discipline that they have, like Daniel has had to attain world champion status, but the back-room team of mums and dads, carers, trainers, coaches and others who are there to support and champion those young people to unparalleled levels of success. The commitment that Daniel had to put in over the years probably manifested in really early morning starts. Some young people go to our swimming pools at 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock in the morning and perhaps for evening swims and, almost always, five to six times a week. Success does not come without cost. It comes with commitment and support.

I thank those who have helped Daniel succeed. He started off, as a young person, in Lisburn LeisurePlex, probably with the little ducks and swans, as they are called, and moved on to Lurgan. He then came back to Lisburn City Swimming Club in his teens. He had to manage his education journey alongside his commitment to swimming. We can resolutely support and congratulate Daniel Wiffen and the team on the success that they have achieved in Doha and can look forward to future success for Swim Ireland.

Sport: Funding

Mr Honeyford: I also congratulate Daniel Wiffen, the new world champion. Not only did he become the champion at 800 metres last week but, yesterday, he won the 1,500 metres, which is an incredible achievement. Daniel is from Magheralin, which comes into Lagan

Valley. He started in Lisburn, and he is now at university in Loughborough.

Daniel is an example of our grassroots sport, and I call on the Minister for Communities to increase the funding that is delivered to grassroots sport across the board and to take the first opportunity that he has to speak with the Irish Government and the Shared Island unit. Most of our sports — nearly all of them, in fact — are constituted on an all-island basis. Daniel is from Magheralin and is representing Team Ireland and Swim Ireland in Doha at the World Aquatics Championships. The funding that we get for our sports clubs at grassroots level is less than that received across this island. We need to balance that up, and I ask the Minister to do that.

I congratulate Daniel, his family and all the coaches and staff around him who have delivered this achievement.

Harold Ennis

Mr Nesbitt: On Friday morning, I received the sad and unwelcome news of the passing of Harold Ennis, who was without doubt one of the brightest and most successful businesspeople that Northern Ireland has ever seen. Harold declared his intentions early, finishing first across the whole island in his final exams for the Institute of Chartered Accountants. He then went on to become a chief executive for the first time before the age of 30 and followed that by masterminding the incredible success story that was Boxmore International.

Harold was headhunted in the mid-1970s to revive the fortunes of what was then the Lurgan Boxmaking Company Ltd, which was heading for receivership. He turned it around in rapid order. By 1983, he had orchestrated a buyout. By the end of the decade, it was a public company, soon to become a darling of the stock exchange and, indeed, the financial media. In 2001, 25 years after Harold began, the company was one of international renown, valued at almost £200 million.

I believe that that is closer to £350 million in today's money.

12.15 pm

Harold gave back to society. He served on the InterTradeIreland board and what was then the Industrial Development Board. He was also a chair of the CBI in Northern Ireland for a couple of years, and many charities — far too many to mention — profited from his input and intellect.

Harold would have been 94 this Thursday. I do not buy into the notion that he had a good innings, because I think that the longer that somebody of that brilliance is around, the harder it can become to move on without them. I offer my condolences to his family, particularly to his children: Mark, Susan, Heather, John and Richard. Harold was always very encouraging to me when I worked in the private sector. He was kind, generous and keen to promote and mentor the next generation. Above all, he was a fantastic critical friend. I last saw him at Christmastime, and he was physically extremely frail, but, mentally, he was still much sharper than I can ever hope to be.

I finish by quoting from the citation from when he was awarded an honorary degree by Queen's University Belfast in 1996:

"Harold has a razor-sharp intellect, which enables him to ask the single most important question on any topic".

That was Dr Harold Alexander Ennis OBE: a great man with a great mind who will be greatly missed.

Sidney McIlldoon

Mr Buckley: I join the tributes that have been paid to our late colleague Christopher Stalford on the two-year anniversary of his tragic passing. Christopher was a great character in the House. He meant a lot to many people here, particularly to you, Mr Speaker, during your time of knowing him in politics. I know that a family is still hurting, and our thoughts are primarily with them at this time.

Our thoughts are also with the late Sidney McIlldoon, who passed away in my constituency last week. Sidney was well known throughout Northern Ireland, Ireland and, indeed, across the world in his role as a former grand lecturer of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. Tragically, he was killed in a car accident last week. Our thoughts are primarily with his wife, Irene, who remains in a critical condition in hospital at present.

At the funeral yesterday, it was testimony to the character of the man that hundreds turned out from right across Northern Ireland and further afield to pay tribute to a man who gave so much to the loyal orders and to Northern Ireland's society. On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I put on record our deep appreciation for all that Sidney did. Our thoughts and best wishes are with his wife, Irene, as she continues to recover at this tragic time.

Measles: Rise in Cases

Mr Donnelly: I rise to highlight the concerning rise in cases of measles across Europe and in Britain and the Republic. The deputy chief medical officer, Dr Lourda Geoghegan, said that it is now likely that new cases will be seen in Northern Ireland. While there have been no confirmed cases of measles in Northern Ireland since 2017, it is only a matter of time before the illness is reported here. The Department of Health and the Public Health Agency are monitoring the situation closely.

Measles is not merely a minor childhood illness that causes a rash; it is a potentially dangerous condition that can have serious complications, such as pneumonia, meningitis, blindness and seizures. It can even be fatal. Just last Thursday, it was reported that an adult who had contracted measles died in a hospital in the Republic.

Almost 89% of children in Northern Ireland have received their first MMR jab, but fewer return for the second dose, with only 85% of children fully vaccinated by the time that they are five years old. The World Health Organization recommends a 95% vaccination rate to prevent outbreaks, and we are currently below that. Dr Hans Kluge — I hope that my pronunciation is correct — is a regional director of the World Health Organization. In December, he said:

"Vaccination is the only way to protect children from this potentially dangerous disease."

The Public Health Agency vaccination catch-up campaign is under way across Northern Ireland. First and second doses of the MMR vaccine will now be offered to anyone between the ages of 12 months and 25 years old who missed getting the vaccinations the first time round.

The vaccine is proven to be safe and has been used since the early 1980s. The times and locations of the clinics can be found on the trust websites.

Vaccination saves lives, and I hope that all Members across the Chamber will join me in encouraging people across Northern Ireland to make sure that they and their children are fully protected against this dangerous disease.

Irish Passports

Mr McGuigan: More than a million Irish passports — renewals and first-time applications — were issued last year.

Interestingly, five of the top seven counties from where first-time adult applications were made in 2023 were in the North. Only Dublin had a higher number of new applications for passports than were made from counties Down and Antrim. Those statistics, in my opinion, make a strong argument for a passport office to be located in the North, and I commend my colleague Niall Ó Donnghaile, who has been campaigning on the issue for years and whose online petition has, by this stage, received close to 30,000 signatures.

Trying to resolve passport queries on behalf of my constituents is one of the most common issues that my office and I deal with, and that is particularly the case between now and the busy summer months. As in past years, I have no doubt that I will, unfortunately, encounter families and individuals who thought that they had applied for their passport in good time but have become worried that their holiday plans will be disrupted as their departure date looms and no passport has arrived.

I should caveat my remarks by saying that, for the vast majority of people, applying for an Irish passport is straightforward and speedy, but there is no reason why that should not be the case for all applicants. On occasions, if issues arise, turnaround times for first-time adult and child passport applications can be slow. The introduction of the hub, which now allows applicants to speak to someone by phone or online, is a welcome improvement, as was extending the dedicated elected representatives' Oireachtas hub to allow MLAs to check the status of applications. Those are welcome improvements to the system, but, on occasions, constituents still have cause, in cases of urgency, to travel to Dublin to seek appointments, to provide additional information, to speak in person to Passport Office staff or to collect passports in advance of their travel. There should be a passport office located in the North to make that process simpler, and I urge the Taoiseach and Tánaiste to look seriously at that issue.

In conclusion, I urge and encourage anyone who is thinking of travelling abroad this year to check the validity of their passport, and I encourage people who are making first-time adult or child passport applications to apply well in advance of their trip.

Deputy Chief Constable Mark Hamilton

Mr Allister: I associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, and those of others on

the second anniversary of the passing of Christopher Stalford.

I want to raise the issue of the privileged treatment afforded to Deputy Chief Constable Mark Hamilton, which is in striking contrast to how he treated two junior officers under his disciplinary process. Of course, the High Court has ruled that the disciplinary process that he oversaw was unlawful, and the court delivered that judgement with scathing criticism of the processes. Unsurprisingly, the Police Federation, on behalf of rank-and-file members, passed a vote of no confidence in Mr Hamilton, who then went on the sick. The Policing Board, which failed to take any disciplinary action and failed to hold Mr Hamilton to any accountability, has now approved his secondment — his cosy, enriching secondment — to the Department of Justice. It is a vivid illustration of a two-tier approach: junior officers are relentlessly pursued, even unlawfully, as in this case, and the perpetrator is validated, rewarded and accommodated with a lucrative move to the Department of Justice. What a farce.

There was no follow-up investigation of Mr Hamilton's conduct, and no accountability was required by the Policing Board.

Of course, we have a parallel, to some extent, in the Police Ombudsman's office itself, where the Police Ombudsman continues to preside over cases against PSNI officers while she has a relevant investigation proceeding, which seems to have been quietly forgotten, into events at her home. The question is this: why is there that two-tier approach? Why is there a bye ball and reward for the high and mighty, and, for the lowly officer, there is total pursuit, even when that is unlawful pursuit?

Mr Speaker: No further Members have risen in their places, so we will move on to the next item of business.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Ms Claire Sugden be appointed as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr McGrath.]

Resolved:

That Ms Cara Hunter replace Mr Mark H Durkan as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr McGrath.]

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: First Stage

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA 01/22-27], which is a Bill to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31 March 2024 and 2025 (including, for the year ending 31 March 2024, income); to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of those years; to authorise the use of those sums for specified purposes; and to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of those sums.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be available in Members' pigeonholes presently.

Members may take their ease momentarily as we change the top Table before the next item of business.

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

Ministerial Statement

Economic Vision

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Good afternoon, everybody. I have received notice from the Minister for the Economy that he wishes to make a statement. I remind the Assembly of the convention that Members who wish to ask a question should be in the Chamber to hear the Minister's statement in its entirety. Before I call the Minister, I also remind Members that they must be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed.

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): In setting out my approach to the economy, it is important to be honest about the challenges that we face. The problems of our low employment rate, low productivity, low wages and severe regional imbalances have deep roots, but they can be overcome. Many of the key levers needed to tackle those issues, including the regulation of financial services, trade policy, monetary policy and fiscal policy, are reserved to London. However, devolution provides significant control over business supports, skills, innovation policy and employment law.

As a small region, we are well placed to tailor support to local industries through partnership and co-design. In addition, as a result of the Windsor framework, we alone can export goods to the British and EU markets without the frictions and paperwork that others now endure. The Windsor framework also protects the all-Ireland economy, which has tremendous unrealised potential, so there are opportunities for change. In order to use our limited resources and powers effectively, strategic focus is critical. I am setting four key objectives as part of a new economic mission.

12.30 pm

'New Decade, New Approach' recognised that good jobs, where workers have a voice and that provide a level of autonomy, a decent income, security of tenure, satisfying work in the right quantities and decent working conditions, should be integral to public policy. Accordingly, one objective is to increase the proportion of working-age people in good jobs. It is not acceptable that being in work does not guarantee a reasonable standard of living. That is particularly the case for women and people with disabilities, who disproportionately make

up the low-paid. We can increase the number of people working in good jobs by investing in affordable childcare and fair pay for childcare workers; creating more and better paid apprenticeships and skills academies; replacing zero-hour contracts with contracts that provide flexibility and protect workers' rights; strengthening the role of trade unions, particularly in the low-paying sectors; altering our economic structure by supporting industries that provide good jobs; harnessing the unrealised potential of the social economy; and improving careers advice, including in schools, so that people are fully informed about the opportunities available to them.

Another objective is to promote regional balance. Everyone, no matter where they live, should have the same opportunity to earn a living. A number of areas suffer from economic disadvantage. The north-west, in particular, has long had a low level of employment despite its huge potential for growth. We can create a more regionally balanced economy by setting local economic targets and funding local economic strategies that are designed in partnership with councils and local enterprise agencies and are based on local strengths and potential; offering greater financial incentives for inward investors and indigenous companies that are expanding to locate in areas that are underdeveloped; developing industries with a strong subregional presence, such as tourism, hospitality and manufacturing; building the portfolio of land and property for business development in disadvantaged areas; and driving forward the delivery of projects that improve regional balance, such as the expansion of the Magee campus and city and growth deal projects.

A third objective is to raise productivity, because productivity is a fundamental driver of overall living standards. Output per worker here is 11% lower than in Britain and, according to a recent study by the Economic and Social Research Institute, almost 40% lower than in the South. We must close that gap by using dual market access to grow domestic exports and attract highly productive FDI; developing all-Ireland clusters in high-productivity sectors; improving work-relevant skills, including through upskilling workers and increasing the number of students in further and higher education; working with business to adopt productivity-improving technologies, such as AI and robotics; supporting R&D and driving innovation through collaboration across government, academia and the private sector; and improving management practices.

The final critical objective is to reduce carbon emissions. Colleagues are well aware of the legal and moral obligation to reach net zero by 2050 at the latest. Done right, the transition to a greener and more sustainable economy can be a just transition that also generates prosperity for all. We can build a green economy by increasing our energy efficiency; becoming self-sufficient in and even an exporter of affordable renewable energy. We have the resources, including wind, biomethane and geothermal, to do that; breaking the link with the global commodity prices and ensuring that people and businesses pay a fair price for the energy produced locally; collaborating strategically on the opportunities and investments needed to realise our energy aspirations on the island of Ireland within the single electricity market; establishing a net zero accelerator fund to help plug the funding gap for projects that are not fully financed by private sources; developing the circular economy and taking advantage of the opportunities that exist to reduce waste and cost and increase collaboration and competitiveness across the island; and using the investment zone funding to support green technologies and the skills needed for a green economy.

In taking forward this important work, it will be useful to have independent experts to advise on how, at a strategic level, those objectives should be pursued and to help monitor progress.

Four people who combine academic rigour with real-life practical application will act as critical friends: on good jobs, Dr Lisa Wilson from the Nevin Economic Research Institute; on regional balance, Dr Conor Patterson from the Newry and Mourne Co-operative and Enterprise Agency; on productivity, Dr David Jordan from the Productivity Institute; and on net zero, Professor David Rooney from the Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy.

My Department's economic development agency has a key role to play in delivering this mission, and Invest NI has many highly skilled and highly committed people. As the independent review confirmed, however, the organisation must restructure and refocus its activities if it is to be effective in the time ahead. There are three particularly important aspects of this reform.

First, attaching stronger conditions and incentives to its support for business in line with the mission that I have set. That may involve requiring a company to recruit people who want to come back into the labour market, particularly people from underrepresented

groups; to locate in a disadvantaged area; or to decarbonise its operations.

Secondly, Invest needs a new regional structure that is dedicated to home-grown small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups. It should provide a similar service to that which was previously provided by the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) and by Enterprise Ireland in the South. Regional offices must work on an inclusive basis and in partnership with councils, the business community, trade unions and local enterprise agencies.

Thirdly, Invest NI must develop industries as well as individual firms. Fostering collections of interconnected companies, whether that is clusters, networks, sectors or industries, will have a more significant impact and will help us to turn the dial on economic indicators. Businesses that are operating inside clusters have higher levels of innovation, productivity and resilience, and those benefits are particularly high for small firms. To capitalise on those opportunities, we will work in partnership with industry and academia to develop sectors such as advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences, and low carbon.

This new approach to economic strategy involves using the Windsor framework to grow local exports and attract better-quality FDI, taking full advantage of the all-Ireland economy, genuine collaboration with business representatives, trade unions and academia, and setting a clear mission of a highly productive, zero-carbon, regionally balanced economy with good jobs. In order to deliver the strategy, Invest NI will strategically use conditions and incentives as part of its work with business, support SMEs and start-ups in collaboration with councils and other stakeholders, and develop clusters of businesses, rather than just individual companies in isolation. Working with our expert advisers, my Department will move at pace to put this vision into action, and its focus will be on delivery. We have a lot of work to do to turn this economy around, and that work starts now.

Mr O'Toole: First, with all sincerity, I congratulate the Minister on his appointment as Economy Minister. I also commend the fact that, in this statement and in his early actions, he has clearly prioritised the development of the all-island economy, North/South cooperation and dual market access. That is hugely welcome, and he will have our support as he pursues those. However, I will also draw his attention to the contents of the UK Government's Command Paper, 'Safeguarding

the Union', which included a specific commitment to the abolition of British Government legal duties around promoting the all-island economy. I assume that he will not support that, but his party president, Mary Lou McDonald, said that she had been in contact with the British Government before that paper was drafted and was satisfied that the Good Friday Agreement was undermined. Did the Economy Minister see that commitment — that the UK Government were seeking to remove obligations around the all-island economy — before it was published, and, in his office, what action is he going to take to ensure that they do not go ahead with that objectionable action?

Mr C Murphy: The fact is that I find it difficult to find a measure of the British Government's legal obligations in that. The all-Ireland economy was growing organically anyway, and the figures show that cross-border trade between 2015 and 2022 has gone from €2.8 billion to €10.2 billion. Regardless of what the British Government were doing or not doing, there is a clear sense of growth there, and that will only accelerate with the new trading arrangements that have managed to come from that. So, like a lot of others, I saw a lot of rhetoric related to the Command Paper, which was clearly designed to give comfort to people, but, in practical terms, had very little effect.

For our purpose, we will continue to promote that, because it makes sense economically for the whole island, just as we will promote east-west trade, because that makes sense economically as well. We will continue to press home the advantages that we have as part of that and create some sense of certainty. I say very clearly that any attempt to create continued uncertainty around our trading arrangements will be damaging to our indigenous companies and their desire to export and will also be damaging to attracting inward investment. The very clear message that I have been getting from business at home and internationally is that business wants to see certainty established, for things to settle down and for people to come to terms with the new arrangements.

Mr Brett (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I congratulate you on your appointment to your role. This is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship. I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The Committee and I look forward to working with him positively.

Minister, one of the key components of the 10X Economy strategy was its partnership

approach. You outline that approach in your statement. The 10X strategy received endorsements from across the business community, including from the Institute of Directors (IoD), the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the tourism sector. Will the Minister confirm his commitment to the 10X strategy and outline what endorsements he has received from those organisations for his remarks today?

Mr C Murphy: I thank the Member for his question and for his cooperation. I wish him and his Deputy Chairperson well. I look forward to working with them and the rest of the Economy Committee as we move forward. I believe that we have a shared view on trying to make the economy a success and on trying to grow prosperity and create opportunities for all of our people.

The 10X strategy was taken forward in a period where, first, the review of Invest had not taken place. That is the primary delivery mechanism for that. That review was critical of the strategy's lack of strategic focus. Invest has suffered because of a lack of strategic focus, so, very clearly, things needed to change with that. Some elements of 10X are beneficial, but others need to be taken forward, particularly in relation to how Invest does its business and the strategic focus that it requires, and also in relation to the fact that more certainty exists with the post-Brexit trading arrangements and what that means for our proposition to the rest of the world for how business will be done here.

In developing this statement and this vision, we have had shared dialogue with many sectors of the Department, including Invest NI. We have a strong sense of engagement and enthusiasm for moving forward with it. We continue to work with all the sectors across the Department for the Economy to make sure that we are all on the same hymn sheet on this and are all pushing forward together. Some of the criticisms in the review of Invest NI, which I think were merited, are being addressed as we go forward to try to get a more cohesive economic proposition.

Mr Delargy: I thank the Minister for his statement. One of the really important points in the statement is about good careers advice, particularly in schools. What can the Minister do jointly with the Education Minister to further enhance that?

Mr C Murphy: I had a brief off-the-record chat with the Education Minister, on the side of an Executive meeting one day, during which we

agreed that careers advice has to be in sync right through from schools to colleges. There is, understandably, a big focus on getting kids through academic education and getting them into universities, but there are so many opportunities now with our colleges, which we are very significantly invested in, and for people to go straight into the work environment and get high-level apprenticeships. We need to make sure that the full picture of what is available to our young people is on offer to them from that early age. Kids are getting advice at 14 years of age, and many of the people who are giving that advice — myself included, if I were in that position — do not know the types of jobs that will exist in 10 years' time for them and the areas that they are moving into, given that technology and job opportunities are changing so rapidly. Therefore, we need to make sure that the education system is in sync with the economy system.

It is not just about growing young people for jobs, because education is a much more holistic thing in the development of young people. It is about making sure that kids have an understanding of what is available, what is out there and what pathways are there, so that they are not just on the same pathway through school, into university, out the other side and then waiting to see what opportunities there are. If we can create clear opportunities and a sense of what is available to people, I think that that will be very important. From my early discussions with the Education Minister, it seems that he is quite interested in that conversation, so I look forward to working with him in the time ahead.

12.45 pm

Mr Honeyford: I welcome the Minister's statement. It is the first time that I have spoken to him as Minister, so I congratulate him on his new role. Having run my own business for many years, I have learnt that it is easy to get caught up in the focus on yourself and your business rather than on selling your product. I associate myself with the comments that we have some highly skilled Invest NI staff, but, following the independent review and the substantial reform that is needed in Invest NI, can the Minister reassure us that Invest NI is able, is capable and has the resources available to focus on selling Northern Ireland and its dual market access around the world?

Mr C Murphy: The Lyons report on Invest NI did not pull any punches about the organisation, where it was at and where it needed to go, and that was a significant wake-up call. Some of the

criticisms chimed with some that we have made and that I have heard in the Chamber over the past number of years. There are some very good people in Invest NI who want to move forward, try to grow the economy and develop prosperity for people. As the Member will know, Invest NI has a new chair and a new chief executive. I have met both of them. I have met the chief executive a number of times and have a strong sense of the work that the two of them have been doing in the background to try to turn the organisation around. We want to support them in doing that, because the report on Invest NI clearly indicated that the organisation needs to be reorientated.

In today's statement, we have tried to give Invest NI a strategic focus, and I think that it is one that it welcomes. Yes, we need to ensure that we develop the proposition for here and that we have the certainty in the post-Brexit trading arrangements that I hope that we now have. It should be allowed to bed in and not continuously be picked at over the time ahead so that we can give people some sense of certainty by working on that proposition and taking it abroad. It is also important because 90% of people employed in the private sector here are employed by small to medium-sized enterprises. Local companies that can take advantage of those trading arrangements have more certainty about how they can grow their business and get involved in exports as well. We therefore need that focus in order to attract investment but also to grow our local economy.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his statement and wish him well in his important role. I have studied many economic statements and policies down the years. I think that the first was Peter Viggers's pathfinder process in 1987. All identify productivity as the key, yet it remains stubbornly low. Does the Minister accept that that is the holy grail of economic policy?

Mr C Murphy: As the Member says, productivity has been stubbornly low. It is the lowest in these islands, and it has been for some time. The gap between North and South has been opening up. It is now something like a 40% difference. A number of factors contribute to that, and we cannot continue to ignore them. We credit ourselves with having a world-class education system, yet its outcome is very substandard and not world class at all. It is not the be-all and end-all, but it is an important factor that has not shifted, and we have to find ways in which to get it to shift.

Productivity is a complex measurement. There is a mathematical formula for it, but a lot of complex factors go into it. As part of this, we

have invited in expert critical friends, if you like: people who know this work. I am not saying that people in the Department do not know it as well, but, sometimes, we can be so bogged down in the minutiae of it all that we do not see the bigger picture. Not only are we trying to set strategic targets for these things but we are trying to ensure that they have outside monitoring and assistance from people who are experts in the field. All those targets can be measured, and we recognise that we have only three years and a couple of months in which to try to make a significant change. That is the target in the time ahead, and, like the Member, I hope very much that we see a change in that particular stubborn index, which has never shifted substantially over the years.

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his statement.*] Minister, will you commit to introducing legislation to improve workers' rights and, in so doing, liaise directly with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions?

Mr C Murphy: The short answer is yes, I will. We have been engaging and will continue to engage. There is legislation in the pipeline on working conditions. We want to ensure that it takes the opportunity to address things such as conditions that create low pay and insecurity in jobs, including zero-hour contracts and other factors. Far too many young people, women and people with disabilities find themselves in that sector, and that is why we have low productivity and low wages. There are opportunities in the time ahead to introduce legislation, which has been in the pipeline. We want to get that right, and, of necessity, that will involve a dialogue with trade unions and others. I look forward to a very early dialogue and to bringing together a legislative proposition to the Assembly that addresses some of those big challenges.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his statement, particularly the comments about addressing regional balance. One of the ways to do that, of course, is through the city and growth deals. There is a lot of frustration, particularly in my council area of Foyle, at the delay in getting those projects over the line. What can the Minister do to progress the city and growth deals as fast as possible?

Mr C Murphy: Last week, I had the opportunity to visit Derry and speak to people involved in that at the chamber of commerce and at Magee, which is one of the central projects to the growth deal. I am concerned that some of the momentum has gone out of that. There is a

necessity, when public money is involved and projects are put forward, to have due diligence to make sure that they work, but we also need momentum. The longer it takes to get the growth deals done, the more the cost goes up: as we have seen with all capital projects, for every year that they are delayed, the cost goes up.

I want to ensure that due diligence is done but that it is not done in a way that effectively strangles the projects. We need to get them moving. There are big opportunities. I was impressed with the level of enthusiasm and the sense of opportunity that there is in Derry. I want the Department to be an enabler for that, and that means that Invest NI will have a much more proactive role with the council, the chamber, business partners and other community and voluntary sector partners in Derry and the north-west.

It also means working with the Southern Government, because significant investment has come from Dublin, and there are strong linkages, particularly in the education sector, between Magee and Letterkenny. I have spoken to Minister Harris about that, and we intend to jointly visit the area to continue to promote that.

There are opportunities, and we need to make sure that the system of government is not slowing that down when we should be pressing ahead with it.

Ms Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his statement. The statement acknowledges the issue of productivity and skills. I hope that the Minister commits to implementing the skills strategy in full, and I welcome the statement about careers advice in schools; I have previously expressed an interest in doing a private Member's Bill on that.

What are the Minister's plans to reform the apprenticeship levy, whereby circa £80 million is paid by Northern Irish businesses each year? Will he commit to making sure that that money returns to Northern Ireland and is ring-fenced specifically for skills?

Mr C Murphy: I agree with the Member on skills. One of the difficulties over recent years — I know this from my previous experience in office — was that the money that we primarily had for skills was European money that ended and was not replaced by the British Government. That has left a significant hole in the Department for the Economy's budget. We managed to fill that, during COVID, with moneys from Whitehall to keep the support for

skills and trying to take people into the workforce. However, that is a real challenge in the time ahead.

The apprenticeship levy has not really worked for us. It was designed in Britain. We have such a high level of public-sector employment that we end up being almost a net contributor to rather than a beneficiary from it. We have to revisit that. The Department of Finance has a role, because it generally speaks to Treasury on that, but I look forward to a discussion with my colleague to find a way to change that, because it has not worked for us in the way that it has worked in Britain. We need to revisit that.

We have to find creative ways, particularly in the current restrained public finance situation, to get money into skills and education, because that will get more people into the economy and that generates more income.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank the Minister for making his statement this afternoon. With funding running out in March of next year, will he work with local enterprise agencies, such as Fermanagh Enterprise in my constituency, to co-design a successor to the Go Succeed programme?

Mr C Murphy: The thrust of what we have said on regional balance is that it has been much too Belfast-centric; the report on Invest NI recognised that. That does not mean that Belfast will not continue to get support. It is an economic hub for the entire region, but that has come at the expense of working with and supporting local areas. If we have more of a co-design process, as the Member mentioned, for Invest NI that means strengthening regional offices, working with councils, business interests and the community and voluntary sector in areas to design what is needed for them, and having the resources to support that.

Each area has a different approach and emphasis. It is about trying to make sure that we provide support for local economic growth. That will be a much more successful formula for trying to ensure that we have proper regional balance in the time ahead.

Mr Buckley: I pay tribute to the many professional staff at Invest NI who, over many years, have created jobs and facilitated investment in the Northern Ireland economy. One of the main criticisms was, evidently, the lack of support for indigenous businesses, which was mentioned in the statement. How does the Minister propose that, in line with the review, we ensure that businesses clearly know

what support is available via Invest NI so that they can grow and meet their true potential?

Mr C Murphy: One of the first ways to do that is to provide that level of strategic focus so that businesses know what areas are getting supported. The client-company mechanism was severely criticised in the report. A lot of businesses that received support from Invest NI were content, but an awful lot of businesses were outside that tent and could not get any support. Unfortunately, we do not have the public finances to provide support for everyone — would that we had. That means that we need a strategic focus on the industries and businesses that we want to grow. We need to encourage the use of clusters so that people can feed off each other to grow their business. Small businesses, in particular, that find themselves part of clusters have proved to be much more resilient and productive. We have to do that in a way that continues to grow the economy, recognising, even though I will argue for all the money that I can get for Invest and other sections of the Department for the Economy in the time ahead, the difficult financial situation that we face. It is about giving a clearer focus and businesses understanding what that focus is. One of the criticisms was that Invest NI had a lack of strategic focus. How do you translate that into businesses understanding what the organisation is doing? I hope that, in the time ahead, we will have a much clearer picture of what Invest NI is about and how it does its business so that businesses can engage with it.

Mr McGuigan: Minister, I welcome your statement and economic vision. I also welcome the acknowledgement in your statement that tourism spreads prosperity across the North. Does the Minister agree that the British Government's electronic travel authorisation scheme poses a significant threat to our tourism industry?

Mr C Murphy: Yes, there is a real concern about that among tourism providers. It is one of the issues that have been raised with me, in the north-west in particular, before I came into office and since. When people visit the area for tourism, they visit Derry and Donegal, so Derry could be the centre of something that is much bigger than just the city itself. There is a real concern about the impact of the scheme. A lot of consequences, whether foreseen or unforeseen, of the British Government's Brexit approach are damaging to the island of Ireland. It is an issue that I would like to engage early on with the Home Office in particular and relevant authorities in Whitehall to try to get

them to see sense on the damage that that scheme would do to our tourism industry in the time ahead.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I wish you well in your new role. You will be aware that the Executive Office is responsible for the re-establishment of the economic policy unit and the development and delivery of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. Will you outline how your statement today will align with those pieces of work, please?

Mr C Murphy: The economy here is not the remit solely of the Department for the Economy; many factors feed into it. We talked about the Department of Education being one, but Finance, Infrastructure and Agriculture all have a contribution to make when it comes to the growth of our economy. There is an economic policy function in TEO. I look forward to engaging in that regard. I think that I have a meeting arranged next week with the head of the Civil Service to discuss economic policy and how the operations of the Department that is under her remit and my Department can come together more closely. All Ministers across the Executive have key priorities to bring to the table, such as childcare and economic growth, in the time ahead, and it is incumbent on us all to make sure that we act cohesively rather than contradicting each other in the approaches that we take.

1.00 pm

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Economy Minister for his statement. I notice that he referenced our further education colleges. In my constituency, we can boast excellent facilities in Enniskillen at the South West College campus, which feeds into our Northern Ireland workforce. Will he commit to ensuring that his vision will have regional balance across all sectors of employment in order to tackle the brain drain from our rural areas to elsewhere around the world? What exact plans does he have to strategically promote the north-west and south-west regions around the world as areas of employment in order to ensure the levelling up of our economy?

Mr C Murphy: The Member makes a fair point in that there has been investment in a lot of our college infrastructure, including in the south-west. We have a good product and good infrastructure there. We need to make sure that the opportunities that that can create for local young people and other people who return to education can be availed of. Those colleges are

underutilised, in terms of the attendance at them, and I would like to see those figures go up and more people availing themselves of the opportunities that our colleges provide.

On promotion, as I said in the statement, there are things that Invest NI can do. Other development agencies put stronger conditions on people about where they want them to go and whom they want them to employ in terms of their net zero contribution, so we have an opportunity to look at how Invest NI does that. It is not simply about saying, "Come here, and we'll give you whatever support we can". We want to see investment go to areas where it has not been so frequently before. We can use the levers that we have in Invest NI to achieve more regional balance, including for the south-west.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, I appreciate the prioritisation that you have given in your statement to regional balance. We in the north-west have seen many visions and have been promised prioritisation, but, unfortunately, we never get to the delivery point. Many countries across Europe put the provision of regional balance in legislation. Do you agree that we need to tackle regional, economic and social imbalance through legislation? Will you commit to such legislation?

Mr C Murphy: I am conscious of the time frame that we are working with. I wish that it were a five-year mandate; we are dealing with a three-year mandate now. The choice is that either I get on with reorientating Invest NI — the delivery mechanism for this is Invest NI, which has not had this orientation in its past — try to get more regional work done with the partners in those areas who have told us how they want things to work and get that going now or I go out and start to consult on legislation, which would probably take, in a best-case scenario, a year to 18 months to get in place. I am not averse to legislating, and, if legislation is required in the future, I would be happy to do that. My focus today is on trying to get the policy changed, trying to get the implementation arm orientated to match the new policy and delivering on the ground.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am pleased to see the focus on affordable childcare and on paying childcare workers. That is good news, especially as the Executive have agreed it as a priority. Given that the 30-hour scheme in Britain has not been successful — we have heard the reasons — what sort of scheme do you envision being delivered locally?

Mr C Murphy: I envision one that the Executive can agree on. There was a discussion about it last week at the Executive, and I was struck by the cohesion across all Ministers about getting the right policy for here. There are other policies out there that may work. It is a bit like the apprenticeship levy that was referred to: it worked in Britain, but it does not necessarily fit the circumstances that we have here. There was a useful conversation and a strong sense that this is a collective Executive priority. It is primarily led by the Minister of Education — everyone understands that — but he was at pains to point out that we want a collective approach to make sure that we are all comfortable with the policy that emerges, that it fits what is needed for this area and that we get that agreed level of support for it across the Executive. The policy that I would like to see is one that matches our needs and one that the Executive as a whole can buy into, and I think that that is the intention.

Mr Kingston: While we all want to see a more regionally balanced economy, does the Minister accept that, ultimately, it is for investors to decide where they will invest? While we can present opportunities and incentives, being overly prescriptive and restrictive could result in potential inward investment going elsewhere and being lost to Northern Ireland.

Mr C Murphy: Many other business development agencies use more levers than Invest NI uses to encourage people to other areas. It is not the case that, if somebody is refusing to go somewhere, you say, "Well, don't come". You can certainly use those levers. I am not certain that that has been deployed to any great extent prior to this. The record of levels of investment clearly show that other areas across the region have been suffering as a consequence of a very Belfast-centric approach. That is not to say that Belfast will not continue to be the economic driver for the entire area, but there are opportunities to create for other places.

The infrastructure is improving. Our roads network is improving. Our Wi-Fi infrastructure is improving. This is not a big place. People come here from other countries. This is almost a little city region compared with what people who come from the United States or other areas are used to. We have levers with which we can try to develop regional balance to the best of our ability, and we will use those. However, we want to see investment. We want to see local companies growing and expanding into areas and make sure that the prosperity that comes from that is shared around the individuals

involved but also the geographical areas involved.

Ms Nicholl: I congratulate the Minister on his new role and wish him well.

Some of the most precious work in our economy is done by childcare practitioners. They are paid poverty wages, so it is really welcome to see that and flexibility highlighted in your vision. Given that recruitment and retention are massive problems and the potential cliff edge that the rise in the minimum wage, which is welcome, will cause providers in April, will the Minister outline how he will work with the Education Minister and ensure delivery as a matter of urgency? We have so many childcare providers facing closure, and some sort of emergency support needs to be put in place.

Mr C Murphy: There is general agreement that a childcare strategy does not involve just the provision of support for parents, although I know that that is an important issue for many people who have young kids. It also involves those who work in that sector, the vast majority of whom are women, who have been underpaid and have little job security. We will not get an effective childcare sector if we do not look after the people who work in it as well as the people who need the provision. That will be the challenge.

I am happy to work with the Education Minister and other Executive colleagues. As I said in response to a previous question, I get a strong sense at Executive meetings of a collective ambition in this regard. It is a policy that, before we managed to come back, the parties who were going to make up the Executive set as a priority. It is something that we will be judged on over the course of the mandate, so I want to see the most effective policy delivered.

Mrs Dillon: I wish the Minister well in his role as our new Economy Minister.

I am glad to hear your comments and to see in your statement that notion of reorientation and a focus on other areas. I speak, in particular, of my area of mid-Ulster, where our engineering and manufacturing sector has been successful in spite of Invest NI and central government help, not because of it. Will your emphasis on clusters include local networks like Manufacturing and Engineering Growth and Advancement (MEGA) in mid-Ulster, which has been doing brilliant and transformative work? A focus on that from central government would be much appreciated.

Mr C Murphy: I thank the Member. Yes. I had the opportunity to speak to people there on a couple of occasions over the past six to nine months. I concur with her view that there is an excellence in manufacturing there that plays a leading role on the world stage in terms of some of the products produced.

One of the issues that we refer to is the availability of land. We were told that Invest NI does not have any land left in mid-Ulster. That is not a tenable situation, given the manufacturing sector there, which is internationally recognised and has the potential to grow much bigger.

Some of the levers that have been available to us now need to be put in place and deployed. We need to make sure that land is available where we find growing clusters like that. We need to make sure that everyone is linked in. We need to ensure that the skills are there, particularly for young people, as the local colleges have already been doing, so that a workforce can be provided to meet the ambition in that area.

There are many levers with which we can assist and enable continued growth. My sense from talking to the people involved in manufacturing down there is that they want to go further and to create more jobs and prosperity in the area. They have deep roots in the area that they come from, which is important, and they want to create economic success there. I see our job and that of Invest NI as enabling that to happen.

Ms Ferguson: I thank the Minister for his statement. As we are a small island, connectivity is crucial to our economy. Having supported City of Derry Airport's public service obligation (PSO) route to Heathrow, will the Minister look at the Derry to Dublin route, as was promised under 'New Decade, New Approach'?

Mr C Murphy: I was pleased to be up there with the Infrastructure Minister last week and to provide support to City of Derry Airport. That connector to Heathrow — one of the busiest airports in the world — is critical to the airport. Also critical to it, as I have said many times, is the connection with Dublin and the potential to grow the business of the airport through that connection. I am pleased, now that the Executive and this institution are up and functioning, that the North/South Ministerial Council will also be functioning. I have already been in touch with my counterparts in Dublin, and those are some of the issues that we want to progress in the time ahead.

Mr Durkan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis, agus déanaim comhghairdeas leis faoina phost nua. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his statement and congratulate him on his new job.*] We welcome and look forward to the transition to a greener and more sustainable economy, but will that include a legislative ban on fracking and petroleum exploration and extraction?

Mr C Murphy: As the Member will know, Economy is a vast Department. I have been getting to grips with all the issues there. The Department is looking at legislation on that, and I will bring forward propositions in the not-too-distant future.

Mr McCrossan: Among the key criticisms of Invest NI from many businesses and investors that I have spoken to are that it is disconnected, difficult to deal with and unrealistic, that it places more hurdles in the way than it offers solutions and assistance and that the north-west does not feature on its radar at all. With the new changes and reforms of the organisation in place, which are much welcomed, what measurable checks can be put in place to ensure that the north-west finally gets its fair share of the cake?

Mr C Murphy: When we talked to people in the north-west and other areas, we found that they want to have their own input into Invest NI. That is what I envisage. Every area in the north-west has its own particular interests in this regard. We are looking for co-design, with Invest NI having a stronger resourced regional presence, working in conjunction with councils, businesses, the community and voluntary sector, trade unions and other interests, so that we agree a plan. That is the measurable part of it: the plan that an area wants delivered to kick-start and support growth will be unique to that area. That will be the measurement.

I have heard many of the criticisms that the Member has made. I have a sense that Invest NI wants to change the way that it does things. I have had good conversations with senior people in Invest NI. We want to see a quick turnaround and a different approach to this, and we want to measure the outcomes accordingly.

Mr Allister: Following Mr O'Toole's question, I waited in vain for a DUP MLA to burst the Minister's bubble about his reaffirmation of the all-island economy, because this wonderful document suggests that all of that has been torpedoed. It seems that the DUP MLAs do not even believe their own propaganda. Does the Minister believe that the unaltered Windsor

framework, with all its dimensions, aids the growth of the all-island economy? Does he further believe that the existence of the Irish Sea border, which did not even merit a mention in his statement, has the same effect by inhibiting trade from GB?

Mr C Murphy: I would say, in the first instance, that I believe that Brexit was a bad idea, even for those of you who supported it, and that any alteration to the trading arrangements between Britain and Europe was going to have an impact. The outcome is that we are not where we were, and we have been trying ever since to make the best of a bad idea by trying to improve those relationships.

1.15 pm

I see the opportunity. It is not about whether I think it makes things easier; the statistics show that trade has grown North-South and South-North. That has happened organically because people have been doing business together. That is good. It is good for people in the Member's constituency in the same way as it is good for people in mine. Making east-west links as frictionless as possible is good for people in his constituency in the same way as it is good for people in mine. We want to see the economic prosperity of the region change. It has been left in the doldrums for far too long, with low productivity, low pay and no real sense of economic opportunity. It is the responsibility of all of us to change the dial on that, and that is what I intend to do through the strategy that I have laid out.

Ms Sugden: I congratulate the Minister on his new post. Minister, your statement referenced energy efficiency. Do you have any plans to introduce energy efficiency grants similar to what we see in GB with the green deal for commercial and residential properties?

Mr C Murphy: There are opportunities. As the Member knows, we have a limited Budget. Departments are not being asked to submit new bids; they are being asked to find out how they can not spend rather than spend money. There are opportunities, however; other funding streams are available. It is incumbent on us to put the renewable heat incentive (RHI) situation to bed finally, and I hope to do so quickly. That will open up opportunities to support green projects. I want us to get to a situation in which we can take advantage of other supports. We will have to work through what that looks like, but we are legally and morally obliged to move to a situation where we produce more green energy. Given the island that we are on, we will

have, over the years ahead, a significant opportunity to become not only self-sufficient but perhaps even an exporter of energy, which would be very beneficial to us. We have to harbour those ambitions and then try to work the strategy in order to get there. There is limited resource available in our budgets, but additional resource may be available elsewhere. We need to be in a position to do that, and part of it is to conclude the RHI experiment, which is a sorry tale for all of us.

Mr McNulty: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Ádh mór ort [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Good luck to you*] in your new role and to my constituency colleague, the new Minister for the Economy.

Minister, like me, you will be aware of the specific challenges faced by businesses in Newry and south Armagh with respect to the availability of full insurance and of government-backed support for businesses unable to obtain insurance. Your commitments to a regionally balanced economy are most welcome. However, do you accept my assessment that any efforts to balance and support our economy at the micro level must be attuned to grassroots needs and, with respect to Newry and south Armagh and elsewhere, will require specific action on insurance costs and coverage?

Mr C Murphy: The Member will know that fiscal matters such as insurance and the control and regulation of them lie in London. That is unfortunate, because there is an inherent unfairness in the way in which insurance companies treat people, particularly in the area that we represent. We saw how inadequate the insurance arrangements for flooding were. It is a big challenge, and the difficulty is that it is regulated in London. As part of my engagement with the Government and Departments in Whitehall, I will be happy to pursue all those issues, just as we pursued the travel restrictions that are proposed.

Yes, we absolutely want to see businesses supported and continuing to grow. That is why a regional strategy will benefit Newry and south Armagh and south Down as much as it will benefit the north-west. Having clarity of arrangements between North and South will grow the all-island economy, which, we know, will be beneficial to the people whom we collectively represent. Insurance is a significant challenge, however, and one for which, unfortunately, we do not have direct responsibility here. We can make representation, and we will do so in the time ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Before I call the last person to speak, who will be Gerry Carroll, more observant Members will have noticed that Gerry was not in his seat at the beginning of the Minister's statement. However, in view of the exceptional circumstances of the Finance Committee's meeting, I have decided to use my discretion to call him.

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope that you do more of that as the session goes on.

Minister, I want to know your view on cutting corporation tax as part of your vision for the economy. Essentially, it is a Thatcherite view that, if corporate taxes are slashed, wealth trickles down, but it never trickles down; it always stays in the bank accounts of the wealthy. As he will know, the latest DUP-Tory deal document, 'Safeguarding the Union', mentions devolving corporation tax, presumably to reduce it. Are the Minister and his Executive colleagues rushing, clamouring and demanding to devolve corporation tax to reduce it? What is his opinion?

Mr C Murphy: I could tell the Member that he missed all the best bits of my statement.

I said this when I had the Finance portfolio, and the Economy Minister at the time agreed with me: it is not something that we are rushing into. The difficulty for us is that the Treasury's approach to the devolution of taxation, particularly corporation tax, is that it wants the money up front that, it thinks, it would yield. That money comes directly from our public services. Our public services are so underfunded, and we are so underfunded in relation to our level of need, that it would not be conscionable to denude them of any more finance in order to hope for the benefit that a lower rate of corporation tax might bring. There are no guarantees, so we would have to hope for what it would bring back to us. We have economic levers in our approach to business, with policies that we can set, and we have to use them as best we can in the time ahead to try to grow the economy. I do not see corporation tax playing any part in that any time soon.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease while there is a change at the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 19 February 2024. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]

Standing Order 42(5): Suspension

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

That Standing Order 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget Bill.

Mr Speaker: In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limit to the debate.

Dr Archibald: There is an urgent need for a Budget Bill to be passed before Departments reach the cash limits set in the previous Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Act 2023. The situation has arisen because of several unique circumstances. The previous Budget Act, legislated for by the Secretary of State in Westminster, was based on a budget position that was far below what Departments required to fund their expenditure for the full year 2023-24. The restoration of the Executive at such a late stage in the financial year and the need for the Executive to consider allocations to address the overspends forecast by Departments and the funding of public-sector pay awards meant that work could not commence on the Budget Bill until now.

Standing Order 42(5) requires:

"No Bill shall pass all its required stages in the Assembly in less than ten days."

That ensures that the Assembly has time to consider and debate the issues properly. Given, however, the risk to the delivery of public services should Departments reach their cash limits, I ask the Assembly to agree to the exceptional step of suspending Standing Order 42(5) to allow the Bill to complete its passage in a much shorter time. Members will be aware

that, when the Bill completes its passage through the Assembly, there are further steps to be completed before Royal Assent is secured, and they will therefore appreciate the urgency of the matter.

Mr Allister: Voting money is one of the most important things that the Assembly can do, particularly as a scrutinising Chamber. Yet here we are: one of the first acts of the Executive is to ask the Assembly to rush every fence in relation to a money Bill and not just to have a day or two's pause. The First Stage of the Budget Bill was today, and now, just over an hour later, we are invited to proceed to the important Second Stage. That seems to me to be unseemly and wholly disproportionate to the obligations on the House to properly scrutinise legislation, particularly when it comes to something as important as voting money.

The circumstances here are even more egregious, because, up until this time, with past Budget Bills, we have always had a Supply debate, in which the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) were produced. You could, therefore, see a precise breakdown, line by line, of where the money was going in each Department and subdivision in the Departments. This Budget Bill, however, has been brought without a Supply debate and without the publication of any supporting documentation that shows where the money is to be distributed. Members are asked to debate a Bill that has just headline figures while absent from it is that which we normally would have from the Supply debate, which has been abandoned.

The provision of the expenditure lines for each Department — I hear no explanation for this — has also been abandoned. What are they? When x Department gets y tens of millions of pounds, where is that money to be spent? What is it that we are voting on, other than a global figure for each Department? We are entitled to know, as the scrutineers of the Bill, where the Minister is asking us to put the money. We always could answer that question when we had the spring Supplementary Estimates. We cannot answer it today.

We then compound the situation by saying, "Let us rush it through in a day". That seems to me to show the utmost disregard for a primary function in the House, and, indeed, it diminishes and demeans the role of MLAs, who are not even taken under the Minister's notice —

Mr Tennyson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: No, you stick to the videos.

We are not even taken under the Minister's notice in respect of where the money will be spent. It is quite appalling.

I wonder what the Comptroller and Auditor General thinks of the process, if they have been asked. I wonder how the Departments will do their end-of-year accounts, when they do not even have their expenditure lines with which to compare them. None of that seems to matter; just bulldoze it through. For that reason, I will vote against the suspension of Standing Orders, if given the opportunity to do so.

Mr O'Toole: I am afraid that I must agree in part with Jim Allister, which is something that I do not always do, but it is important to acknowledge that we are being placed in a deeply unacceptable position. There is, of course, the irony that some of the people now talking most loudly about us not having scrutiny were the loudest cheerleaders for us not having an Assembly to scrutinise anything for more than two years, but let us stop, pause and reflect on the purpose of what we are doing.

Authorising money to be spent is the most important thing, in many ways, that the legislature can do. We are supposed to have a Budget process that involves the Minister of Finance bringing a Budget statement, which is a strategic spending document, having agreed it with her or his Executive colleagues, to the Assembly before the end of the financial year. At the same time, we are supposed to have spring Supplementary Estimates so that we can vote to regularise the spending for the end of the current financial year. That is part of what we are doing now, but, as has been said correctly, we do not have any spring Supplementary Estimates, so we are not able to properly judge and read across what we are voting on.

Of course, we have not had a Budget, even a one-year Budget, since, I believe, 2021. The process is completely suboptimal. In fairness to the officials involved, there are clearly extenuating circumstances, which were created by a combination of the political chaos that we had here for several years and decisions made by the British Government to not regularise spending authorisations and not pass a Budget Bill at Westminster.

1.30 pm

Arguments have and will be made about what will happen if we do not proceed with

suspending Standing Orders, and I will say something about accelerated passage in my role as Chair of the Finance Committee, but it is important to say that we cannot simply go on for ever and a day rushing through spending legislation in this place. We are not just granting accelerated passage, which is pretty commonplace for Budget Bills, but we are suspending Standing Orders. Although we will not push this suspension of Standing Orders to a Division, we do not support it. It is not only suboptimal; it is completely unacceptable. We need a properly transformed way of doing Budget scrutiny in this place, and the Executive and, indeed, the Department need to stop treating this place with a degree of, at best, patronisation and, at worst, mild contempt in how we do scrutiny. We need to do our jobs properly and, critically, from the public's perspective, be seen to do that. Therefore, it is important to lay down a marker with this suspension of Standing Orders. For those of you who are new to the Chamber, this is going much further than we normally go in ramming through a Budget Bill.

Mr Carroll: We are being asked to endorse an unacceptable process, and, for that reason, I will vote against suspending Standing Orders. We have a short time to scrutinise the Bill, which involves large sums of public money, and I primarily blame the Tories for not properly investing in public services generally but especially when this place was down. Obviously, the DUP is culpable for its two-year boycott. We have no time to really look at the detail. It is absurd. At the second meeting of the Finance Committee today, we had a briefing from an official at 12.00 pm, and, if things go according to parties' expected votes, we will have the whole thing done and dusted by tomorrow evening. Where is the time for scrutiny? There is none at all really. It is absurd.

We should not be playing fast and loose with people's lives and public money. We should be allowed the chance to dig into the detail. It is not good enough to rush these things through. What happened to not forgetting about the legacy of the renewable heat incentive? What about all the talk afterwards that we would learn how to properly scrutinise the use of public money? It seems like that lesson has completely gone out the window and that it is back to business as usual here, which is completely unacceptable.

We also have a concern that I want to dig into in more detail later. The Minister of Finance, in a written statement received by members of the Finance Committee, stated:

"It is regrettable that the Executive was not in a position to fund the full c£700 million of estimated pay costs identified by departments."

I do not know whether every MLA has read that statement — probably not — but I suspect that it will be news to a large number of public-sector workers — perhaps all of them — who may not get the full pay that they deserve. It is not just about scrutiny; it is very concerning for politics that the Assembly will rush through the Bill. We have already heard junior doctors express trepidation at the deal that they have been offered. How many other public-sector workers are facing the same situation? My concern is that this will possibly cement an insufficient pay deal for large numbers of public-sector workers, and the Finance Minister and other Ministers will say, "It is too late. It has been rushed through. Nothing you can do". For that reason, as well as the other reasons, I will vote against suspending Standing Orders.

Mr Tennyson: It is important that we are clear about the consequences of failing to suspend Standing Orders and failing to grant accelerated passage for the Bill. Mr Carroll refers to not "playing fast and loose" with the issue, but I would argue that those who oppose the suspension of Standing Orders are the ones guilty of playing fast and loose with the issue. The Minister has been clear that, if the Bill is not given accelerated passage and if Standing Orders are not suspended, Departments could fall into difficulty accessing cash, and the prospect of any pay award for 2023-24 will fall by the wayside. We owe it to our public-sector workers and public servants, who have been waiting this long, to do this at speed.

I agree that this is an unsatisfactory way to bring forward a Budget Bill, but, in fairness to the Minister, that is not of her making. While I do not want to lower myself to the playground antics of Jim Allister, who has had a road to Damascus conversion about the role of MLAs, it is due to the fact that this place has been down over the past two years and MLAs have not been permitted to carry out their role and scrutinise that we are now in the position where that process is necessary. All of us in the Chamber should have been involved since last year, from the Main Estimates right through monitoring rounds and Supplementary Estimates, to get to this point, but, instead, we are in the position where all we have is the Budget Bill. While I accept that there is a desire to see spring Supplementary Estimates, the Executive have been restored for only a matter of weeks, and we got clarity from the Treasury only on Tuesday on what the conditions and

quantums of the funding package actually are. It is simply impossible to expect that to be available at this stage. I agree with Members that this process is substandard, but I ask those Members to think carefully about the reckless and irresponsible approach that they are taking.

Ms Ennis: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member who spoke previously. I will keep my remarks short. I am actually a bit flabbergasted that we have people in the Chamber who advocate delaying the Budget for a moment longer than is absolutely necessary. People talk about obligations. The only obligations that we have are to provide certainty to Departments so that they can operate effectively till the end of the financial year and to deliver to the public-sector workers whom we all support — I mean our teachers, our police, our civil servants, our transport workers and our health workers — the pay award that they deserve. Anybody advocating holding that up for a minute longer has those people to answer to.

Dr Archibald: I thank Members for their contributions. I acknowledge that this is a difficult situation and that it is far from ideal. Neither I nor my officials consider it to be setting any sort of precedent. Obviously, we are dealing with the legacy of the damaging Budget that was set by the Secretary of State that put our public services under immense pressure. Work has only commenced on the spring Supplementary Estimates. We will bring them to the Assembly for it to consider as quickly as possible. Obviously, the urgency with which the Bill needs to proceed has been outlined. It is driven by the critical need to secure access to cash for Departments so that they can continue to deliver vital public services for the remaining weeks of this financial year — not passing it would put that in jeopardy — and to get pay awards for public-sector workers delivered. Therefore, I ask Members to agree to the suspension of Standing Order 42(5).

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

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 74; Noes 2.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Miss Brogan, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, 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 T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

OTHER:

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Honeyford, Mrs Long, Miss McAllister, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McGuigan and Ms Sheerin.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister.

OTHER:

Mr Carroll.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister and Mr Carroll.

Total Votes 76 Total Ayes 74 [97.4%]

Nationalist Votes 25 Nationalist Ayes 25 [100.0%]

Unionist Votes 34 Unionist Ayes 33 [97.1%]

Other Votes 17 Other Ayes 16 [94.1%]

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Ms Hunter, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 42(5) be suspended for the Budget Bill 2024.

2.00 pm

Assembly Business

Ms Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the debate on the motion, Mr Allister made an unparliamentary comment towards my colleague Eóin Tennyson. Under Standing Order 65, I ask you to make a ruling on that.

Mr Speaker: We will look at what was said and decide whether it is unparliamentary or otherwise.

Members may take their ease before we move to Question Time. Any Member who wishes to leave may do so now.

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Executive Office: Priorities

1. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their Department's priorities for the rest of this financial year. (AQO 3/22-27)

10. **Mr Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their priorities now the Executive have been restored. (AQO 2/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 10 together.

Priorities from the last mandate remain important to us. We will bring forward the 'Ending Violence against Women & Girls' strategic framework and press ahead with the important programme of work on mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses. Those are crucial issues, but they are set against the backdrop of a very difficult financial position. The Executive's most immediate priority is the stabilisation of public finances, and we are in ongoing communication with Treasury and the Prime Minister and are calling for our public finances to be placed on a sustainable footing.

We are in the process of developing and agreeing an immediate set of priorities for the Executive, and we will, of course, update the Assembly in due course.

Mr Easton: I thank the First Minister for her answer. What is the Executive Office's assessment of the revenue-raising in Northern Ireland that is required to meet those targets? What does it mean for the central good relations fund?

Mrs O'Neill: There is no doubt that, while we work towards our Programme for Government and immediate priorities, of which there are many to deal with, it is important that we get the basics right with the fiscal framework. That is why we have identified that, and I am delighted that we enjoy cross-party support to make the case for a proper financial arrangement here. That is ongoing work, and it will, obviously, have implications for how we fund all the programmes that we have, whether in the

Executive Office or across the other Departments.

I have no doubt that, over the course of time, we will have much more to say to the Member about what that actual budget looks like, particularly as we develop next year's Budget.

Mr Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht a freagraí go dtí seo. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the First Minister for her answers so far. She talked about laying out the priorities. What is the impact on those priorities of the continuation of Tory austerity?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, there is no escaping the fact that Tory austerity has badly damaged our public services. The Executive have clearly outlined serious concerns with our current financial situation. We are funded below need, but, as I said, I am glad that all Ministers are united and speak with one voice on the fact that we need to be properly funded. The Executive have written to the Government and the Treasury to call for a discussion on a long-term funding stability plan. We need to have an urgent, ongoing discussion with Treasury, because it is critical that we are given the right resources so that we can put our finances on a more stable footing. We have to get that fundamental right.

Ms Bradshaw: First Minister, will you outline the timeline for the recruitment of a permanent secretary to the Executive Office, please?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the detail of that process, but it is under way. I am happy to confirm that in writing to the new Chair of the Committee. I wish you well in your role.

Mr Frew: If the First Minister is truly a First Minister for all, will she meet the COVID-19 vaccine injured and bereaved?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to meet anybody who writes in and requests a meeting. It is important that, regardless of whether we agree or disagree on things, we are able to have conversations.

Mr Beattie: First Minister, will you outline your proposals for the setting up of a transformation delivery unit?

Mrs O'Neill: That is still in development. We are working our way through the detail of it. It is important — I think that your colleague raised concerns about this — that it is open to all

Ministers so that everybody has access to it. It is under policy development, but the House will have a chance to scrutinise what is being proposed.

Mr O'Toole: First Minister, notwithstanding the current debate and discussions around the fiscal package, Executive parties have been in discussions around developing a Programme for Government for, I think, around 18 months now in a parallel process to other talks. Can you give us a date for when the Programme for Government will be published?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure you that it is just in the past two weeks that we have been formally around the table discussing a Programme for Government. We will bring that forward as quickly as possible for scrutiny in the Chamber. Prior to the restoration of the Executive, there were numerous conversations with the head of the Civil Service around priorities and what things potentially would look like, but that is no substitute for an official Programme for Government, which we are working our way through. I hope to be able, in the coming weeks, to talk in the Chamber about that at length.

Executive Office Ministers: Guidance

2. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what guidance is provided to Executive Office Ministers to ensure that they only represent agreed Executive positions when undertaking publicly funded foreign visits. (AQO 14/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: As First Minister and deputy First Minister, we have taken the Pledge of Office required of all Ministers. In that pledge, we have agreed to:

"observe the joint nature of the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister"

and:

"support, and act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly".

We are fully committed to delivering on that pledge in all aspects of our public duties.

Mr Allister: Let me make the follow-up question clear: when the First Minister flies at public expense to, say, the St Patrick's Day celebrations in Washington, will she exploit the fact that she is travelling at public expense and

abuse the office that she holds by espousing causes such as the Palestinian cause or the cause of Irish unity? Those are hardly Executive-agreed policies, or are they?

Mrs O'Neill: When arrangements are made for official travel, they are always in the context of the joint nature of our office. Speaking personally, I believe that it is incumbent on all of us to use every voice that we have to raise the plight of the Palestinian people and advocate peace and a settlement. I think that all of us watch on with horror at the slaughter there, day on day. It is important that we express our desire for our example to be a shining example of how you can achieve peace.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad Aire as ucht a freagra. [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the First Minister for her answer.*] Does the First Minister agree that building and maximising international relations is critically important for growth and prosperity here?

Mrs O'Neill: The short answer is, obviously, yes. We have enormous opportunities now open to us, including the use of dual market access, that allow us to grow our exports and attract higher-quality foreign direct investment (FDI). We should promote our reputation as a world-class destination: somewhere to live, work, study and invest. We are working with our officials to identify priority areas for international engagement, thematically and geographically. We also plan to work with our partners across the globe to promote our international objectives and bring benefits and prosperity to all of the people who live here.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Support

3. **Ms Nicholl** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what support their Department will provide to local councils for projects to support asylum seekers and refugees in the 2024-25 financial year. (AQO 12/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: With the agreement of the strategic planning group for refugees and asylum seekers or, in the short version, the SPG, the Department allocated £1.54 million of Home Office full dispersal funding to local councils that has been and continues to be used to support the ongoing development of asylum infrastructure and improve services available locally. The Home Office has yet to

confirm full dispersal funding instructions for the 2024-25 financial year, and officials continue to press for urgent clarity on that. The funding quantum is likely to be limited. While we are keen to continue to enhance the support available at council level, the SPG will need to consider the full range of needs before the allocations are made. The Department has, however, secured funding from the Home Office for refugee employability and integration projects, and, in the 2024-25 financial year, councils will each receive £50,000 for projects to support refugee integration.

The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) is a member of the SPG, and the Department also chairs a regular council engagement group. Through both forums, officials will continue to engage with councils and to provide an update when further information on funding is available.

Ms Nicholl: I thank the First Minister for her answer. She will be aware that the Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership has ceased to exist and that TEO has taken the governance into that Department. I have concerns regarding accountability and transparency. As dispersal and integration will be key roles for so many Departments, will the First Minister commit to looking at that again and at how we can ensure that the governance is fully transparent and open?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for that. I share that view. It is so important that we are joined up and coordinated and that everybody is working to the same plan. The Strategic Migration Partnership did cease to function, as you said, but we have worked with the Home Office to cover some of those functions. It is important, now that we are up and running again, to take a fresh look at that to see whether there is anything else that we can do to improve how that functions. If it is not the partnership, what does it look like? I am happy to continue to engage with the Member on that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht a freagra. [*Translation: I thank the First Minister for her answer.*] Thank you, First Minister, for your response to Kate Nicholl's question. Will the First Minister provide an update, as best she can, on the refugee integration strategy and say how that fits into everything now?

Mrs O'Neill: Consultation on the draft strategy ended on 21 February 2022. The analysis showed strong support for the proposed vision and for the outcomes. Work to date has

included establishing appropriate structures to support an effective and joined-up approach across government, which Ms Nicholl raised; providing support for Ukrainian arrivals; facilitating the allocation of dispersal funding to enhance local support and services for asylum seekers; implementing regional immigration advice services; and developing an orientation package. Alongside that work, officials have been collaborating with other Departments to develop thematic delivery plans. The next step is for officials to bring the final refugee integration strategy and associated plans to the Executive for agreement in the coming months.

Ms Hunter: On asylum-seeking, I know that we are all appalled by the murder of thousands of innocent children, men and women in Palestine. Does the First Minister agree that we must step up to the mark and urgently create and commit to a Palestinian visa scheme —?

Mr Speaker: We need to stay on topic.

Ms Hunter: It is to do with asylum-seeking.

It would allow for the safe passage of Palestinian people who have family in Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: As a rule, we as a society should be as open and as welcoming as we can, particularly to anybody who is fleeing persecution or a war-torn zone. Again, we can speak to our officials about that to make sure that we are as welcoming as we can be and that we support people who need our support. That is the decent to do in any good society.

High Street Task Force: Update

4. **Ms Brownlee** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the implementation of the high street task force report 'Delivering a 21st Century High Street'. (AQO 9/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Reilly will answer that question.

Miss Reilly (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): On 6 August 2020, the Executive formed the cross-departmental high street task force, chaired by the junior Ministers. The Department for Communities provided the secretariat. The task force was appointed for five years. Its membership was drawn from a wide range of sectors, including retail, hospitality, academia, central and local government and the community and voluntary

sectors. The task force's aim was to deliver the vision of sustainable city, town and village centres that are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services, as well as being great places to live. The task force's report 'Delivering a 21st Century High Street' was submitted in March 2022 to TEO, and junior Ministers at that time publicly accepted it.

High streets are at the heart of our society in more ways than one. They not only drive the economy but create shared spaces where society thrives.

The task force report was, as I said, published in March 2022, and the junior Ministers paid tribute to the work done by the task force and welcomed the strategic narrative. The recommendations will be of interest to a number of Departments.

2.15 pm

Ms Brownlee: My constituency encompasses the historical town of Carrickfergus, where a significant part of the high street is within the conservation area. Conservation areas could find it difficult to implement some of the suggestions in the report. Will there be additional support for areas like that to allow them to thrive also?

Miss Reilly: I am happy to come back to the Member on that in writing.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the junior Minister for her response to a specific report on the work of the high street task force. Will the Minister outline progress to date on taking forward all the work of the high street task force?

Miss Reilly: The high street task force, as I said, was established by the last Executive to look at enhancing investment in cities, towns and villages that had changed over recent years. The task force worked with relevant Departments, businesses, organisations, trade unions, chambers of commerce and councils to look at the issues affecting high streets and their changing use.

Other action has been taken in parallel. For example, the ministerial advisory group for architecture and the built environment has developed a fresh approach to place-making called Living High Streets. A Living High Streets craft kit is available on the ministerial advisory group website to help local communities to develop more sustainable high streets. The COVID recovery small settlements regeneration

programme built upon the successful COVID-19 recovery revitalisation programme. Together, those programmes delivered £40 million of funding to address challenges faced by village, town and city centres. Consideration of the report is a matter for the Executive, and Ministers will shortly write to Executive colleagues inviting them to consider how they will take forward the findings of the report.

Delivering the recommendations will require resources, of course. That is why we need our public finances to be on a sustainable footing. The First Minister and deputy First Minister, with the Finance Minister, will make that case directly to the Treasury in the coming period.

Mr Stewart: I thank the junior Minister for the update on the high street task force. Town centres and independent retailers are the backbone of our local economy. In my constituency of East Antrim, they face a 10% increase in their rates as a result of the striking of the rate. Will the Executive Office commit to looking at rebalancing how we tax and set rates for independent retailers so that they are not paying the full burden of the rates process?

Miss Reilly: The Member will know that that is a local government matter, but we do acknowledge the vital importance of the hospitality sector in driving people to visit their local high street, particularly as retail habits continue to change. We also recognise the wide range of issues that the hospitality sector has faced, including COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis. Hospitality businesses will be a vital part of creating more sustainable high streets, and the recommendations of the report build a strong foundation.

COVID-19 Inquiry: WhatsApp Messages

5. **Mr Durkan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the investigation into why WhatsApp messages relevant to the Covid-19 inquiry were deleted from Ministers' phones. (AQO 15/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: In August 2023, TEO notified the module 2C inquiry team of a potential loss of data from Civil Service mobile devices supplied to Ministers and spads that may be relevant to the terms of reference of the public inquiry. The group head of NICS internal audit service was commissioned to undertake a fact-finding investigation into how some mobile devices returned by Ministers and spads came to be reset. The report, dated 7 December 2023, was shared with the module 2C inquiry legal team

on 8 December. The terms of reference of the NICS mobile device fact-finding investigation stated that, if analysis of the mobile devices by an IT specialist was required to determine the status of each device and retrieve information where possible, that would be undertaken as a separate exercise.

On 20 December 2023, the head of the Civil Service commissioned an independent technical analysis of devices that had been allocated to former Ministers and special advisers in NICS. The analysis of devices is ongoing, and the COVID inquiry will be advised of the outcome of that exercise.

Mr Durkan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad Aire as an fhreagra sin. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for that answer.]* People across the North and beyond were understandably disturbed that those WhatsApp messages had been wiped. Does the First Minister regret the deletion of those messages, and will she undertake to change guidance for the Civil Service so that something like that cannot happen again?

Mrs O'Neill: The purpose of the whole public inquiry is to learn lessons and make sure that any lessons that need to be learned are taken on board and the mistakes never repeated. I want to be very respectful of the process of the independent investigation, as the inquiry asks us to be, but I can assure the Member that we have fully participated with providing any information that has been requested for the purposes of the inquiry. I am glad to say that oral hearings for module 2C of the inquiry will be begin in Belfast on 29 April and will run for three weeks. It is really important that we respect the process. In the fullness of time, I have no doubt that we will come back to this in the Chamber.

The Member asked about lessons learned. In the first instance, the investigation report has been given to the inquiry. The inquiry will then decide whether and how it wishes to publish that report. When it comes to lessons learned, I can assure you that guidance has been given to all newly appointed Ministers and spads as to what is expected.

Ms Kimmins: Does the First Minister agree that this public inquiry is particularly important for addressing the concerns of those who lost loved ones during the pandemic and that providing answers for those families should be the primary concern of everyone in the Chamber?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. I am sure that, as always, we all offer our condolences to all those families that lost a loved one. Our thoughts are with everybody who continues to mourn the loss of someone that they held very dear, and I absolutely agree with the Member that this is about them having their opportunity, through the inquiry, to examine our response to the pandemic and ensure that the lessons that are learned for the future are learned absolutely. It is essential that the inquiry has the full cooperation of all, and I have no doubt that that is everybody's intention.

Mr Buckley: Did the Minister ever communicate via WhatsApp with regard to the organisation or arrangements relating to the funeral of Bobby Storey?

Mrs O'Neill: I am going to be respectful of the inquiry; I answer to the inquiry. I have appeared before the inquiry and will do so again.

Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls

6. **Mr Donnelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a timeline to implement the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls. (AQO 6/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Cheann Comhairle, junior Minister Reilly will answer this question.

Miss Reilly: We are committed to bringing forward the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls as soon as possible. This Executive strategy has been developed through a successful co-design process involving people and organisations from right across government and society, including, crucially, those with lived experience. Our officials are liaising with Departments and members of the co-design group regarding the outcome of the recent public consultation. Preparatory work to enable effective delivery is under way, and the draft two-year implementation plan is being developed for consideration by Ministers. The draft strategic framework is expected to be submitted for Executive consideration and approval in the coming weeks.

We recognise that a lot of work is already being taken forward across Departments and in our communities. The framework is intended to enhance and complement that work in order to bring about the changes that we all want to see. It is essential that we work in a more strategic,

joined-up way to tackle violence against women and girls. Governance structures are being designed to avoid duplication and maximise the effectiveness of public resources. Close departmental collaboration is ongoing, and monitoring will have an outcomes-based focus to ensure effective implementation.

Mr Donnelly: Ministers will be aware that many of these frameworks are subject to budgets. Is the Minister satisfied that an adequate budget exists for this work over the period that it is required?

Miss Reilly: The Member knows that we are operating in a very difficult budgetary situation, the impact of which is felt across all Departments and within our communities. We acknowledge the continuing good work that is being carried out by delivery partners in very challenging circumstances. Work is ongoing to develop an implementation plan to support the delivery of the strategic framework. That work includes the preparation of a detailed business case to inform ministerial decisions on associated funding requirements.

Ms Sheerin: Comhghairdeas leis an Aire faoina post nua. I formally congratulate my colleague on her appointment.

The problem of violence against women and girls is so widespread in society and, by its very nature, statistics cannot properly capture just how big a problem it is. Can the junior Minister outline everything that she and her Department are doing to combat it?

Miss Reilly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a ceiste. *[Translation: I thank the Member for her question.]* Yes. Significant work has already been taken forward by the Departments of Justice and Health through the stopping domestic and sexual violence strategy; by statutory agencies, including through the PSNI's 'Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan'; and by the voluntary and community sector. Despite that, ending all forms of violence, abuse and harm against women and girls remains one of the most pressing challenges facing our society today.

As a response, the previous Executive commissioned the development of the strategic framework, and work is under way to establish the foundation for the necessary whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. Engagement with stakeholders across a range of sectors is ongoing, including working together on prevention across education, in the workplace, when socialising and with our

children and young people. This week, junior Minister Cameron and I, along with senior officials, met the UN special rapporteur on violence against women and girls, Reem Alsalem. It was clear from our discussion that, in order to make progress, we need to see that violence against women and girls is everyone's problem and that solving it will require collective action by everyone in society.

Ms Egan: Does the junior Minister agree that ending violence against women and girls will require buy-in from all Departments and that it made no sense for the Executive Office to consult on the strategy at the same time as the Department of Health cut all core grant funding from Women's Aid? Will the Executive Office commit to work with other Departments to implement the strategy?

Miss Reilly: Go raibh maith agat, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist sin fosta. *[Translation: Thank you, and I thank the Member for that question too.]* I will be happy to come back to the Member in writing.

North West Strategic Growth Partnership

7. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership. (AQO 8/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: The North West Strategic Growth Partnership continues its work to support the north-west region to achieve its full potential and transition to being a net economic contributor. The partnership hosted its most recent plenary meeting on 30 November 2023. The plenary received updates on various matters, including tertiary education and skills, infrastructure and spatial growth, and the potential for green growth in the region. A refreshed memorandum of understanding between members of the north-west tertiary education cluster was also launched at the meeting. It is an excellent example of how education providers across both jurisdictions can work together to deliver better services for students.

Between September 2022 and May 2023, thematic discussions were facilitated between members of the partnership, which brought together key players, including the local councils, policy officials from both Administrations and other key stakeholders, in order to have focused conversations across topics such as economic development, further

and higher education, tourism and health. Planning is under way to facilitate further discussions on priority areas in the near future.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Leadership is crucial, and the Executive Office needs to step up and put all support behind the North West Strategic Growth Partnership. Will the First Minister commit to ensure that the Executive take their leadership role, with the required level of funding allocated to this body, to agree a cross-border strategic programme to drive growth in the north-west cross-border city region?

Mrs O'Neill: Some of the work that has happened even up to this point has been excellent. We can see all the other areas where further collaboration can be achieved, and we have to back that up. The fact that we are working across both jurisdictions is equally important in order to maximise the potential that we know is there.

Before Question Time, the Economy Minister took to his feet to set out his economic vision, and he referred to the need for a regionally balanced economy. That is important in order to rebalance and ensure that the north-west is part of the plan for expansion and better prosperity for everybody, so that everybody enjoys it.

Mr Delargy: Will the First Minister outline any other progress in the north-west?

Mrs O'Neill: There are the city and growth deals for Derry City and Strabane District Council and Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. I understand that Derry City and Strabane District Council is progressing towards signing its deal in the spring or summer of this year. Likewise, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council is progressing towards signing its heads of terms in spring this year. That is, no doubt, good news for the north-west.

The Executive commitment to increase student numbers at Magee remains a priority, and I understand that the Economy Minister will outline his plans for that in the weeks ahead. The graduate-entry medical school opened to its first cohort of students in 2021, and the second and third cohorts started over the past two years. I understand that the university is also developing the business case for a state-of-the-art north-west medical school, incorporating a graduate-entry medical school and personalised medicine.

From the progress that is being made and that will be made in the time ahead, we can see that

it is quite an exciting time for investment in the north-west. DFI is going to be key to that, but it is important that the Executive are seen as champions of regional balance and that we make sure that we get it right, now that we have the opportunity again to do so.

2.30 pm

Executive Office: Decision Making

8. **Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures the Executive Office has put in place to ensure decisions are taken in an open and transparent manner. (AQO 5/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: TEO operates under a corporate governance framework that sets out management responsibilities and the actions that the Department takes to ensure that decisions are open and transparent. The framework covers the principles of good corporate governance and explains the importance placed on policies, plans and review arrangements. It prescribes the Department's systems of internal control and risk management, along with TEO's internal and external audit arrangements. It is supported by the departmental board's operating framework and by the terms of reference of the audit and risk assurance committee and the major business case committee. Divisions and arm's-length bodies provide quarterly assurance statements to confirm that the framework's requirements are being met. The framework is subject to an annual review to ensure that it is up to date and responsive to emerging issues.

As part of its commitment to transparency, TEO publishes departmental board agendas and minutes of board meetings. The Department's annual report and accounts contain a governance statement demonstrating the importance of transparency and openness. The decisions taken by departmental officials under the Executive formation legislation during the Executive's period of suspension have also been published.

Mr Speaker: There is one minute for a question and an answer.

Mr Buckley: The COVID inquiry has rightly raised serious questions surrounding openness and transparency, with former First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon suggesting that the use of WhatsApp was all too common. With that in mind, will the Minister inform the House whether she supplied the inquiry with any

WhatsApp messages on personal or departmental phones?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in an earlier answer, I am going to speak to the COVID inquiry. That is the forum in which we should address all those things. I can say that an investigation is under way of how WhatsApp data was wiped from devices in the Department. I can also say that the Department produced more than 290 strings of WhatsApp engagements, but I am certain that policy decisions were not made not by WhatsApp but through the official channels.

Mr Speaker: That is the end of the time for questions. We will move on to topical questions.

First Minister: Commitment Not to Resign

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister will commit to not resigning her office for the remainder of the mandate, given that, on the day on which she was inaugurated, he asked her to make a commitment to the people of the North that she and the deputy First Minister would not resign and cause the collapse of the institutions, something that he followed up on last Sunday by letter — to which he is yet to receive a response — and bearing in mind that this is not a stunt, given that, today, we have talked about a range of urgent priorities for the people of Northern Ireland for which, in order to deliver, we need to have institutions. (AQT 1/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: As I said to the Member on each occasion, I am here because I want to be. I am here in the Executive Office, as part of the Executive, because I want to be and because I want to serve all the people. That is the mandate on which we were all elected to serve. We received your letter and will respond to you in writing, but I can say this: it is much bigger than the office of the Executive Office, because what you refer to is fundamental change. The best place for that to happen is in the political space, and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee is probably the best place for that to be taken forward.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with the First Minister that we need fundamentally to reform the institutions on the basis of the rules, but, until we do that, only two people — you and the deputy First Minister — can prevent the institutions collapsing. First Minister, when the DUP collapsed the institutions, you said that it was "utterly contemptible, cruel and self-serving".

You said that it was punishing the public and using our people as ransom. You said that it threatened our democracy. I agree with you on all those things, so why do you insist on your party's retaining that veto?

Mrs O'Neill: What I insist on is that I am here to do business. I am here to be in the Executive. We have chosen to go into the Executive, to take the hard decisions and to deal with public services on a day-to-day basis. We have taken the Pledge of Office. We are here to work. The issue on which the Member has written to us is of a much more political nature, and he should bring it to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. We will not be found wanting in engaging in that conversation, because we should all constantly be looking at the things that allow us to work better and at what makes us work more effectively. I am certainly up for that conversation.

Age Discrimination Legislation

T2. **Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plans to introduce stand-alone age discrimination legislation for the accessing of goods, services and facilities. (AQT 2/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: Consideration of extending age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services was, as the Member knows, the subject of consultation in the previous mandate. At that time, a decision was not made in respect of the scope of the legislation. I have been told that the issue now requires further work to inform the potential scope of the legislation. I have no doubt that, again, like many other things about which we have talked today, we will have to come back for more detailed conversations in the Chamber on those things.

Ms Sugden: I thank the First Minister for her answer. She will appreciate that this is the only region of the United Kingdom that does not have that specific legislation. The issue seems to be around the lower age limit. Does she agree that we need the legislation in place, even if that means going with what has been done similarly in GB and the 18-plus limit?

Mrs O'Neill: You are right: we are the only place on these two islands without any protection against age discrimination, particularly in the provision of goods, facilities and services. We need to look at it urgently and to build on the work that has gone before to bring it forward in this mandate. I look forward to working with the Member, who has shown a

keen interest in it, to get to the point that we are all trying to get to.

International Women's Day

T3. **Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to state the importance of International Women's Day on 8 March. (AQT 3/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I am glad to see that the Member is taking an interest in International Women's Day. I hope that, this year, for International Women's Day, the Executive are able to at least advance our plans around ending violence against women and girls. I hope that we can get close to that juncture for International Women's Day, because it would be a great sign for wider society and for women and girls that the Executive take that seriously.

Mr Buckley: On that day, the Operation Kenova team will report on the actions of the high-profile agent, Stakeknife. Given the abuse, sexual and otherwise, that many women faced at the hands of paramilitaries, can the Minister inform the House whether she ever met Freddie Scappaticci?

Mrs O'Neill: God bless us and save us. That has nothing to do with the Executive Office. We will work our way through all our Executive business. The Member may wish to be divisive, and, if that is what he wishes to do, that is his prerogative. I am committed to working in this joint office and to trying to do our best around all the issues in public services. That is what I am focused on. I will even go further than that: that is what the wider public are also focused on.

FICT Report: Recommendations

T4. **Ms Egan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their Department will bring forward recommendations from the flags, identity, culture and tradition (FICT) report in this mandate. (AQT 4/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I congratulate the Member on her new post as Deputy Chair of the Committee. I look forward to working with her. I know that she had flagged that area as one in which she is keenly interested.

We were able to progress some of that work previously. The FICT report was finally presented to the Executive Office in July 2020. It is a comprehensive document. There are 45 recommendations in that report. It does not

provide all the solutions, but it certainly offers us a way forward in dealing with the issues at the heart of division. It looks at cultural traditions and identities and how they can be celebrated and commemorated. It looks at that wide area on the basis of equality and mutual respect. We need to have that full report brought back to the Executive. At that time, an implementation plan was identified for May of this year. We now need to get the up-to-date position from our officials, and then we will probably talk to the Committee and bring it to the House no doubt on further occasions.

Ms Egan: I look forward to seeing those plans in Committee. Does the First Minister agree that instances in which flags of proscribed organisations are erected on street furniture, with the relevant Departments or agencies refusing to remove them, are completely unacceptable and that we need legislation to tackle and regulate that issue?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with you. It makes absolute sense for us to publish the FICT report and then move on to whatever legislative changes we may need to make. There is no doubt that the implementation of the report will be challenging, but that is why we need to have the implementation plan in place.

I want us to get to the point where we adopt a positive approach to managing the issues of identity, culture and tradition, which continue to cause division. Let us all work towards legislating, where appropriate, and ensure that we do all that we can to create an inclusive, welcoming and multicultural society with anti-sectarianism at its core.

NICS: Silo Working

T5. **Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action the Executive Office will take to address silo working in Departments. (AQT 5/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I will write to the Member. Do you mean in relation to how everybody is working in their respective Departments? I will talk to you afterwards, perhaps, to get more clarification of what you are asking.

Reconciliation: IRA Condemnation

T6. **Mrs Dodds** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, in the interests of reconciliation, the First Minister will condemn the terrorists in the IRA who were responsible for death and destruction, given that 17

February 1978 is marked by one of the worst IRA atrocities in Northern Ireland, when an incendiary device ripped through the La Mon Hotel, killing 12 people, who were burnt alive, and injuring dozens. (AQT 6/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I think that the Member and I have discussed areas like this before. It is so, so important. I said two weeks ago, when I accepted the position of First Minister, that I regret every loss of life, without exception. That is everybody out there who has been hurt in our society. It is our job, together, to try to build a better society. It is our job to look towards the future, and it is our job to try to properly deal with the past.

Mrs Dodds: The general public are tired of platitudes, and they want to know, in the interests of reconciliation, that such atrocities can be condemned wholeheartedly.

Let me try another one. Ian Sproule was killed by the IRA. Such was the ferocity with which the bullets hit his body that the IRA later phoned his family and told them to go out into the yard and look at the mess that they had left him in. In the interests of reconciliation, will the First Minister condemn such actions? Actually, will she go further? Given the allegations of collusion with the gardai in relation to the death of Ian Sproule, will the First Minister use her influence to call for an inquiry into such collusion?

Mrs O'Neill: This all speaks to why we need to properly deal with the past, why we have to have a proper reconciliation process and why we have to properly deal with what was agreed by all parties way back in the Stormont House Agreement, because what the British Government are doing about dealing with the legacy of the past does nothing to heal anybody's wounds and nothing to advance our society. I am committed to building a better future, I am committed to trying to reconcile people, and I am committed to doing everything that we can to move our society forward. No matter who out there has been hurt in the past, that is so regrettable across the board. It does not matter what background you come from or who hurt whom; it is regrettable that there has been any loss of life here on our island.

Mr Speaker: Mike Nesbitt is not in his place.

October 7 Attacks: Condemnation

T8. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister condemns the attacks on 7 October in

Israel, which started a chain of events that we all witness each night on our televisions. (AQT 8/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I have done so previously.

Mr K Buchanan: Do you defend Israel's right to defend itself, or is there no alternative?

Mrs O'Neill: This is far too serious for petty games. It is far, far too serious for petty games. What is happening in Palestine and the Middle East requires a ceasefire, requires dialogue and requires all of us to lift our voice to call for an end to it. All sides — everybody in the Middle East — need it to stop. The bombardment every day of the people in Gaza — the Palestinian people — is horrendous and heartbreaking to watch, so we should all be very conscious of using our voice to call for peace and dialogue. To use our own example, we need to continue to have dialogue if we are to get to a peaceful solution, which is what we all want to see for the people in the Middle East.

A5 Upgrade: Irish Government Contribution

T9. **Miss Brogan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister welcomes the recent confirmation from the Taoiseach that he intends to bring a proposal to the Cabinet to recommend an increase in the Irish Government's contribution to the A5 road upgrade project, which is a hugely important infrastructure project for the people of West Tyrone. (AQT 9/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. I know that the Member is a huge advocate for the A5 and understands the necessity of it and the benefits that it will bring. I very much welcome the Taoiseach's recent commitment in the Dáil. That is a positive step, and the upgrade of the A5 is vital for the people in the north-west. The upgrade is needed. It will improve road safety and enhance economic development in the area, so I look forward, in the coming days, to more positive announcements about the A5 and the contribution to its funding.

2.45 pm

Miss Brogan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. [*Translation: I thank the Minister.*] The long delay in the project has obviously been hugely frustrating for the many families who have lost loved ones on that dangerous road and for the many users who know the dangers that they

incur when using it. Does the First Minister agree that work needs to begin as soon as possible?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I hope that the work can start very soon, now that we have our Executive back up and running and a Minister at the helm in the Department. We all have to maximise all the funding that is available to us and get the work started as quickly as possible. I commend everybody who has been working, for example, on the Enough is Enough campaign and all the area's representatives for the work that they have done to get us to this point. I hope that we will see more positive news in the coming days.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Fishing Industry: Skilled Worker Visa

1. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has to protect and safeguard the fishing industry, following the Home Office's announcement of an increase to the minimum salary required for people arriving on the skilled worker visa. (AQO 20/22-27)

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I will start by saying that it is good to be here. Scrutiny of Ministers and accountability to the Assembly are vital.

Immigration is an excepted matter and a policy area that the UK Government (UKG) retain exclusive control over. I am, however, aware of the difficulties that are facing the fishing industry, and I plan to write to the Home Office on those changes and their potential impacts on Northern Ireland's agriculture and fisheries sectors. My officials will also continue to work with representatives from Northern Ireland's fishing industry in order to understand the extent of the impact on our fleet.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the urgency of the issue and the fact that it affects the fishing industry on a day-to-day basis, especially in my constituency and particularly in Kilkeel harbour, will the Minister agree to meet representatives of the fishing industry in the short term and give them the opportunity to highlight the matter?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. I would be delighted to do that. On Wednesday, I will visit Portavogie harbour, and, on Thursday, I am provisionally set to meet representatives

from the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation. I look forward to the motion that will be brought to the House on, I understand, Tuesday.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that a good start to safeguarding the fishing industry would be to deal with the outrageous situation whereby fishermen from Northern Ireland who make their catches in British waters cannot land them because they are decreed to be foreign catch? Will he address that?

Mr Muir: I am aware of the issue that the Member refers to. At this moment, I outline that, as Minister, my approach to EU exit will be different to what has gone before. I intend to implement the law. To me, respecting the law is important. I believe in upholding the ministerial code in word and deed. I also want to focus on working with others to find solutions. I will focus on that issue in the time ahead. I am not focused on deliberately enlarging problems. I am focused on solutions. My task at hand, and this is what I intend to do, is to make the job of managing EU exit exceedingly boring. We have had far too much drama. What we need is delivery.

Mr Blair: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I want to say at the outset that it is with absolute pleasure that I welcome the Minister to his new office and to his place today. Will he provide an update on the ongoing inquiry into the seasonal worker route by the migration advisory committee (MAC)?

Mr Muir: I am very aware of the issue and its impact on the industry. In March 2023, the migration advisory committee announced that it would undertake a self-commissioned inquiry of the seasonal worker route. My Department's officials submitted a response to the call for evidence, and, by engaging closely with Northern Ireland stakeholders, significant opportunity has been afforded to local businesses that utilise that route to be part of the review process. That included supporting them in organising a stakeholder engagement event with Professor Brian Bell in September 2023 and subsequent individual site visits and interviews with MAC officials in January 2024.

The migration advisory committee has indicated that the findings of that inquiry were due to be published in spring 2024 but that that may be delayed until the summer, given that it is now under time constraints to complete a rapid review of the new immigration shortage list. I will continue to meet and work with representatives from businesses that use that

visa route so that I can understand their needs. I await the publication of MAC's recommendations, and I hope that those will subsequently allow the Home Office to provide clarity on the future of that visa route post-2024 and give our stakeholders the certainty that they need.

Mobuoy Remediation Project

2. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline how environmental considerations for the Mobuoy remediation project are being met. (AQO 19/22-27)

Mr Muir: The environmental crime that was committed at Mobuoy is simply appalling. Huge quantities of polluting waste materials were unlawfully deposited adjacent to the River Faughan, a special area of conservation, and 2 kilometres upstream of Northern Ireland Water's drinking abstraction point. My Department is committed to pursuing the perpetrators of such crime through ongoing proceedings, including, where possible, ensuring that the polluter pays through confiscation under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

Safeguarding public health, ensuring safe drinking water and reducing the environmental impact of this crime is paramount. To that end, my officials are delivering a comprehensive environmental monitoring programme, which includes detailed monitoring using international quality standards of on-site groundwater and surface water in partnership with Northern Ireland Water and through monitoring of the River Faughan. Quality reports are freely available on the DAERA website. I am advised that, to date, there has been no adverse impact on the safety of the drinking water supplied from the River Faughan.

My Department appointed an integrated consultancy team to develop a draft optimum remediation strategy, in line with best practice. That strategy to deliver long-term remediation of the site is based on the best balance of environmental, social and economic factors. A detailed risk assessment, drawing on intensive site investigations and seven years of monitoring, has provided the foundation for the development of the remediation strategy. I intend to issue the draft strategy for consultation within the next two months.

My officials are in regular contact with local stakeholders, including elected and community representatives and young people, to keep them informed and help develop a future site

vision to secure a positive environmental outcome for all at the Mobuoy site.

Mr Beattie: I welcome the Minister to his post.

We find ourselves in a truly abysmal situation. Some £600,000 has been spent on that already this year. Will the Minister outline how much it is likely to cost and for how long? Will that spend protect our wild Atlantic salmon waterways, which are in danger from leakage?

Mr Muir: To date, my Department does not have a cost estimate that has been assessed and approved through the required public finance processes, such as an approved business case. There are several reasons for that. First, my Department continues to pursue the perpetrators of this environmental crime through ongoing criminal proceedings. Secondly, my Department will shortly issue a public consultation on a range of remediation options for the site. The views of stakeholders are hugely important to me, and I want to ensure that those views are taken into account in the remediation options chosen. Hence, it is not possible to confirm stable costing now. Thirdly, a range of approval processes must be carried out to ensure that any remediation proposals are both technically sound and cost-effective, including consultation with Executive colleagues and, most importantly, the Department of Finance in relation to affordability. Those processes can only move forward following the results of a public consultation.

Work has been undertaken by consultants on the potential costs and will inform a draft outline business case. I am aware that one of the options contains remediation costs of £107 million, which, on a point in time estimate, are subject to significant change to the technical development and the timescales over which any remediation might take place. I am conscious that the costs could be much more than that. In addition, there are significant iterative processes to review and business cases to assess before they are considered by the DAERA casework committee. That has not taken place. There is, therefore, no agreed preferred option, and there will not be one until consultations are fully completed and, informed by that, updated options are developed and presented for the next stages of scrutiny and approval.

Mr McAleer: I welcome the Minister to his position and look forward to working with him as a member of the AERA Committee.

I thank the Minister for outlining the next steps in the remediation project. Is it possible, at this stage, to give indicative timescales for any of those steps?

Mr Muir: I recognise that remediation is expected to take a number of years to complete. An implementation plan and timetable for remediation remains subject to the outcome of upcoming public consultation and public finance approvals. The public consultation will give all interested parties the opportunity to comment on the draft optimum remediation strategy. In the meantime, the Department will continue its comprehensive environmental monitoring programme. Following consultation, the responses will be considered and my Department will determine any necessary amendments to the draft strategy.

I visited the site a number of years ago and I know the concerns in the community in relation to the matter. I know that we need to move on it, but we need to do that correctly and ensure that we are taking into account the public comments and concerns. It is right up there in our priorities, but I want to make sure that, whatever we do here, we do it right.

Mr Middleton: The Minister will agree that Mobuoy is a scandal that, sadly, has gone unaddressed for far too long. What assurances can he give to the residents of the area, who, unfortunately, continue to live with this illegal dump and continue to deal with illegal dumping within and outside that site? What assurances can he give to members of the public who have been waiting far too long?

Mr Muir: As the Member has outlined, the whole issue of environmental crime is a matter for concern, as is the need for enforcement around it. The people who are dumping are engaging in criminal activity, and, in Northern Ireland, we need to make sure that we are turning all our energies towards catching the perpetrators who are associated with that. I hope to be in Derry/Londonderry in the next number of weeks, and I will visit the site in order to look at those issues. I will be happy for the Member to correspond with me on any particular issues on which enforcement needs to be focused.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answers and congratulate him on his elevation to his new position. Given that this is not just a huge environmental crime but a huge economic one, is he minded to pursue a public inquiry? Given that his counterpart in DFI is citing the situation

at Mobuoy as an impediment to the completion of the A6 and, therefore, the economic development of the north-west, will he pledge to work with DFI to resolve the situation as swiftly as possible?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question: there were two questions there. First, I have to declare that my stepfather is a quality manager with the A6 project from Dungiven to Drumahoe. In relation to that, I am aware of the concerns that this situation could impede the second phase of the A6. As for a public inquiry, I am committed to ensuring the range of conditions in which the perpetrators of the crime against the environment are prosecuted and that public safety is protected. At the moment, my focus is on the immediate issues, considering the need for remediation. I am very conscious of the financial costs that would be associated with an inquiry.

Water Quality: North Down

3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures his Department is taking to address poor water quality around the North Down coastline. (AQO 22/22-27)

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question; this is something that is very close to my heart. My Department seeks to improve water quality through the mechanisms outlined in the river basin management plans, which also cover coastal waters. Before bringing the third river basin management plan to the Executive, I will need to consider the outworkings of the water quality review on Lough Neagh and the reports of the Office for Environmental Protection and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which are due to be published in the near future. The primary sources of pollution are agricultural run-off and waste water. I will be examining how we tackle pollution from agriculture through measures like the review of the nutrient action programme. The proposals will also include working with Northern Ireland Water to target waste water infrastructure investment.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer and congratulate him on his appointment. Last summer, as he will know, Brompton bay, Donaghadee bay and Ballyholme beach all failed minimum water quality tests and were given a poor rating by his Department. With the popularity of open-sea swimming and the European yachting event, does he feel that, as he stated with Lough Neagh, it could take decades to solve?

Mr Muir: I am very conscious that this is an issue that requires many Departments to feed into it. As I outlined in my answer, agricultural run-off and waste water infrastructure are two of the primary causes of pollution. We need to invest in waste water infrastructure, and I will be looking to my colleague in the Department for Infrastructure for investment around that, which will flow from the Department of Finance.

We know what actions are required in relation to agricultural run-off, but I need support from the sector and from the Department of Finance so that we can make the investments to address the situation. It should not be like this, but we have to work together to turn it around. I am conscious that sea swimming is a very popular activity that people are engaging in, but they need to do it with confidence that it is safe.

Ms Egan: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber today and congratulate him on taking up his new role. Will he join me to meet sea-swimming groups in North Down to discuss the impact that it is having on them when water quality does not meet expectations?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question, and I would be delighted to do that. It is important to hear their concerns, which are not just in relation to water quality but about sampling and reporting so that people are aware when it is safe to swim. I will be happy to meet those groups.

3.00 pm

Mr Chambers: I welcome the Minister to his post. Can he confirm whether his Department is aware of any issues around agricultural run-offs or overflows from Northern Ireland Water outlets into the Cotton river, which enters the sea at Ballyholme bay, Bangor?

Mr Muir: I am indeed, and, as a constituency MLA, I met the chief executive of Northern Ireland Water on Friday. That issue is in one of its plans. Ballyholme beach has been plagued with issues of water quality, so we need to have a specific focus on how we can turn that around.

Independent Environmental Protection Agency

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what plans he has to implement the New Decade, New Approach commitment to

establish an independent environmental protection agency. (AQO 16/22-27)

Mr Muir: I believe that good environmental governance is about focusing on environmental outcomes and ensuring that we have the optimal structures and processes in place to enable us to achieve those outcomes.

My immediate priority, reflecting the statutory obligation placed on the Department, is to secure Executive approval for the draft environmental improvement plan. However, I also want to explore options for strengthening environmental governance for the longer term, in particular looking at the benefits that could accrue from setting up an independent environmental protection agency. This work will need to reflect the changed landscape for environmental oversight, including as a result of the UK leaving the EU, the role that the Office for Environmental Protection already plays and how we can interact with the Environmental Protection Agency in Ireland. It will also need to take account of the requirements in the Climate Change Act.

I will provide a further update to Members in the coming weeks on how a review of environmental governance will be taken forward, ensuring that it incorporates meaningful consultation and engagement.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister, and I wish him well in his new position. Minister, as is obvious from your response, we both agree on the need for independent oversight to call out your Department, and indeed other Executive colleagues, on environmental issues such as the one that we have experienced, the ecological crisis in Lough Neagh. Can you give the Assembly a time frame for the completion of the governance review and when might we see the actual process of establishing an independent environmental protection agency? We have had many reviews but no action.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I would like to see that review carried out this year. Obviously, it depends on resources in the Department. The steps after that are that there will be a consultation with the public and then reliance on Executive colleagues to allow this to go forward. I seek to engage with all sectors of society to outline the benefits associated with an independent environmental protection agency. It was one of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach, and it needs to be delivered.

Mrs Dillon: Minister, I wish you well going forward, and I hope to work closely with you, particularly on the issue around Lough Neagh. Can we get some indication, Minister, of what meetings you have had or what plans you have to bring the lough back into public ownership? We know that this is one of the greatest obstacles to moving forward with Lough Neagh.

Mr Muir: I am aware of the issues associated with ownership of the lough. I am meeting the Earl of Shaftesbury this week. I am looking forward to that meeting, which will be frank and open. I will be very keen to see the outcome of the work that the Lough Neagh Partnership is doing. It has recently received National Lottery funding to facilitate a review of the management and ownership of the lough. So, this is a twin-track approach when it comes to my engagement with the current owner and the future options for this.

There are no quick wins with the issues associated with Lough Neagh, and I think that it is important that I put it on the record in the Chamber today that it is highly likely that the scenes that we saw last year will occur this year. I say from a genuine place that it is a damning indictment that this situation was allowed to unfold.

Miss McIlveen: I congratulate the Minister on this his new role. Can he provide his assessment of the effectiveness of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) and, importantly, whether it has been fully funded to allow it to carry out its duties?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for her question. As part of the environmental governance review, we need to look at how the Office for Environmental Protection is functioning and how it relates to Northern Ireland. I can see benefits associated with it where it has called us out on what we are doing, but does it have the understanding that is needed on Northern Ireland? I am not entirely sure about that, and the review, hopefully, will be able to tease that out. Essentially, we need an independent body that can call me out, and I am quite keen to establish that.

Miss McAllister: Minister, I, too, congratulate you on taking up the role. In some of your answers, you briefly touched on the benefits of an independent environmental protection agency. Will the Minister outline some of those benefits?

Mr Muir: We have seen with a number of issues, such as Lough Neagh, that the need for

one has developed over time. We need an independent body that can have the foresight to call out an issue before it becomes a problem. We also need to have something that can guide not just the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs but other Departments. The whole issue of environmental governance is one for across government, not just for my Department.

Mr McNulty: Comhghairdeas [*Translation: Congratulations*] to the new Minister of Agriculture on his post. One of my favourite childhood memories is catching a fish in a dammed river running off the slopes of Slieve Gullion, but there have not been any fish in that river for a long time. Has the Minister any policies to support the rewilding and replenishing of our waterways?

Mr Muir: I am very conscious of the issues associated with the restocking of our angling estate as a result of the issues with the fish farm. The issue that the Member raises is one of many that I am dealing with on coming into office. I have over 150 requests to meet and an inbox that is overflowing. There is a lot to do, and that issue is part of that work. The fact that we did not have a Government for the past two years has had a significant impact. We are going to see the consequences of that play out over not just the weeks and months ahead but the years and decades ahead.

Agri-food Sector

5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what his plans are in relation to the agri-food sector. (AQO 29/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am very aware of the value and importance of the agri-food sector to Northern Ireland's economy, with the agriculture and food processing sectors employing around 80,000 people. That is particularly significant in our rural and coastal areas. I was inspired by my visit last week to Roy Lyttle's farm in Newtownards, and I look forward to engaging with a wide range of stakeholders in the coming weeks and months to hear their views on ways in which to help the sector to continue to prosper, as well as their playing a critical role in achieving our environmental obligations.

My Department is dedicated to improving the sustainability, productivity and resilience of the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland and continues to operate a range of existing programmes to support it. Those programmes include the Northern Ireland regional food

programme, which supports the promotion of Northern Ireland produce.

My officials are also progressing a range of new policies across agriculture and food. In particular, DAERA is leading on the development of a new cross-departmental food strategy framework, which presents a new whole-of-government approach to food in order to get better outcomes for Northern Ireland, to transform our food system for future generations and to help position Northern Ireland as the home of sustainable food.

I am committed to working across government and with other partners to address the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. I look forward to receiving further briefings from my officials on those important areas and will consider how they can be progressed.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, and congratulations on your appointment. Will the Minister outline to the House what progress he believes has been made on delivering a Northern Ireland food strategy?

Mr Muir: My officials are leading on the development of a cross-departmental Northern Ireland food strategy framework. It is a new, strategic, collaborative effort on food that will help improve economic, environmental, health and social outcomes for Northern Ireland. A public consultation exercise was carried out in the autumn of 2021. A Northern Ireland food strategy framework review lab, involving all relevant Departments, was held in October last year, with the aim of testing the draft framework against recent changes in the strategic policy context and refreshing the text, as required. I look forward to reviewing the food strategy framework, and I intend to discuss the matter with Executive colleagues before consideration of its publication.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time. Will he continue to implement the farm support programmes, as initiated by the former AERA Minister?

Mr Muir: I congratulate the Member on his appointment as Chair of the Committee, and I look forward to working with him.

The farm support and development programme is something on which I have been engaging with officials over the past two weeks, and I will be engaging with them again tomorrow. My officials have been working on the new farm support and development programme. The schemes and measures that are being

introduced will provide levers to contribute to statutory obligations under the Climate Change Act 2022, with a firm focus on just transition. In June 2023, my Department launched a timeline for the roll-out of its proposed farm support and development programme. That timeline provided the industry with an overview of when proposed schemes and measures will be introduced on a phased basis, subject to legislative and business case cover.

On 1 January 2024, the beef carbon reduction scheme was introduced. It is aimed at improving the efficiency of the beef sector and reducing livestock greenhouse gas emissions, thereby contributing to meeting the Climate Change Act targets.

That scheme is the most significant new element from the overall farm support programme to be added in 2024-25. Work is ongoing on the development of the proposed farm sustainability payment, farming with nature package and a number of other enabling measures and action schemes.

I will take some time to consider the overall content and progress of the proposed programme and how it addresses the priorities in the sector. I had a constructive meeting, last week, with the Ulster Farmers' Union at which we discussed this. The meeting was productive and useful, and there was a meeting of minds on many areas. I say to those who have a perception about me that I intend, over the next three years, to prove them wrong.

Mr Irwin: Given the importance of the agri-food sector to Northern Ireland, the Minister will be aware that some 300 planning applications from the agriculture sector are stuck with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and have not been responded to at this time due to ammonia levels. Will the Minister give an undertaking that he will look into that and expedite it as soon as possible to ensure that new applications and improvements on farms can go ahead?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question; he is moving ahead to Diane's question. I am very conscious of the issue around ammonia. Over the past two weeks, I have read quite a lot about ammonia. I have the KPMG report, which was produced by the sector, at my bedside. I have read over half of it already. I am aware that it is a complex issue. There are no easy solutions. I am also aware of the current situation that is impeding planning applications. My officials are working hard to address any issues in the system. We need to move at pace

and to make sure that whatever we do is correct, so that we are not back at square one. I acknowledge the frustration and anger from the sector on the matter. I hear it, and I intend to act.

Mr McCrossan: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his first Question Time.

Does the Minister agree that the agri-food sector in the North is an important part of the all-island industry, that cross-border trade and supply chains benefit the economy across the island of Ireland and that, despite Brexit and the efforts of some of his Executive colleagues, the future sustainable economic growth of the sector relies on taking advantage of and building on those all-island links?

Mr Muir: As Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I am keen to work North/South and east-west. There are a lot of commonalities, and the reality is that trade moves both ways. Last Thursday, I spoke to Pippa Hackett from the South. I have also been in contact with Charlie McConalogue, and I am engaging with Eamon Ryan. I am doing the same with my colleagues in Wales and Scotland, and I have reached out to DEFRA. I have invited Steve Barclay to Northern Ireland, but, if he will not come here, I will go and see him, because we need to engage across the whole North/South and east-west area and to work towards our common goals.

Ammonia Standing Advice

6. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will reverse the decision taken by the Department to no longer rely on published ammonia standing advice to facilitate a period of consultation and analysis. (AQO 28/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am conscious that, informed by the requirements of the legislation in place to cover decision-making in the absence of Ministers, my officials took a decision that they could no longer rely on published ammonia standing advice, also known as the operational protocol, as the basis for statutory advice on planning applications. That decision was taken following very careful consideration of the legislative obligations placed on my Department and in response to a potential legal challenge by the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP).

At this point, I have no plans to reverse the decision, rather my focus is on developing a new ammonia strategy that will be accompanied by new advice to inform planning

decisions. I am determined that the new advice will be evidence-based and capable of ensuring full compliance with environmental law. I also want to ensure that the policy development process reflects an understanding of the needs and aspirations of our agri-food sector, which makes such an important contribution to our economic well-being.

In the meantime, my Department has put in place an interim assessment approach, which will be used while a revised operational protocol is being developed. The interim assessment, which is based on robust scientific evidence, allows my officials to deal with planning applications in a legally compliant way, using site-specific advice on a case-by-case basis. As I outlined, my officials seek to work with that.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Minister. I do not know whether to be heartened or sorry for him that the report is his bedside reading.

A couple of questions arise from what he said. Many of the people to whom I speak in the industry are concerned that officials went ahead and changed the advice without the normal process of consultation. I would like to hear what the Minister has to say about that issue. I am glad to hear that he is to publish a new strategy. In the meantime, however, we cannot have a variety of areas doing different things in terms of planning applications. We already find that in the planning process at the moment. The Minister needs to ensure that there is consistency for the industry.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: The Minister does not have time to answer the question, so I ask him to provide a written answer to Mrs Dodds.

We move on to topical questions.

Sludge: Canal at Toomebridge

T1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he is aware of a build-up of rather unusual sludge on the canal surface at the lock gates in Toomebridge and to state whether it is being investigated by NIEA. (AQT 11/22-27)

Mr Muir: As was once said, all politics is local. I am aware of those issues. I have been briefed by my Department on that. Anyone who becomes aware of such issues should report them immediately to the pollution hotline. Without those immediate reports, any investigation will be impeded.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for that. The Minister has brought me nicely on to the next part of my question. I have heard from different people that, sometimes, even though issues such as those are reported on the hotline, it can be some time before they are investigated by NIEA officials. Are there sufficient resources there? If not — there clearly do not seem to be — will you make a bid for additional resources for NIEA?

Mr Muir: The focus over the next number of weeks will be on putting bids into the Department of Finance for the budget for next year. I am conscious that finance is the key element that constrains what my Department can do, whether in grant support, education or enforcement. I intend to make an ambitious bid to the Department of Finance, because we need those resources for enforcement to safeguard our environment. If there are any particular concerns about those reports being made and not being followed up in a prompt manner, I am happy to hear about them.

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 10 have been withdrawn.

NIFAIS: Problems

T2. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after congratulating him on his new post, to state the action his Department intends to take to fix the NI food animal information system (NIFAIS). (AQT 12/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am aware of the issues and the associated media reports at the weekend. There are always issues with the roll-out of IT systems; usually, they do not go exactly as planned. However, if people have particular concerns, they should raise them with the Department pretty promptly so that we can investigate them. In the past week or two, I was briefed by officials on the roll-out of the system. I am happy to hear about any particular concerns about it, because the system is absolutely vital for our industry.

Mr Robinson: Thank you, Minister, for that response. Does the Minister agree that farming families and vets work long and late hours, have huge pressures regarding record-keeping and other requirements and that, therefore, every effort must be made as quickly as possible to resolve the issues with the new system?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I am conscious that our farming community is a key part of our economy and that, on a lot of occasions, people putting long hours and a lot of dedication into the family business is a generational thing. We need to find ways in the Department to support that. I am conscious of the concerns around the need to use the system and for it to be responsive. I will engage with officials about some of the concerns that have been raised recently to see whether we can find a way to ensure that we address those and are more attuned to any concerns from users. It is important that we respond to those concerns.

Bovine TB: Eradication Plans

T3. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after congratulating him on his first Question Time, albeit he seems to be enjoying it, which suggests that the questions are not hard enough, to state his plans to tackle the spread of bovine TB. (AQT 13/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am very conscious and aware of the issue of bovine TB. I was briefed on the issue on the Saturday on which I took office. The honeymoon ends quickly when you leave the Chamber. There are challenges around that issue, because it is not sustainable for farms, and it is not financially sustainable for the Department. I am also aware that, when TB arrives on a farm — let us be clear that 10% of the herd has currently or previously been affected and associated with it — it causes distress and apprehension. Over time, we need to get a strategy in place that gives a bit of light at the end of the tunnel for the farms and businesses that are affected.

I will engage with officials and stakeholders in the time ahead so that we can chart a course out of the current situation and so that we can look at situation in the rest of the UK and Ireland to see how they have approached the issue. The current situation is not sustainable.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for his response. Do you plan to follow in the footsteps of your predecessor and legislate for a badger cull in Northern Ireland?

Mr Muir: I am very aware of the issues and of the associated legal challenges that arose. One element of bovine TB is a wildlife strategy, and we have to consider that. Let us engage. Let us see whether we can find a way forward. I am aware of my party's policy. People will not be surprised by it. In the time ahead, as Minister, I

will be guided by evidence and science. You cannot really go wrong if you are guided by those.

Rural Development Framework: Update

T4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after welcoming him and telling him that he has done well so far, albeit he has a few minutes to go, to provide an update on the rural development policy framework, which will overtake the rural development programme. (AQT 14/22-27)

Mr Muir: I was conscious, on taking up office, that some people refer to me as "the Minister of Agriculture", so I usually finish that sentence with, "Environment and Rural Affairs". Sometimes, rural affairs has been second fiddle to the rest of the Department. I am keen to see how we can move forward. The development programme is one part of it, and there is the associated grant support.

Also, I am aware of the powers in the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, and I question whether it really has significant teeth, because it just refers to "due regard". I will engage with officials in the time ahead to help me scope out my priorities for rural affairs and rural development. This is week 3 for me in the Department. I usually try to get six or seven hours' sleep a night. I will return to the issue later this week.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for that answer. I appreciate your response and a Minister who answers the question.

In the past, a lot of rural groups have received rural hall funding or micro grants. Will the Minister look at that funding, because it is vital for our communities? There are few grants that those groups can get to remain operational, so if you could follow up on rural micro grants, which, I think, the Speaker implemented when he was Minister, that would be great.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his question. I have asked my officials for more guidance on that to see how we can progress it. I am aware of how the funding goes through, and you have acknowledged the value of that. In my Department, money can go much further, and the opportunities and benefits for rural communities can be significant. I have already got a query in with my officials to see what more we can do about that.

We also need to look at rural affairs in a wider sphere and recognise not only the isolation that can be felt but the sense of community. We can bind communities together and address the isolation that is often felt in rural communities. A particular challenge for me as Minister is how I engage with them and, most especially, with the farming community so that we can break down barriers and misperceptions and bring people together.

Waste Management: DAERA Role

T5. **Mr McReynolds** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the role his Department plays in waste management in Northern Ireland. (AQT 15/22-27)

Mr Muir: My Department's remit is quite wide and includes waste management. I am conscious that those responsibilities include strategy, policy, legislation and, where funds permit, grant support. We have requirements outlined in the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. That means that we must show more ambition and take greater action on waste management. We should reduce, reuse and improve the quality and quantity of what we recycle.

I will seek to commence a consultation later this year on household and non-household municipal recycling. The challenge is to convince hearts and minds about that, balancing compliance with the law, financial, environmental and social factors.

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Minister for his encouraging response. Belfast City Council is finally increasing the number of homes that receive household glass recycling in Belfast. Can the Minister confirm that he will commit to working with councils across Northern Ireland to improve their recycling rates?

Mr Muir: Councils in Northern Ireland play a key role in waste management. I will seek a meeting with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), SOLACE, Arc21 and other organisations in the time ahead to discuss the way forward. I welcome the developments in Belfast City Council on glass collection. The ambition being shown in Belfast and by other councils across Northern Ireland is to be commended. I want to find a way in which I can support them.

Lough Neagh: Return to Public Ownership

T7. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the fact that, the other day, he said that he would meet the Earl of Shaftesbury to discuss Lough Neagh and other issues, whether he will demand that the earl return the lough to the people, given that his ancestors stole it. (AQT 17/22-27)

Mr Muir: Many issues will be discussed in the meeting this week. If people think that ownership will be the solution to the problems of Lough Neagh, they are badly mistaken. There are big issues there that we need to address. We all have to face up to some really hard decisions, and I will outline those in the next weeks. Let us be clear: there is not an easy solution for Lough Neagh. Big, hard decisions and funding will be required to turn the situation around.

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Minister. I urge you to make sure that the demand to take the lough back into public ownership is made categorically to the earl. What penalties do you think the earl should receive for the mismanaged decline of the lough? If you drop litter on the street, you are fined. There cannot be an exemption from fines for the mismanagement and decline of the lough just because somebody comes from the landed aristocracy. Do you think that he and his company should be liable for fines, given the state and the decline of the lough?

Mr Muir: In approaching the Lough Neagh issue, we have probably three tools: one is education, and that is probably the one that we need to divert to first; the second is regulation; and the last is enforcement. If we get into the game of issuing fines, we have failed. We will probably have to move to that, because some people will not go with us, but I want to bring people with us in turning the situation around. I will look for the support of the entire Chamber for the plan for Lough Neagh.

It is easy, in discussions around Lough Neagh, to say that the situation is appalling but, on the other hand, run away when we have to take really difficult policy decisions. The Lough Neagh situation did not occur just out of the blue; it occurred because of generations of environmental misgovernance in Northern Ireland. We have to recognise that Lough Neagh is an example of what we want to make sure never occurs again.

TB Eradication Partnership

T8. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after welcoming him in his new post and offering her congratulations, to state whether he will commit to working with the TB eradication partnership, which has developed a strategy to deal with the scourge of TB in Northern Ireland, to implement its recommendations without further delay in order to deal with TB in wildlife and farm animals. (AQT 18/22-27)

Mr Muir: I am aware of those recommendations. As I said, I engaged last week and will engage in the time ahead with the Ulster Farmers' Union to get its views. Many different suggestions are coming forward to me. I am conscious that time may not be on our side for the budget for next year that is associated with this. I am also conscious that the Secretary of State directed that we consult on reducing the compensation scheme to 90% in the first year and 75% in the years thereafter. I hope that we do not get to that situation. We need to take decisions quickly to ensure that we can have sustainability for our finances but also for farms. The farming community is a key part of the Northern Ireland economy and community, and we need to find a way to support it.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for his answer. He talked about compensation. Will you commit to not reducing the compensation that farmers receive for TB reactor animals until partnership recommendations have been implemented in full?

Mr Muir: I cannot give that commitment because I do not know what my budget will be for next year. That is the reality. Whatever settlement I get for next year will have a significant impact on how we can deliver functions for Northern Ireland. I will not seek to reduce it, but I am very conscious of the financial situation. I will work with Executive colleagues and the Department of Finance to see what settlement we can get.

I am conscious of the devastating consequences when TB arrives in a herd. I really hear that. I see the devastation on farmers' faces when it arrives. We need to find out what we can do to support them. I want to be the farmer's friend. People may not listen to me or agree with that, but I want to give them as much support as I can. I will need help to be able to do that.

Mr Speaker: That brings Question Time to a conclusion. I ask Members to take their ease

while a change is made at the top Table before we commence the debate on the Budget Bill.

3.30 pm

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they may table amendments in the Bill Office for up to one hour after the Second Stage is passed. I inform Members that the Speaker has received a letter from the Committee for Finance advising him that the Committee is satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2), and that the Bill can therefore proceed under accelerated passage.

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 01/22-27] be agreed.

The Second Stage debate is on the Budget Bill that will authorise the expenditure of Departments for the 2023-24 financial year. The Executive returned just over two weeks ago, so this was the first opportunity that I had to progress a Budget Bill. The lateness in the financial year and the approach taken by the Secretary of State to the Budget means that not progressing the Budget Bill at pace could result in Departments running out of cash. There is an urgent need to secure Royal Assent for the Budget Bill to ensure that Departments and other bodies can continue to access the cash that they require from the Consolidated Fund to deliver services for the remainder of the financial year.

The situation is more challenging than would normally be the case, due to a combination of factors, many of which are beyond our control. This is clearly not an acceptable or tenable position, so swift action was agreed by ministerial colleagues last Thursday. Departments are currently operating under the authority of the Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Act 2023, which is based on the Budget that was set by the Secretary of State in April 2023 and which, as we are all very well aware, falls far short of the funding that Departments need. As a result, Departments will reach the cash limits set by that Budget Act much earlier than would normally be the case. In addition, the timing of the Executive's restoration and the need for them to have decided on allocations in response to their consideration of the forecast overspends and funding of public-sector pay

awards means that the Budget Bill could not be prepared until this late point in the year.

As a result of that combination of circumstances, I ask the Assembly to consider the Budget Bill in shorter time than usual. The introduction of the Budget Bill would normally follow immediately after the Assembly's consideration and approval of the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs), which would involve a debate on the Supply resolutions. With the timing of events this year, work is only now able to commence on the preparation and publication of the Estimates. As it is a document of 300-plus pages, involving detailed financial tables, it is not possible for it to be completed and published before the Budget Bill needs to be introduced. Instead, I will bring the Estimates document to the Assembly as soon as the work on it has been completed for the Assembly to consider.

After the Assembly has passed the Budget Bill, there is a further stage for the Bill to be considered by the Attorney General and the Advocate General in order to confirm legislative competence before it can be submitted for Royal Assent. Any delay in progressing the Budget Bill will increase the risk that we could reach the limit set by the Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Act 2023. In that situation, we could face a position in which my Department is unable to issue cash from the Consolidated Fund to any Department that has reached its cash limit.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Archibald: Yes.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister tell the House the difference between the figures in the Budget (No. 2) Act and what is in this Budget?

Dr Archibald: I will come on to the headroom later in my contribution.

This is an exceptional situation in which we find ourselves so late in the financial year. I assure Members that I do not ask this lightly of the Assembly. I am cognisant that doing so restricts the scrutiny and consideration space that the Assembly is entitled to give the Bill. I assure Members that it will not, in any way, be regarded as establishing a precedent. My Department and I will ensure that the Assembly has the proper time required to fully consider the next Budget Bill, together with the 2024-25 Main Estimates, once the Executive have agreed their 2024-25 Budget.

For many people, the process today may seem technical and complex, but its importance and significance must not be underestimated, as it enables us to keep delivering public services and prevent Departments from running out of money. Money and financial packages have dominated the agenda since the Executive returned, and my Executive colleagues and I were determined to take swift action to address the challenges that we face.

Last Thursday, the Executive prioritised public-sector pay with an allocation of £688 million for our hardworking public-sector workers. That announcement shows that the Executive are working together and taking action in the most challenging circumstances. It is an important step for our health workers, teachers, police, transport workers and civil servants because it enables negotiations with trade unions to start immediately. I want to see them conclude as quickly as possible in order to ensure fair pay for workers.

The funding provided for this year's pay awards is non-recurrent. That will add further pressure to the 2024-25 Budget and, unfortunately, means that our finances are likely to remain in a very challenging position. Members will have noted the independent Fiscal Council's assessment of the restoration package last week, which supports the Executive position of our being underfunded on the basis of need. The Fiscal Council reiterates that the package does not address our underfunding in any sustainable or long-term way. If the British Government do not address that, we will reach a cliff edge. It is a case of when, not if.

The Bill also includes a Vote on Account in order to allow Departments to continue to deliver services into the early months of the incoming 2024-25 financial year. It is important to stress that that does not constitute setting a 2024-25 Budget; that Budget-setting process will follow. Once the Executive have agreed their 2024-25 Budget, it will be brought to the Assembly to consider with the 2024-25 Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

The timing of the Executive's formation and the need for the Executive to carefully consider the prioritisation of allocations in the Budget for 2024-25 mean that it is possible that when the Budget (No. 2) Bill is brought to the Assembly, the Assembly may not be able to complete consideration of it before the summer recess. In order to remove any risk to Departments' cash position, and to ensure that the Assembly is not curtailed in the time available to it, the Executive have agreed that I seek a larger-than-normal Vote on Account in this Budget Bill

to ensure that it will be sufficient to last until the summer recess. Although the Vote on Account would normally be set at 45% of the previous year's provision, this Budget Bill contains a Vote on Account set at approximately 65%.

As is normally the case for Budget Bills, I asked the Finance Committee to agree to the use of the accelerated passage procedure under Standing Order 42(2). I put on record my gratitude to the Committee for considering that request at such short notice and for confirming its agreement to the use of accelerated passage. I am also grateful to the Assembly for its agreement that Standing Order 42(5) be suspended for the Budget Bill as an exceptional step to allow the Bill to complete all its stages in less than 10 days.

Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate:

"shall be confined to the general principles of the Bill."

I shall endeavour to keep to that direction. The Bill will authorise the use of £23,937,688,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources totalling £28,817,828,000 by Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2024. That is this financial year.

The Bill will also authorise the issue of £15,724,763,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources totalling £18,731,611,000 by Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2025. That is the Vote on Account, which, as I have explained, does not constitute the setting of a Budget for the 2024-25 year. Its purpose is merely to allow Departments to continue to operate and to provide services in the early months of that year, pending the consideration of the Executive's Budget for that year through the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in part 2 of each schedule. The Bill also authorises the use of income in 2023-24 by Departments from the sources set out in part 3 of schedule 1. Those amounts supersede the amounts that were previously authorised by the Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Act 2023, which was legislated for by the Secretary of State in Westminster. I draw Members' attention to the point that, although the vast majority of the expenditure by all Departments is done on the authority of statutory powers provided through legislation

passed by the Assembly, there are occasionally some functions that may be done on the sole authority of that Budget Act.

The Assembly's authority is sought for the following items of expenditure under the sole authority of this Budget Bill: in the Department for Communities, £11 million on welfare reform and mitigation and £40,000 on the annual uprating of pneumoconiosis; in the Department for Infrastructure, £1.5 million for active travel; in the Department of Finance, £450,000 for the Fiscal Council; and in the Executive Office, £4 million for the truth recovery programme, £2 million for ending violence against women and girls, £1.4 million for actions relating to historical institutional abuse (HIA) and interdepartmental working, £3 million for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, £210,000 on full dispersal of asylum seekers, £22,000 for refugee integration proposals, £96,000 for strategic migration partnerships for British nationals overseas and £102,000 for strategic partnerships for asylum.

Clause 5 of the Bill provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department in 2023-24 of £11,968,844,000. That is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 4 for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. Similarly, clause 11 provides for temporary borrowing by my Department in 2024-25 of £7,862,382,000. I must stress that clauses 5 and 11 do not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power. Rather, they enable my Department to run an effective and efficient cash-management regime and ensure minimum drawdown of the block grant daily. That is very important when contemplating the daily cash requirements of our Departments.

3.45 pm

I will briefly mention the allocations to which the Executive agreed last Thursday and which I detailed in my written ministerial statement. We had to wait until 13 February for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to confirm the detail of the financial package that accompanied the restoration of the Executive. The key elements that are relevant to the 2023-24 position are £1,045.6 million resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) in 2023-24 for general overspend pressures and pay, of which £559 million is repayable, and the deferral of the repayment of £559 million for two years, with a commitment to writing it off, if the Executive publish a sustainability plan by May 2024 and implement it by May 2025. I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to request an

urgent meeting to discuss the conditions and timescales, which I regard as unrealistic.

The total amount of £1,045.6 million resource DEL available in 2023-24 takes account of the repayment of the outstanding reserve claim for 2022-23. That amount is supplemented by £21.9 million of existing funds that have become available due to changes in regional rate forecasts and easements identified by Departments in respect of earmarked funding, which Departments could use only for the purpose for which it was originally intended.

Ms McLaughlin: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Dr Archibald: Yes, go ahead, Sinéad.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, you have a tickle in your throat. Maybe you should have a moment or two to rest your throat and get some water without having to continue. Is that OK? I feel your struggle.

Dr Archibald: Thank you, Sinéad. That was very helpful.

The resource DEL allocations to Departments, which were set out in my written ministerial statement, cover the current level of Department forecast overspends, totalling some £380 million, and provide an additional £688 million for pay. The allocation for pay awards is just over £100 million higher than the £584 million provided specifically for pay in the financial package. That funding has been provided as a total resource DEL allocation for each Department to allow individual Ministers to manage their budgets effectively and to avoid influencing pay negotiations. It is now for individual Ministers to manage pay awards within the funding envelopes provided. My Department will begin discussions immediately with unions on the 2023-24 pay awards for those staff on NICS terms and conditions.

The additional funding allocations agreed by the Executive will provide much-needed relief to our public-sector workers and help to offset the pressures facing Departments. Significant challenges exist across all areas of our public services. The harm done by the decisions made in an effort to live within the Budget set by the Secretary of State in April cannot be reversed in the few weeks of the financial year that are left.

Unfortunately, the uncertainty over the total quantum of funding available and the need to wait for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to confirm the detail of the financial package that

accompanied the restoration of the Executive meant that it was only possible for the Executive to make a decision on 15 February 2024 on allocations to Departments to address overspends and to provide funding for public-sector pay awards. To have delayed work on commencing the preparation of the Budget Bill until after that decision was not viable, due to the risk of Departments reaching their cash limits before the Bill could be passed and Royal Assent secured. Instead, the Executive gave their agreement for my Department to prepare the Budget Bill to include headroom to ensure that Departments had the authority to spend the budget that has now subsequently been allocated to them by the Executive. The Budget Bill is, therefore, written to a position that includes that headroom.

All Ministers have committed to constrain their Departments' expenditure, including pay awards, to the budget allocation agreed by the Executive and not by the amount of headroom included in the Budget Bill if that is any higher. It is a highly unusual situation, which has been driven by the timing of events. It is not anticipated that we will face such a situation again, as the Executive now have the opportunity to agree their Budget for 2024-25 and for Ministers to set their Department's expenditure plans accordingly.

The numbers contained in the Budget Bill are significant, and I am sure that Members will agree that it is not an easy task to translate those figures into the delivery of public services on the ground. The reality is that it is critical for the Budget Bill to be passed to ensure that public services can continue to be delivered, including in our health services, our schools, our road services and our water services. On that note, I will conclude, and I will be happy to deal with any points of principle or detail on the Budget Bill that Members may wish to raise. I thank Ms McLaughlin for giving me a break to get my voice back.

Mr O'Toole (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): As well as welcoming the Minister to her role, I commend my colleague Ms McLaughlin. That is what we mean by constructive opposition: helping people out where necessary.

First, I will speak in my capacity as Chair of the Finance Committee. In that role, I will present the views of the Committee and its perspective. I thank the Minister for her comments, and, on behalf of the whole Committee, I congratulate her on her appointment. The Committee wants to build on its relationship with the Minister on

the basis of openness, candour and good communication.

The nature of today's proceedings and the Minister's request for accelerated passage of the Budget Bill 2024 mean that we are not necessarily where we would have wanted to be. Members trust that, in the future, the Committee will enjoy a much more appropriate level of scrutiny of Budgets and other aspects of the Department's work. Perhaps the Minister will say more about that during her winding-up speech.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, as you are aware, I wrote to the Speaker, on behalf of the Committee, to highlight the Minister's request for accelerated passage for the Bill following the briefing that Committee members received on Wednesday 14 February. At that point, the Committee had not had sight of the Bill. As you are aware, the Committee and other Members did not receive the Bill until late on Friday afternoon. As the Committee's letter indicated, the request for accelerated passage is predicated on the Committee agreeing that there has been "appropriate consultation" as per Standing Order 42(2). Additionally, granting accelerated passage to the Bill will compromise paragraph 20 of strand one of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which states:

"The Executive Committee will seek to agree each year, and review as necessary, a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes, subject to approval by the Assembly, after scrutiny in Assembly Committees, on a cross-community basis."

Section 64(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 states:

"The Minister of Finance and Personnel shall, before the beginning of each financial year, lay before the Assembly a draft budget, that is to say, a programme of expenditure proposals for that year which has been agreed by the Executive Committee in accordance with paragraph 20 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement."

However, given the timing of the Executive's restoration and where that coincides with the Budget process, as well as the rationale that has been given to Members by the Minister that the Bill must be passed with all haste, the Committee has agreed to the requested accelerated passage for the Budget Bill 2024, while also noting that the Vote on Account represents 65% of the current Budget allocation to see them into 2024-25.

Having finished speaking in my formal role as Chair of the Finance Committee, I will now relinquish my Finance Committee Chair's mantle. I do not have a hat to take off, but, if I did, I would take it off. I will now speak as leader of the Opposition.

The most fundamental thing that any legislature does is authorise spending following the Government making a Budget statement, which is supposed to set out key policy priorities. However, that is not what this is. We are authorising spending for the rest of the financial year, which is less than six weeks away, and a Vote on Account for 65% of the spending in the next financial year. That is nearly two thirds of the spending in the next financial year, and I will come back to that point. In the speech that I have just given on behalf of the Finance Committee — I am in a different role now as leader of the Opposition — I said:

"we are not necessarily where we would have wanted to be."

That was diplomatically understated. It is nothing short of shameful that we have yet again found ourselves in the position of desperately passing a Budget Bill at a frenetic pace with practically zero scrutiny. Of course, Budget Bills are only the legal authorisation for spending; they do not set out strategic priorities. For anybody who wants to read the Budget Bill, I will say that it is, as the Minister indicated, a short Bill. It has an explanatory and financial memorandum and schedules at the end that set out cash totals and what are called control totals for different organisations, Departments and other statutory bodies. Essentially, those schedules set out how much Departments can spend in cash and give them the legal authorisation to make those drawdowns from what is called the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund. That is all that the Bill does. It is a lot — it is a very important thing — but it does not set strategic prioritisation. It does not allocate resources on the basis of what the new Executive have said should be the priorities for the people of Northern Ireland.

In our view, as the Opposition, it is clear what those priorities should be. In the short term, they should be paying public-sector workers. It has been said today that any delay in the passage of the Budget Bill would threaten the Executive's ability to close pay deals with public-sector workers. Officials have not entirely proven that point to my satisfaction, but, in the interests of getting those pay deals closed as quickly as possible, we, as the Opposition, will not throw any barriers in the way of getting the

Budget Bill passed. If the officials are sincerely saying that — it would not actually be a delay, by the way; it would simply be passing the Bill through the normal, provided-for time periods — we will not stand in the way of the Bill's passing. However, I am afraid that neither the officials nor the Minister have convincingly made that case.

The job of a Budget document, which is to set strategic priorities, was envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement to be the fiscal vehicle by which to deliver on the goals and priorities that were set out in a multi-year Programme for Government. However, we have not had an updated Programme for Government in nearly a decade. In the short period of Government between 2020 and 2022, we had only limited single-year Budgets, which essentially rolled over funding settlements with barely any strategy, let alone a plan for rescuing our public services. It has to be said that that is what the Budget Bill does again: it simply rolls over totals. Lots of organisations were told at different times over the past year that funding cuts would be imposed on them, and that includes different organisations and charities such as Healthy Happy Minds that provide services in schools and other parts of the community sector. The Bill formalises those cuts that have already happened and that are factored into the 2023-24 Budget settlements for their parent Department. Those organisations were told by multiple different parties in the Chamber that, "We just need to get back into the Assembly, do something with the Budget and we might be able to help you", but approving the Budget means that that cannot happen now. It certainly cannot happen in this financial year. It might be rolled back in 2024-25, but we should be honest about what we are actually doing. We are formalising spending for the last financial year — I mean the allocations that have already happened — unless there is a plan to address those cuts that have already been imposed, but the Minister can correct me on that.

I am not saying that we should not pass the Budget Bill. If that is what it takes to keep the lights on and pay public-sector workers, we will not stand in the way, but we should be honest with people about what the Bill does. Collectively, particularly the parties that have brought down the institutions over the last half a dozen years, we have failed to be honest with people about what the document actually does. As I said, we have not had an updated Programme for Government for nearly a decade. We have simply had roll-forward Budgets on a single-year basis, and, when we have not had those, we have simply had things

like the Bill, the stages of which we will pass today and tomorrow. It is a Budget Bill like those that are often passed at Westminster and sometimes passed here when we have been bothered to sit. All the while, our public services, particularly the NHS, have fallen not only into decline but, in some cases, collapse.

I want to put on the record some comments about the fiscal position and negotiations with the UK Government. On Tuesday 6 February, we said that the Executive and Finance Minister were right to push back against the British Government on the agreed financial package and fiscal framework, particularly on making the fiscal floor a floor and not a ceiling, and to ensure that that is properly backdated to reflect what they have already acknowledged. We acknowledge and support that position if the Minister and Executive grip it properly and deal with in a properly strategic way. I will come back to that.

4.00 pm

This is our first opportunity as legislators — there are some new legislators here — to talk about how we do budgeting. We cannot talk about our budgeting in the North without talking about the broader UK position. Others, including Caoimhe Archibald, the Finance Minister, and Conor Murphy, the Economy Minister, have said today that we are essentially reliant on allocations from the British Government in London; and we are — that is the nature of the devolution settlement. I aspire to change that, both in getting more powers for here and, ultimately, through constitutional change in the long run. However, given where we are, we have to acknowledge that the UK Government position and the policies that they have pursued over the past decade and a half have fatally undermined public services in this place. First, they pursued austerity, which is widely acknowledged by not just left-leaning parties like mine but most serious people in the economics profession as a self-inflicted harm on the public realm in the UK writ large. Austerity was a mistake. It was a self-inflicted wrong borne particularly by the most vulnerable in society. There was also the insanity of Brexit, which I speak of with some personal experience. As predicted, Brexit has reduced the capacity of the UK economy, thus reducing tax revenue and the resources available for public spending.

As I said, the Finance Minister and her colleagues are right to push back on the Treasury and aim to address the outstanding questions asked by the financial package. I ask the Finance Minister whether she will, in her

closing remarks, give us an update on when she expects to formally commence negotiations with the UK Government, what timeline she places on their resolution and when the Assembly will get an update on how the negotiations are going and whether they have been resolved. I worry, given the chaotic position of the Tory Government in London, that it will not necessarily be particularly straightforward to have a coherent, orderly negotiation with them.

Given the incompetence and untrustworthiness of this British Government, it is surprising that the Executive appear to take them on trust over a financial package that was not fully nailed down. Even though many of the broad outlines were discussed and proposed at Hillsborough before Christmas, not one written commitment was made public, so far as I can see, between the talks at Hillsborough and the restoration of the Executive. The Executive have spent more than a week appearing to contradict both themselves and what appears in plain black and white in a letter that they sent to the UK Government, which acknowledged that work on revenue raising would begin. None of that, I am afraid, inspires confidence that the new Executive have yet got a grip on either their approach to public finances or their plan to rescue public services.

Will the Minister update us today on when she expects to bring a full Budget to the Assembly? Will it be a multi-year Budget or just a one-year settlement? The Vote on Account of 65% and the statements that we may not have full scrutiny done on the Budget (No. 2) Bill by recess appear to indicate that we will not get a full Budget statement. Obviously, if we do not get a full Budget statement, that contradicts obligations under the Northern Ireland Act. It would be good to have a formal update on whether the Executive expect to breach their obligations under the Northern Ireland Act to bring a Budget to the Assembly before the end of the financial year, which is in less than six weeks' time. Critically, when we finally get that Budget, will it be linked to outcomes in an updated Programme for Government? As I said to the First Minister earlier, the Executive parties, which, as you are aware, do not include us, have, for the past 18 months, been meeting on the contents of a Programme for Government. Most of us who were not in that room would have expected the Programme for Government plans to have advanced a little beyond theoretical discussions. It would be helpful to have a timeline on a Budget, and clarity on whether it will be a multi-year Budget or a one-year settlement. Will it be tied to Programme for Government outcomes? Will it

incorporate the costed and timelined public service rescue plan that we all endorsed on Tuesday 6 February in our Opposition amendment to the motion, which we supported, that put forward the Executive's position of asking the UK Government for more support?

First, let me say that I do not want to bombard the Minister with too many questions. I worked with her in her previous role on the Economy Committee. She acquitted herself really well there, and she is highly regarded. I am aware of the debacle that we face in passing the Bill at extreme and unacceptable pace. By the way, although we abstained in the vote earlier, it is important to acknowledge that it is a big deal, in addition to granting accelerated passage, to waive Standing Order 42(5), which is such a basic provision in terms of legislative scrutiny. I acknowledge that the Finance Minister has inherited a lot of the problems. What I will ask from her is that she is upfront and clear about her decisions on how she is allocating money, the priorities that she is setting and all of that.

Further to that and before I close my remarks, I draw her attention to a suggested amendment that we will submit today as a constructive Opposition. I do not know whether it will be ruled in scope; if you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, have any influence with your colleague the Speaker, maybe I could ask you to nudge him to judge it to be in scope. We have said consistently that there needs to be better accountability and transparency not just on the management of public finances here but in the improvement of public services. The public do not believe a lot of what we say, not because they think that we are all liars, but because, time and again, there have been plans, aspirations and strategies, but there has not been follow-through and delivery.

Genuinely and seriously, as a constructive Opposition, we think that one of the most important things that we can do in the mandate is to move towards a culture of delivery, openness and accountability, so our amendment attempts to give the Fiscal Council, which already exists but does not have a statutory footing, the statutory power not just to report on the public finances, as the Office for Budget Responsibility does in London or the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council does in Dublin, but to assess how well the Executive are doing on a suite of key metrics. There do not need to be dozens; it can be a series of key ones that are linked to Programme for Government outcomes. I imagine that getting waiting lists down would be one and that dealing with the crisis in special educational needs would be another. I imagine that some of the economic

reforms that the Economy Minister talked about earlier today would be one. We think that giving the Fiscal Council the power in law to report on those metrics would be a hugely welcome step forward. Assuming that our amendment is taken, I ask the Finance Minister to agree to support it. If it is not taken, will she commit, first, to putting the powers of the Fiscal Council in law, and will she also agree that the Fiscal Council should, in addition, be given the power to report on Executive delivery? It would be helpful if she could make that commitment here today.

Thank you to colleagues for being patient as I have gone through two speeches, but this is important. We are compressing debate on the most important thing that we can do as legislators, which is to authorise the spending of money, and that is coming after years of not being here to do our jobs. We need to do much better than this process. I look forward to completing the rest of the debate later today and tomorrow.

Ms Kimmins (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I support the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. Let us be clear: the Budget that we have before us is the result of a harsh Tory-led initiative that continues to decimate our public services year-on-year. The Budget comes in the final weeks of the financial year, giving little to no opportunity to address or reverse the harm that has been done across all Departments. However, I commend the efforts of the Finance Minister, who has made difficult decisions in a difficult context to ensure that public-sector workers are at the heart of the Budget and, to the best of her ability, to offset the serious pressures that all Departments are experiencing.

It is known that the Assembly is united in the view that we are and continue to be underfunded on the basis of need by the British Government. We must continue to make our united voice heard in order to secure a more equitable and sustainable funding package, in strong opposition to the Secretary of State and the Tory Government's concerted effort to add to the huge financial burden that many families and households are currently trying to deal with. Our health service in particular requires significant investment, and that need continues to grow as trusts and the Department operate in the context of a deficit budget that could have been avoided had the budget proposal of my colleague and the former Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, in 2022 of £1 billion for the health service over three years been progressed. There is wide concurrence that a multi-year Budget would enable the health

service to plan ahead and to deliver more stable and sustainable services, which cannot be done in the same way when operating under an annual Budget.

I am pleased that the Finance Minister and the Executive have prioritised public-sector pay, which will include our health and social care workers, and it is crucial that the Health Minister takes action to get that into the pockets of workers as soon as possible and that all workers get the fair pay that they truly deserve. However, there remains a huge plethora of issues facing our health service more imminently. Today, GPs have voted overwhelmingly for strike action next month, and significant challenges are being faced across primary care and our GP practices. It is key that every effort is made to recruit and retain more doctors to improve access to GP services. GPs face incredible burnout and are over capacity. Without proper investment to deliver on that, we will undoubtedly see the growing pressures on GP practices continue. Many have already had no choice but to close their doors, and the implications of that are felt across all of our communities and even more acutely in our rural communities.

Workforce is one of the most fundamental issues impacting on our health service, with thousands of staff vacancies across the North. That continues to contribute to unprecedented waiting lists. Whilst I anticipate that the pay settlement for workers that we, hopefully, will see in the near future will go some way to tackle that, it will require much more investment in the long term. If we want to attract staff to work in our health service and, most importantly, if we want to retain those staff to create stable and sustainable service delivery for patients and service users, we need more investment.

The availability of workforce will underpin the ability to deliver on many of the crucial strategies that continue to sit with the Department unfunded, including the cancer, mental health and elective care strategies, all of which are hugely important but, without proper investment, will inevitably be impacted. Patients simply cannot wait any longer. As waiting lists grow, the needs of patients will also continue to grow, resulting in even further increased pressures on our health service.

Properly funded services will ensure better pathways and better outcomes for patients, and we must work together to obtain the funding needed from the British Government. Every aspect of our health service is suffering as a result of 13 years of Tory austerity and the

decision of the British Government not to provide a block grant that reflects need. Until that is addressed, our health service will struggle for a prolonged period.

The consequences of that also impact on our social care system, which is continually being diluted due to staff shortages and underfunding, with families finding it increasingly difficult to access the respite services that they need. It also causes major shortfalls in the provision of domiciliary care packages, which, in turn, puts additional pressures on our hospitals and services. The workload for unpaid carers is skyrocketing in the absence of proper and proportionate support.

The long-term impacts of not addressing all of these issues are already being felt and will be far-reaching, not just for our health service but across all Departments. The health and well-being of our people is paramount in enabling the creation of a prosperous society, and we need to see a fundamental acknowledgement by the British Government that they must deliver a more equitable funding package moving forward to ensure that our Ministers can bolster our public services, especially our health service, and properly deliver for the people of the North.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Finance Minister for addressing the House today. As we speak on the Budget Bill, it is important that a significant difference is noted and emphasised between this Budget Bill, which covers the approvals for the remaining six weeks of the 2023-24 financial year and the commencement of 2024-25, and the separate, important issue of the full debate and scrutiny of a complete 2024-25 Budget, which should be completed as soon as possible in the coming months and put in place to underpin the key priorities and objectives of the new Programme for Government. Today's Bill is being presented under accelerated passage, due to the circumstances of timing, to enable our Departments to function in the meantime. We are not where we would have wanted to be, and I trust that, in future, we will enjoy much more appropriate scrutiny of Budgets.

It is important that the Budget Bill passes to enable the operation of our Departments at this time, but it is not defining the future of our public spending. That remains the responsibility of the Executive and the Assembly as we move into the 2024-25 Budget process. The UK Treasury has indicated that the way in which Northern Ireland is funded will be altered, moving forward. However, we, unfortunately, remain in a position where the details of that

incorporation of a process and a model that appropriately reflects Northern Ireland's true need has not been concluded.

I hope that we receive an improved financial position moving forward and, on that basis, that we can effectively plan for the future delivery of Northern Ireland public services in the 2024-25 Budget process.

4.15 pm

I note that the Budget Bill also affords Departments the ability to commence 2024-25 spending at 65% of Vote on Account until a new Budget is adopted. Again, I note that that is necessary to enable the Departments to function, but it needs to remain a priority to develop the new 2024-25 Budget as soon as possible in order to capture the priorities of the new Programme for Government and put us in the best place to deliver them in the years ahead.

I have a question for the Minister to address at the end, if she pleases. One matter of particular importance is the payment of public-sector workers across all sectors and divisions. Can the Minister assure me that this Budget will make full and proper provision for all the vital members of staff in our public services, without whom our public services could not function? If not, for which groups of workers will it not be guaranteed?

I also want to make a critical point about context. It is vital that we consider this Budget, and, indeed, the next, in the proper context of our funding from Treasury. The Hillsborough proposals, adjusted slightly by the Treasury letter of 13 February, are very important. There are two major problems. First, the Hillsborough package is logically an unsustainable arrangement, both in recognising the need to fund Northern Ireland to need from 2024-25 onwards and in recognising the need to provide funding for two years to plug the gap arising from the impact of being funded £3 billion below need in two consecutive years from our baseline funding. We are effectively funded to need for 2024-25 and 2025-26. That means that we will be funded to need in those years but will again plunge below need in 2026-27. Secondly, although the Government have moved some way on recognising need, subject to the problems set out, they are hoping that we will settle for an arrangement that involves just one, half-baked aspect of the protection that Wales has enjoyed and continues to enjoy. To protect its block grant funding from falling below need, Northern Ireland must fully benefit from

both aspects of the protection that is afforded to Wales. We need a fiscal floor, defined need and an uplift.

The UK Government's funding of Northern Ireland is an urgent issue and needs to be addressed. We are facing critical challenges with health, education, the economy, childcare, agriculture, infrastructure, an increase in our minimum wages from 2024-25 onwards and many more issues. We need to put in place a multi-year Budget for Northern Ireland to deliver for everyone here as soon as we practically can.

Today, I support the Budget Bill to enable Departments to be able to function. I also support the need for the Assembly to prioritise and deliver on the new Budget as soon as possible in order to underpin the new Programme for Government.

As to the amendment, I note that recognition of the Fiscal Council is an important issue. I believe, however, that it deserves a full piece of its own. To add to the Member's point, its ability to have full scrutiny and power is very important, and it should be addressed as an item on its own.

Mr Tennyson: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the Bill. At the outset, I welcome the Minister to her place and congratulate her on her new role. I very much look forward to working with her in my position as a member of the Finance Committee.

As I indicated to the Committee earlier today, I am content that the Bill proceed by accelerated passage, recognising that, if it were not to receive Assembly approval and Royal Assent swiftly, Departments and other public bodies might have legislative difficulty in accessing cash not only in the closing weeks of this financial year but in the early months of 2024-25. We all recognise, however, that the position in which we currently find ourselves is entirely unsatisfactory. I am conscious that, in normal circumstances, the Minister and the Finance Committee would have been intricately involved in shaping and scrutinising this Budget from the outset, through the Main Estimates and monitoring rounds, right up to finalisation and, ultimately, this Budget Bill. Instead, in the absence of a functioning Assembly and Executive, and for the fifth time in the past seven years, the 2023-24 Budget was laid at Westminster by the Secretary of State, without the input of locally elected and accountable Ministers and in the absence of any meaningful scrutiny or debate in this place. That is not a position that any of us should be prepared to

countenance or grow accustomed to. It is an appalling dereliction of duty, and it is simply not good enough.

Those repeated cycles of political abeyance have not been cost neutral. Swingeing cuts have had a devastating impact on the people we all represent. Too often that burden falls on the most vulnerable in our community, from cuts to holiday hunger payments to the withdrawal of the Happy Healthy Minds counselling service and some of the worst hospital waiting lists anywhere in western Europe. The harm arising from decisions taken in an attempt to live within the Secretary of State's Budget will not be undone in the remaining six weeks of the financial year. Nonetheless, the additional funding that has been provided will offer much-needed relief to public services and to public-sector workers, who have been immensely patient in challenging circumstances.

It is important, however, that we remind ourselves of the context in which the Bill is being introduced. Under the Conservative Government, following a decade of austerity and a botched Brexit, the UK's economic growth has stagnated, consumer prices have increased sharply and living standards have fallen, while the UK's tax burden is set to reach a post-war high. The Chancellor's autumn statement contained precious little by way of targeted support for the most vulnerable and, instead, prioritised tax cuts over public spending. Just last month, the IMF warned the UK Government against further tax cuts, calling instead for a focus on investing in public services and reducing debt; a call that I will echo. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) also highlighted a lack of detail in government returns regarding spending plans, suggesting that it would be — I quote — "generous" to call the forecasts "a work of fiction". That is an unprecedented intervention.

The consequences of Tory mismanagement are plain for all to see: households, businesses, public services and, indeed, the devolved Administrations are all under huge financial strain. Unlike Scotland and Wales, however, Northern Ireland faces the additional and unique challenge of having been funded below its independently assessed level of relative need. It is welcome that, after much prevarication, the UK Government have finally conceded that inequity, following negotiations with the Executive parties. The principle of fair funding, based on relative need, was established in an agreement between the UK and Welsh Governments in 2016. Significantly, that arrangement was arrived at in Wales in

advance of the Welsh Government's breach of its funding floor.

The UK Government have provided £559 million for what they refer to as "overspend pressures". That amount, which accumulated largely under the Secretary of State's stewardship, is deferred for two years and written off only if certain conditions are met. However, we must be absolutely clear: this is not an overspend; it is a product of that very underfunding. That the Government now seek to attach punitive revenue-raising conditions in order that Northern Ireland simply receives the funding that it is owed is demonstrably unjust and unfair. Indeed, the timelines set out by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury are unrealistic and risk setting back financial sustainability rather than enhancing it.

Further disparity arises when we scratch the surface of the proposed needs-based factor, which does not operate as a Welsh-style fiscal floor. In fact, it is not a floor at all but a ceiling. Estimates suggest that it could take between 20 and 50 years to return to a point below which we should never have been allowed to fall in the first place. Failure to properly baseline the floor will have a further scarring impact on our public services, with underfunding continuing long into the future and a dangerous and irresponsible cliff edge looming in 2026.

In addition to securing appropriate baselining, the level of any floor is critical. My party has long contended that the 124% touted by the Government does not take adequate account of the justice need in Northern Ireland. The time period over which average policing and justice spend, relative to England, was assessed significantly underestimates objective need, focusing on a period during which the budget was disproportionately squeezed and is further obscured by COVID-19 spending. It is our view that the period during which policing and justice spend was ring-fenced, between 2010 and 2015, offers a more reliable reflection of the UK Government's revealed funding preference and, therefore, should form the basis for deriving relative need. That would lift overall relative need to 127%, and there are strong arguments that, by incorporating taxable capacity and benefit rate sensitivity, it could and should be even higher.

I am sure that Members from across the House will agree that the work of the Fiscal Council has been indispensable in informing the public debate on the issues. At a time when we are aiming to reform our public services, we must also reform our approach to scrutiny and ensure that the council is now placed on a firm

statutory footing. In doing so, there is a strong argument that the council should also be empowered and equipped to assess and make recommendations in respect of the cost of division. Estimated to be anywhere between £400 million and £800 million every single year, dealing with that cost is the gateway to transforming not only our finances but our society.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Tennyson: Of course.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with much of what the Member is saying. We talked about the Fiscal Council having the power to report on a whole range of things. That could, and should, include the cost of division. Does he view with sympathy our amendment, which seeks to put the Fiscal Council in law and give it powers to report on public services?

Mr Tennyson: I have great sympathy with the amendment. I have set out very clearly that I agree that the Fiscal Council should be placed on a statutory footing. I am not sure that the Budget Bill is necessarily the best avenue by which to do that. It remains to be seen whether the amendment is within the scope of the Bill. However, I understand that the Department of Finance has been doing work on that, and I ask the Minister to prioritise the bringing forward of legislation in that sense.

Although the UK Government's financial offer does not, in and of itself, provide long-term sustainability, it offers space and time for further substantive negotiations on our fiscal framework ahead of the next spending review. As attention turns to those discussions, it would perhaps be useful if a degree of independence were also brought to that process. That is why Alliance has called for the establishment of an independent commission, drawing on the experience of the Holtham, Calman and Smith commissions, to be tasked with independently adjudicating, assessing and setting out evidence-based recommendations with regard to our funding formula and additional powers and flexibilities that may be granted to an Executive as part of a broader fiscal framework. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on that proposal.

Achieving sustainable finances will require a change in not only the quantum of funding that is available but our financial governance. We must, at the earliest opportunity, return to multi-year budgeting in the next spending review. That must be accompanied by increased multi-

year flexibility and carry-forward to avoid haphazard use-it-or-lose-it mentalities in Departments and a commitment from the Government to work with us rather than against us to address financial unknowns, such as the PSNI data breach and McCloud.

There must also be a serious engagement on the further devolution of powers to ensure that, when we discuss revenue raising, we do it in a way that protects the most vulnerable and is progressive and fair. Only then will we be in a position to offer the stability and certainty necessary to transform our public services, our health service, our education system and our economy.

Finally, although I welcome the space that has been granted for Ministers, the Finance Committee and the Assembly to have scrutiny of the 2024-25 Budget by increasing the Vote on Account, I reiterate the need for the Main Estimates to proceed as quickly as possible. As Members have already referenced, many public bodies are operating on budgets that are already insufficient and have recruitment freezes in place, so it is imperative that they have certainty at the earliest opportunity. I am sure that the Minister appreciates the urgency of that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:

References have been made to an amendment. It is up to the Speaker to agree that that amendment will be accepted and that it is within the scope of the Bill. I appreciate that Members jump up and down to give way; that is their prerogative. The amendment has not been accepted, but it is being spoken about as though it has. I remind Members that it has not been accepted yet.

Mr Brett (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): At the outset, I congratulate you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, on your appointment. I am sure that you will bring the trademark of a north Belfast woman to the role: very firm, but fair. I wish you well in that role. I also welcome the Minister to her role.

My initial remarks are on behalf of the Committee for the Economy. The Committee, like all other Committees, has had very limited time to consider these matters. It is notable that the usual documentation, such as the spring Estimates and the Estimates memorandum, has not been provided. It is, therefore, difficult for me to fully reflect all the views of Committee members at this stage, but I will endeavour to do my best. I understand that advances from the Consolidated Fund, under article 6 of the Financial Provisions Order, may be coming

close to exhaustion. Thus, the Committee would be interested to know what, if anything, in the Department for the Economy that money covers. Perhaps, the Minister will, in her response, set out what aspects of those finances are close to running out in the Department for the Economy.

I turn to public-sector employee pay, and the Economy Committee has a particular interest in a pay settlement for FE lecturers. I would be grateful if the Minister could address that in her remarks.

In recent press statements, the Executive advised of some welcome allocations for those public-sector pay disputes from the UK Government. Can the Minister outline whether those will be settled within the remit of the Department for the Economy by the end of this financial year?

4.30 pm

On behalf of the Committee, I am keen to know whether the Minister recognises that any delay in settlement might result in Treasury trying to claw back some of the finances in this year. The Committee is concerned that that could take place. On the wider economic impact of Executive spending, in the past, contractors have complained about departmental capital surges. That is where Departments' capital spending profiles have been very much weighed towards settling at the end of the financial year. I am sure that the Minister will agree that those capital surges, where Departments appear to be holding off on spending, are not conducive to steady economic growth, which we all want to see.

That concludes my remarks as Chair of the Economy Committee. I just want to make a few remarks as a member of the Finance Committee and as an MLA for North Belfast. As we are authorising funding of 65% for many Departments, there are a number of issues that my party and I would like to see sorted as soon as possible, particularly in relation to the pay settlement. Our party is determined to ensure that our education support workers receive the pay settlement that they deserve. I think that we speak on behalf of all Members when we say that we recognise the valuable role that our non-teaching education staff play, be that in special educational needs provision or in the classroom.

As a North Belfast representative, I also want to see further funding awarded to the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice. We will press for

that now that funding has been made available. Like many constituencies, North Belfast has, as, I am sure, the Principal Deputy Speaker will concur, an amazing community sector. Now that the accounts have been agreed, subject to the will of the House today, we want to ensure that that sector gets the certainty that it deserves.

As Chair of the Economy Committee and as an MLA for North Belfast, I support the Bill's passage today.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I will speak as Chair of the Committee for Communities initially and then make some remarks as a Sinn Féin spokesperson. In the first instance, I welcome the Minister to her new role. We look forward to working with your Department, Minister. I also look forward to the opportunity in the Committee to scrutinise future Budgets, and I acknowledge and note your comments on that today. Indeed, the Committee looks forward to being consulted on next year's Budget, being involved in the decisions on future spending and setting priorities for funding. Consequently, we anticipate hearing from the Department in detail about its spending plans for 2024-25 in the weeks and months ahead. In the interim, as the Committee agrees its forward work programme and looks to the responsibilities in the portfolio of the Department for Communities, we will be keen to hear from the Minister today on the settlement for the Department in both the short and longer term. The Communities Committee considers a broad range of issues, such as housing and homelessness; social security; energy poverty; social inclusion; charity regulation; liquor licensing; gambling regulation; language; sports; and heritage. It clearly spans a huge range of interests and will require significant resources in the time ahead.

I would now like to make a number of points in my capacity as a Sinn Féin MLA. In acknowledging the challenging fiscal circumstances that the Assembly finds itself in, particularly following a Tory-imposed Budget last April, it is clear that there will be extreme challenges for all of us around the Chamber in the time ahead. I welcome the Minister's statement today and, in particular, the allocation of £688 million for public-sector workers. It is important that we acknowledge the crucial nature of the work that our public-service workers carry out and, indeed, their right to fair pay. I certainly hope that they will have clarity on final pay awards as soon as possible.

It is clear that the financial package that accompanied the restoration of the Executive will, undoubtedly, fall far short of what is required across all Departments. It is unfair and unrealistic to ask people to contribute more to pay for services at a time when they are already paying more to meet their basic needs and experiencing increasing difficulties in accessing public services, such as the waiting lists that we see in the health service. Those services have been negatively impacted by many years of underfunding and underinvestment, something with which we will continue to struggle.

As I mentioned, the Department for Communities is a huge and varied Department. It supports some of the people in our communities who have been rendered most vulnerable as a result of disadvantage. It is responsible for the Supporting People fund; social security; housing; welfare mitigations; social strategies including, crucially, the anti-poverty strategy; sports; culture; arts; and local government.

I welcome the resource and capital budget allocation for DFC, which will, hopefully, bring some certainty and stability to the Department. I also welcome the £6 million for social housing, the £6 million for the NIHE Decent Homes Standard and the £1.2 million for the cladding scheme. It is clear, given the ongoing housing situation, with 45,615 applicants on the waiting list and 4,422 households in temporary accommodation, that significant pressure is being placed on the Housing Executive budget for homelessness prevention work. It is projected that 23,557 new social homes will be needed for 2022-27. Any reduction in delivery will have a detrimental effect on meeting that target. It would force more households into homelessness and temporary accommodation and, indeed, place further pressure on our statutory services.

It is vital that we continue to speak with one voice and challenge the funding formula used to allocate the Budget here. We also need to prioritise our public services and support for those who need it most. That is certainly what I will do as a member of the Committee for Communities. I support the Bill.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next Member to speak is Deborah Erskine.

Mrs Erskine (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on taking up your post. I do not think I have had the opportunity to do so. I

also congratulate the Finance Minister and look forward to working with her.

As other Chairs have said today, due to the urgency and limited timescale for the Bill, the Committee for Infrastructure has not yet had any opportunity to consider the Bill's provisions or assess the Department's capital and resource requirements for what remains of this financial year and into 2024-25. I understand the reasons for that, but it means that my comments in my capacity as Chairperson will be limited.

I am confident that the Department's financial needs will be an area of particular interest for the Committee in coming weeks, as we shape and develop our forward work programme and seek to understand the Department's immediate financial position and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the longer-term position. I am sure that, like me, other members of the Committee will actively participate, as we undertake our work, by fulfilling our advisory and scrutiny functions, which are underpinned by the aim of ensuring that the public services provided by the Department for Infrastructure are delivered to the standards that we all rightly expect.

Whilst recognising that the amount of preparatory work required to bring forward the Budget Bill is significant, the need to maximise our finances must be at the heart of everything we do. To achieve that, Committees need to be actively involved and engaged to contribute to the process. We need to be consulted, and we need our views to be sought. I understand and accept the need for the Bill to progress without delay to ensure that Departments have legislative authority for what remains of this financial year and for the few months of the next financial year

I will now make some remarks as the DUP MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. It will come as no surprise that I want to champion my area as regards infrastructure and all the other pressures that need to be met. There are many key areas of infrastructure that need investment to improve and grow our economy, meet the challenges of climate change and create better communities.

I was pleased to hear the Finance Minister make mention of some of the needs of our Infrastructure Department. Infrastructure accounted for 3.3% of the departmental allocations in the resource budget for 2022-23. To grow the economy, create the better communities that we need and deliver health transformation, we need investment in

infrastructure; it is one of the key things underpinning all of this.

Translink and Northern Ireland Water are two areas within the remit of the Minister for Infrastructure that need huge investment. The COVID pandemic had a severe financial impact on Translink, with loss of revenue from reduced passenger numbers. Adequate public transport is needed to encourage people to move to greener ways of travel. Government policy must work through all the Departments. While Northern Ireland Water continues with price control 21 (PC21) commitments to stop constraint areas, more needs to be done. This week, the Committee for Infrastructure will hear directly from Northern Ireland Water about the challenges that it faces. Ultimately, however, investment in networks is key: without it, construction cannot go ahead, and the public will see significant deterioration in their public services.

I welcome the commitment of £16 million for road structural maintenance, bus and rail capital projects and water and waste water infrastructure. However, given the capital pressures facing the Department, that will not stretch far. In my constituency, there is a pressing need to progress major road projects. One example that would unlock Fermanagh — Enniskillen in particular — is the immediate progression of the A4 southern bypass. I am keen to see that happen in my constituency. It will help to reduce congestion in Enniskillen — a fantastic town, Minister, if you have not already been — and boost our local economy greatly.

We need adequate funding for Northern Ireland for the many projects that Members in the Chamber will have and that our Executive will want to see driven forward. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council rightly pointed out in its report last week that this part of the UK faces a:

"cliff-edge' drop in funding in 2026-27".

It was welcome that one of the very first actions in the Assembly Chamber was that we all committed to ensuring that the Treasury provides Northern Ireland with a more sustainable level of funding. I thank my friend Gavin Robinson, deputy leader of the DUP, who championed that over many years, making sure that the issue of the funding received by Northern Ireland was brought to Westminster. To meet the challenges and work on the cross-departmental issues, we need funding not only to stabilise but to transform our services. That being said, I support the Bill.

Mr Chambers (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): I welcome you to your new role, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.

I rise as the Chairperson of the Audit Committee. As the Committee has not yet met — our first meeting is planned for 6 March — I wish to make it clear that I am not reflecting the views of the Committee today. However, I feel that it is necessary for me to make a short contribution about the Bill, as well as about the wider budgetary process.

The main role of the Audit Committee is to scrutinise and agree the budgets and estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. The Committee fulfils that function in place of the Department of Finance in recognition of the independence of those non-ministerial bodies. Given the Minister's request for accelerated passage for today's Bill and the timescales for the 2024-25 Budget, it is likely that there will not be time for full and proper consultation on this Budget or the next Budget. Although I understand that much of the background to the timescale for today's Bill and the short timescales for the Vote on Account and the Budget process for 2024-25 does not lie at the door of the Minister, it is still her Department that has brought today's Bill forward without proper consultation. I hope that that will not continue in the future.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Chair of the Audit Committee for giving way. I asked him to do so in order that I could make a point that will, I think, be important to his Committee. A statutory body that his Committee scrutinises, the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), wrote to the Finance Committee today to say that it is very concerned about its allocation, which is just a rollover from the previous financial year. I want to mark the Member's card in that regard, because his Committee will have to do work on it. The Audit Office is worried about its ability to carry out its critical audit and public service scrutiny work.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Member for his intervention.

The Audit Committee has a statutory function to consider and agree the Estimates for the NIAO, the NIPSO and the Assembly Commission. As the 2024-25 Budget will ultimately be reflected in the Main Estimates, it is clear that the Audit Committee will still be able to carry out its

scrutiny role. However, for the record, the Audit Committee expects to be afforded the opportunity to deliver its functions as part of ongoing and future budgetary processes. With that in mind, I look forward to early engagement between the Minister's Department and the Committee. That concludes my remarks in my capacity as Chair of the Audit Committee.

As health spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, it would be remiss of me not to make a few comments on the situation that faces our health service. A debate on waiting lists will take place in this place tomorrow, but we need to bear in mind the huge, sometimes life-changing, consequences of the disruption that gripped the Department of Health's budget this year. Really difficult decisions were taken, some of which, I suspect, none of us as politicians would ever have taken. For instance, the reduction in quarter 4 funding for targeted waiting list initiatives has been hugely damaging. Thousands of people missed out because of the reduced activity, and, unfortunately, despite the system's best efforts to protect people and prioritise red flags, it is a simple matter of fact that some patients will have come to greater harm.

Although I am certain that the Minister has been urgently reviewing what is possible in the short time that remains of this financial year, in reality the scope and scale of what is deliverable before 31 March is limited. Fundamentally, however, if we are ever to get to grips with the challenges weighing down on our health service, we will need a workforce that is appropriately remunerated. It is a matter of huge regret that the previous optimism, when all parties agreed the principle of restoring and retaining pay parity, was so cruelly dashed only two years later with the collapse of the Executive and any prospect of a multi-year funding settlement.

The health service, like so many other public services, has been hugely affected by rolling industrial action, but that action could have been avoided if we had had a functioning Executive and Assembly in place. I very much welcome the confirmation of funding from the UK Government for public-sector pay, but, as an Assembly, we urgently need to realise that, until we are able to put in place a more coordinated approach to pay, there will be a huge impact not just on staff morale but on patients' welfare.

We could spend hours talking about our health service, as needs must, but as the outcome of the spring Estimates laid out, what the health service really needs is certainty about what is

and is not deliverable and about what funding is available, not just today or next week but next year and the year after. Annual budgets will not provide the foundations required for the genuine and sustainable health and social care transformation that the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Mr Mathison (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I rise to contribute in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, before making remarks as the Alliance Party's education spokesperson.

The Deputy Chair of the Committee and I have been in post for just a fortnight, and the Committee's membership was confirmed just a week ago, so the Committee has not had much opportunity to form a detailed view on the Bill. It was able to set out some of its key priorities at its first meeting, however, and they are relevant to the debate. That first meeting took place last Wednesday, and it was great to welcome members to it. All of them expressed a clear and deep commitment to improving outcomes for our children and young people. I emphasise that, when we consider the education budget, we must keep at the forefront of our mind that investment in education is an investment in children and young people, while a failure to invest lets down the very people whom the education system is set up to serve.

We were not presented with a first-day brief or a Budget briefing at the first meeting of our Committee, but we look forward to having a series of meetings in which we will be able to address departmental priorities, beginning this Wednesday with our first briefing from the permanent secretary and his officials. I look forward to working with the Committee in the weeks ahead on scrutinising the budgetary position in detail.

I note from the Finance Committee's meeting today that, without accelerated passage of the Bill, the risk that the Department of Education would run out of money had been identified. On behalf of the Committee, I ask the Minister, as Phillip Brett did earlier, to provide a bit of clarity on exactly what the potential impact on education spending would have been had the Bill not come forward today.

The Finance Minister has advised that the allocations will address forecast overspend in the Department of Education, that all ring-fenced resource DEL will be met and that that resource DEL will go towards settling pay deals. The Committee has not been briefed in detail on any of that work, but I make it clear that it

was very clear in its first meeting that it wants to prioritise delivering fair pay settlements for our education workforce. We have committed to that by ensuring at our first meeting that the teaching unions will attend and that, shortly after, the non-teaching unions will brief the Committee. It is absolutely vital that we appropriately remunerate our teaching workforce and find a path out of the ongoing industrial action in our schools.

I understand that Statutory Committees would normally expect significant consultation to allow them to exercise their function of Budget scrutiny, but, with the return of devolution at rapid speed, which was far from ideal, and with every stage of the Budget Bill being scheduled to pass within two days, it has been impossible to carry out that work. It is improbable, as many Members have highlighted, that the Bill will receive the appropriate or ideal scrutiny that it should be afforded. The Bill has arrived with a lack of background discussion and information. It will cover Departments until the end of the financial year and bring forward the Vote on Account, but that is all in the context of no consultation or engagement with Committees. That is a regrettable situation, but I welcome the Minister's confirmation that there is no intention to treat that as a precedent.

The Deputy Chair and other members of the Committee will perhaps give their perspective over the course of the debates, but I emphasise that the Committee wants to begin its work with a constructive start. We will be questioning officials in the weeks ahead on some of the shortcomings of the accelerated passage process, but, as Chair of the Committee, I welcome the Bill as a necessary first step in the work of this Administration.

I will now make some remarks as an Alliance Party MLA and, specifically, as our party's education spokesperson. I support the Bill, and I will refer specifically to the budgetary context for education and the Alliance Party's priorities in that regard as we look forward.

Education in Northern Ireland is in a state of crisis. That crisis is largely a crisis of funding. Education, which in any functioning society should receive strategic and prioritised investment, is in Northern Ireland chronically underfunded. Across the board, that seems to be something on which the parties in the Chamber can agree. The 2023-24 Budget, pay pressures aside, had an estimated £300 million funding gap for education, and that has had a profound impact in the past year on school budgets and on capital investment in the school estate and infrastructure.

It is therefore vital that, in the coming financial year, we address the funding gap. Education needs a budget that reflects the need for strategic capital investment, not least in the area of special educational needs (SEN) but also to address the maintenance backlog in our schools. Future Budgets need to address the widening disparity in per pupil spend in Northern Ireland. By the calculation of the independent review of education, the annual gap is in the region of £155 million compared with per pupil spend in England, so the challenge is by no means a small one.

Given the substantial financial pressures experienced in education in this financial year, it is vital that the Executive receive from the UK Government a funding settlement that properly reflects our objective need. Failure to fund education in line with need punishes only our children and young people, and it is a failure to invest in our future growth and prosperity.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Chair of the Education Committee for giving way, and I congratulate him on the elevation to that role. Does he agree that the continuous collapse of this place and the political failure have added to the pain that our children have endured? While there is a budgetary issue, there is also a political failure, which is very obvious when it comes to education in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that it is time for everyone in the House to commit fully to proper investment in education and, indeed, our children's future?

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will come to those exact points as I continue my remarks. There is no doubt that the continual cycle of the collapse of the institutions does nothing to deliver for our children and young people. It is beholden to everyone in this place to commit to removing the veto from politics in Northern Ireland on that basis.

I turn back to my remarks in relation to a funding settlement that reflects our objective need. Alliance has been very clear in all our contributions on the issue that that needs-based adjustment needs to be more in the region of 127%, which my colleague Eóin Tennyson referenced, to better reflect that need. I assure Members that we will continue to make that case, not least so that the investment required in our schools can be made in the future.

In addition to my comments on teacher pay when I spoke as Chair of the Committee, it is vital that the Finance Minister makes an urgent

decision on the pay and grading review for non-teaching staff. I have already submitted a question to the Minister in that regard, and we do not have a clear timescale as to when that will be delivered. I will welcome any detail that she can provide today on that issue, because if we fail to address the huge issues around pay and terms and conditions for our non-teaching support staff, it is very difficult to see how we can avoid further hugely disruptive industrial action, which has only the outcome of impacting on our children and young people and, in particular, our children who attend special schools.

I will make a further comment on capital investment in education. While any moneys coming to education for capital projects via the UK Government's financial package will be welcomed, and I will be the first to welcome them, concerns have been raised that the UK Government will seek to reheat previous funding streams such as funds from 'A Fresh Start'. They were previously earmarked for shared and integrated projects. Many schools across Northern Ireland are relying on that pot of funding for their new buildings and extensions. Any loss of access to that funding would be an entirely retrograde step in my view. I ask the Finance Minister, as we look to future Budgets and future resource that will be available to the Department of Education, to provide urgent clarity as to the position around Fresh Start funding, specifically in relation to the financial package from the UK Government, and to clarify what assurances she can offer schools that their projects will not be jeopardised.

We should not just seek to ensure that education is appropriately funded. We should, of course, do so, but there is an urgent need for the reform and transformation of education on multiple fronts. Investment without reform will not deliver either financial sustainability or the excellent system that our children deserve. I will highlight a few areas of priority that it will be vital to address if we are going to deliver financial efficiency and sustainability.

I highlight SEN services. They must be properly resourced, but they must also be transformed to ensure that there is a clear focus on early identification of need, meaningful early intervention and a commitment to deliver SEN education in line with the very best international practice.

Our system of area planning needs to be overhauled to transform it from the cumbersome and, at times, unnecessarily competitive system that we have today and to

ensure that it is open, independent, transparent and focused on the needs of local communities. It must work to promote new models of school management that deliver sustainable schools, where children from all communities are educated together in the classroom. The Department must take seriously the financial impact of our divided school system and take clear steps to address it systematically. A proper audit of the cost of division in education is long overdue, and if the Education Minister is listening to the debate, I urge him to take that forward.

Tackling educational disadvantage must be prioritised, yes, through investment — I will be a strong advocate for proper investment to deliver the recommendations of the 'A Fair Start' report — but we also need to look seriously at the systemic factors that widen attainment gaps between the least well-off pupils and their better-off counterparts, not least the impact of our system of academic selection.

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

5.00 pm

We are all aware of the financial pressures facing education this year and into next year. They have been building year-on-year for some time. As Daniel McCrossan highlighted, that has not been helped by our history of stop-start government in Northern Ireland, which has made the delivery of multi-year Budgets and proper strategic planning in education impossible, representing a failure of our children and young people.

I urge that, today, as we consider the Budget Bill, we make clear our commitment not just to delivering sustainable finances for this place but to ending the role of the veto in our politics, giving the public the reassurance that they need that we have a stable Administration as we look to the future. We must reform these institutions, if for no other reason than to provide the stability that the public so desperately need. I will always argue for sustained and radical investment in education for our children and young people, but we also need a plan to deliver not just investment but meaningful transformation that will give us a modern, progressive and better-integrated education system that serves all pupils, regardless of economic background, and delivers equality of opportunity for all.

Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Deputy Speaker, I formally wish you well in your new

role, and I pass on my best wishes to our new Finance Minister.

I will speak first on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office. While the Executive Office has a relatively small budget of around £182 million, most of that is earmarked, so there is only a small amount of baseline funds to play with. Trying to make savings of £10 million out of the £76 million available has, no doubt, been a tall order. Only so much freezing of recruitment and 10% top-slicing across the Department and its associated arm's-length bodies can be undertaken before important areas of delivery, such as good relations funding, are cut. That emphasises why detailed scrutiny of the Budget is so important to the Committee, and accelerated passage deprives us of that.

The extent of the Vote on Account — almost two thirds of the intended spend for 2024-25 — is also a matter of concern. It is the role of the Committee to discuss in detail how the Department allocates resources and to provide views on how money should be spent. The Committee needs time and space to examine and consider the options open to use resources effectively and to provide value for money.

There will also be new areas of expenditure, ranging from the full implementation of free period products — the legislation that was passed in the last mandate — through to the appointment of the language and identity commissioners. Those extra costs will also have an impact on how the Department cuts its cloth. Indeed, the Committee looks forward to being consulted on next year's Budget and being involved in the decisions made on future spending and on setting priorities for funding. Consequently, we anticipate hearing from the Department in detail about its spending plans for 2024-25.

I will now make a number of points in my capacity as an individual MLA representing the Alliance Party. A notably high share of the Executive Office's spending is annually managed expenditure, and I do not expect to see that change imminently. There are already commitments from the end of the last mandate, as I noted. My party and I trust that, in addition to those commitments, we will imminently carry through the recommendations for the appropriate standardised payment for mothers and adoptees arising from the mother-and-baby homes scandal, plus implementation of the tackling violence against women and girls strategy. I should add that one of my overriding concerns for the current financial year — this is shared by many respondents to the

consultation on the Budget equality impact assessment — is the loss of skills in the voluntary and community sector arising from programme cutbacks.

It is fair to say that my party and I are somewhat concerned at the state in which the Executive Office finds itself after two years of boycott, and there will need to be swift work to correct that. It must be emphasised that this is not remotely the fault of officials in the Executive Office. While the absence of Ministers created difficulties for all Departments, it made the effective operation of the Executive Office almost impossible. That would have been the case even at the best of times, but, in fact, particularly in recent months, we have been fairly close to the worst of times. In particular, the absence of a permanent secretary since September meant that no decisions were made. The transfer of the functions of accounting officer to the deputy secretary is not optimum, and it is my strong view, and that of my Alliance Party colleagues, that a permanent secretary should be put in place swiftly so that the functions of accounting officer can rest where they are supposed to rest for the next financial year.

We also want to see greater financial clarity from the Executive Office once the new permanent secretary is in place. Currently, we are, effectively, assessing programmes and impacts rather than overall departmental performance. We do not want to be in the same position this time next year. It is hoped that the direction of Ministers and a permanent secretary will mean that there is leadership in setting a transparent Budget in time for the 2024-25 financial year and beyond and that, next year, we will have a series of updated strategies and consultations to work off as we evaluate the Executive Office's performance.

Put simply, we have a lot of catching up to do over the coming months to make sure that the Executive Office's contribution, be it to victims, good relations, public-sector reform, international links or whichever of its many vital areas of work it covers, provides maximum value and maximum benefit.

Dr Aiken: I welcome the Minister. Regrettably, I will probably have to slip out in 10 minutes or so to our all-party group (APG) meeting. Sadly, you will have to step down from the all-party group, but I thank you very much for your work for the APG on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and everything that you have done. I congratulate you on your new post. I am glad that we have somebody in the role who understands science,

technology and maths. That will be particularly appropriate.

That is probably as good as it will get, Minister, as you would imagine. As an ex-Chairperson of the Finance Committee, I have looked at the process today, and I am nervous about what has happened, as, indeed, are many of us who are familiar with what has gone on in the past. I noted that you said in your remarks that there is a real concern about this because we are likely to run out of cash. The Committee had briefings from officials about concerns that the Education and Communities Ministries would run out of cash and the real problems that that would create. Last Wednesday, we were briefed by officials that overspend was somewhere in the region of £400 million and that they were having to reach out to take money from the contingency fund to help to pay for Civil Service pensions. There is obviously considerable concern in the Civil Service and Departments about our financial position. It should concern us all, though, that we have heard time and again that we are not in a position to compare the figures with the Supplementary Estimates. Normally, what would happen at this stage is that each of us would reach into the Supplementary Estimates and pull out figures to compare them with where we actually are and what we should be doing.

It is obvious, Minister, that you are aware, because you have been told by other Ministers and Departments, where the pressures and pinch points are, but we are not aware of that information. We have not been made aware of that information in the Finance Committee, and, from what I have heard from Chairpersons of other Committees — I have heard from the Committees for Education, Infrastructure, Audit and others — they are not aware either. Minister, if we are to make this work effectively, which we all want to do, we need to be aware of the information. If you have that information, Committees should have it as well. We are not setting out to deliberately trip you up. Trust me: I am not. I know what it is like, and I have seen the parlous financial situation that we are in. However, we are not in a position to help you unless you give us the information that we need. Bear in mind that, during the last short period that we were here, we, particularly in the Finance Committee, looked at improved reporting procedures so that there would be greater transparency. I do not feel as though we are getting any transparency at all at the moment. If you were being honest with yourself, Minister, I do not think that you could say that you were getting the transparency that you need to make the decisions that are out there.

We are being asked about a Vote on Account to 65%. We are being told that the reason that we need to do that is the difficulties that there are in forming the budgetary process. One thing that I would like the Minister to address in her remarks — I think that it has already been raised by the Leader of the Opposition and other Members on these Benches — is the state of the discussions with Treasury. What is the state of the discussions that, you said, you were going urgently to have with Treasury? We are being asked to approve a series of budgetary positions without knowing what the outcome is likely to be. We have not been told what the pressures are and where they lie. We have been told that there are considerable problems, but we have not been given detailed information. We have no Supplementary Estimates, even though, obviously, the Civil Service must have got the figures from somewhere. It is drawing money from the contingency fund, so it must know how much of those moneys there are. It must have ideas of what the budgetary positions are. We do not have that information, yet we are asked to sign off on a cheque for £18 billion. I will say that again: £18 billion. We are asked to sign off on that to keep our vital public services going. For how long? Is it for three months, for four months, until the summer recess or until after it? Do we know? We have not been given that information. We have to have that if we are to effectively help, support and scrutinise.

The people of Northern Ireland are, frankly, jaundiced — that is the politest word — about this place and what we do. One of the reasons for that, which we saw with RHI and all sorts of things, is that we have no real method of controlling our public moneys. Time and time again, we are caught out. I know that this might be a spotter sort of thing — the learned Mr Allister KC is not here — but one of the things that we brought out last time is that, when we look at the lines in the budgets and accounts that come before us, we, like a good set of auditors, should always check the small detail to see if it adds up. One of the things that we used to look at is what is called the "black box". Some of you will not be aware of what the black box is, but it is a method of accounting procedures. The figure should be no more than £1 million. That is the maximum that it is supposed to be, as laid out by the Audit Office. Last time we had a look at the black box, it was £1 billion, which was, obviously, completely off the scale. This time, it is £28 million. Therefore, by a factor of 28, we are out on even the basics. The Minister's officials are here: maybe they could beaver away and come up with some of the answers on that, because, frankly, it is not acceptable. People who want to see

Northern Ireland run well need to understand that the accounting processes are being done correctly.

Here is the situation. We do not know what the outcomes, the out-turns or the pressures are. All we are being told is that the whole thing will come collapsing down around us. We have been given none of that information. Minister, I trust you; I do. We should trust the Finance Minister with the finances to deal with the situation. However, I need to be assured that you are getting the right information. Many of the finance spokespeople present were in regular communication with the Department of Finance up to Christmas. The parties that were likely to be in the Executive and, indeed, the Opposition were invited to those meetings. There was a large degree of clarity about the positions and pressures. Indeed, it was probably sufficient for us to start making a judgement about the real issues that we would have to deal with when we got to the Programme for Government. All that stopped just before Christmas. We are now through the next quarter. I cannot, in all honesty, say that I have a handle on where our finances are. I cannot see where the moneys are coming in and coming out.

I am told that we have real pressures. The Health Minister tells me that we have real pressures, and I believe him. We have real pressures on teachers' pay, on public service pay and all over the place. We do not have any figures. I look around at the Committee Chairpersons, and nobody is saying, "Steve, you are wrong", or, "Will you take an intervention? I know what is going on". You do not. Feel free, please. Not one of them is saying that.

We do not have that degree of information. If we are to do our job effectively, we have to understand that and do that.

5.15 pm

Minister, I encourage you to be as open as you can or even to go the extra step. We should have the information that you have. If we are to continue to build trust and make sure that we have a Budget process and a Budget that is working, we need to know that. Our party will support the Budget, but we are doing that because I trust you when you tell me that we are going to fall off a cliff. I am doing that in good faith, because I do not know that. What I know, however, is that we have moved into unprecedented territory. When I say that we have a Vote on Account of 65%, that should

scare the living daylights out of every MLA here, and it should scare the living daylights out of every Department. We are handing over a cheque for £18 billion, the details of which we do not know. That is not a great situation for us to be in, Minister.

I hear your commitment. I would love to make sure that we will have the spring Supplementary Estimates. One of your officials told us today that we would have them by the end of March. I want to make sure that that happens, and I would like to hear from you a commitment that that will happen. If it does not happen — I have my concerns about that — we need to have answers about what we will do about that. Frankly, this is untenable, and we cannot keep on going the way we are. I wish you all the best, Minister. I will be supportive of you: you know that I will be. I trust you, but you need to get on with it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I thank the Member for that, but it is an opportune time to remind all Members that remarks should be directed through the Chair.

Mr Sheehan: I speak as a Sinn Féin MLA, although I am Deputy Chair of the Committee for Education. The Chair of the Committee covered most of the remarks that I would have made if I had spoken as Deputy Chair.

Sinn Féin wants an education system that delivers for all and leaves no one behind. We believe that education should be underpinned by equality. Our education system should equip all children and young people for life and allow them to pursue their dreams and goals without barriers. As Sinn Féin's education spokesperson, I want to comment on the ongoing funding crisis in education, which has taken place against a background of years of Tory austerity and chronic underinvestment.

Sinn Féin continues to prioritise important issues in the education system, including tackling underachievement, special educational provision and improving early years. I thank the Finance Minister for the £688 million pay award for public-sector workers. Our hard-working teachers and non-teaching support staff, like all public-sector workers, deserve fair pay and conditions, and I am hopeful that those can be delivered in the time ahead.

The independent review of education recently published its final report, 'Investing in a Better Future'. The report notes that education in the North is highly underfunded, largely as a result of historical and systemic spending cuts. The crisis directly affects learners and the

workforce. Many of the report's recommendations can be delivered only with additional funding. Recurrent funding for the Department of Education has reduced in real terms by £145 million — that is 6% — over the last 11 years, while the pupil population has increased by 7%. During that time, per pupil funding reduced in real terms by around 11%. The funding provided for our children and young people is lower than that received by those in other regions.

The British Secretary of State created this difficult Budget, resulting in Departments making the decision to live within it. The Department of Education has made cuts to programmes that disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged children and young people. We had cuts last year to programmes like holiday hunger, Happy Healthy Minds, digital devices and so on: the list is lengthy. Not only is there not enough funding for education but, when cuts are made, they disproportionately affect the children who are already most disadvantaged. Further cuts to the education budget could have had a detrimental impact on a wide range of areas, including the day-to-day running of schools, special educational needs support, school transport, youth services and school builds. The Irish-medium sector also needs to be properly funded. At the moment, there are severe difficulties in regard to accommodation quality, and resources that are generally available to English-language schools are not available in the Irish language. The supply of teachers is creating difficulties in the Irish-medium sector as is the lack of expertise from specialists, such as educational psychologists who have fluency in the Irish language.

The funding gap in education needs immediate attention, but there is also the need for additional long-term investment in education.

Ms Armstrong: Thanks very much to the Member for giving way. The Member was talking about additional resources, and one of the key things for Irish-medium schools is the lack of exam papers, because they are not even produced for those children. Does the Member agree that we need to put investment into their exams as well?

Mr Sheehan: Absolutely. I could not agree more. Much of the written material that goes into mainstream schooling is not translated into Irish. An extra burden is placed on teachers in the Irish-medium sector to translate papers that are given to the Irish-medium sector in English.

The Fiscal Council's assessment of the financial package supports the position that the Executive are underfunded on the basis of need. The financial package does not address our historical underfunding in a sustainable or long-term way. The British Government need to engage meaningfully and urgently with the Executive and the Minister of Finance to address that underfunding, including the chronic underinvestment in our education system.

Miss McAllister: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. This is the first time that I have been in the Chamber when you have been in the Chair, so congratulate you on taking your role.

I will try to keep my remarks short, but there are a number of areas on which I want to speak in particular as health spokesperson for Alliance and as a member of the Policing Board, as well as in my capacity as an Alliance MLA. I recognise that today's debate is not a vision for the future, and we must be clear on that when we make our representations to the public. None of us in the Chamber would want to be here today if this were the vision for the future, but, unfortunately, after more than a decade of Tory austerity, we are where we are and must deal with the public finances as they stand. They were obviously not helped by two years of the Assembly's not sitting. Out of the previous seven years, we have had too many years where we have not been able to make decisions for the benefit of all of the people of Northern Ireland. However, moving forward, I look forward to the Minister highlighting the case with the Treasury and with our Departments for how we can realise that vision for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

I want to move on to talk about how we landed in this position. Over the past two years, we have placed our permanent secretaries and civil servants in untenable positions, where they have had to take decisions that they, frankly, should not have taken. Unfortunately, we landed in a place where it seemed that everything that was not placed on a statutory footing was up for the chop. A number of MLAs have spoken about Happy Healthy Minds and about holiday hunger. We also had the Engage programme. A number of programmes in the Executive Office could not be fulfilled, not just because of the lack of an Assembly but because of the funding allocations.

When we have cut funds to non-statutory obligations, we have essentially shifted the burden. In the Chamber last week, I spoke on the issue of mental health in particular. When

we cut the community and voluntary sector, the burden is placed back on the statutory sector.

As an example, I will talk about holiday hunger. The two-child cap on households in Northern Ireland has plunged so many families into poverty. In North Belfast, my constituency, over 1,000 households are affected by the cap. So many of those families relied on the holiday hunger programme in order to feed their children. We are talking about feeding children in 2024. Now that they do not have that safety net, those families have had to rely on other services in our community. When we did not see further expansion of multidisciplinary teams or Sure Start, more and more families were put on waiting lists and so turned to other statutory and community organisations. Again, it is not just about cutting services but about shifting the burden elsewhere. When we do not have mitigations in place, we see waiting lists increase across health and education, more families in distress and more pressures on our statutory services.

Despite having the youngest population, Northern Ireland spends more per head on health and social care than anywhere else in the UK, yet our system is crumbling. It is not getting any better. It is overly bureaucratic and delivers by far the worst outcomes for waiting times, for diagnosis as well as for treatment. We want to ensure that what we spend is not spent on a failing system but on a system that is transformed, but we cannot achieve that transformation without ensuring that we have sustainability in the immediate future. That is why we need to ensure that, moving forward, our health service is put front and centre of that transformation. We need to ensure that we can rely on our workers by not driving them out of jobs, by paying them correctly and by valuing the work that they do in the service by ensuring that there is adequate provision in each of our disciplines.

Last month, I stood on the picket lines with many of our healthcare workers, education workers and Fire and Rescue Service workers. Those people chose their vocation because it is something that they are passionate about. If we want to ensure that people who are passionate about their role stay in that role, we need to pay them correctly. I understand and can see that we cannot go entirely in the direction in which every single worker and union wants us to today, but, by ensuring that we progress this Bill and outline our vision for the future, we can lay down the right marker to be on that forward trajectory.

It is not just me, as Alliance spokesperson, or Members right across the Chamber who speak about the capacity of the health sector and the pressures that it is facing. That is coming from the sector itself. Many organisations out there speak directly to us about what they want to see when it comes to our health service's finances. The Royal College of Surgeons has said time and again, "We need three-year budgets. Recurrent funding is critical. We need £200 million every year for five years if we are to cut long waiting lists for good". The British Medical Association (BMA) has said, "We are frustrated by the slow pace of transformation and reform of health and social care in Northern Ireland. Plans have been made, but implementation has not followed". Cancer Research UK, while waiting for the full funding and implementation of the cancer strategy, has said that it has been disheartened, and much more, for so many people affected by cancer that, two years on, so little has been progressed.

When we speak today in the Chamber, it is not just about us as MLAs representing our constituencies. We are representing the entirety of Northern Ireland and the many allied health professionals and organisations that do their work, day in, day out, and know just what is right for the health service.

I will now speak a little bit about the justice budget. In the past 12 years, the health budget has grown by 70% and the education budget by 45%, yet the justice budget has seen just an increase of a little over 3%. The policing budget takes up 70% of the justice budget, but it is just one element of the criminal justice system. If we are to have a fair and expeditious justice system, we need to fund it in its entirety. Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I know from sitting on the Policing Board that there are inescapable pressures when funding the justice system, but if we are to see a true and fair allocation of the entirety of the justice budget, we need to see that happen across the board.

5.30 pm

We want to ensure that those facing the front-line pressures, whether in justice, health or education, are not the first people to be withdrawn across Northern Ireland. We can do that only if we have a Budget that is a vision for the entirety of Northern Ireland.

As I said when I made my first remarks, we are not where we wanted to be, but, unfortunately, given where we have landed, we need to ensure that we have a safety net for the Departments moving towards the end of the

financial year. For that reason, we support the Budget Bill today, but we look forward to working with the Minister of Finance to ensure that we can realise the potential for the entirety of Northern Ireland moving forward.

Miss Brogan: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.*] I begin by welcoming you to the role of Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Minister for bringing the Budget Bill to the Floor of the Assembly. I thank my colleagues in the Finance Committee for agreeing to its accelerated passage in the exceptional circumstances as well. Urgency is required to ensure that the Budget Bill passes through the Assembly and receives Royal Assent as promptly as possible. That is to make sure that Departments do not reach the limits of the cash allocated to them through the Budget that was set by the Secretary of State in April 2023. As we know, those allocations fell well short of the funding that Departments need, and we saw the devastating impact of that Budget on many of our public services. As a result of the previous Budget, Departments will reach the cash limit much earlier than usual, and we need the Budget Bill to progress so that Departments can continue to access the cash that they need to deliver services for the remainder of the financial year.

We have waited far too long for the opportunity to come to the Chamber and debate a Budget Bill that will bring much-needed stability to our public finances. The Bill's being debated today is an important step in finally addressing the chaos that has been a feature of the past 18 months of Tory misrule, both for our public finances and for our ability to deliver decent public services. Let us have no doubt that the difficult financial position that we find ourselves in today is a direct consequence of the underfunding of Budgets by the Tory Government. In the past year alone, Tory underfunding has delivered cuts of up to £1 billion to our public services.

As elected representatives, we see every day the impacts that those cuts have on our communities, and many of those have been mentioned here this afternoon already. It is utterly reprehensible that Tory cuts inflicted so much hardship on the most vulnerable in our society, many of whom were already struggling due to the cost-of-living crisis. The £3.3 billion financial package that was agreed is, of course, very welcome, but, as many others have stated, the funding package will only plug the gaps left by the years of Tory underfunding and is simply not enough to deliver long-term sustainability.

I welcome the announcement from the Finance Minister last week that £688 million has been made available for public-sector pay. Our public-sector workers have waited long enough for fair pay, and that money now provides an opportunity for deals to be reached. I am delighted that the Minister made that a priority. However, it is worth noting that the pay negotiations associated with the money, earmarked for public-sector pay, could be jeopardised if the Bill was not to progress. Voting against the Bill could, in fact, be voting against a fair pay deal for workers.

It is hugely significant that the very first act of the restored Assembly was a united call from all the parties for a new fiscal framework that would ensure that funding be provided on the basis of need and that our finances be put on a sustainable footing. Sinn Féin is ready and willing to work with the other parties to achieve fiscal sustainability in the longer term, but we must be given the time and space to consider all the options that are available to us. In the meantime, I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Budget Bill to deal with the immediate pressures facing us, and I urge Members to support the passage of the Bill through the Assembly.

Mr Frew: I rise to speak again in a Budget Bill debate. From my recall of all the debates on finance and Budgets that I have taken part in, there has never been a satisfactory process in order that this place can scrutinise properly a Budget Bill and the finances of the Executive. We are no different today with this Budget Bill.

Under normal circumstances, the Committee would have had much more time to scrutinise the Bill, which would have followed on from the usual Estimates process and the Vote on Account. Those processes would have given a clear indication of the Budget's direction of travel. This Bill simply makes provision for Departments and arm's-length bodies to remain funded until the end of the financial year, as well as setting a 65% Vote on Account for next year's Budget and allowing movement between the Consolidated Fund and the Departments and their arm's-length bodies for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 financial years.

I always take exception to Standing Order 42(2), which gives the Finance Committee the power to grant accelerated passage, as opposed to Standing Order 42(3), which gives the Assembly that power. I always take exception to being asked whether appropriate consultation has taken place. On this occasion and on many others, that is simply not the case,

so I have a problem with that question being asked. It is not true to say that there has been appropriate consultation. However, we also realise why the Bill needs to proceed via accelerated passage. Worse than that, Standing Order 42(5) has been suspended, and accelerated passage has shrunk from 10 days to two. We are not in a very good or comfortable place. Not only are we, as an Assembly, not in a very good or healthy place, how can the Executive be? Ministers have been in post for only a matter of days, and we already have a Budget Bill before us. There is nothing strategic about that. However, I understand why: there are Departments that will run out of money.

Earlier today, I was interested in an answer that the Economy Minister gave to a question from Claire Sugden. He said that Ministers had been asked where they cannot spend money, rather than where they can. We are in a very bad place. That brings me to the briefing that we received in the Finance Committee today from departmental officials. They told us that two Departments in particular — the Department for Communities and the Department of Education — are at risk of running out of money before the end of the financial year. Think about what that means. By the way, Education and Communities are both under DUP Ministers. Think about the Department for Communities. When I asked whether it was about running the Department, the answer was no. It is about delivering the benefits system, including personal independence payments, DLA, universal credit and all those benefits that are sprinkled down to support our most vulnerable. That, basically, is the position that we are in. I do not want a message to go out that, now that the Executive are back and the Assembly is here, all is well and everything will be rosy. Quite frankly, it is not.

It is quite clear that the biggest burden on our Departments is the pay settlement. That is about right, because we need to invest in people. We need to ensure that, as the money sprinkles through the Departments, all pay settlements are resolved, not just those affecting parts of Departments or some workers and staff. I have a real issue — it has been raised here today — about non-teaching staff, bus drivers, classroom assistants and cooks. All of that worries me. We should look at not just the front-line services but all the ancillary services, and support those people. I hope that the Minister takes that on board. I do not know how much the Finance Minister deals with the Education Minister and the other Departments in those negotiations, but we have to be mindful

of that in the Assembly when we scrutinise those things.

I go back to the point that I have made endless times before. We are publishing and agreeing a Budget, yet we have no sign of a Programme for Government and no sign whatsoever of a strategic direction, so how can we really evaluate the need out there when we are doing this back to front? If we had time, we should have a Programme for Government that is then funded through our Budget system. We cannot get to that place. To be fair, we have never been in that place. Basically, what we have done with the Budget is pack £18 billion, wrap it up in black boxes, as Steve Aiken said, into the back of a car and release the handbrake. We do not have a satnav, a direction, an outcome or a place to go to yet, and we have just released the handbrake. That worries me. It should worry us all with regard to the detail.

What also worries me is that some in the Chamber think that it is a good idea to have additional fiscal powers. Really? You want additional fiscal powers when we do not even get to see the detail of a Budget that we are being asked to pass and that will distribute 65% of next year's Budget. Without seeing the Vote on Account and without seeing the detail, that is worrying.

What about our charitable sector? What about the organisations that do sterling work out there and do it far better than government ever could? What about funding for them? What about infrastructure and capital investment? If we do not get our act together — we have never had our act together on infrastructure — people will die. It is not just health-related spending that saves people's lives. People die when we do not invest properly in our infrastructure. We have not done that — ever.

I have heard many people talk today about big, bad Tory austerity. I get that with regard to how the Tory party has governed over the past number of years. However, you cannot really talk about big, bad Tory austerity on the one hand when, on the other hand, our Departments hand money back. How can you talk about austerity and not having enough money when the Department of Health and others — this is not just the Department of Health — hand back millions? We have to get real in this place. The Departments here do not spend money well — they do not.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate the point that he makes around the risk of underspend at year end. In fact, that was an issue that I raised in the

Finance Committee earlier. Does the Member agree that, given the cycle of stop-start government that the DUP and others have subjected us to, strategic spend is not always possible and that we need multi-year Budgets and multi-year flexibility in carry forward in order to realise that potential?

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his contribution, because he makes a valid point. Stop-start government does not always work or should not work. It hurts people; I get that. Parties over the years have made strategic political decisions on that stuff. However, I can tell you this now: even when we do have government, it hurts people. For two years, when the Assembly was up and running, it hurt people. It closed businesses down; it ruined livelihoods; it closed our schools; it deprived our children of their education; and it stumped development in our toddlers. All in all, the Assembly sat like a zombie Parliament and let that happen.

Where in this Budget —.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. I know that he is very passionate about that area in particular, but it is a bit peculiar to listen to the Member talk about a zombie Parliament when his party has been a senior partner in that Government for many years. Surely a lot of responsibility lands at your feet.

5.45 pm

Mr Frew: The Member mistakes me: I am talking about the Assembly being a zombie Assembly, not the Executive. The Executive make decisions, and they have been hurtful. My party has stood up against and voted against those decisions many times and has sped up the return to normal.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will give way.

Ms Bradshaw: I was on the former Health Committee, as you are aware, along with two of your DUP colleagues. Nobody was happy with the way in which the coronavirus regulations legislation was brought forward, but we voted for it consistently because we knew that it was in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. Hansard will reflect that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Before we continue, I ask Members to return to the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Frew: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am sorry, but it is not good enough for Members to say, "We didn't want to do this", and, "We didn't want to do that", when you caused so much hurt to our people out there.

From September 2017 to June 2018, 1,731 pupils had an absence level of 50% or greater, with 523 pupils missing over 80% of school. That changed dramatically with lockdown philosophy. The absence levels for pupils from September 2021 to June 2022 show that 4,000 —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I intervene again to ask the Member to return to the Budget Bill debate.

Mr Frew: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I raise those figures because, frankly, I see nothing in the Bill that recovers the hurt caused by the last Executive and the Assembly, which did not scrutinise and do its job properly. Where in the Budget Bill do we see an acknowledgement that hurt was caused and that we could have done it differently and a plan for how we fix it? Nothing in the Budget Bill fixes the hurt that was caused by the previous Executive, when the Assembly should have been scrutinising them.

Given my lack of faith in this place to scrutinise bad legislation, you can understand my nervousness around allowing a Budget Bill to allocate 65% of next year's Budget without seeing any real detail, strategic vision or direction as to how we will proceed. That scares me. Frankly, if it does not scare me — for the benefit of Hansard, I see Members around the Chamber laughing. How funny it is. We have hurt people, destroyed businesses, hurt children's education and hurt toddlers' development, yet people think that it is funny. That is the state of play as we see it.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way for the second time. I am just looking for some clarification: is the Member still in the DUP, because he is criticising his own colleagues, or am I living in a completely different place?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I ask, once again, that we return to the clauses of the Budget Bill, the subject of the Budget Bill debate, which is what this session of the Assembly is discussing.

Mr Frew: Yes, I will, Mr Deputy Speaker. I respect your ruling.

The Member must realise that the Assembly is a different place from the Executive. When decisions are taken —

Mr McCrossan: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Frew: It is. It is a different place. When that is blurred — this man is now a member of the Opposition. From what I see, there is more opposition in my little finger. The Opposition said today that they were not happy with accelerated passage, and then they abstained. What sort of opposition is that? Deadly. There is more opposition and more scrutiny in my little finger than we see in the official Opposition. I look forward to seeing them up their game as we go along with this procedure and process.

The fact remains that we do not see enough detail quickly enough to be able to make informed decisions around the Budget for this place, and that will hurt our people. At the minute, there is no strategic vision whatever. We have lifted the handbrake from the vehicle, and it is running down the hill. We have done that simply to make sure that some of the Departments — not just the two I mentioned; there will be others — do not run out of money. What I really worry about, however, is what we will put in place for the next financial year if we have already allocated 65% of that Budget. It seems to me that the Finance Department officials are not that hopeful that there will be a Budget in good time for next year, given that they have allocated 65% and say that that will take them well into the summer recess. It looks like a rocky road with regard to finalising strategic streams of finances to our Departments to ensure that we cover the costs and burdens.

Another important issue relates to some of the decisions that the last Assembly made. I name the climate Bill, which was costed at billions of pounds — £2.3 billion was reported in the press at the weekend. Where is that factored into this Bill? Where are the burdens of the past — of the previous Assembly and Executive — factored in? Where is that costed? That is a massive question that the Assembly cannot yet answer. Not only can the Assembly not answer it; the Executive cannot answer it either.

There are many issues going down this road that I really worry about. We in the House should be assured that we will have to take a lot of difficult decisions. I hope that all the parties in the Assembly will scrutinise this properly to ensure that we do not hurt people, as we have

in the previous two years when the Assembly and Executive were not running. I hope, but we will wait and see.

Ms McLaughlin: I feel like I am in a twilight zone after that, but anyway.

I am glad that we are here debating this step to release funding for Departments. That our financial allocations are being made here, not in Westminster on the whims of a Tory Secretary of State, is good news and will be sheer relief for people in communities across Northern Ireland. However, a point that has been well made many times today is that this is not the way that any of us want to do business. Rushing a Budget Bill through by hyper-accelerated passage, however necessary that may be, is by no means good for governance, nor is it appropriate for the proper understanding on the part of MLAs or of the public of the financial plans of the Executive and of how we will spend money in the first few months of the year.

That lack of scrutiny and accountability is totally perverse. Indeed, the whole process of this Budget Bill is a symptom of the dysfunction of our politics and a consequence of the failure to govern this place over the last two years. Those of us who believe, as I do, that any new fiscal framework must include greater fiscal devolution should also recognise that it is harder to make that argument in a convincing way when the constant threat of collapse threatens to undermine the ability to properly manage our finances. That is another reason why fiscal sustainability is dependent on political sustainability.

The process is also symbolic of the perverse lack of transparency and opaque decision-making that has clouded this place for so long. For too long, outcomes from our politics have been muddled. Looking at any area of public policy, we see report after report being issued but a lack of serious accountability for delivery. Just in my constituency, there have been promises, reports and strategies but no delivery. It appears that the Executive's homework simply never gets marked, and our public debate never seems to get round to interrogating the impact of our public policy decisions. Some of that, of course, is because this place is up as much as it is down, but, whatever the reason, the public are losing faith in our ability to deliver outcomes. From the patients waiting in chronic agony for their first appointment with a consultant to the parents waiting for their child's special educational needs assessment, families rightly wonder what their Government are achieving and what

progress we are making on the issues that they care about.

In this new mandate, we must change how we do business. From the state of our school estate to the quality of our roads, Northern Ireland faces a multitude of challenges that have their roots in poor government, chronic underfunding and political dysfunction. The least that the public should be able to expect from their politicians is accountability and the ability to judge delivery against objectives. That accountability is undermined when the processes are rushed, especially when it comes to public spending. Scrutiny and accountability must also be improved through the proper and full Budget process later this year. The Budget must be linked to an agreed Programme for Government and closely aligned with clearly measurable strategies and policy objectives. Now that we are back at work, we must get on with demonstrating delivery. Everyone in this place wants to see that take place, and we must put in place the structures to ensure that it is able to take place forthwith.

Mr Baker: Infrastructure has a vital role in building and connecting communities. The right infrastructure allows our communities to truly thrive, prosper and achieve their full potential. As a member of the Committee for Infrastructure, I will comment on the Budget from that perspective and on the importance of having locally elected Ministers in office.

My party continues to prioritise the much-needed A5 road scheme to save lives and deliver a road that is fit for purpose. This morning, I spoke about the importance and value of Casement Park. I thank the Finance Minister, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, for the £688 million funding award and welcome the fact that funding has been allocated to afford workers the pay rise that they deserve. I hope that Translink and the union can come to a speedy conclusion.

I welcome the additional £16 million capital for infrastructure, which will go towards road repairs for those in most need. I also welcome investment for NI Water for much-needed water and waste water capital projects and funding for our public transport network to go towards zero-emission buses. I welcome the Minister for Infrastructure's swift commitment to improving our roads by finding the additional £1 million last week and prioritising within the £16 million. Unfortunately, as things stand, potholes plague roads across the North; the quick intervention will help make our roads safer. Our bus and train staff work tirelessly to ensure that people can depend on our public transport, while

Roads Service staff are on the front line of ensuring road safety and fixing roads with the limited resource that they have available. Those are just a few examples of the exemplary work of our public-sector staff, people who have had to take industrial action to demand fair pay and good conditions.

Infrastructure is an economic driver, but is also vital for social mobility, inclusion and accessibility. Those are priorities for Sinn Féin, as is tackling climate change and working to address flooding. We need to invest in better roads, active travel and biodiversity. Our public services have been completely decimated by more than a decade of Tory austerity and cuts. In reality, that means a massive road maintenance backlog; a water and waste water system that constrains development across the North; long-awaited capital projects facing delays; and essential public services such as community transport and public transport being left on the back foot. Sadly, I am naming only a few examples. The fact that we are and have been severely underfunded is agreed across the board. Importantly, the Fiscal Council agrees with the Executive that they have been underfunded.

Last year, the British Secretary of State threatened the public with the introduction of water charges. That is the last thing that workers and families need during a severe cost-of-living crisis. I welcome First Minister Michelle O'Neill's statement last week on that, reaffirming that water charges will not happen on her watch.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he provide clarification on his party's position, particularly given that it has the Department for Infrastructure, the First Ministry, the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy? Was it not his colleague Chris Hazzard who, when he was Minister for Infrastructure, installed a lot of water meters across Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: I will be honest with you: I do not know the answer to what you are asking. We do not support water charges — that has been made clear — but, particularly on what you said about Chris, I do not know the local issue.

A chairde, [*Translation: Friends*] I support the Bill, but there are challenging times ahead, and we need to continue to work together to prioritise the needs of the public and to protect everyone from the cruel and shameless Tory cuts that we continue to face.

6.00 pm

Ms Bunting (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Mr Deputy Speaker, I beg your indulgence, first to congratulate you and then to place on record my acknowledgement of the second anniversary of the passing of my friend and colleague Christopher Stalford. He may no longer be with us, but he will never be forgotten.

I declare an interest, in that I have a close family member who works in the legal profession.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice. The Committee has not yet had an opportunity to undertake detailed scrutiny of the Department's budget or financial position and has therefore not been able to consider in detail the matters covered by the Budget Bill. We did, however, receive an overview of the Department's work from the permanent secretary at our first meeting last week, and Committee members took the opportunity to discuss some budgetary matters with him then. It is in that context that I make my remarks.

The non-ring-fenced resource budget for the Department of Justice for 2023-24 was £1,157 million. That meant that it began the financial year with pressures amounting to £149 million. The PSNI accounts for 65% of the Department's budget, but add to that the Prison Service, the Courts and Tribunals Service and legal aid — four key areas of the justice sector — and that figure rises to 95%. That leaves little room to reduce spend in order to balance the budget in a way that will not have consequences for the delivery of vital services.

In the course of the year, the projected overspend was reduced to £35 million by slowing spend across the justice sector. That included suspending PSNI recruitment and not recruiting prison officers. There are obvious consequences from such measures that have had to be taken. The non-recruitment of prison officers comes against a backdrop of an increasing prison population. Current staffing levels are for a population of 1,450 prisoners, but over 1,900 people are in custody, and that number continues to increase. The ability to provide effective rehabilitation to an increasing population when the service is understaffed will therefore be diminished. Members also made the point that a significant amount of valuable rehabilitative work is carried out by the community and voluntary sector, which can often be among the first in line when budget cuts are necessary.

The Committee also heard that the number of police officers is projected to be just over 6,300 by March 2024. That is the lowest number of officers since the formation of the PSNI and is well below the "New Decade, New Approach" target of 7,500 officers.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. She raises a very important point about the funding of the Police Service. Will she join me in offering support to officers, who come under threat every day in our communities, particularly in my constituency, where Detective Chief Inspector Caldwell nearly lost his life as the result of an attack? That is unjustified and unacceptable at any time, and we support our local officers on the ground in doing the work that they do.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, I am certainly content and happy to be associated with those remarks.

The Department's allocation of capital DEL for 2023-24 was £129 million. Of that, £37 million was returned in-year owing to slippage in projects, most notably the police college. The Department received £11 million in-year for legal aid pressures, and the allocation of £75.3 million non-ring-fenced resource DEL and £4.9 million resource DEL in the Finance Minister's announcement of 15 February is to be welcomed. While pay awards still have to be finalised, that may mean that the Department does not finish the year with an overspend.

I understand that it is important that the Department live within its budget, but the impact of the measures that it has taken to get here must not be underestimated. Examples such as those that I have just outlined should be a cause of concern for us all.

I will now talk about the next financial year. The Committee was advised that a flat-cash scenario would leave the Department facing estimated pressures of almost £430 million, which equates to 37% of the Department's baseline. That is a planning assumption, and a flat-cash scenario is by no means certain. It could indeed be worse than that. The Department's work is demand-led, and those costs are inescapable. The Committee heard that one of the outworkings of such a Budget settlement would be that the PSNI would not be able to work towards increasing the number of police officers, which, as I mentioned, is at its lowest-ever level. Work is ongoing to determine the optimum number of police officers, but it is expected that the outcome of that work will

show that it should be significantly higher than it currently is.

Most, if not all, of us will agree that preventative and rehabilitative work is much more fruitful than reactive work and, indeed, may actually reduce costs in the longer term. Where the justice system is concerned, that often involves collaborative working with other Departments. As an example, Committee members heard about a prison population oversight group that is looking at ways both to reduce the number of people going into prison and to ease the pathways of those leaving prison. The group currently includes representatives from the health sector and, in the future, will likely include representatives from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. That is to be welcomed. The Committee is keen to hear more about that and other innovative practices that will impact positively across the justice sector.

During discussions with the permanent secretary, I raised concerns about the extent to which people are engaged in the justice system when they should not be. When the previous Justice Committee undertook scrutiny of the budget, it noted that parts of the system play important roles in the delivery of health and social care outcomes. In the main, those are non-statutory functions that aim to meet the needs of individuals that are otherwise not being met, and they were often done with or on behalf of another Department. At that time, the Committee questioned why some or all of the funding responsibility rested with the Department of Justice, when some of the services were clearly linked to another Department's remit. It emphasised that a more collaborative and joined-up approach to funding those services was required. I expect that that will be a key area of focus for the new Justice Committee.

While the discussion with the permanent secretary at our meeting on Thursday was a general overview of the work of the Department, it kept returning to the impact that the financial position is having or will have on service provision. Over the coming weeks, the Committee will take evidence from various directorates in the Department, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies. That will include the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and the probation service, among others, and we will, no doubt, hear directly about the effect that it is having on their important work.

The Committee obviously has not had enough time or information to enable it to make a

collective decision, but it is fair to say that members indicated that they had concerns about various matters during our discussions with the permanent secretary. We will have the opportunity to consider those in much greater depth in the coming weeks.

I will now speak in my capacity as an individual MLA. Since being appointed DUP spokesperson for justice this time last year, I have made it my business to familiarise myself as far as possible with the sector. It is a fascinating and multifaceted area of work, but there are some stark realities for the House and for society as a whole. The cold hard facts are that the Department of Justice will face £430 million of unmet pressures, which equates to almost 40% of its budget. There are no further savings to be made. Decisions now may involve moving money from one budget line to another, but there are no savings to be found, and there are consequences to such decisions. None of that is in the Department's control. As I stated, 95% of its budget is demand-led.

In the past 12 years, as other Members have stated, the budget for the Department of Health has increased by 70%; the Education budget by 45%; and the Justice budget by 3%. When Education and Health fail, the justice system should be the last resort. Increasingly, however, the justice system is not the last resort but the daily reality. It is clear that the justice system is picking up the stresses from the rest of the system. It is important to note that the majority of people going through the criminal justice system have complex needs and are likely to be dealing with addiction and trauma. There are people in police cells because there is nowhere else that is safe for them to go. People are in prison for the same reason. Custody is not the place, and that takes us back to the issue of "right people, right care", about which we have heard so much of late. We are reaching a point at which, without question, public safety will be impacted. Prevention is always the aim, but, in order to do that, there must be investment.

In my remarks as Chair, I mentioned four key areas, and I wish to elaborate on them to give Members the picture. I will start with the PSNI, which accounts for 60% to 65% of the DOJ's budget. Debate about the number of officers is valid and worthy, but it merely scratches the surface. The NDNA agreement made it clear that there would be 7,500 police officers, but we find ourselves with the lowest number of officers since the service began. It is of further note that, over the past number of years, the police's budget has been cut to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. It has been cut to the bone, one might say, and we are now in

circumstances where the service may become unrecognisable to the public. The conversation has moved from planning and modernisation and turned to cutting services and what may realistically be provided. The service is now looking at a new operational model and at further cutting services that had already been cut. The previous Chief Constable sounded the alarm, as has his successor. Both men were and are faced with conflicting choices between their statutory duties as accounting officers and their legal responsibility to keep people safe. That is in circumstances where, unlike any other force in the UK, they are not permitted to hold reserves, not allowed to borrow and find it impossible to plan strategically on the basis of an annual budget.

I also want to point out that, in the last mandate, the House passed a raft of new laws. However, the finance did not follow the function, and, in many cases, the police just absorbed the financial cost of implementation and received no additional allocation of money. The police are increasingly becoming the first port of call in the absence of all others, but remember: they often have to face the Police Ombudsman for their trouble. For example, if they attend a call on behalf of the Ambulance Service or if they come upon a person who is unwell on the street, should that person die, the incident will be reported to the ombudsman and investigated. Officers often spend entire shifts in A&E. As society is increasingly suffering from complex needs, the PSNI is becoming embroiled in work that is not for the police and for which they are not appropriately qualified. That is the reality facing the police, and there is a consequential impact on morale and sickness levels. The strain is showing, and a considerable number of officers are seeking to leave, often scarred physically or, indeed, mentally as a result of what they have seen. They are the people who run towards danger as all others run away. They are the people whom we rely on to keep us and our communities safe, and the public will take a dim view if the service is grossly underfunded to the point where it will take decades to recover. That is what we face.

I will turn to the Prison Service, where the picture is similar. The prison population is approaching its highest number ever and is expected, within the year, to reach 2,000 prisoners. It is built for circa 1,500 people. The population has grown to such an extent that not only are some prisoners doubling up but old blocks have had to be reopened to house them. That is exacerbated by huge numbers on remand or in receipt of short sentences, and the reoffending rate has risen to 40%. While prison

officers are being recruited, the stretch is such that the rehabilitation of prisoners is significantly impacted, all of which impacts on wider society in the long term.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for giving way. She mentioned prison officers, and one of the issues that the Finance Minister deals with is Northern Ireland Civil Service HR. There is a considerable issue with prison officers, particularly with HR services that are being provided by NICS HR. Will the Member agree that that is one of the key areas that need to be sorted out? It is not just a question of finance; it is a question of leadership from the Civil Service.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Member for his contribution, and I concur.

Over 50% of prisoners have addiction issues. Among the female prison population, a significant number have highly traumatic backgrounds. Among young men, there are high levels of anxiety, depression and an inability to control their emotions.

While some people may argue that they are criminals, and that can certainly be said of some, the facts are that many of them are unwell and in the wrong place. They need healthcare. Moreover, we need people to emerge from prison rehabilitated and able to rejoin society in a responsible manner, not to cause risk to the rest of us and not to reoffend.

6.15 pm

Recently, I visited Magilligan prison and Hydebank Wood Secure College, and Maghaberry will follow. Magilligan is an old World War II air force base that was always supposed to be used as a temporary measure. We are long past the point where Magilligan is a temporary measure. It is apparent that the need for capital works is substantial, but people there know that it is not coming, so, instead, they are opting to do what they can in a piecemeal fashion, which is just doing their best to make it work — likewise, at Hydebank. I should caveat all that by saying that I am not soft on crime, but, when people who are mentally ill and seriously disturbed are put in prison because there is nowhere else suitable for them to go and when there are female prisoners in their eighties who essentially require nursing care, we have to start to rethink. There are no female-only hostels that are approved by the Probation Service. Unsurprisingly, the three biggest issues that the service faces are mental health, addiction and

trauma. In the first three months of last year, the service used up its annual addiction services budget. In three months, it was gone.

Significant modernisation and capital works are required across some parts of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service estate, some of which is listed, which invariably adds to the costs, but the longer the work is delayed, the more it will cost in the long run. I have met the Bar Council and the Law Society. I know that the Chamber has not always been sympathetic to them at times, but in few other sectors would people be permitted to wait 12 to 16 weeks for payment, some for work that was completed a year or more previously. Those delays could be the difference between a practice surviving and having to close. Many in the legal profession are on their knees, and, no doubt, firms will close. We should not forget that those practices are small businesses. They contribute to the economy. They are on our high streets and employ our constituents. Yet, legal aid payment is not their only struggle. Beyond the big five, they are finding it impossible to find graduates to take up roles in any area of law beyond corporate law, because people want a career, prospects, a good salary and not to have to go to a police station at 3.00 am to conduct an interview. There are weighty issues facing the legal profession, and, as a result, our society, because, at the worst of times, everybody is entitled to a defence and due process.

I want to move to a subject outside of Justice: the proposed closure of Castlereagh college as a result of a lack of funds for capital work. That is a short-sighted, discriminatory and regressive proposal. In over 20 years, at least seven or eight reports have been written about the under-attainment of Protestant working-class boys, and the proposal is to close a college in their heartland that has a long and illustrious history of bringing back to education those who were disenfranchised by it through their experience in school. The college has given many young people opportunities because of a different way of learning. Moreover, if our economy is to grow, the teaching of skills is essential to that growth. To remove the most accessible college that Belfast Met has, when there is insufficient space to accommodate those classes in other campuses, is appalling, regressive and detrimental to Northern Ireland plc at a time when contracts are being awarded to firms such as Harland and Wolff.

In conclusion, I reiterate the need to move to three-year Budgets as quickly as possible. Those in the community sector who do invaluable work in our constituencies are having

to spend a great deal of their time seeking funding for their posts when they would rather focus on their projects. Moreover, nobody wants to go into the sector because of the instability and difficulty in accessing credit and mortgages. It is time that we moved to help them, stabilised their employment prospects and allowed for strategic direction and planning in order to ensure best value.

Mr Dickson: May I take the opportunity to congratulate you for the first time, Mr Deputy Speaker, in your new role? I also congratulate the Minister on her appointment. I worked with her in the Economy Committee during the previous mandate, and I have a great deal of respect for the work that she did and the way in which she chaired that Committee. She will bring her depth of understanding to the new role.

I will speak as the justice spokesperson for the Alliance Party on how the Budget will affect the Department of Justice. As the Committee Chair pointed out, since devolution, the Department has been chronically underfunded relative to other Departments, as recognised by the Fiscal Council. As many Members said about the whole budgetary situation in the Assembly, the Department of Justice has been further hampered by single-year budgets. A clear message is going out this evening about how we budget in the future: single-year budgets are clearly not the answer.

The stark realities that we face in the 2023-24 Budget mean that the Department of Justice's opening pressures amounted to some £149 million, driven by escalating demands on policing, legal aid, prisons and youth justice, pay pressures and inflation across the justice sector. It is crucial to understand that the vast majority of the Department of Justice's budget is truly inescapable. Staff costs and statutory commitments consume nearly all the available resources, leaving less than 1% for discretionary spending.

Over the years, a cost recovery model has operated successfully and delivered significant reforms, despite the noose around the neck of the Department of Justice's budget. However, it is clear that we have reached the point where potential savings would automatically raise costs in other areas. One of the best examples of that is the introduction of GPS tagging as opposed to the current method of tagging. That would help us with the prison population and with remand prisoners; it would do all of that. It is technology rich and expensive to deliver, but the reality is that, if it keeps people out of prison cells, it is a cost saving to us. However, the

Department does not have the budget to deliver it.

I recently joined the Chair of the Justice Committee on her visit to Magilligan prison and saw at first hand the challenges of working in what is effectively a World War II airbase, with Nissen huts that have not changed in any shape or form from the day and hour that they were built. However, the services that are delivered across that prison, by staff who are dedicated and governors who really want to make a difference, are absolutely amazing. We met and spoke with prisoners who were impressed by the way in which they were being looked after and cared for in that environment.

Since January 2021, the prison population has surged by over 30%, leading to the necessity of doubling up prisoners in cells and the reopening of facilities that, quite frankly, should have been demolished. Those facilities are still standing and are being used, but they are far from adequate. I cannot emphasise enough how impressed I was on my visit to that prison by the work that is being done there. It is vital that we secure sufficient funding to deliver not only the work that is going on but the plans that it has for the future.

The situation significantly hampers the Minister's ability to implement effective rehabilitation strategies and subsequently reduce offending and reoffending rates, and that is what this is all about. When people are housed two to a cell in those conditions, that undoubtedly limits their rehabilitation opportunities and hinders successful reintegration into the community. In 2022, our Justice Minister, Naomi Long, approved an increase in operational staff levels by 56, from 1112 to 1168 — a move reflected in the 2023-24 Budget. However, the surge in the prison population, driven by complex factors like extended remand periods due to judicial delays and pandemic-induced backlogs, poses a threat to the stability of the prison environment. As has been said, we predict a higher growth in the number of prisoners entering the prisons.

The success of rehabilitation and resettlement programmes is seriously in jeopardy if we cannot get a grip on the situation. Those programmes are vital for public safety, and this is an area of significant concern that I hope we in the Justice Committee will be able to investigate in greater detail. A budget to deliver change will deliver hope and better prospects for the whole of the justice family.

Legal aid, which is a fundamental and yet underfunded component of access to justice,

remains inadequate and inadequately supported. Despite its demand-driven nature, it has consistently been underfunded, leading to delays that affect not only the legal profession but the very essence of the delivery of justice. All areas, including probation, juvenile justice, the courts and tribunals, and victims, are suffering as a result of the constraints on the Justice Department's budget.

As has been mentioned, a critical area of concern is the budgetary reduction for the PSNI. That reduction not only hampers the PSNI's ability to meet its operational needs but means that the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increasing police numbers to 7,500 is an unfunded pledge and has now become unobtainable. Currently, the number of police officers is expected to peak at 6,358, which is a shortfall that will undeniably compromise policing effectiveness. That is something that we see in the community day and daily. I meet community officers regularly in my constituency office, and I see them when I am out and about in the constituency. Unfortunately, there is such a high turnover that the whole purpose of the programme of getting to know their communities, getting to know the nooks and crannies where young people hang out and getting to know all the key players in the community is lost because they are moved on to other duties so quickly.

As we look ahead, it is imperative that the Budget Bill represents more than a stopgap financial solution for the relatively small levels of investment. The Department of Justice can deliver a stable and effective justice system if the Assembly, going forward, and in the Budget to follow this Budget, provides sufficient funds to do that. We can provide a safe and fair community for everyone, across all the systems of justice, if we just have the resources to do it.

Let us remind ourselves that our discussions today are focused on the current 2023-24 Budget, but I look forward to seeing many of the issues that I have raised this evening being tackled through the scrutiny of the Justice Committee and being dealt with by the Minister of Finance when it comes to the future Budget and the negotiations that she will have with the Treasury and others, and around the Executive table. Certainly, this evening, I am heartened by a lot of the comments that I have heard in the Chamber about how parties are willing to work together to deliver better Budgets, better finance and better resources for all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Miss Hargey: Like everybody else, I welcome today's important business and the Second

Stage of the Budget Bill, which has been introduced by the Finance Minister. We find ourselves in the current situation of having to introduce this Bill because of the approach that has been taken by the British Government and the Secretary of State over the past while. The Finance Minister has introduced this Bill, and it was essential that she did so, as it provides much-needed relief for our public-sector workers and eases the urgent cash-flow pressures on Departments that we have been hearing about today. I am glad to say that her announcement last week of £688 million was the first decision that the newly formed Executive have taken to prioritise public-sector pay. That is positive and to be welcomed.

Many of us stood with those workers on the picket lines just a few weeks ago, and I am glad that we are now back here in the Assembly, making decisions and living up to our commitments to them to prioritise that issue. I know that a lot of people have spoken today about the timing of the Bill, and things are negative as well. However, the resounding optimism that I heard from people on the picket lines — notwithstanding that there were pressures around their pay — reflected that they wanted us back in this Chamber.

They did want locally elected Ministers back in position, taking decisions on their behalf. Notwithstanding all the issues and difficulties that we will move through in the coming weeks and in the coming period, there is hope and optimism out there because we are in this Chamber and we do have Ministers making decisions. The fact that we are here discussing this — the importance of what is in this Bill to public-sector pay — shows that having local Ministers in place actually does prioritise local workers. Therefore, again, I am delighted that we are here. The next step is important, and that is that Departments engage urgently with local trade unions to negotiate and, importantly, conclude as soon as possible those negotiations to ensure that we can get the fair pay into people's pockets.

6.30 pm

From my role as Deputy Chair of the Justice Committee, I know that there has been a lot of discussion of justice issues. Joanne Bunting highlighted in depth the issues pertaining to the Justice Committee and the Department of Justice. Last week, the Committee met to discuss the current budget issue and to look at the forward programme. Indeed, we met the Minister today. A key discussion in those meetings was that on public-sector pay,

including for policing, prisons, probation services and the Youth Justice Agency. That is key for the workers who run those vital services.

A decade of austerity by Westminster was a political choice. It was a choice by the Tories to introduce a policy of cutting and running down public services, and that had a huge impact on services here and a knock-on effect on resourcing appropriate and safe staffing levels in the justice system and, indeed, across many of the Departments that we have been discussing today. We see high levels of vacancies as a result and a growing demand on our services, and that is placing unprecedented pressures on all aspects of our justice system to respond. That, of course, has a knock-on effect on access to justice and the speeding up of the justice system, leading to delays in completing cases within reasonable timescales, and, of course, longer bail and remand periods. Those are some of the big challenges that we will face over the next period.

We must ensure that we are funded on the basis of need, with a sustainability plan to ensure that we have an effective and responsive resource plan for public services so that we can move from a demand-led service towards prevention, collaboration and, importantly, integrated planning and implementation. Again, I welcome the Minister's action in writing to the British Treasury and Government on urgent engagement between them and the Minister and, indeed, our First Minister and deputy First Minister to look at our finances and our fiscal levers to ensure that we have the necessary tools to plan. This rightly builds on the work of the previous Finance Minister, who established the Fiscal Commission and the Fiscal Council for this very reason, recognising that we have been underfunded, that we urgently need to move to a multi-annual situation and that we need to address the wider issues that were brought up here today around workers' rights and, importantly, around tackling inequality and poverty.

Now is the time for action, and I hope that the Bill will pass its Second Stage today. Action is also needed from the British Government to sit with the Finance Minister and address these issues as urgently as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, as this is Brian Kingston's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Kingston: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome you to your role, and I wish you well in it. I also wish the Finance Minister well in her role. As this is my maiden speech, officially, I wish to say that I consider it a great honour and a great responsibility to have been elected to the Assembly by the people of North Belfast. I sincerely thank those who have given me that mandate and duty, and I am here to serve the well-being of all my constituents.

I wish to begin by paying tribute to my DUP predecessors who represented North Belfast in the Assembly. That is Nigel, Lord Dodds, William Humphrey, Nelson McCausland and Paula Bradley, all of whom I worked for. I also pay tribute to Diane Dodds, who represented West Belfast in the Assembly at an earlier stage.

I am honoured to follow in their footsteps.

I have lived and worked all my adult life in North Belfast and West Belfast, where we raised our children. For 20 years, I worked in community work in the Suffolk estate, on the Falls Road, in Rathcool, in the greater Shankill area, in upper Ardoyne and in Ballysillan. In 2008, the opportunity arose for me to work for Nigel Dodds MP from his Shore Road office, which I was very pleased to do. I went on to serve for 12 years on Belfast City Council as a councillor for the greater Shankill area. Those years included three years as the DUP group leader on the council and also my serving as Lord Mayor of Belfast in 2016-17, which was the greatest honour of my life. I note that there are five other former Lord Mayors of Belfast currently serving in the Assembly. There is just one currently present in the Chamber. I think that the others have all left.

My motivation as an elected representative is essentially the same now as it was when I was in community work. That is to be a difference maker, to help make positive things happen — things that improve people's lives, their opportunities and their local community — and to tackle issues that are having a negative impact on people's quality of life. I want the greater Shankill area in North Belfast to be the best that it can be, a place where people are supported and enabled to achieve their potential. It is a pleasure to work alongside many people in various sectors who share that goal and to encourage cross-sectoral working among voluntary sector groups, statutory agencies and the private sector.

As an elected unionist, I am passionate about promoting and defending Northern Ireland's place within the Union, playing our full role

within the United Kingdom and also maintaining positive relations with the rest of this island, Europe, the Commonwealth and the wider world.

North Belfast has many positive assets, from Premiership football teams, the superb new Ulster University campus at York Street and the many excellent schools that are involved in shared education through the North Belfast Area Learning Community (NBALC). We have half of the Belfast harbour estate, which is a key driver of our economy, including its impressive City Quays development and the new film studio at Giant's Park. North Belfast has an acute hospital at the Mater, a range of business parks, industrial areas, shopping centres and retail hubs, significant community sports facilities, parks and the beautiful Belfast hills from Black Mountain to Squires Hill, Cave Hill and on to Carnmoney Hill.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I see that the clock is not running, so I have time to mention briefly some of our North Belfast luminaries: Sir Kenneth Branagh, Sir James Galway, Ciarán Hinds, Eamonn Holmes, Anna Burns, Norman Whiteside, Carl Frampton and, of course, the late, great Frank Carson. It was the way he told them. North Belfast is often seen as being like a patchwork quilt of different communities. There is a growing and strong willingness and determination among the various parts of North Belfast to work together for the mutual benefit of all our people and to tackle negative issues that arise. I will always support those collaborative efforts.

My constituency office is constantly busy, assisting constituents with issues of concern. I thank my office staff of Naomi, William, Mary and Jordan for their public service, as well as our team of councillors and my colleague Phillip Brett MLA.

In my role as a local parliamentarian and legislator, I will continue to push for quality statutory services and for the right interventions and investments that will address the needs raised by my constituents across a wide range of issues, such as housing, the local environment, education, health, training and employment, economic development, infrastructure and inward investment, all without crippling their personal and household finances through excessive taxation, which is relevant to today's debate. It is my responsibility, along with others, to provide the best standard of representation for North Belfast people, to speak up for them and to ensure that their concerns and voices are heard and heeded.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I was going to welcome the Deputy Speaker, as it would have been the first time that he was here when I spoke, but there is no need to do that now.

I put on record my remembrance of the late Christopher Stalford as well. I remember him fondly. The first time that I met him was in the audience at a TV studio; he was only 17 years old at that stage.

I also congratulate Mr Kingston on his maiden speech. We heard all about North Belfast, including some unusual things that I was not aware of. It was quite interesting, Mr Kingston.

I welcome the Budget Bill. It is interesting that many Members spoke as a representative of a Committee or as a Committee Chair, but, as my colleague Mr Aiken pointed out, their comments did not have very much to say about their Committee or what was happening; it was just a wish list. I could say the same for the Agriculture Committee, because most of it is just a wish list of what the Committee would want to see being developed. That is not the fault of the Committee Chair or the Committee; it is just that we do not have the information at this stage, and that is a difficult issue for us with the Budget.

I listened to Mr Frew make the most convincing case not to have a Northern Ireland Assembly. I thought that he did it exceptionally well. What his intentions were behind that, I am not exactly sure. However, I put on record that, after listening to Mr Frew, I am very pleased that I was not here during the previous mandate. It seems to have been a terrible mandate for what went on or did not go on and for decisions that were not made or were made against the widespread will of the people of Northern Ireland.

I could add to the wish list. A number of Members have spoken about the £18 billion almost blank cheque that has been given to the Finance Minister. Obviously, the Finance Minister has to decide where to distribute that as well, and there will be compelling issues. I heard Ms Bunting talk about policing and justice, and she gave very deliberate, distinct and clear messages. I heard many others talk about education and health. They all have significant priorities, and the Executive will have to make decisions on those priorities along the way. My issue, at this stage, is the lack of consultation and scrutiny. As Committee

members or, indeed, in the House, we have not been able to scrutinise those particular issues.

I want to make a case — everybody else is doing it — for issues such as TB eradication in the agriculture sector. I am sure that Minister Muir will make that case. Instead of our eradicating that terrible disease, it is getting worse; the numbers are going up, and the public bill is going up every year. On forestry enhancement, there seems to be a fallback on the amount of forestry that we are planting every year in comparison with the targets, and I want to see that enhanced. We have huge issues around Lough Neagh: everybody knows that; we have already debated it. The Mobuoy environmental issue in Londonderry is another critical issue that could be as big a disaster as Lough Neagh, if it is not at that point already. At the weekend, I raised the issue of climate change and the £2.3 billion bill that will face Departments up to 2027. That is only three years away: £2.3 billion, and we thought that we got quite an amount from the UK Government when we got £3.3 billion.

Where is that money coming from? I do not know whether it is included in the Budget or not. That is the same for the other issues that I have talked about such as those in policing, justice and education. The problem is that we just have no idea.

I have heard mention made of the A4 southern bypass in Enniskillen. That is a shovel-ready project that is part of the mid south west growth deal. I am sure that the Finance Minister and the Minister for Infrastructure will want to move that quickly because it is ready to go. I hope that that will come to pass in the not-too-distant future.

6.45 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I am the bearer of good news. The Member might not have seen his emails because he was busy preparing his speech, but a written ministerial statement has come in from the Finance Minister this evening about releasing funding for the A4.

Mr Elliott: I really appreciate that. It is not often that I hear such a positive intervention from the SDLP Opposition. That is really positive news. I thank Mr Durkan for his kind intervention to break the news to the House. That is good news, and I appreciate that decision from the Finance Minister and the Minister for Infrastructure.

We need to settle on the budgets. Mr Aiken said that we need to carry out our scrutiny role. I would like to hear from the Minister, when she makes her winding-up speech, when Committees will get more detail so that we can scrutinise it much more. We also need the opportunity to make suggestions. I support the Bill now because it has to go through to keep Northern Ireland running. It is important that we do that for everybody's sake, including teachers and health workers, so that they can get their pay increases. It is also about getting potholes fixed, getting our children taught in schools and making sure that we have policing on the ground. Those are important issues. I will leave it at that.

Mr McAleer: I am thankful for the opportunity to address the House on the Budget 2023-24. I will speak as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on agriculture, as a representative of a large rural constituency and as a member of the AERA Committee. I have a keen interest in achieving the long-term economic growth of our communities, rural and urban. It is welcome that the Executive are prioritising public-sector pay with an allocation of £688 million for our hard-working public-sector workers.

The DAERA statement on the 2023-24 Budget indicates that there will be major challenges ahead in meeting statutory and contractual commitments, with difficult decisions to be made. The threats that we heard recently from the Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris, to impose new charges on farmers for bovine TB testing and future cuts to compensation for TB are punitive. It is clear that the Tories are pursuing an ideological agenda that is punishing farmers and the wider public. Farmers, as we know, already face a range of challenges. The Chair of the AERA Committee touched on some of them, particularly those to do with TB. The proposed additional charges will place an extra burden and stress on farmers and their families, who are already struggling.

The Tory Government have slashed the block grant, so we must ensure that there is no differential impact on the section 75 groups. At all times, we must work to ensure equality of opportunity. The DAERA resource budget for 2023-24 has ring-fenced funding of £328.5 million for agriculture, the agrienvironment, the wider rural economy and fisheries. However, there is no certainty beyond 2024 about the budget for direct payments. Even more worryingly, the Labour Party in Britain has indicated that there will be a reduced farm budget if or when they are elected.

As a consequence of leaving the EU, we are no longer part of the EU common agricultural policy. The funding model here is now different, with resource money coming from one pot provided by the British Government since EU exit and managed annually. As we know, agriculture is a pillar of the local economy, and agriculture and food processing are island-wide industries. The uncertainty about what will replace the agriculture budget post 2024 for farming families, the rural economy and the agri-food supply chain could threaten the viability of agriculture production and have a negative impact on rural communities. That same uncertainty goes for the rural development programme, which was 50% funded by the EU when we were in it. In contrast, our neighbours in the South of Ireland have certainty: they have a six-year multi-annual budget from the common agricultural policy. Farmers in the North will struggle to survive and compete with their neighbours across the border, where there is a level of certainty about direct payments continuing beyond 2024. Indeed, that could distort both our ability to compete with our neighbours in the South and the all-island market.

As a Sinn Féin MLA, I want to give a clear message to the British Government that we need to see the farm support continue post 2024 and a future budget ring-fenced, as was the case for the pillar 1 EU CAP payments. It is important to remind people who are not from a rural background that, preceding our leaving the EU, the single farm payment, which accounted for 80% to 90% of a farmer's income, came as a ring-fenced payment directly from the EU and was separate from our block grant. It is important to note that, when we were taken out of the EU, the UK Government promised that that lost EU funding would be replaced. That pledge needs to be stuck to. Certainly, I will implore the Executive, our Finance Minister and, indeed, the AERA Minister to ensure that that commitment is lived up to.

Ms Eastwood: I congratulate the Minister on her new role. Comhghairdeas agus ádh mór, agus lots of ádh mór. [*Translation: Congratulations and good luck, and lots of good luck.*] At the outset, I commend the AERA Minister, Andrew Muir, on his work to date in committing to tackle the environmental crisis at Lough Neagh. However, that presents a significant challenge not only in the current financial year but on an ongoing basis, due to the budgetary constraints that, I am sure, we are all aware of.

The same can be said for the necessary work and statutory commitment on climate actions,

including the just transition fund. There is a real fear that other key strategies and programmes on issues such as animal welfare could end up being shelved or delayed, given the current and likely future budgetary position. There are also ongoing, crucial commitments on the agriculture and agri-food sectors and broader environmental issues. It is widely acknowledged that there are awaited strategies on biodiversity, the environment and peatlands, some of which relate directly to the climate challenge and all of which are about protecting our natural environment. They will require actions and, therefore, dedicated resource, particularly for interdepartmental climate commitments.

The rural affairs aspect of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs brief continues to bring demand in relation to connectivity, rural isolation, access to services and addressing the urban/rural divide. The need for many future-proofing initiatives to be funded sustainably and dealt with in accordance with their cross-cutting nature and to ensure the necessary contribution across Departments must remain a high priority in current budget profiling and in future years.

The funding package accompanying the restored Assembly, while welcome, is not sustainable for maintaining momentum and the necessary actions for a greener, cleaner future across the sectors governed by DAERA. It will be a matter for future Budgets to ensure that DAERA is baselined and, indeed, built on.

Mr McGrath: Today we are being asked to support a Budget. It is a complicated Budget that covers all areas of finance relating to many Departments and agencies. There are decisions, though, that need to be taken and people who need to be rewarded, not least our hard-working public-sector workers, who have waited too long for their pay awards. We are led to believe that the Budget might address the key issue of public-sector pay. We wait with bated breath to see whether all the pay awards that are outstanding and that have been allowed to grow and fester over the last 10 or more years will be sorted soon. As ever, I will make a brief reference to why those hard-working public-sector workers — the doctors, nurses, teachers, classroom assistants, civil servants and others — have had to wait. It is because, for five of the past seven years, this place has been collapsed and we have been left without an Executive or an Assembly. Yet, we are back again and cannot even get a straightforward answer or commitment from our First Minister and deputy First Minister that they will not collapse the institutions again any time soon.

It would be remiss of me not to also mention that we have heard today that junior doctors have voted for strike action. I am taken by how torn they were about taking that decision. They did not sign up to be medics to strike. They did not become lifesavers to withhold that service. However, they have been pushed and pushed, and they are now beyond the brink. I met them recently, and they told me that it is about more than just pay; it is about the conditions. It is about being able to get a hot drink at 3.00 am when you are in the middle of a 12-hour shift. It is about when they realise that they are one of the few medics who are on duty in a large hospital filled with very sick people. For some of them, it is just about having somewhere to store their coat or handbag safely and knowing that, when they are at work, their property will not be stolen. I hope that that can be addressed. I seek assurances from the Minister that finances will be made available to stop that junior doctors strike.

As a member of the Health Committee previously and again now and having been the party's health spokesperson for a number of years, I am concerned about many elements of the budget for the Department of Health. It will underscore a number of key cuts that will dive deeply into our communities.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that the lack of investment in pupils with special educational needs has a detrimental impact on their health outcomes? Does he also agree that it is unacceptable that Northern Irish pupils receive less investment than their neighbours in Scotland and England and that we must see an urgent commitment from the Executive on those matters?

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for the intervention. As a former youth worker, I absolutely understand that, if we do not invest in our young people and give them the best possible start and opportunities, they will be impacted as they grow older, so I agree with everything that she has said.

One cut that seemed very cruel was the removal of the core grant scheme for the community and voluntary sector. The scheme had a budget of over £4.5 million that was made available to 62 groups. That was cut by 25%, so that only £3.6 million was made available. That was further cut by 50%, so that only £1.8 million was made available. That is not a cut; that is a decimation of our public funding for organisations that deliver on behalf of the most vulnerable in society. This Budget will lock in those cuts — cuts to organisations

such as Action Mental Health, Age NI, Cara-Friend, Children in NI, the Down's Syndrome Association, the Eating Disorders Association NI, Home-Start and Include Youth, to name just a few.

We need to ask the Minister why, for example, the Women's Aid Federation has had its funding slashed. The funding was cut by the Department of Health, and that cut is now locked in by the Budget. I quote from the media:

"Sinn Féin has urged the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health to commit to the continuation of the Women's Aid Federation's funding, and even at this late stage, are calling for that action to be taken."

Minister, those were your words to the media just a few months ago. Will you, after publicly calling for the money to be made available, now make sure that that funding is available?

What about when we got representatives of 62 organisations together in the Senate Chamber a few months ago and challenged the permanent secretary about those cuts? All the political parties contributed to the video that marked that day.

Finance Minister, your colleague, the chair of the all-party group on children, who invited the permanent secretary to the meeting, said in that video:

"This funding needs to be restored".

We have already seen the disproportionate loss of funding for the most vulnerable in our society: the disabled. It needs to stop. We need to help everybody, and we need to work together. Will you, like your colleague, suggest that we should help everybody, including the vulnerable and the disabled in our society?

The Budget underscores the cut, copper-fastens the cut and delivers that cut. The Budget gives grounding for a 25% cut followed by a further 50% cut to the most vulnerable in our society. Mencap, MindWise, the Stroke Association and the Samaritans: cut, cut, cut. Is this Budget really the best start for the Executive? In places, it certainly is not. I call on the Minister to review the allocations and ensure that, in a £28 billion Budget, we are not damaging thousands and thousands of vulnerable lives in our community to save two million quid.

7.00 pm

Ms Armstrong: I welcome Dr Caoimhe Archibald to her post and wish her well in it. Having sat through a long debate, I note well the Minister's perseverance.

As has been reiterated by Members in this Budget Bill debate, the legislation provides legal cover for expenditure in 2023-24 — the current financial year — and reflects spending that has already occurred or that will occur in the first half of the new financial year. The 2023-24 financial paper must be viewed against the backdrop of the lack of an Executive and the role that the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office have played in the Budget allocation for this year, without monitoring rounds or transparency in relation to how much of the previous year's overspend has been repaid. That has led us to where we are today.

I acknowledge the extremely pressurised environment in which the Department of Finance staff — indeed, finance staff across all Departments — have worked over the last number of years, and I sympathise with them. As the Alliance spokesperson for communities, I have attended meetings with the permanent secretary, Colum Boyle, and his finance staff on several occasions. I thank them for their work and recognise the level of stress that they have endured while aiming to deliver the impossible task of meeting needs, political objectives and priorities in the context of an increasingly restrictive financial position.

The figures in the Budget Bill reflect the fact that we are again discussing a single-year Budget. Every day, I hear from organisations that work in partnership with the Department for Communities to deliver support for people who are in receipt of benefits or in housing stress, as well as for our sports and arts sectors, local government and those who work in other areas within the remit of the Department for Communities. Those people speak as one: they all need an end to single-year Budgets.

The lack of clarity about this year's Budget and future years' financial priorities has a negative impact on many of our arm's-length bodies and key partners, including those in the community and voluntary sector. We see many skilled people leaving the sector because they can no longer live under the pressure of an uncertain future. I ask all the Members of the House what Northern Ireland would look like if we had no funded community and voluntary sector. We would be in trouble. The concordat agreement with the community and voluntary sector is moot. Unless and until we have a sustainable

Executive and Assembly, those working in the community and voluntary sector and our key partners will have no faith in this place or its commitment to meeting the needs of the community. I support reforms whereby we will never again come to the House at the eleventh hour to debate finances in this way. By updating the processes of the House, we could at last give everyone who has been elected to the House an equal vote and end the vetoes.

The Budget adds nothing new to the Department for Communities. While they are welcome, the additional amounts outlined simply patch over the fractures caused by a lack of sustainable finance. While all politicians from every party would like to debate how we are meeting need, the stark fact of the Budget Bill is that, over the past year, the most vulnerable continue to be left behind. During and immediately after COVID, Northern Ireland received additional moneys to cope with the pandemic. With the end of the pandemic came the end of significant levels of related resourcing, but we have not returned simply to pre-pandemic levels of financial support. The level of funding provided to Northern Ireland and specifically to the Department for Communities is not meeting need. For example, during the past year, the Department for Communities has not had enough money to start building the target number of new social homes, leaving more than 45,500 people in housing stress, which the Chair of the Committee for Communities, Colm Gildernew, referenced. During the past year, we have had a reduction in the money available for discretionary support and discretionary housing payments. More people are living in poverty, as confirmed in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 'Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2021-22' headline figures, which show that 16% of individuals are living in relative poverty and 13% in absolute poverty. That is a disgrace. Cutting support to such vulnerable people cannot continue into next year. During the past year, the cost to provide temporary accommodation for the rising number of people in housing crisis meant that the ability to invest in prevention of homelessness is nowhere near what any of us would want it to be. The Department for Communities has just about kept its head above water.

Northern Ireland can no longer afford to have such harmful single-year Budgets. This has to be the last year in which we have a Budget Bill for a single year. It reflects a lack of investment in our citizens. Northern Ireland is the only devolved region that has seen funding below relative need, as evidenced by the Fiscal

Council. It is significant that the UK Government have now conceded that key principle. Indeed, the proposed 124% needs-based adjustment operates more as a fiscal ceiling than as a fiscal floor, slowly returning us to a point to which we should not have been allowed to fall in the first place. It is inconceivable that the UK Government would wilfully continue to underfund Northern Ireland on that basis. We are asking not for special treatment but for a fair funding settlement that is equitable with other parts of the UK. Fairer treatment will allow the Executive and the House to aim to meet the needs of citizens across my constituency of Strangford and across Northern Ireland. There are strong arguments that, accounting properly for justice needs and to deliver climate objectives, the fiscal floor should be at least 127%. Alliance has led the way in that regard, and it is welcome that the Fiscal Council acknowledged that argument in its most recent publication. I thank my colleague Eóin Tennyson MLA for his expertise and ongoing work in that area.

With the Executive restored, we have a stronger collective position from which to negotiate. As I have said before in the House, we should not look to put a ceiling on our ambitions for Northern Ireland, but we need to draw a baseline to ensure that people here no longer receive less investment than their counterparts in the rest of the UK. I accept that the UK is in a challenging financial period because of the impact of austerity, Brexit and cuts to public spending, but I do not believe that Northern Ireland should pay the price for the Conservatives' inability to deliver a fair Budget.

Through the work of the Committee for Communities, I see at first hand the level of deprivation that a lack of appropriate investment creates. I thank the many front-line workers and citizens who have spoken to me about how hard it is for those on the lowest income across Northern Ireland. Members will have read in pages 8 and 9 of schedule 1 to the Budget Bill the breadth of the Communities remit and how expenditure arises. All will be delighted to hear that I will not repeat that huge list, as published, but, for the record, the Department for Communities pays the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Northern Ireland Library Authority, National Museums and Galleries Northern Ireland, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Sport NI, the Charity Commission, the Commissioner for Older People and many more. The Department also has expenditure and services including grants, loans, compensation, benefits such as special rules for terminal illness, discretionary support grants and loans, collection of debts, provision

of youth and adult employment services and the various strategies that promote and protect socially excluded groups. It is a huge remit that requires a substantial level of investment to meet the needs of the Northern Ireland community.

While I am pleased to see that there has been an increase in the departmental expenditure limit of £15.5 million, there is a decrease in net resources for capital purposes of £10.5 million. Annually managed expenditure, otherwise known as "AME", has increased for net current purposes and net capital purposes, enabling, in this financial year, the payment of social security and other benefits, grants, loans, allowances and payments to people of working age, pensioners and people with disabilities and their carers, in accordance with the prevailing legislation and regulations. Put simply, it is money that comes across from Westminster, because Westminster sets the amounts.

The non-budget expenditure, which is the amount of expenditure through the social fund that is used for discretionary and winter payments, has been increased by just under £69.5 million.

In previous years, rather than waiting until the last part of the year, the Budget position was revised through in-year monitoring rounds from revised departmental spending plans. I can only guess how many Budget Bills I have spoken to in the House since I came here in 2016, but this year has been the first time that we have had no opportunity to look at the position, and, sadly, the Secretary of State has decided not to disclose the amounts.

In keeping its head above water, the Department for Communities has not been able to publish and progress its range of social strategies. They include the anti-poverty strategy, the disability strategy, the active ageing strategy, the gender equality strategy, the sexual orientation strategy and the inclusion and social change strategies that should now be available to assist the Minister of Finance and the Executive to underpin a Programme for Government. I therefore ask the Minister of Finance to confirm in her response whether the Budget for 2024-25 will be underpinned by a Programme for Government that seeks to improve social inclusion outcomes for many of our socially excluded groups and whether she will consider the recommendations in the Department for Communities' social inclusion strategies that have been developed by expert panels.

I would appreciate the Minister's confirming whether she will include time in the process — time to enable Members and her Executive colleagues to identify priorities that will meet need — and whether, in future, she will seek to enable delivery through a multi-year Budget. Others have said, "This is very quick. This is terrible", but 65% of the Budget for next year has been laid down. That now gives us time for scrutiny of the future Budget.

It is becoming more difficult to accept that the Assembly continues to prioritise health and education without meeting head-on the reforms that are needed to provide sustainable service delivery, all while our housing stock desperately needs to be maintained. We have not even started to look at how a programme to retrofit social homes will be carried out. The waiting list for homes grows longer, and children and families still live in poverty. All of that has a significant impact on health and education.

We need appropriate time to plan a Programme for Government that will include the housing outcome, as previously promised. We need cross-departmental sharing of funds in order to deliver an effective programme of delivery for the next three years. This must be the last time that we debate a single-year Budget that limits our ambitions for Northern Ireland. I sincerely hope that the returned Executive will work together to deliver better for Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Members, the Second Stage debate began at around 3.30 pm, and the Finance Minister has been here throughout. We have had three additional requests to speak since I came in. I hope that the list does not grow much longer, but we will facilitate it, if it does. I propose a 15-minute break for everyone, especially the Minister, and we will resume just before 7.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 7.14 pm and resumed at 7.29 pm.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. We will resume the debate. I call Robbie Butler to make the next speech.

7.30 pm

Mr Butler: Given that I was late in adding my name to the list to speak, I will keep my comments relatively brief.

Minister, given the quantum of what is being asked for, in the Vote on Account in particular, accelerated passage should not normally be granted — there is probably agreement on that

across the Chamber — nor should it be agreed in such short-term form. However, we are where we are, and public services demand that we act expediently. We need to examine, at all times, why we are in the position that we are in, having to make decisions in this manner. Predominantly, what has led to this position is the fact that we have had a two-year political veto exercised over the Assembly. We have form in that regard. We had a three-year veto between 2017 and 2020. Sadly, that type of experience does not add qualitative or quantitative benefit to our ability to bring any forensic examination to the accounts. Regrettably, the crisis that public functions and services find themselves in, which, in all honesty, is due, in part, to the underinvestment that we have spoken about for a number of weeks, is matched by our serial underinvestment in politics in the Chamber. As Colin McGrath of the SDLP pointed out, in five years out of the past seven, the Assembly has not sat.

If we set that aside, accept that there are cracks and gaping holes — not just those that affect our streets, pathways and roads — and look at the health and education systems in particular, we find that they have been hammered by underinvestment and the lack of proper politics in this Chamber. Most people would agree that education is one of the areas most deserving of transformation. An abyss has been developing, and not only in crumbling buildings. We see the wages of teachers and support staff fall woefully behind those of their compatriots across the other United Kingdom jurisdictions. Children from socially disadvantaged areas are still bound by a widening gap in educational attainment. Most worrying of all is the growing crisis in special educational needs.

While much could be said about the whole gamut of deficiencies and stresses in the education sector, Minister, I want to highlight a real-time matter that needs to be addressed without hesitation to avert a serious impact on the most vulnerable pupils. Many children who attend school daily do so with the expert assistance of a team of non-teaching wonder workers: from the morning pickup by the bus or taxi driver and the driver's assistants, right through to the school-meal cooks and those who provide one-to-one or broader classroom assistance. The reality is that if we did not have that team in place, many of those children would miss out on their school experience.

I do not believe that there is a single person in the Chamber, or indeed across the country, who does not recognise the financial hardship facing many in our public services. The need for

fair pay and an equitable pay increase for those who provide essential services is recognised by all, but nowhere is it more pronounced than amongst educational support workers. Those people are paid some of the lowest rates across our public services. Regrettably, many of those workers feel undervalued and are looking elsewhere. Minister, we have already lost too many of those talented and dedicated staff; we cannot afford to lose any more.

Mr Honeyford: I congratulate the Finance Minister on her new role and wish her all the best.

I support the Bill. It is unfortunate that we do not have time to scrutinise it thoroughly, but I acknowledge the need to move forward apace after the past two years of suspension. As has been said, the Budget that we are discussing is for the current year and there are only a couple of weeks left of that year. However, I must mention a couple of things that are important now and will be essential in future. I speak as the Alliance Party's economic spokesperson and a member of the Economy Committee.

This morning, we heard the Economy Minister's statement, which contained some good news but also some really large economic challenges. I want to focus on our growth and opportunities, as well as those challenges. We should not lose sight of the fact that it is the business community that creates jobs. It increases the profits that are able to be reinvested in order to bring money into our economy, which creates prosperity. It is essential that we work together to create the conditions and give businesses the best platform — in sporting terms, the pitch for them to play on. We need to create the best platform that they can have to support the business community and allow all sectors to grow.

Given the added challenge that most of our businesses are small businesses or microbusinesses, which are spread across the region, I welcome the Minister's comments earlier around the spread of economic investment and talent around Northern Ireland. Being in the unique position of having access to the GB markets and the EU markets is something that we know about all too well. It has been in every news bulletin over the past while and it has been debated thoroughly here, and people here know about it. However, it is one thing for us to understand this opportunity: it is completely something else for the rest of the world to know about it and for us to be able to exploit the opportunities that we have in the rest of the world.

There is also a lot of work that needs to be done to support and encourage our local businesses to realise their potential to export and move outside the Northern Ireland markets and into the EU and the Irish markets. There will need to be significant investment in order to realise that growth. There is truth in the old saying, "Follow the money". It is easy to make statements and say words, but the real value and the heart of the priority will be where the money is spent. Where the Budget is allocated to is the heart of where we are going.

There are significant challenges in our economy this year and into the next, and I want to highlight a few of those. There are issues around energy transition and the reform of Invest NI and the changes that we need to see being brought through there. We need adequate funding for higher education, skills and all-age apprenticeships. While I am really encouraged by the Economy Minister's statement earlier, in which there was focus on growth in our economy and on tackling productivity, it is really important that, moving forward, the Department for the Economy has an adequate budget allocation that allows and enables reform, specifically in the areas that I have just raised. The reform of Invest NI and empowering the skills programme will require investment in the short term, but, if delivered, gives us the opportunity to deliver success in the longer term. We cannot afford to miss the opportunity that is in front of us now to transform our economy. It is essential that that happens, and we need to take that opportunity.

It is also important to stress that the growth of our economy is not limited to one Department. It is not just about the Department for the Economy: it includes not least DAERA but the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities, which all have a role to play in economic growth.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the Department for Communities: be still my heart. I absolutely agree that shared budgets need to be there, but Northern Ireland has already missed out in this financial year on some of the crucial investments that the rest of the UK have had. Does he agree that we will be seeking for the Minister of Finance and the Executive to ensure that we never miss out on those opportunities to upskill our people here?

Mr Honeyford: Absolutely, I am happy to agree. I would be scared not to. *[Laughter.]* I am only joking. I jest. I am delighted to agree with that: moving to multi-year Budgets will be essential as we go forward.

That brings me to my last point, and I will finish where I started. The last two years of suspension need to be the last suspension. It is essential that, in future years, we have reform and that there are no more collapses of these institutions by either of the largest parties. Every year, we will have opportunities to deliver change and create more prosperity and a prosperous society for all of our people. We all need to be over the detail of how the Budget affects our Departments, not coming in with a rushed Budget every time the Assembly is restored. We have only had a working Assembly for two years out of the past seven years, and this stop-start Assembly has held back our potential. It has caused hurt in our community, and suspension leaves its own negative legacy. Not only does it damage the public's trust in these institutions, but it makes bringing about change even more difficult and more costly, as we start further back and need to do more to bring us forward. As the Alliance Party, we look forward with hope, but now is the time to draw a line and end the cycle of collapse. We cannot build the economy that we need by starting and stopping this place. We need to see the financial growth, the new jobs and the opportunities that all of us deserve.

Mr McCrossan: While it is important that a Budget is put in place to protect public-sector pay and deal with some of the other challenges that exist, this is just not the appropriate way to do business. People expect more from this House. They expect us to scrutinise on their behalf to ensure that they are getting a fair deal and the best possible deal with public money. Also, the lack of accountability that lingers around this place has returned, because, while we were out there, some of us trying to get back in again, we told the public that things were going to change. Here we are, in the first few weeks, the honeymoon of the return of the Assembly, and we are back to square one, with the same old, same old manufactured crisis met with temporary, sticking-plaster approaches.

I am sorry if that bursts the bubble of some of the Members who have spoken today, but the reality is that the public are depending on us. They are relying on us to be here, and the starting point should never have been a collapse of the Assembly. However, the reality is that, for five years, people were deprived of that necessary and essential representation. In the absence of this place, the block on my democratic right and that of others in this House to advocate for our constituents was allowed to go on for five years. That is unforgivable and unacceptable, and it has done untold harm to all our people collectively. In fact, they are

united in their frustration, in their grief, in their pain and in their anger. However, they are also united in their hope for better from this place. That is why today, as we debate this Budget Bill without any proper scrutiny or drilling into the detail, people will be shocked that this Budget will be allowed to slide through as a stopgap measure because of how this place has been allowed to operate.

Does anyone remember this? [*Applause.*] That was the clap that we gave our public-sector workers. When you look back on that, do you know how embarrassing that is, when we would not even pay them what they were entitled to get for years? It is despicable. They have had to stand on picket lines, when we needed them in hospitals and caring for our community, because they had no other choice. They were told that there was no money, and, now that this place has returned — thank God, and long may it be here — we need to do better by our people. Public-sector workers — health workers — should not be standing on picket lines to receive the pay that they are duly entitled to. This, to kill any myth, is not a pay increase. It is not a pay rise. It is a levelling up. They are getting finally what they should have got a long time ago and they deserve so much more.

When you look at some of the detail across the various Departments, you see that it predates the most recent collapse and, indeed, the first collapse, when Sinn Féin brought down the House. We have the worst track record on a whole range of areas. We are the worst when it comes to waiting lists. We have the worst level of investment in education and the worst level of investment in roads infrastructure. We have the worst level of care for older people.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree that, every time this place collapses, our young people suffer as well? One of the many examples is that, currently in Northern Ireland, there is a cut to funding for children who have suffered significantly from sexual abuse. This is wrong, and there should be commitment and discussion from Ministers on that issue to ensure that this never happens again.

Mr McCrossan: That is one of the many, many areas that needs immediate attention.

7.45 pm

That brings me to special educational needs. It is an area that the previous Education Committee, on which I was privileged to sit, scrutinised significantly and was promised that

things would change. When the going got tough, however, the tough got going. This place just disappeared. What if, when the going got tough in our health service, our workers just decided not to go in? What if our teachers in classrooms, who were there during the toughest of times, looking after our children and young people, just decided not to go in? Special educational needs is a major crisis for this place, and it is a huge crisis for the education budget. The Education Authority and the Department of Education do not seem to have a handle on the problem. There is a huge and growing concern that, after many promises, they still have not learnt lessons. Guess what? Young people — the most vulnerable in our society — are being failed daily. Too many false promises are what is causing the problems in this place.

For all the worst possible reasons, we are chart-toppers when one considers some of the things that I have outlined. When we consider that this place and its population consists of six counties, 11 council areas and 18 constituencies, it is a ridiculous situation. This is not rocket science. What makes it even more unforgivable is that political parties think that the solution to any problem that we face is to go out that door and not come back in. Let us hope that that does not happen again.

When I talk about education, let us look at some of the cuts that have been made, because they are significant. The Budget locks them in. I attended many meetings with colleagues in the House who were outraged by all the cuts that were being implemented by permanent secretaries, civil servants and the Secretary of State. They were saying, "When we get back in there, we will sort it". I have read countless statements that contradict the positions of parties today. In the spirit of goodwill, I will not embarrass Members, but I will list some of the cuts. For example, an end to the Healthy Happy Minds programme. Mr Butler and other colleagues from the previous Education Committee will remember the importance of that funding: cut. An end to the Engage programme: cut. An end to the digital devices scheme: cut. An end to the Book Start Baby scheme: whoa, now there is something. Do you know that we are probably the only place that has cut that scheme? That is despicable.

There has been a pause on capital development. Some 28 new school projects have been paused, and 40% has been cut from the free period products budget. We debated and brought in that legislation, and we just cut it at the first hurdle. There is a 50% cut to the

shared education budget. There is something to be proud of. There is a reduction in nurture funding from £70 million to £62 million; an end to school coaching programmes by the IFA and the GAA; an end to funding available to Young Enterprise to encourage innovation and development; a pause on a cashless scheme for schools; and a depletion of the funding available to the extended schools programme. The list goes on and on, and it is all locked in. The Budget today just copper-fastens cuts to all those things that we have listened to people talk about daily.

Mr Tennyson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

Mr Tennyson: The Member has said that, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Does he acknowledge that the SDLP was invited to participate in talks alongside all the other parties to negotiate a financial package and, when the going got tough, the SDLP got going and left others to do the work?

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for his intervention. He needs to look up the definition of "opposition". We are not in the Executive, and we will not be a mudguard for anyone in the House any longer. We are going to start standing on our own two feet to call out the cosy-corner situation in the House. The reality is that people deserve accountability, and they have not had proper, accountable politics from this place for a long number of years. We are in opposition, and we will be constructive.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

Mr Carroll: I recognise and welcome some of the Member's words, but, as the Opposition, he and his colleague have said some strong words against the Bill. Will they oppose the Bill?

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for raising that. You will note that I qualified what I said at the beginning by stating that public-sector pay is vital to ensure that our public services continue. That does not necessarily mean that we agree with everything in the Bill. There is a lot of it that Mr Frew does not agree with as an independent member of the DUP. However, the reality is that we need to do something about the mess that we are in, which was inflicted on us by the absence of political parties that had a responsibility to deliver for this place. That is what we are dealing with. It is not ideal. There

is nothing romantic about Northern Ireland politics, let me tell you, and there is a lot of suffering as a consequence of the inaction or the action of this place when it comes to it.

The public pay settlement is a major issue, and it needed to be resolved. It is unforgivable that it lingered for so long and probably will linger for so long. Pardon me for being paranoid, but, when it comes to promises in this place, there is not a great track record of delivering on them.

I will move slightly away from education to healthcare. Has anyone visited A&E? It is an outrageous place to be if you are sick or unwell. Unfortunately, on multiple occasions over the last number of months, I have had to sit in A&E with a very unwell family member. When you sit and watch how the staff are overworked, underpaid and not working in good conditions, you understand why so many of them have little choice but to go elsewhere.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I enjoyed my time with him on the Education Committee, and I think that, with tonight's input so far, I will enjoy his performance in opposition.

Does the Member agree — I think that he will — in regard to the deficit that our health service has faced — not just the underinvestment but the political underinvestment when we have not had a ministerial lead, ministerial direction or the political leadership for the transformation that is needed in our health service — that there is a lasting trauma that impacts on the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr McCrossan: I do, absolutely. Bengoa needs to be implemented; those reforms need to be put in place; and our health service needs to be a major priority for the House. I am clear about that.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way and for highlighting this very issue. I had occasion very recently to be in A&E with my mother. The first thing that you see is the pressures that the staff are under, but you also see police officers spending a lot of time in A&E. I spoke to one of them and said slightly jokingly, "You could probably get a job here". He said, "Yes, and in social services as well". Often, the police are the first responders because of the pressures on our Ambulance Service. That is the situation that we are in.

I say a big thank you, genuinely, to the staff in Causeway Hospital's A&E for their help and

support on that night. It was a great relief to me and our family.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for his intervention. My well wishes and, I am sure, those of colleagues across the House are with your mum. I hope that she has a full and speedy recovery, Patsy.

A&E in Derry is probably the worst possible example of what you would expect from our healthcare system. That has been recognised by senior directors of the Western Trust and by those who manage that difficult crisis scene daily. There are people in their 80s and 90s sitting on hard chairs for well over 24 hours, if they are lucky. There are no beds, and nothing is available: no privacy, no dignity, nothing. That is killing people. Do you know why, Mr Speaker? It is because people are choosing, even when they are sick and need intervention, not to go to A&E because it is so traumatising for them to attend what I have seen on countless occasions. My colleague Mr McGlone rightly points out that, at the weekend, there are police everywhere, accompanying people who are intoxicated or have mental health or addiction issues. They are sitting in the same space. There is no sufficient space for children with special educational needs in A&E. There is no space for people with dementia who need care, and their family members have to stand for hours, while their loved one sits there surrounded by chaos. Is that the vision we have for this place and our people?

There needs to be serious investment and intervention in our health system, because, at the very least, we should have dignity at all times.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

Mr McNulty: I have visited Daisy Hill's emergency department, and I have heard that Craigavon's emergency department is akin to what you have just described: there were seven police officers at one time in the corridor, with patients stacked head to toe on trolleys. The backs of the trolleys cannot even be put down. The patients have been stripped of their dignity. The nurses and doctors have been prevented from fulfilling their duties in a safe environment. Does the Member agree that that has to stop and that we need the cross-border healthcare initiative to be restored immediately so that we can ease the burden on our health system now?

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for his intervention. He, too, paints a picture of our health service that is difficult to look at. The reality is that, because of a lack of funding generally in health services, no matter how sick you are or how complex your issue is, you go to A&E. If you ring your GP surgery and cannot get an appointment, you go to A&E.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: Two wee seconds.

If you have a mental health or addiction issue, you go to A&E. No matter the problem, that is where you are sent, and it is leading to a major crisis in the care of our people. It affects countless older people in particular. It would break your heart to see that, after contributing to this society for a lifetime, that is how they are treated when at their most vulnerable. That is totally reprehensible.

Mental health and addiction services are also huge issues in all of our constituencies. I am sure that we have all had people in our offices who are battling with their mental health and cannot get the support that they need.

Do you want in on that point, Patsy?

Mr McGlone: Yes. Thank you. You are taking me to where I was going to take you. The first thing is that people are winding up at A&E when they should be going to their GP. The second thing — this is a huge issue — is about mental health services: people with severe mental health or addiction problems are attending A&E. That is not the right place for them. Their problems are being compounded by having a lot of sick people around them. It is not a conducive environment for calming down a person who has severe mental health problems; nor is it a good environment for the rest of the people who are there with physical health problems. It is not being done in the right way. Does the Member agree that there has to be some sort of triaging system to ensure that people with severe mental health and addiction problems get help as soon as possible? Does he agree that A&E is not the best place for that help?

Mr McCrossan: I agree entirely with the Member.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member take his seat for a minute? You are having a great debate about the health service, but this is a debate about the Budget. We should focus on finances rather than getting into the nitty-gritty. Even with the

best will in the world, we will not fix the health service tonight.

Mr McCrossan: Mr Speaker, you are absolutely right, but all of those problems emanate from the fact that there has not been a proper budget for or investment in our health service. That is why we are talking about the problems. They are a consequence of fast-tracked, unaccountable budgets, such as the one that is to be rubber-stamped here soon. The reality for a lot of people is pain and suffering.

Mr McGlone made a very important point. When I was a student in Liverpool, no matter what the issue was, you could walk down the street to a service that was accessible to people. No one knows when their mental health might deteriorate; it can happen to anyone at any time or point. At that critical juncture, you need help there and then. You do not need an appointment in two weeks' time. People arrive at my office seeking that support and help, but the services do not exist because they have not been properly funded. If someone is not registered with a GP or with local mental health services, when I phone, we are told to ring an ambulance. That person does not want to go in an ambulance to A&E to sit in an area that will add to their deterioration. We need to fund those services properly, because people are losing their lives. They are desperate. We, collectively, have a responsibility to ensure that that is resolved, so we need to invest properly in our healthcare services.

The reality when it comes to accessing care is that there has been a failure to look after older people. Our hospital wards are filled with older people who cannot get domiciliary care packages. They might have no family support network, their needs might be too complex or difficult for their family or they might have a small family circle. A couple of the wards that I visited were filled with older people who would love to be at home. Those people are being failed miserably. All of us will be old some day — some quicker than others — but the reality is that, if the system is failing people at that point in their life when they most need help and support, what are we here for? We need to resolve those problems. Older people should not be treated in the way that they are being treated in our society. We need to give them the dignity and respect that they deserve.

8.00 pm

I will quickly move on. The A5 costs lives every year in my constituency. There are stories of

heartbreak and devastation everywhere you go. No matter which part of the road you are on, you see headstones, crosses and tributes to people who have died. People have been promised for over 50 years that investment in that infrastructure would happen. Every time there is a delay, people die. The least that people deserve is safe roads to travel on. I want to see and am hopeful that there will soon be a positive announcement on the A5, because it will save lives and unlock the economic potential of that part of the island. It is long overdue. I wait in anticipation and hope for a positive announcement from the Irish Government on that. I encourage the Minister to ensure that there is money for that in the Budget in order to ensure that, when we get to that critical juncture, the project that her colleague the Minister for Infrastructure announced is ready to go.

This week, we had an announcement from the new Minister for Infrastructure, John O'Dowd, that there is £1 million for potholes in roads. I welcome any investment in our road infrastructure, because it is diabolical, but £1 million will not get him out of Omagh. It is a serious problem. It is an extremely dangerous situation if, when travelling along any road, you hit a pothole. People are swerving on the roads to avoid potholes, and they end up causing an accident on the other side of the road. It is a major problem, and £1 million does not cut it. There needs to be greater investment in our infrastructure.

That brings me to the final point. People in our communities are struggling on a daily basis. They want us to work together. They want us to stick with it when it gets difficult. They want us to find solutions to their problems. They want us to fund the health service properly. They want us to fund our education system properly. They want access to good housing. Young people deserve a future in this place that is much more than sticking a plaster over a problem until it falls off.

Today is regrettable, because we are just back to the same old, same old approach from Stormont: pass the Budget; no scrutiny; resolve a few problems; and create a mountain of many others. Let us get beyond that. The only way that we can do that is by making the commitment that my colleague Matthew O'Toole, the Leader of the Opposition, has requested from the First Minister and deputy First Minister: when things get tough, stick with it; find solutions; knock down whatever door is in front of you; and put our people first.

Mr Allister: I commend Mr McCrossan for his compelling speech. I look forward to, in a few minutes' time, holding the "No" door open for him as he votes against this wholly inadequate Budget. Let us see.

When I lift up the Budget Bill and turn to page 1, it is hard to escape the huge figure that appears there for our resources: £28,817,000,000 — it is good to be British, but it is never enough. That could say £38 billion, and there are Members who would demand more, particularly on the Sinn Féin Benches. They are past experts at spending everyone else's money. That is, in fact, their *raison d'être*, so that they can forever blame the Brits: "There is not enough money: blame the Brits". Sadly, there have been echoes of that from some on the unionist Benches. The DUP have joined in with their own Brit-bashing on the money front.

Yet, here we are, back in Stormont, on the foot of a package that Members accepted as the way forward. They bought the package. I am sure that we are all familiar with the Latin phrase, "caveat emptor" — let the buyer beware. Did they? No. They bought £3.3 billion as the way of getting the keys to the House, and they are not through the door before they are demanding more and more. Of course, as I said, that is the only purpose for which some of them exist, because they could never acknowledge that being a part of the United Kingdom is financially beneficial or anything like it. You have to own what you bought into.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He mentioned that being part of the UK is financially beneficial. Does he agree with the UK's official budget, fiscal and economic forecaster, the Office for Budget Responsibility, which says that Brexit has basically reduced the UK's trading capacity and, therefore, its economy and GDP by about 4% in the long run, which obviously means much less tax revenue, which means much less money to spend on public services, including in Northern Ireland?

Mr Allister: No, I do not. Let us be clear. I hear all the time in the House about Tory austerity and the terrible Brits who do these terrible things to us. As has been pointed out tonight, this is a Budget that builds in those cuts. They are now Sinn Féin cuts. Sinn Féin is now taking ownership of the denuding of our education service, our health service and everything that goes with it. Let us have a bit of honesty about where we are.

There is no point in the First Minister and deputy First Minister speaking in front of impressionable four-year-olds in a playschool

and equally impressionable BBC journalists, beating their chests and saying, "We'll not have water rates. We'll not increase rates. We'll not do this. We'll not do anything", when they accepted the very deal where the rubber will hit the road. The Fiscal Council has told you and anyone would have known that there is a cliff edge to that £3.3 billion. This is an Executive who are trying to blame everyone but themselves, when they are the people who bought into this. If they did not have enough money and if that mattered to them, why are they here? They would have been holding out. Some of them, of course, would be here for no money — £3, never mind £3 billion, would have done them, such was their anxiety to be here and to take ownership of Tory austerity, as they do tonight.

Then, we look at the challenges coming down the road. A former Finance Minister of the House tells us in today's 'Belfast News Letter', that the Climate Change Act that the House previously approved will impose a charge of £2.3 billion. Was any of that factored into those wonderful negotiations? The House committed itself, in its folly, to all sorts of expenditure arising from a target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with a reduction in net emissions of at least 48% by 2030. A climate change commissioner has to be appointed, a public body has to be set up to scrutinise changes, and something else called a "Just Transition Commission" has to be established. That will all cost a phenomenal amount of money. Where was the negotiation to get that money? Where is that money coming from? It is all very well to say — we had this so much at the end of the last Assembly — "Let's push through all of these populist measures and populist private Members' Bills, but never cost them or worry where the money will come from." Of course, that is the typical Sinn Féin approach. In fact, the less money you have, the better, because the more you can blame the Brits. That is the mentality of the Minister and her party in the House.

As we go forward, we will see more of the dysfunctionality of the Executive. Indeed, we had a classic example of that last week, when the Education Minister came to the House to make his first statement. We may have been in the Chamber, but the Minister was not talking to us: he was making a presentation — a plea — to his Executive colleagues, including the Finance Minister. He set out that he needed £500 million or £600 million — I cannot remember exactly — to fix certain things. He did not come to make an announcement that, "This is what I've got, this is what I'm going to do with it and this is how I'm going to fix things",

as you would expect from an Executive Minister. No, he came to the House to address the Finance Minister and his other Executive colleagues with bids for his Department. That is the classic dysfunctionality of the Executive. We are only beginning to see it, and we will see it more and more as Ministers make their siloed presentations.

This all comes down to a Budget that has locked in the cuts to date. The title deeds of those cuts have thereby been transferred from the wicked Secretary of State to the Finance Minister of Sinn Féin. That is where the ownership now lies, and that is where it will lie going forward. When public-sector workers and others find disappointment in what they are given and when our schools continue to be short of finance, let us put the blame where it belongs: on this Executive and on Sinn Féin in particular, who hold all the key economic posts. This is what they serve up to us tonight. It is little wonder that a minority of us refuse to vote for such a thing.

Mr Carroll: I have already said that the process that we are asked to endorse today — the spending of so much public money without knowing where it will all go or for what purposes it will be used — is totally absurd. It smacks of the new Assembly continuing in the same vein as its predecessors. There is a question over MLAs, especially those outside the Executive, having their say on the Budget Bill and being able to properly scrutinise it. We have been unable to do so. That is not to mention the members of the public who are constantly told that decisions are made on their behalf. There is no inclusion for them. The Assembly has failed the first test of its scrutiny role by rushing the Bill through earlier and being likely to pass it by tomorrow.

Over the years, we have heard a lot about the renewable heat incentive and the need to learn lessons about proper processes being put in place to ensure that public money is spent properly. Those calls have fallen on deaf ears. Too many times, I have heard in this stop-start Assembly, of which I have been a part, that accelerated passage is a special case or that there are extenuating circumstances, but legislation is being rushed through again today. Here we go again and again.

We are given mere hours to scrutinise it and are then asked to rush it through. It is a return to the way it always was at Stormont.

8.15 pm

We know that a huge portion of the blame lies with the Tories and their cruel and unforgivable approach to funding public services in this place. The Tories have collectively gutted some £500 billion from public services since they came to power in 2010. That is half a trillion pounds of public money — a staggering figure — the loss of which has led directly to a spike in the number of people going to food banks, homelessness figures going through the roof and people in their millions struggling in poverty. The Tories' Budget and the consultations launched by Departments were essentially a hit wish list through decimated public services and working-class people.

I and my party welcome the announcement from the First Minister that water charges will not come in as a secondary, separate charge. However, there have also been suggestions for higher tuition fees, possibly limited travel for over-65s, and the reintroduction of prescription charges. They all hang over ordinary people like the sword of Damocles. I say clearly that, if the Executive proceed with any of those plans, people need to be ready to take to the streets to protest and campaign to resist such cruel measures. The DUP enabled the Tories all along by collapsing Stormont and by being attached at the hip for so many years. Now that Sinn Féin is in the Government, with ministerial portfolios, it should not do the Tories' bidding.

The Tories have the gall to talk about financial management and budgets here while the total level of debt in Britain is some £2.5 trillion. They have a mountain of debt but the cheek to lecture us. When selling the Bill, the Minister and her colleagues talked about the money that is set aside for public-sector workers. The first thing to be said is that, if there is an increase, whatever the detail is, it will have been won by the public-sector workers who went on strike last month in unprecedented numbers — 170,000 of them. People were told for too long about money trees not existing, but we knew that it was a spoof and a lie, and the workers did not buy it. They changed the narrative and shifted the terms of the debate. Anything extra that has been obtained is down to their fight, their strikes and their struggle, not to the clever words of politicians behind closed doors.

The Finance Minister stated in correspondence to the Finance Committee:

"It is regrettable that the Executive was not in a position to fund the full c£700 million of estimated pay costs identified by departments."

The question is this: who will lose out? Unite the union has already written to the Minister to clarify whether the £688 million pay package makes any provision for a pay and grading review sought by striking education workers that is six years overdue. The union has warned that if there is not enough money or not enough on offer, the workers will take strike action. That is a certainty, and I will back them if they take that action. As we have heard, they are some of the lowest-paid workers, who deliver essential work in difficult and challenging circumstances, especially with people who have complex needs.

Junior doctors are also appalled by the pay offer that they have received. Their wages have fallen by 30% over the past 15 years, a significant divergence of pay, but the DUP has said nothing about it. The BMA left its meeting with the Department feeling extremely disappointed and disheartened; it has been offered a below-inflation pay deal that will do nothing to recruit more doctors and stop people leaving these shores to seek and obtain greater pay. The Budget Bill fastens in those pay cuts. That alone should be a reason to vote it down. I thank our junior doctors for all their hard work over the years. If they are out on picket lines, I will stand with them, but will it not be absurd if Executive parties pass the Bill and then join the picket lines when people strike early next month? I hope that they do not.

The Budget contains some money to support asylum seekers and refugees, but it appears to be completely inadequate. Huge challenges are faced by our asylum seeker and refugee communities, and the Executive need to stand up and fight for them. The Executive need to challenge the rotten Tory hostile environment policies, not implement them. The Home Office needs to cough up money to ensure that asylum seekers are not evicted from their homes when they achieve settled status. I am long enough in the tooth to know that that will not happen without pressure from anti-racism groups, migrant communities and housing campaigners. It is not enough for the Executive to leave the Tories to it or to oversee their dirty work.

If all that the Executive do is implement Tory policy, it begs this question: what exactly are the Executive good for? Budget cuts are budget cuts, and it makes little odds whether they come directly from the Tories or from their enablers here.

I finish by inviting the Opposition to vote against the Budget Bill and join the socialist opposition

and people who stand against the Budget for the reasons that I have stated.

Mr McReynolds: As the penultimate Member to speak this evening, at this late hour, I congratulate the Finance Minister on her new role and recognise her endurance. I thank her and the Infrastructure Committee Chair for their contributions.

It is fair to say that last week was challenging, with key issues already to the forefront in the Chamber, Committees having reassembled and Chairs having recovered, hopefully, after reading out what felt like hours of statutory rules to us. Since becoming infrastructure spokesperson for the Alliance Party, I have been fortunate to attend regular briefings with the permanent secretary, Denis McMahon, over the past year. I have heard about the significant budgetary pressures that his Department has faced, from staff vacancies to facilitating essential projects to maintaining current levels of service standards.

Today's Budget Bill is welcome, and we support the reason for its being brought forward unusually fast, as my colleagues have acknowledged. I will refer in my remarks to what it achieves within the broad remit of the Department for Infrastructure. The Bill demonstrates why we now need a sustained and recurring Government in place in Northern Ireland to deliver the budgetary support and security that the Department for Infrastructure requires.

In addition, I agree that we need to be able to scrutinise, but we also have to support the Minister for Infrastructure and his Department to be creative in their use of funds and to ensure that new ways of thinking are deployed to make money go further than before, as well as to support them to be able to invest more money in the short term in order to deliver more in future.

There are ideas that will ease budgetary pressures in the long run, such as improving our active travel offering, thus increasing the ease with which it is possible to move around without having immediately to resort to private car use, reducing congestion, improving connectivity in our communities, improving public health and making local areas safer. Working with Northern Ireland Water to ensure that it has the necessary funds to deliver water to our homes, and is able to make long-term strategic decisions in doing so, will save money in the long run that can be refocused further down the line. By working with Translink to ensure that our public transport offering is fit for

purpose in the 21st century, there are huge opportunities, through the new Belfast transport hub, to reimagine Belfast city centre as a vibrant space to welcome visitors to Northern Ireland and to allow our citizens to move around it with ease.

Finally, we as a party have significant and grave concerns for capital funding. Understandably, resource pressures have overshadowed such projects, but it is essential that the Committee make sure that it is able to proceed and that we do not look back at the opportunities that could have been. The Alliance Party wants to see a radical improvement in our infrastructure in order to prepare Northern Ireland for the future. We want to modernise it by targeting spending to maximise social and economic benefits and by taking a responsible, long-term approach towards it. This Budget eases short-term pressure on the Department, and we look forward to supporting the work of the Minister and the Committee to deliver enhanced infrastructure across Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: I will attempt to be brief. I first join other Members in welcoming the Minister to her position and wish her well in what will be an important and, no doubt, challenging role.

I do not feel the need to rehearse the argument about how we are processing the Budget Bill. That point has been well made by many Members. I would like us to commit to this being the last time that we do it in this way so that, the next time that a Budget comes to the House, it will be a multi-year Budget, with plenty of time for us to scrutinise it. It is not only about a multi-year Budget but about a Budget that is closely aligned with the Programme for Government, and not only a Programme for Government but an outcomes-based-accountability Programme for Government that is focused on outcomes, meaning not just on the inputs and outputs of government but on delivering for our people.

I heard many Members say today, "We are failing our people". This evening, I think particularly of the community and voluntary sector, which had already suffered a huge blow with the loss of the European social fund moneys that the UK Government have not adequately replaced. The lack of certainty is now leading to a huge issue over job retention in that sector.

It is perfectly reasonable for a key worker to look to see whether they are getting their contract renewed for the next year, and, if there is uncertainty, they may see a nice, secure job

in the statutory sector and migrate there, because they have bills and mortgages to pay, cars to run and children to bring up.

I will speak briefly about the two areas on which I speak for the party. One is the economy. I welcome the Economy Minister's statement earlier, and I wish him well in trying to achieve what I believe to be the holy grail of economic development: closing the productivity gap. At some of the meetings that I attended in the build-up to the return of Stormont, much was made of how we must collectively engage in additional revenue-raising. It seems to me that, actually, there is one very agreeable way to increase the revenue that we raise, which is to create more highly paid jobs, yielding more income tax, more national insurance contributions and more disposable income. That would lead to people buying stuff and so to more value added tax. If they were shopping locally, there would, of course, be more corporation tax from certain companies.

The other area on which I speak is policing. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. Over the past months, every week, I have heard the police talk about how the budget gap is impacting on service delivery. It is also impacting on morale. We ask the police to keep people safe, and we do so while the threat level is severe and while the attempted murder of DCI John Caldwell a year ago reminds officers and staff alike that they are not safe at any time. On or off duty, in the police station, on the beat, at home or in the shops: they are at risk.

We pass laws — we are quite right to do so — that place additional duties on the PSNI. For example, a Bill on stalking was passed in the previous mandate. That puts another duty on the PSNI, but do we accompany such duties with additional budget? No, we do not. We will have to think about that. Some Members made the point that the police are first responders and that they deal with a lot of medical situations. It was once put very succinctly to me by a senior officer: police officers operate defibrillators; ambulance crews do not carry handcuffs. The question is twofold. First, is that the right division of labour? We have to have that debate. If our answer is, "Yes, that is actually the best way to go about business", we must ask ourselves whether the budgets for the various agencies reflect the fact that we are asking one agency to do the work of another.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way, because the matter is very close to my heart. The Assembly has seen multiple failures when it comes to the training college at Desertcreat,

which should have been in place years ago. The reality is that, if we want to save money and to provide better public services and a better emergency response to save people's lives, there is that need for a tri-service response, whether it is the Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service or the Prison Service and the Police Service, because the jobs are multifunctional now.

The Member makes a really good point about the security risk to police officers. I started in the Prison Service in 1996. I think that my take-home pay was around £850 at that stage, but I had to check under my car every day that I held that job. Prison officers still find themselves with that security risk in 2024. Money does not pay you for some of the jobs that our people have to do. Will the Member reflect on that? He set out a good position on the Police Service in regard to the ongoing security risk, but Prison Service staff still face a similar threat.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for the intervention. I do not disagree with anything that he said.

I will finish by referencing Mr McCrossan, who was very passionate but, to my mind, very negative. I am very proud to come from this neck of the woods, this little postage stamp on the world map that some of us call "Northern Ireland" and some call "the North of Ireland". Yes, we can do better, but I believe that we will.

8.30 pm

Dr Archibald: I put on record my thanks to Members, Chairs and Deputy Chairs who contributed to the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. It has been very useful to me, as Finance Minister, to hear the views of the respective Committees and Members on the important financial and economic issues that face us.

I will endeavour to respond to as many of the issues raised as possible in the closing moments of the debate and, hopefully, without another coughing fit. However, before I do that, I want to be clear again about the speed of the Bill's passage and the effect of that on the scrutiny of it. This is not the way in which we would choose to do business, but I am asking Members today to ensure that Departments get the funding that they need to continue to deliver public services until the end of the year and to deliver fair pay for public-sector workers.

The Chair of the Finance Committee, Matthew O'Toole, made the point, as did a number of Members, that the Bill legislates for cuts. I agree that the starting point for the Bill should not have been a Budget that was set by the Secretary of State; it should have been a Budget that was set by the Executive. There is no doubt that the decisions that Departments had to make to live within the Budget set by the Secretary of State have caused harm, and I will make it clear to the Treasury that the Executive's funding needs to be put on a sustainable footing and that that needs to include funding based on need. The Bill provides significantly more funding, obviously, than was in the Secretary of State's Budget, and, last week, the Executive agreed to allocations of £1.067 billion resource DEL and £83.5 million capital DEL. That included the £688 million for public-sector pay.

Mr O'Toole also referred to an amendment that he intends to table following this Second Stage debate. I will not go into that in detail until it is accepted, if it is accepted. Work is ongoing, with legislation being drafted, to place the Fiscal Council on a statutory footing. Given the Member's role as Chair of the Finance Committee, I know that he will be aware of the Department's plans in that regard, as those plans were detailed in the first-day brief provided by the Department.

Mr O'Toole also asked for a timescale for engagement with the Treasury on the financial package. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury wrote to me on 13 February setting out the details of the financial package. I have a number of significant concerns about the package as set out in the letter, and, on receipt of that letter, I wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to highlight those concerns. I await a response to that letter, although I understand that last week was recess in Westminster. I also continue to seek an urgent meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Diane Forsythe asked some questions about the package for pay awards. The Member is quite right: Departments identified around £700 million of pay pressures in 2023-24. The financial package provided £584 million specifically for pay, and I sought flexibility to put some of the £559 million that was originally provided for overspends towards pay pressures. As a result, the Executive were able to allocate £688 million for pay. Unfortunately, the funding provided by the financial package did not go far enough to fully address the pressures that Departments had identified, although we allocated as much as we could towards the pay pressures. The allocations

agreed by the Executive provide funding envelopes for Ministers to begin negotiations with all the pay groups identified. Individual Ministers are now in the process of engaging with trade unions to negotiate pay awards for the various groups of staff. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the detail of those negotiations, including the funding for individual awards and individual staff groups. A number of Members referred to particular groups of workers. Those negotiations continue.

Eóin Tennyson talked about the need to address the underfunding and, specifically, about our level of need. I do not believe that the 124% needs-based factor that has been proposed by the British Government represents a fair estimate of our need. There is a wealth of evidence, from the Fiscal Council in particular, that that could — in my view, should — be higher. Those options remain unexplored. Whether it should be a job for the Fiscal Council or another independent commission to look at that, the issue can be debated further. However, it is clear that the British Government need to revisit the issue. As all Members will know, I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury seeking an urgent meeting, and I will discuss that point with her.

Phillip Brett mentioned year-end underspends. In normal circumstances, the Executive would be able to carry forward a limited amount in year-end underspend under the Budget exchange scheme. That will still be possible this year for capital DEL. However, as the additional funding that is provided in the financial package is provided from a claim on the reserve, no carry forward will be permitted for resource DEL. I have made my Executive colleagues aware of that and have asked them to seek to avoid underspends. I also asked that Departments engage immediately with the Department of Finance should any issues emerge between now and the end of the financial year.

Mr Chambers and Mr O'Toole had an exchange about the role of the Audit Committee in setting budgets for independent bodies. In the absence of the Assembly, the Secretary of State set the budgets for those bodies. I appreciate that they were not happy with that. I agree that that is far from ideal. However, we have only a few weeks left of the financial year and limited funding available, so there is little scope to change that now. However, going forward, it will, once again, be for the Audit Committee to set the budgets for those bodies. I ask that, in doing so, obviously, the Committee take account of the wider public expenditure position.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Minister for taking an intervention. She has a lot of questions to answer, and I appreciate her patience. My question is specifically about the Audit Office and its forward work programme. Can her Department correspond with it and give it a little bit of certainty? The control totals in the schedule to the Bill make it slightly difficult for that office to plan. I will leave that with the Minister or her officials.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for the intervention. I am sure that officials will make a note to pick up that particular point.

Nick Mathison asked about the impact of the Bill's not being passed. As I explained in my opening remarks, Departments are operating on the authority of the Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Act 2023, which the Secretary of State legislated for and which was based on his Budget that was set back in April. There is a risk that a number of Departments, including the Department of Education, could reach cash limits if the Budget Bill is not passed and does not receive Royal Assent as soon as possible. The impact of that would be that my Department would be unable to pay money out of the Consolidated Fund to any Department that has reached its cash limit. Obviously, that is not a situation that any of us want to risk happening.

Nick raised the non-teaching staff pay and grading review, as did a number of other Members. The business case to support the proposal for the implementation of the pay and grading review is still undergoing scrutiny and has not yet received expenditure approval. My Department has raised a number of questions about the original business case and is working through updated information that the Department of Education recently provided in order to ensure that such questions have been adequately addressed. I also understand that, in parallel, the Department of Education is continuing to engage with the Education Authority to review its cost estimates in order to ensure that they are accurate. That work is ongoing. As such, although I fully appreciate the importance of the role of the workers in that staffing group, which Mr Butler, Mr Carroll and others highlighted and which cannot be overstated, we need to ensure that appropriate scrutiny is completed.

Nick also raised the Department of Education's capital position. The £150 million Fresh Start funding package for shared education and shared housing has been repackaged into the funding that is available for allocation by the

Executive. I understand that some shared and integrated education projects that were initially being considered to progress using Fresh Start funding have not yet become contractually committed, and it is now a matter for the Executive to determine allocations for Departments.

Mr Aiken raised a number of points. He raised concern about the use of the sole authority of the Budget Act, often referred to as the use of the black box. I covered that somewhat in my opening remarks and set out the range of services that that is being used for. He is absolutely correct: sole authority should be used only for items of expenditure that are to last for a short period or for which the level of expenditure is relatively small. It is absolutely correct that significant services involving significant expenditure should be legislated for properly by the Assembly. The Member will be aware, however, that it has simply not been possible for us to do that for the past two years.

Looking at some of the significant areas that are being delivered under sole authority, we see that, at the top of the list, is our mitigation of the British Government's welfare reform measures.

If the sole authority of the Budget Act is not used for this, our mitigation measures will cease, and that would obviously plunge some of our most vulnerable people and households into crisis. Absolutely, this needs to be put on a firm statutory footing now that the Assembly is functioning again. However, until that can be done, we must ensure that the most vulnerable continue to be protected.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Archibald: Yes, sure.

Dr Aiken: Minister, the point was that, when I was the Chair of the Committee, it was reported that that figure should not exceed £1 million. That came from the Audit Office and also — I think, but I would stand corrected — the Comptroller and Auditor General. Those are real controls that should be there. It is not a question of sole authority being used. Those are the kinds of things that we should be checking on to make sure that it is being run properly. Going above that figure is not acceptable.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. We have discussed at length today the extraordinary circumstances that we are in with this Budget.

Dr Aiken also expressed his dissatisfaction with the level of information that the Assembly has been provided with in relation to the amounts in the Budget Bill and the Vote on Account. It is regrettable that the timescales involved mean that it has not been possible to provide spring Supplementary Estimates to accompany the Budget Bill. That is purely down to timescales. Until I received a letter from the Treasury last Tuesday, I had no certainty on the funding available for 2023-24. The Executive allocated that funding on 15 February, and a statement was issued to the Assembly later that day. That statement showed the resource and capital DEL allocations to each Department. I set out in the statement that that included £388 million for overspend and £688 million for pay. As the Member will know, the spring Supplementary Estimates document is long and complex and not something that could be turned around in a matter of days. Therefore, while it is regrettable that that document did not accompany the Bill, if the Bill is to obtain Royal Assent before the Departments exhaust their cash limits, it needs to proceed on the timescale outlined.

The Vote on Account is quite simply a percentage of the provision in the 2023-24 Budget. It is intended to ensure that Departments can continue spending until such times as a Budget Bill, based on the Executive's 2024-25 Budget, obtains Royal Assent. As I explained in my opening remarks, the Vote on Account is intended to last until after the summer recess to ensure that not only the Executive but the Assembly have sufficient time to consider the Budget for 2024-25.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Archibald: Yes.

Dr Aiken: It is a short technical point for our information. For the Bill to obtain Royal Assent, a statement about the Estimates has to be part of the information package that goes with it. If the Bill goes for Royal Assent but we are not going to get the Estimates until later, how are we going to apply those Estimates?

Dr Archibald: We hope that those two timescales will align to allow that to proceed in relation to the 2023-24 Budget Bill that we are discussing.

Joanne Bunting and Stewart Dickson raised issues around the budgetary pressures facing the Department of Justice. I welcome the points made by both Members regarding the budgetary pressure on the Department of

Justice. I took account of those funding pressures in my written ministerial statement, in which I confirmed that the Executive have provided a further £75.3 million to help DOJ meet the remaining needs for 2023-24. That additional funding will provide the Justice Minister with funding to address outstanding financial pressures in areas such as policing, including pay. I look forward to discussing the Department of Justice's financial position with the Justice Minister as part of the Executive's consideration of the 2024-25 Budget.

Mr McGrath and Mr McCrossan spoke about what this Budget does. The Secretary of State put in place a Budget last April that caused damage across our public services. Many of us had been critical of that Budget as being deeply punitive. This Budget Bill secures the funding for Departments for the final few weeks of the financial year and delivers fair pay for public-sector workers. It will not undo the damage of that Budget, and no one claims that it will. This Bill is not setting the Budget for 2024-25 and future years. The Executive are now beginning the process of considering the 2024-25 Budget. Indeed, the Vote on Account in this Budget Bill is intended to allow the Executive and the Assembly to carefully consider the Budget for 2024-25.

Finally, Mr Nesbitt talked about our needing to have an outcomes-based Programme for Government, and I completely agree. It is important that that is the case, because it will help us prioritise how we spend our money.

8.45 pm

Mr Speaker, we could all continue to debate these issues for some time, but I will draw my remarks to a close. I have tried to respond to as many issues as possible. As always, the debate has been wide-ranging and many significant points have been raised, and I am thankful to Members for that. It is imperative that the legislation debated today continues its passage through the Assembly so that public services can be delivered without delay or interruption. In conclusion, I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising spending on public services by Departments for 2023-24 and into the early months of 2024-25 through the Vote on Account.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 62; Noes 2.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Beattie, Mr Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Donnelly, Mr Easton, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Elliott, Ms Ennis, Mrs Erskine, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Honeyford, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Miss McAllister, Mr McGuigan, Miss McIlveen, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Mr O'Dowd, Miss Reilly, Mr Robinson, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Ferguson and Ms Á Murphy

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Carroll.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister and Mr Carroll.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 01/22-27] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. I remind Members that amendments to the Bill for Consideration Stage may be submitted in the Bill Office for up to one hour from now.

Adjourned at 9.05 pm.