



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 March 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget Bill: Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** I inform Members that the Budget Bill received Royal Assent on 14 March 2024. It will be known as the Budget Act (NI) 2024 and is chapter 1.

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** We have received a complaint from Hansard that Members are adjusting their microphones and speaking directly to others and not through the microphones. That is causing some problems for Hansard. There will be a letter going out to all Members to help you with that. One bit of advice is that the microphones are not on unless the wee red light is on, so if you are whispering to your colleague, which you are very well entitled to do, Big Brother is not listening, and you do not have to move the microphone away.

## Members' Statements

**Mr Speaker:** Members who wish to make a statement should rise in their place. You will have up to three minutes in which to make your statement, and there will be no interventions or points of order until this item of business has finished.

### Christian Brothers Grammar School, Omagh

**Mr McHugh:** Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le mo sheanscoil, Scoil na mBráithre Críostaí, ar an Ómaigh. *[Translation: I would like to congratulate my old school, the Christian Brothers' School, in Omagh.]* On Saturday, they won the Hogan Cup, which is a very significant all-island competition. For two years in succession, the Christian Brothers in Omagh have won the competition. In the centenary year of the MacRory Cup, they won that also; again, for two years in succession. It was interesting that two Tyrone schools, St Patrick's, Dungannon and Omagh Christian Brothers, competed in the MacRory Cup final. The Christian Brothers in Omagh continued into the Hogan Cup competition, which they won on Saturday.

The future is bright for the Cumann Lúthchleas Gael *[Translation: Gaelic Athletic Association]* in County Tyrone. Arís ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le Scoil na mBráithre Críostaí ar an Ómaigh. *[Translation: Again, I would like to congratulate the Christian Brothers' School in Omagh.]*

### Home and Car Insurance

**Mr Brett:** I will raise concerns on behalf of people of North Belfast and across Northern Ireland about the rising costs of home and car insurance. Like other Members, I am sure, I have been inundated in recent weeks with correspondence about renewal costs. The prices quoted for renewals show that the cost of home insurance in particular has gone up hugely in recent weeks. I was contacted at the weekend by a family in Rathcoole who were seeking to renew their home insurance and were quoted prices that had increased by 450%. The car insurance quotes, particularly for our young people who are trying to drive for the first time, are astronomical and completely unacceptable.

The Committee for the Economy has contacted representatives of the British insurance industry to request that they come to the Committee and

explain why the people of Northern Ireland are being singled out for those ridiculous price increases. It is clear that that needs to change and that the costs cannot be passed on to families who cannot afford them. I put on record the House's message that we will continue to raise those important issues on behalf of our constituents.

### Royal Belfast Academical Institution

**Ms Bradshaw:** I congratulate Royal Belfast Academical Institution on its win in the Schools' Cup yesterday. The school has a long and proud history of 34 outright wins in that competition, which is the second oldest rugby tournament in the world. Yesterday's victory adds to the school's win in the Medallion Shield, which is, essentially, the junior schools' cup and its win in the Burney Cup, which is the boys' schools hockey tournament. It has been a fantastic year of sporting success for that south Belfast school. I commiserate with Ballymena Academy and all the other teams that took part.

As we know, team sport is not just about the players on the field. It is about the coaches, volunteers, parents and the entire school community. Last year, I visited Belfast Inst. When I met the principal and members of the board of governors, I saw their dedication to success on the field and in the classroom. Well done, Inst.

### Seachtain na Gaeilge

**Miss Reilly:** Over the past two weeks, we have witnessed a magnificent celebration of all things sport, culture, arts and language that we should all be extremely proud of. As Seachtain na Gaeilge *[Translation: Irish Language Week]* draws to a close, we reflect on the vibrant tapestry of events that has unfolded throughout the island, where families and communities have come together to revel in the beauty of our language, traditions and heritage. As I said a couple of weeks ago, at the beginning of Seachtain na Gaeilge, míle buíochas *[Translation: a thousand thanks]* to all the groups, organisations and activists who continue to ensure that our language, culture and sport are accessible to everyone and, of course, celebrated.

On Sunday, we celebrated St Patrick's Day together. That is a day when the world turns its eyes to our shores in celebration. From Donegal to Kerry and from New York to Sydney, people across the globe come together for a bit of craic agus ceol *[Translation: craic and music]*. It is a reminder that, no matter

where we go throughout the world, there is a bit of our home everywhere.

In the middle of all that, the Ireland men's rugby team became Six Nations champions at the weekend. That, again, put our island front and centre of the sporting world. The past few weeks should not be lost on any of us, because we have so much to celebrate and to be proud of. I congratulate the team on a fantastic tournament and win.

The past few weeks teach us that we should cherish and enjoy the testament to the indomitable spirit of our island. Let us continue to celebrate our language, culture and heritage with unwavering pride. Let us never forget that the power of sport unites and inspires us and reminds us of the greatness that lies in each and every one of us.

## Farmers

**Mr Buckley:** I will talk about an issue that is close to many hearts in Northern Ireland, Mr Speaker, including yours: the farmer. The farmer has been the staple blood of Northern Ireland's society since its inception. I doubt that there is a single Member who, if they trace their roots back far enough, will not find some form of farmer connected to their family name. When we enter the Building and show people around, we look at the three pillar industries that supported Northern Ireland: shipbuilding, linen and the agriculture sector. Two have, sadly, become less relevant over the years, although there has been something of a renaissance in shipbuilding, but agriculture has been the staple.

Sadly, however, the view among many farmers in Northern Ireland is that the political classes no longer care about them. They feel that, given the current direction of laws, they are being legislated against rather than enabled to fulfil their true potential and add to the Northern Ireland economy.

We have always been proud of our agri-food sector. We have put it up in lights across the world when we compare the great produce and the family origins of food that is produced on this island, particularly in Northern Ireland, with that from elsewhere.

There are issues today that are existential threats to the sector. The first is TB. TB costs the taxpayer in Northern Ireland roughly £50 million a year. We know that there are potential solutions. There have been targeted culls in England that have had positive results in

bringing the number down, yet we in Northern Ireland still sit on our hands rather than get on to try to support that farming industry. Not one badger has been legally culled in Northern Ireland. That is absolutely scandalous when we compare it with this statistic, and this is a fact: in the last five years, 89,000 dairy and beef cows have been culled for having TB — 89,000, Mr Speaker. That is ridiculous and is an indictment of the political classes that put the need for a targeted cull of badgers, which is a small number, over and above the livelihoods of farmers in Northern Ireland. It is high time that we got a grip of the issue.

The ammonia strategy is another issue. We have restricted our poultry sector, which has always had a proud reputation across the world. Because of the ammonia policies that have been introduced, that sector is unable to expand and develop. That applies not just to the poultry sector but across the board.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr Buckley:** It is time that we stood up for farmers and ensured that their voice is represented.

## Victoria Square Residential Development

**Ms Ferguson:** I want to raise the case of residents in the Victoria Square residential development along Chichester Street in Belfast who are unable to live in their properties owing to structural concerns that are due to defective design and materials.

As we all know, everyone rightly deserves a safe space that they can call "home". Through absolutely no fault of their own, families and individuals in the 91 apartments, 54 of which were owned and let out by the charity Ulster Garden Villages, at Victoria Square residential development were made homeless back on 10 April 2019 and forced to move into temporary accommodation or to live with family. Despite that, due to the existing limitation period of six years arising from the operation of the Limitation Order 1989 and the Defective Premises Order 1975, those people are faced with the unthinkable reality of having to continue to make their mortgage or rent payments, cover additional rents for alternative accommodation and pay costs such as insurance, service charges and rates. As one resident stated, it crushes your spirit to be told to evacuate your home. Another resident said that the "rug was pulled" from under him and

his wife, who felt that this was their retirement home.

We have a duty to ensure that a legal technicality does not continue to cause financial ruin for those who had no control over the circumstances in which they found themselves. People bought the apartments in good faith, and discovering that they are unsafe to live in, through no fault of their own, has been deeply traumatic and stressful. The current provision continues to provide a shield for negligent building works, and defective work may never come to light in that short time frame, with significant consequences in the long term, as is evident in this case. There is now an urgency that the period in the Defective Premises Order within which a claim can be made here be extended so that homeowners here can secure parity of protection.

I urge the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Minister for Communities to swiftly work together on the transfer of the functions of the Defective Premises Order and to develop a Bill for that to happen without delay. If urgent action is not taken to rectify the current state of affairs and to extend that period, the builders and designers of this flagship building, which is uninhabitable, may, for no reason other than a legal technicality, avoid responsibility for its condition. That result would be simply unconscionable and would mean that there is no redress. We therefore have a duty to act quickly in the pursuit of a just outcome. I welcome the fact that all Executive parties will work together to support the homeowners whose lives have been destroyed by this ordeal and to immediately legislate to close the legal loophole.

10.45 am

## Fusion Theatre, Lisburn

**Mr Butler:** In the Chamber last week, I heard a lot of tributes to Cillian Murphy on his win at the Oscars and to Emma Stone. Just the week before that, I spent a wonderful evening in the Lisburn civic centre with Fusion Theatre, Lisburn. That group has operated in Lisburn for around 10 years, and it has a team of 11 fabulous volunteers who look after some of our most talented young people from across Lagan Valley and beyond. I stayed for around three hours watching a fantastic show called 'Anastasia - The Musical'. I think that it was the first time that the production had been put on in Northern Ireland. I was struck by the talent that we have on our doorstep. I have no doubt that,

if some of those young people pursue a career in theatre and the arts, soon enough, we may see an Oscar winner from Northern Ireland. I commend all the parents and volunteers who put in many hours to get the very best out of those talented young people.

## Atrocities in Gaza

**Ms Hunter:** I will use any and every opportunity in the House to bring up the atrocities in Gaza and the ongoing cruelty being suffered by the Palestinian people. On the day that we will debate the holiday hunger that faces children here, it is important to note that trucks that are trying to bring aid and food into Gaza are being blocked and children there continue to die of starvation.

I have attended rallies and spoken to activists and my constituents. We are all rightly outraged by the ongoing atrocities. How many life-saving supplies are so close, yet so far, to those who need them? Knowing that, every day, women there are going without adequate and appropriate period products, instead using things like tent material and cloths, is absolutely heartbreaking. It creates a sense of indignity that they do not deserve. Newborn babies and pregnant mothers are malnourished. Ultimately, in our role as politicians, we are humans first and must use our platforms to speak about the importance of acting with humanity. That is why it is so important to raise that here today and to continue to raise it in the House.

It has been exceptionally difficult to watch the images of injured and murdered families, especially children, under the rubble in Palestine. They love as we love, feel as we feel and mourn as we mourn. The horrific treatment and ongoing dehumanisation of the Palestinian people have been truly horrifying to watch since October. Relentless bombings and shootings have contributed to the deaths and murders of over 30,000 people. They were people just like us. They lived lives and loved.

Journalists and their families are also being targeted. Recently, an Al Jazeera journalist was freed after being held for 12 hours and severely beaten in Israeli custody. I want to use the opportunity to highlight the incredible bravery of journalists like Bisan Owda. She is a young woman of a similar age to me who is risking her life to share stories of suffering, truth and injustice from inside Gaza. As representatives, we have a moral duty to use opportunities like this, in Members' statements, to continue to talk about Palestine and the suffering of its people, to advocate for peace, to use our voice to call



out the horror, injustice and suffering for them and to let them know that we stand with them.

## **Irish Film and Television Academy Awards: Nominations**

**Ms Mulholland:** I rise in response to the nominations for the Irish Film and Television Academy awards. There has been such a remarkable surge in talent in the Northern Irish arts scene. That is underscored by the region's burgeoning talent and vibrant creative community. From captivating films to compelling TV productions, Northern Irish artists are making their mark on the national and international stage.

I pay particular tribute to 'Blue Lights' creators, Declan Lawn and Adam Patterson. I do not know whether anybody has watched it. There is a great deal of excitement for the new series, a preview of which, coincidentally, is playing, in a few weeks' time, in the Braid, back home in Ballymena. Well done to them: four nominations in the top four categories.

There are nominations for Kenneth Branagh for best supporting actor in a film; Derry's own Bronagh Gallagher for best supporting actress in a film; and the directors of 'An Irish Goodbye'. If you have not seen it, please do. Robbie has left the Chamber, but that was our Oscar winner. They have been nominated for their new film, 'The Golden West'.

As we can see, those nominations not only celebrate individual achievements but highlight our rich cultural landscape and the growing influence of the Northern Irish arts industry. If we can achieve that with a real-term cut in arts funding, imagine what we could achieve with a fully resourced and fully funded arts sector. I pay tribute to all those who have been nominated.

## **Excess Deaths**

**Mr Frew:** I will talk about excess deaths. I will push out some figures, and I want the House to remember that, while we can all throw out figures and facts, they are real people: mums and dads, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and wives and husbands.

We have already seen from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) figures this year that we have experienced 235 excess deaths in 2024 alone. Excess deaths are those that are above average. In the past year, from week 10 to week 10 ending 8 March 2024, we have had

569 excess deaths. More startling, however, are the figures from March 2022 to March 2023, ending in week 10. We experienced 1,024 excess deaths. Those are mums and dads, brothers and sisters.

That is all in the context of us having experienced and lived through two high-death years relating to the pandemic, which pushed our averages for deaths up. At a time when we should be seeing excess deaths drop, we have seen them rise further, yet the Department of Health in Northern Ireland and the UK Government in Westminster refuse to investigate why so many people are dying excessively and why so many do so at their private home. Departments and Ministers want to ignore the fact that so many people are dying excessively now.

## **Communications Services: Landline Repairs**

**Mr Elliott:** I rise to raise an issue around communications services in Northern Ireland. I note that BT is the largest provider. Often, when you contact BT about a constituent's service or a series of lines being down in an area, it indicates that it is no longer an essential service and that that is why faults are often not repaired within one or two days. People who have the Helpline system — mainly senior citizens and those with disabilities — cannot have that connection if they do not have a landline in place, whether it is provided by BT or another provider. It is a real concern for those people, because some do not have any support except for the button that they wear around their neck or wrist. They can press that button and get help if they fall or are in any deep trouble.

I ask that the landline providers, particularly BT, which, I assume, is the largest communications provider in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, review that situation, especially where those lifelines are required to support families and individuals who may not have support from the community or families in the wider context. I ask providers to ensure that, when there is a breakdown in the service, they repair those faults, view landlines as an essential service and treat them as such by repairing them as soon as is reasonably possible.

## **Irish Sea Border**

**Mr Allister:** Last week, we had the news that £192 million is to be spent building border posts at a border that, some tell us, does not exist. It is clear that the propaganda that all that was at

the border was what was always there for phytosanitary checks and to stop smuggling etc is patently false, otherwise £192 million would not be spent building border posts.

I also got an answer from the Agriculture Minister last week telling me that 151 DAERA staff are employed at the border posts, that he needs more, and that he is recruiting another 28 staff. What are they doing? Let me give you some examples.

I have a constituent in Cullybackey who breeds budgies. Every year or so, he brings in a new budgie from England to vary the strain. Now, what does he have to do? He has to have a veterinary certificate in England for the budgie. He has to have a veterinary certificate in Northern Ireland when the budgie arrives. He has to fill in all the paperwork, and he has to pay all the fees. Who would have thought that the EU single market is so fragile that the import of a budgie from Cheltenham to Cullybackey puts it at risk?

What else do those DAERA staff do? We know, for example, that, with the bluetongue designation, there are cattle for Northern Ireland, bought in Scotland or England, sitting there for months on end unable to be brought into Northern Ireland because EU law says otherwise. Yet, cattle bought in France can be transported through GB and come in unimpeded. Why? It is because GB is regarded as a foreign country, whereas the cattle coming from France are regarded as coming from another part of the EU.

I also had a case recently of someone who shows birds across the water. When he arrived back in Belfast, he was pulled in and all his birds were sent back to England to be quarantined for six weeks. His birds, which came from Northern Ireland and were taken to a weekend show in England, were sent back at his expense to be quarantined in England. Then, there are some who are so foolish as to believe that there is no sea border. Sadly, it continues to exist in all its ugliness and its partitioning of this United Kingdom.

## **Victoria Square Residential Development**

**Mr O'Toole:** First, I should say that, when I came into the Chamber today, I did not expect to hear Mr Allister talk about the subject of budgie smugglers —

**Mr Allister:** There you go.

**Mr O'Toole:** — but some pleasant surprises await us in the Assembly.

I want to speak about the important matter of my constituents who, around a decade ago, invested in apartments at Victoria Square in Belfast city centre, which is located at the northern edge of the South Belfast constituency. They purchased in good faith from what they believed to be reputable developers. Since then, many of them have had to vacate the property because it is not fit for human habitation and has serious structural defects.

In the past number of years, in many cases, they have had to continue to pay not only mortgages on those properties but rates and service charges. That is completely inappropriate. They have been seeking legal recourse from the developers. As people will be aware, last week, that reached a very difficult moment for them when, because what is called the limitation order for Northern Ireland is for only six years, their case was struck out, despite the judge being clear about the unjustness of the situation that they were placed in.

There is a clear legislative answer to the problem of the injustice faced by the Victoria Square owners, which is to bring our legislation in Northern Ireland into line with that of England and Wales. Legislation there was updated in the wake of the Grenfell disaster to ensure that people in defective properties have 30 years rather than six years in order to seek legal recourse and to make claims to see them whole. That is a completely common-sense, essential and urgent legislative change that we, on a cross-party basis, can agree here.

I am pleased that the Minister for Communities moved at least to indicate publicly last week that his Department would take ownership. There was a little bit of bureaucratic pass the parcel for the owners over the past year or two, with different Departments, in the absence of Ministers, saying that they were responsible but not wanting to take responsibility for delivering the legislation. Now, I hope that the Communities Minister is able to confirm urgently that he can and is willing to bring that legislation forward. The Victoria Square owners, in particular, need it to help them. They need it to be retrospective enough that their case can be heard again.

Many of those people have faced financial ruin and extreme emotional distress. Some are dealing with profound illness — in some cases, they are battling cancer. They have had to deal

with this unacceptable burden over the past number of years. There is a legislative remedy that we can bring forward here. We have debated a lot of private Member's motions over the past month and a bit. Here is legislation that we can pass to improve the lives of our citizens and ensure that people are not placed in that situation in future. I therefore hope that the Communities Minister can take action, and take it rapidly, and that we can all agree to pass the legislation.

**11.00 am**

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes Members' statements.

## **Executive Committee Business**

### **The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024**

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is motions to affirm two statutory rules, both of which relate to workers' compensation. The Minister will move the first motion and then be invited to commence the debate on both motions listed in the Order Paper. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on the first motion. I will then call the Minister to move the second motion, and the Question will then be put on that motion. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

I have been advised that the Minister for Communities is unable to be in the Chamber today, so I call the Minister of Education to move the motion on his behalf.

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

*That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.*

*The following motion stood in the Order Paper:*

*That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Specified Diseases and Prescribed Occupations) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed. — [Mr Givan (The Minister of Education).]*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

**Mr Givan:** The two statutory rules make amendments to the lump sum payment scheme under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, which is known as the 1979 scheme. The regulations will increase the amount of the lump sum payments made via the 1979 scheme. There is no statutory requirement to increase the amounts paid through the scheme, but, as has been the case in previous years, the amounts are being increased from 1 April in line with inflation. Lump sum payments will increase by 6.7%, which is the inflation rate as measured

by September 2023's consumer prices index (CPI). The increase is also in line with the increase to the industrial injuries disablement benefit (IIDB), to which the scheme is linked. The regulations will ensure that lump sum payments here are paid at the same increased amounts as those payable through the corresponding scheme in Great Britain. The aim of the 1979 scheme is to pay compensation to people who suffer from certain dust-related diseases or to their dependants.

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

The second motion relates to a statutory rule to update the diseases covered under the scheme. The scheme currently covers five respiratory diseases related to exposure to asbestos. They are mesothelioma, diffuse pleural thickening, primary carcinoma of the lung, byssinosis and pneumoconiosis. Hopefully, I pronounced all those correctly. Historically, the definition of the diseases specified in the 1979 scheme has mirrored five diseases that have been prescribed for the purpose of obtaining entitlement to industrial injuries disablement benefit. The prescribed disease definition set out in the industrial injuries disablement benefit legislation has been updated over time, following recommendations made by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council (IIAC) based on improved clinical understanding. Those updates have not, however, been reflected in the 1979 scheme. That has inadvertently led to two of the specified diseases in the 1979 scheme no longer mirroring the corresponding prescribed diseases in the industrial injuries disablement benefit legislation. The order makes the changes required in order to realign the definitions. To achieve that, the list of specified diseases for the purposes of the 1979 scheme is being amended to include unilateral as well as bilateral diffuse pleural thickening and to extend the scope of primary carcinoma of the lung. The current definition requires accompaniment by asbestos or diffusal by bilateral pleural thickening. The updated definition will simply require evidence of occupational exposure to asbestos.

The order also makes consequential amendments to the Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Prescribed Occupations) Order 2007, which lists the occupations prescribed for the purpose of each disease to which the 1979 scheme applies. Let me put on record that, although the statutory rule will provide for the realignment of the definitions in the 1979 scheme with the industrial injuries disablement benefit legislation, in practice, payments have been

made to sufferers of those diseases in line with the wider definitions despite the divergence in the legislation. That is because the Department has been using the definitions as set out in the industrial injuries disablement benefit legislation when considering entitlement to a lump sum payment through the 1979 scheme. It is therefore important for me to state that people who have made claims that relate to the two relevant diseases in the past have not lost out and would have received a lump sum payment via the scheme as long as other entitlement conditions were satisfied.

The 1979 scheme is intended to compensate people who have been exposed to asbestos during their employment and have contracted a specified disease through that employment but have not been able to get compensation from the employer. The length of time between exposure to asbestos and diagnosis with one of those diseases is often too long. Usually, it is many years before symptoms are displayed. In some cases, an employer may no longer be in business. To be eligible for payment via the 1979 scheme, one, there has to be no current or previous claim for damages for the disease for which the person is claiming; two, there must be no relevant employer that can be pursued through the courts and, three, the person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit.

The lump sum payment via the 1979 scheme is paid in addition to the weekly industrial injuries disablement benefit that relates to the same disease. Dependants can make a claim if the person who had the disease has, unfortunately, passed away before making a claim themselves.

The amount of the lump sum payment depends on the age of the person with the disease and the level of disablement at the time of diagnosis. People whose condition is diagnosed at an earlier age and who have high levels of disability will be entitled to a higher lump sum payment. Dependents who make a claim after the sufferer has died are entitled to a lower lump sum payment. The maximum amount that can be paid through the 1979 scheme is being increased this year to £114,210 for a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis. The increase will help to ensure that payments provided by the scheme maintain their value.

While Members will, no doubt, agree that no amount of money can ever compensate a person affected by any of those terrible diseases, I am sure that Members will want anyone who is diagnosed and makes a claim after 1 April 2024 to receive the higher

amounts. Members will, I am sure, also agree that realigning the disease definitions is a positive measure. Therefore, I ask Members to support the two statutory rules.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** I thank the Minister. He could have got an easier day to stand in, given those pronunciations.

The regulations were considered by the Committee for Communities on 14 March. Members acknowledged that the amendment regulations dealing with pneumoconiosis payment of claims would increase the amounts payable by 6·7%, in line with the uprating of industrial injuries benefit.

The Committee also recognised that the rule is in line with the long-standing parity principle for social security and related matters. Members welcomed the fact that the increased annually managed expenditure requirement rule will be met in full by the Treasury, with no additional cost to the Executive's block grant. The Committee was therefore content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

I move on to the second regulations, on specified diseases and prescribed occupations. These were also considered on 14 March. The Committee is aware that the regulations make changes to realign the definitions of certain specified diseases with the definitions of the corresponding prescribed diseases set out in industrial diseases benefit legislation. Members of the Committee welcomed the fact that the rule will make the changes required to realign the definitions of certain specified diseases in the 1979 scheme with the definitions of the corresponding prescribed diseases set out in the IIDB legislation.

It is good to note that two of the specified diseases, the definitions of which no longer mirrored the IIDB legislation, will now be included via this rule. The Committee was therefore content to recommend that the Assembly also approves these regulations.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call Diane Dodds. [*Pause.*] The Member has indicated otherwise. I apologise to the Member. I call the Minister of Education to make a winding-up speech on behalf of the Minister for Communities.

**Mr Givan:** Mr Lyons asked me to fill in for him today. However, I previously served as Minister for Communities, so it feels as though I have

gone home today, albeit that I was not in office to take through what is, usually, an annual process. I was happy to facilitate Minister Lyons, who sends his apologies to the House: a close friend passed away suddenly, and the funeral is today, which is why he is not able to be here to take this forward.

On behalf of the Minister, I thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for Communities for the positive way in which they have dealt with the rules. The Committee's prompt consideration allows the legislation to be made in a time frame that enables people in Northern Ireland to benefit from the increased amounts from 1 April and brings the definitions of the specified diseases up to date. I know that we all want to ensure that payments via the scheme are safeguarded and not devalued by inflation and that the definitions of the diseases are up to date. I commend the motions to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed.*

### **Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Specified Diseases and Prescribed Occupations) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The second motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Specified Diseases and Prescribed Occupations) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed. — [Mr Givan (The Minister of Education).]*

### **Human Medicines (Amendments Relating to Coronavirus and Influenza) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024**

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I beg to move

*That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments Relating to Coronavirus and Influenza) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

**Mr Swann:** I seek the Assembly's approval for the making of this set of regulations, which contain important provisions relating to the continued support of the United Kingdom's COVID-19 and flu vaccination programmes in Northern Ireland. I am sure that Members will agree that the vaccination programmes in recent years have been an outstanding success and that they have helped us once again to live a more normal way of life.

The Human Medicines Regulations 2012 (HMRs) are a set of UK-wide laws that regulate the use of medicinal products for human use. They set out a comprehensive regime for the authorisation of products; for the manufacture, import, distribution, sale and supply of those products; for their labelling and advertising; and for pharmacovigilance. The Human Medicines Regulations have a UK-wide territorial application and must be amended using powers set out in the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021. Subsequently, any statutory instruments that amend the Human Medicines Regulations on a UK-wide basis must also be made jointly and debated and approved via the draft affirmative procedure in the Houses of Parliament and in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As part of the UK's response to the pandemic, the Human Medicines Regulations were amended jointly in 2020 by the Human Medicines (Coronavirus and Influenza) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 to provide regulatory flexibility to support the roll-out of the vaccination campaign and upscale the influenza vaccination programme in the UK while protecting public safety. Therefore, the Human Medicines (Coronavirus and Influenza) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 were introduced to extend some of the flexibilities around the supply, distribution and administration of COVID-19 and influenza vaccines up until 1 April 2024. Those changes have helped to facilitate the vaccination campaigns against seasonal flu and COVID-19. The health service in Northern Ireland has made use of the full range of options available to it, as enabled by those amendments to the HMRs, in order to safely vaccinate our health staff and the wider population. That was done

with the aim of protecting those most at risk and minimising disruption to normal health services. Given the experiences arising from the pandemic, we needed to retain some flexibility to deal with the unknowns. We now know that vaccines have more than proved their worth, and it is therefore important that we retain the flexibility and ability to deliver the vaccination programmes that some of those provisions have afforded to us.

## 11.15 am

I will now set out and explain the proposed amendments that are in the draft regulations and explain why those provisions are still needed.

Regulation 3 enables trained healthcare professionals or staff under the supervision of healthcare professionals to conduct the final stage of assembly, preparation and labelling of COVID-19 vaccines without additional marketing authorisations or manufacturers' licences being required. The flexibility that that provision provides continues to play an important role in our COVID-19 vaccination programme due to the supply chain arrangements and the way in which vaccinations are packaged. COVID-19 vaccinations are still not available as a prefilled syringe, so each vaccine that is administered continues to require final-stage preparation before administration to patients. The provision also allows the labelling of vaccines with a new shelf life at distributor level after thawing without the need for a manufacturer's licence or marketing authorisation. The current provisions expire on 1 April 2024, and, if they are not extended, that has the potential to significantly disrupt preparations for the upcoming spring booster programme, which will rely on the ability of vaccine distributors to thaw and relabel COVID-19 vaccines prior to final distribution to Health and Social Care (HSC) vaccine providers.

Regulation 19 allows COVID-19 and influenza vaccines to be moved between vaccine providers that operate under Health and Social Care arrangements without the need for a wholesale dealer's licence. The supply of vaccines from one healthcare organisation to another is normally classed as a wholesale distribution supply and is therefore subject to having a wholesale dealer's licence under regulation 18 of the HMRs. If the organisation does not hold such a licence because it is not required for normal business, that can lead to problems and delays in moving the vaccines between service providers and can run the risk of appropriate vaccination of at-risk groups not

taking take place and the vaccines that could be used to facilitate access being wasted. The flexibility provided by the amendment to regulation 19 has enabled COVID-19 and seasonal influenza vaccines to be moved swiftly and safely in our healthcare system between HSC providers in order to meet patient need, improve access and avoid wastage. While the deployment programme is now more mature and, in normal circumstances, the requirement for wholesale dealer licences is an important safeguard, there is a continuing need for those flexibilities to be retained for future campaigns to ensure accessibility and reduce wastage.

Regulation 247A enables the use of an extended workforce that is legally and safely able to administer a COVID-19 or influenza vaccine without the input of a prescriber. That is done using an approved protocol. The national protocol model has become a key tool in supporting both vaccination programmes by enabling the use of an expanded workforce to administer vaccines, with safeguards in place to ensure public safety, such as requirements for supervision by a prescriber or specified registered healthcare professional. That reduces pressure on our Health and Social Care workforce in other areas.

Nearly 500,000 influenza vaccines are administered as part of our annual flu programme, and almost 350,000 COVID-19 vaccines are now administered as part of the autumn programme. That puts additional strain on an already stretched system, so, given that almost 80% of flu and COVID-19 vaccines are co-administered, it is essential that we make the best use of the available workforce to ensure that those considered most at risk receive their vaccines on time. Although COVID-19-related deaths and hospitalisations have declined, largely due to the continued effectiveness of vaccines and improved treatments, it continues to be recognised globally as a pandemic, which, in turn, enables the continued use of regulation 247A to develop those national protocols for the administration of our vaccine.

There is a continuing requirement to deliver vaccines at pace and at scale, now and in the future, while maintaining public safety. Vaccines have proven to be the best line of defence against COVID-19 and for the prevention of severe illnesses arising from seasonal influenza, and that helps to reduce unplanned hospital admissions, which is a key factor in Health and Social Care resilience. However, I acknowledge that some of the measures may not be the most appropriate means of supporting vaccine deployment outside a

pandemic response and that a more permanent solution needs to be put in place. During the period in which the amended regulations will operate, my officials will work collaboratively with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales to undertake consideration of longer-term and permanent proposals that will be consulted on at a later date. In the short term, however, at a time when COVID-19 continues to be prevalent, there is an ongoing need to support the continued safe and effective supply, distribution and administration of vaccines by maintaining the provisions until April 2026.

There was a UK-wide public consultation in 2023 on the proposed amendments to the three regulations, and my Department circulated the consultation to all relevant stakeholders in Northern Ireland. There were 220 responses from across the UK. Due to the consultation's technical nature, less than 3% came from Northern Ireland. However, over 80% of those who responded expressed their support for each of the proposed amendments.

The Human Medicines Regulations have a UK-wide territorial application and are normally made jointly by my Department and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, using the draft affirmative procedure, and debated and approved via the draft affirmative procedure in both Houses of Parliament and in the Assembly. However, with Northern Ireland not having a sitting Assembly until recently and given the significance and time-limited nature of the amendments, the UK Government recently made the decision to proceed with the laying of draft amending statutory instruments that applied only to Great Britain. The statutory instrument was made for Great Britain on 6 March, following debate in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and will come into operation on 31 March 2024, extending the legislative provision that I have outlined today to 1 April 2026.

The draft regulations before the Assembly replicate the provisions made for Great Britain. If the draft regulations are approved by the Assembly today, the respective provisions will be extended and will continue to apply to Northern Ireland after 31 March 2024 and until 1 April 2026 in the same way as they will apply to the rest of the United Kingdom.

My officials attended the Health Committee meeting on 29 February to outline the policy intent of the draft statutory rule and to respond to any questions the Committee had with regard to the regulations possibly being debated in the Assembly. I am pleased to confirm that the Committee raised no issues on the content of

the draft regulations. It is with the Committee's support that I now bring the statutory rule (SR) before the wider Assembly and its Members. I therefore commend the motion to the Assembly.

**Ms Kimmins (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee for Health's consideration of the rule. The Committee was briefed by officials on the rule at its meeting on 29 February. The Human Medicines Regulations govern the arrangements for the licensing, manufacture, wholesale dealing and sale or supply of medicines for human use. The rule seeks to amend regulations 3A, 19 and 247A of the HMRs in order to support the ongoing delivery of COVID-19 and flu vaccinations in the North of Ireland.

Officials advised members that regulation 3A enables trained healthcare professionals or staff under the supervision of healthcare professionals to conduct the final stage of assembly, preparation and labelling of COVID-19 vaccines. Officials outlined that the rule is required as regulations 3A and 19 have sunset provisions that will cease to have effect in the North on 1 April 2024 unless they are extended.

During questions, the practical outworkings of why the extension is needed were discussed. Officials stated that the vaccines are procured on a UK-wide basis and that, at present, deployment of vaccinations is determined by the characteristics of the vaccines. We are aware that the vaccine is provided as multi-dose preparations and is not currently available in prefilled syringes. Officials outlined that they hoped that improvements in technology would allow that to change in the coming years. The rule will allow for the continued roll-out of vaccine programmes until a longer-term solution is found.

At its meeting on 29 February, the Committee agreed that it was content with the policy proposals of the SL1. The Committee then formally considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 7 March and agreed that it would recommend that the rule be approved by the Assembly.

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Minister for his clarification of some of the issues that I was going to talk about.

We should acknowledge that the debate today has fewer implications for personal freedoms than the more draconian powers that the Assembly rejected last week. It is important to

put that on the record. I note that we were included in the consultation and that no local objections were raised. That, again, is important.

I want to highlight a couple of issues. One is the doing away with the requirement for wholesale dealers to hold a licence. The Minister said that, in normal circumstances, a licence would be required. If I recall rightly, we started to administer the vaccine in very late 2020. What is before us today would extend that to 2026. We really have to ask how long "normal circumstances" apply on the issue. I urge the Department to get on ahead with dealing with the issue, and I would like the Minister in his summing up to indicate how the risks of abuse are being mitigated and to tell us how many businesses or operators are moving the final COVID vaccines to providers. It is really important to know that.

The vaccine is still not at a stage where we have prefilled vials, and, therefore, there has to be a final assembly. I know that it is dependent on manufacturers, but we would like to see that move on so that we can normalise such operations. That is important.

Minister, there is an important issue here in that you have asked for an extension until 2026. We understand that it is a UK-wide extension, that the laws will apply UK-wide, and that we should do that. However, we want to see a normalisation of the process, and the issues that I highlighted are extremely important in getting us to that position.

**Mr Donnelly:** First, I pay tribute to all who have worked over the past four years to ensure the efficient and effective roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination programme. It was a remarkable achievement by Health and Social Care staff in particular but also by the scientists who made a life-saving vaccine possible. I also thank Minister Swann for his leadership throughout the pandemic.

The Alliance Party will support the draft regulation and the decision to extend regulations 3A, 19 and 247A of the Human Medicines Regulations to maintain the existing clauses until 2026 and to prevent their expiration later this year. Extending the clauses will permit the continued operation of COVID-19 and influenza vaccine programmes under an expanded workforce on a scale required to keep the population safe. That is what is important. We should do all that we can to support the roll-out of those vaccination programmes.



As with other COVID-related extensions, it is important that the Department of Health works towards a more long-term solution — a permanent solution. I hope that the Minister intends to work with relevant partners to take full consideration of the operation of vaccine programmes over the next two years.

**11.30 am**

I will raise a point about the danger of vaccine misinformation, which, sadly, remains prevalent, particularly on social media. I hope that all Members agree that such misinformation should be challenged. Vaccines save lives, and the COVID vaccine has saved many lives across the UK, including here in Northern Ireland. It has also allowed us to move away from lockdowns and other public health measures. It is important that we support the continued roll-out of the vaccination programmes.

**Mr Chambers:** The amendment regulations being considered may seem fairly technical, but, in reality, they are critical to the ongoing delivery of the vaccination programme here. That is largely due to the circumstances and physical characteristics of the vaccines that we still use across Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Unlike other vaccines, COVID vaccines are not currently available in prefilled syringes; they are only available in multi-dose vials and are still mainly distributed in a frozen state throughout the supply chain. Because of that, they require further physical effort and intervention at the point of administration to the patient. That is what makes them so different to many other vaccines and why the flexibilities being discussed need to be extended. Although progress is being made all the time, the vaccines that we use for the COVID-19 programme, which are procured on a UK-wide basis for the four nations, are still only available in a physical manner that requires these extensions to be in place.

Of course, today's debate is only happening because there was no functioning Assembly until last month. The United Kingdom Government at Westminster laid a statutory instrument in January, but that applied only to Great Britain. The passing of the amendment regulations will see the equivalent flexibilities being extended to here for a similar time frame, which is up to 1 April 2026. By that point, there will hopefully have been enough progress and advancements in the research and technology behind the vaccines to allow them to be packaged and distributed like many other existing injections. In the meantime, however,

the amendment regulations and the extension are necessary, particularly for the booster programme that is due to commence next month.

On a personal level, I look forward to being able to continue to receive vaccine boosters, and I confirm that the Ulster Unionist Party fully supports this extension.

**Mr McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It is important to note that these regulations will assist with the preparation and distribution of COVID vaccines, which remain a critical weapon in our arsenal for fighting against COVID and the seasonal flu. We know the problems that can occur if our hospitals become overwhelmed, especially during wintertime, and the pressures that that can put on the staff and systems. If we can do anything with the vaccinations to try to reduce the number of people contracting these illnesses, that would certainly help. It does not take a genius to draw the connection between having the vaccination, it preventing you from catching the illness, and that then preventing you from having to go into hospital, which hospital staff would greatly appreciate.

As has been said, cases of other illnesses such as measles are on the increase. We have known that there is a problem with slipping back to there being more examples of that condition, which is often because people do not take the opportunity to have vaccinations because of misinformation on social media. I hope that the people who can get those vaccinations will get them.

I am a bit concerned that our health service is so close to collapse that, if we were to see an increase in the likes of COVID again, it would really struggle. A difficulty with that could be that a lot of the goodwill that we have required of staff would no longer be there because they are exhausted, they feel that they are overworked and underpaid, and they feel that the transformation that is necessary in the health service is taking too long to be delivered. I hope that that is something that the Minister will continue to work on to try to give us a health system that can cope should there be a rise in cases in the future. The SDLP is happy to support the motion, however.

**Mr Frew:** First, I pay tribute to my colleagues Diane Dodds and Alan Robinson, who have been doing sterling work on the Health Committee to scrutinise a lot of the measures and to shine a spotlight on the Department, and I welcome that.

I would fight for anyone's right to obtain a medicine that they thought would assist them with their health. It is important that medicines be available for people when they require them. That is a given. The issue that I have, and that I have lived through over the past four years, is with the way in which the Department of Health created an us-and-them society, whereby people were shamed if they did not take a medicine. That is a period of shame that we all look back at and ask ourselves why the Assembly found itself in that position, where, first, it had to coerce people into taking a medicine that was highly promoted and, then, discriminated against people who did not receive it. Taking it should have been a free-will choice.

It was good that medicine was available. It was not good that people were coerced into taking it, and, because people were coerced into taking that medicine — COVID-19 vaccines — that is why the Minister, the Department of Health and the previous Executive, all of whom coerced people, then ignored those who have been vaccine-damaged. That is very serious, because we know that, with every single medicine — it could be the best medicine in the world — people still have adverse reactions to it. Why, then, do we ignore those people who have been vaccine-injured? Why can we not be open and support them? Whilst there is a veil over the eyes of the Department towards those people, they will not receive the acknowledgement and the help that they require in order to move on with their lives.

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

**Mr Frew:** I will make progress and then give way. We know, according to the yellow-card reporting scheme, that over 51 fatalities have been reported. That is in Northern Ireland. We know from the scheme that there have been over 5,000 reports of serious adverse incidents. I have met well over 100 people who have been injured, and the journey that they have been on has been absolutely horrendous, yet we will not hear a debate in this place about how those people are being affected. Why is that? Why are they being ignored? Why does the Department of Health ignore them? Not only does it ignore them but, at times, it gaslights them.

I have heard many times from Members, in the House or outside, that people who are vaccine-injured are anti-vaccine. That is an absolute impossibility. They took the vaccine in good faith. The vaccine was promoted by the Department of Health, and those people now need support, but the very people who could

give them that support — MLAs, the Department of Health and the Minister — turn their face away. I will give way now if that is OK.

**Mr Donnelly:** We have heard a lot of these things. Vaccine misinformation on social media has already been mentioned today. One thing that concerns me is that talk like that might put people off taking the vaccine when it is offered. Does the Member agree with me that people who are offered the COVID vaccination in the ongoing roll-out should take it, and does he support the roll-out of the COVID vaccination?

**Mr Frew:** I have applauded the vaccine roll-out since the very day it began, but I will tell you this: taking medicine should be down to individual choice. It is all very well for Members and Ministers to say, "Everyone should get a vaccine" and actually discriminate against people who do not, but it is about people's individual health needs, and that is why they should consult their GP. No MLA should force a vaccine on anyone. That is especially important when medicine can have side effects.

The Member talked about confidence. I look at that issue now, and I am absolutely appalled. One reason why people have no confidence in the Department of Health on this is that they see how people who have been vaccine damaged are treated — being ignored, gaslit and called anti-vax. That has had a massive impact on confidence with regard to medicines.

I will make progress and say one other thing: the vaccine damage payment scheme is totally and utterly inappropriate. I ask the Minister to comment on that. If you prove that you are damaged and disabled — over 60% disabled — you get only £120,000. Some of the people whom I have met have a life-limiting condition. They cannot proceed to live a normal life, and £120,000 just does not cut it; yet, you have to go through the rigmarole of assessment in order to prove that you are 60% disabled. What if you are 59% disabled? What if you are 50% disabled, and your life is ruined? Where do you go from there? I ask the Minister whether the vaccine damage payment scheme should be reformed in order that people who have been vaccine damaged get the support that they need for the rest of their life.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Members, that concludes the list of Members to speak. I ask the Minister to conclude the debate and make a winding-up speech.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Committee Chair and other Members who have made contributions

on the regulations as part of what has been a wider debate. I will turn to some of the points that have been raised. I thank the Chair for the ongoing support and engagement of the Committee for Health.

In regard to Mrs Dodds' enquiries about why we need to extend provisions for COVID-related medicines to 2026 and why we do not have a more conventional way of delivering the provisions, the provisions continue to be important for the COVID-19 vaccination programme in Northern Ireland owing to supply chain arrangements and the way in which vaccines are packaged. The current recommended COVID-19 vaccinations, as has been said, are still not available as prefilled syringes, so each vaccine continues to require final-stage preparation before administration to patients. They are also distributed through the supply chain in a frozen state and require defrosting prior to final distribution to the health service vaccine providers. I do not have the specific number of businesses involved in that, but I will put that in writing to the Member.

Allowing the provisions to lapse would, as I said, significantly disrupt plans for the distribution and deployment of vaccines for the upcoming spring programme. The provisions have allowed movement of vaccine between providers under our health and social care arrangements without the need for the wholesale dealer's licence. Such movement is in order to meet patient need, improve access and reduce waste. The supply of vaccines from one healthcare organisation to another would normally be classed as wholesale distribution supply and therefore as subject to having a wholesale dealer's licence under regulation 18 of the HMRs.

If such a licence is not held by the organisation because it is not required for normal business, as is the case for many healthcare organisations, it could lead to problems and delays with moving the vaccines between service providers and run the risk of appropriate vaccination of at-risk groups not taking place and wastage of vaccine. While the deployment programme is now more mature and, in normal circumstances, the requirement for wholesale dealer licences is that important safeguard, there is a continuing need for the flexibilities to be retained for future campaigns to ensure accessibility and to reduce wastage while longer-term and permanent proposals are developed.

**11.45 am**

Looking to some of the other comments, as part of that UK-wide collaboration across the four nations, it is about how we look between now and 1 April 2026 to get a permanent solution in regard to how we manage vaccine supply and distribution, relabelling and the workforce challenges that we have had.

Vaccine safety is not included in the SRs, but it has been mentioned today. Safety is at the forefront of the COVID-19 and influenza vaccination programmes. Important safeguards have been put in place to ensure that the flexibilities provided by the amendments and wider do so safely and effectively. Vaccines are still subject to the usual controlled storage requirements, which include the maintenance of the cold chain in the transfer of any medicine between vaccine providers. Under those arrangements, storage is properly controlled and appropriate records of correct storage and transfers are maintained.

A key part of safety is ensuring that the vaccinator workforce is trained to the highest level and ensuring that the workforce has undergone comprehensive training before administering a vaccine. Staff operating under national protocol arrangements are supervised by a named healthcare professional.

I will mention the safety of COVID-19 vaccines. Each COVID-19 vaccine candidate is assessed by teams of scientists and clinicians on a case-by-case basis and is authorised only once it has met the robust standards of effectiveness, safety and quality set out by the independent medicines regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). The MHRA is a globally recognised organisation that is recognised for requiring high standards of safety. Importantly, the monitoring of vaccine safety does not stop once a vaccine has been approved. The MHRA continuously monitors the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines through a comprehensive COVID-19 vaccine surveillance strategy to ensure that the benefits outweigh any known risks. All the COVID-19 vaccines administered in Northern Ireland to date have been approved for use by the MHRA.

In addition, the COVID-19 vaccine programme has followed the advice and recommendations of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), which is the independent expert advisory group that advises the four UK Health Departments on all vaccination-related matters. The MHRA, in the report on coronavirus vaccines, which was updated in March 2023, states:

*"All vaccines and medicines have some side effects ... These side effects need to be continuously balanced against the expected benefits in preventing illness.*

*Following widespread use of these vaccines across the UK, the vast majority of suspected adverse reaction reports confirm the safety profile seen in clinical trials. Most reports relate to injection-site reactions ... and generalised symptoms such as a 'flu-like' illness, headache, chills, fatigue ... Generally, these reactions are not associated with more serious illness and likely reflect as expected".*

It continues:

*"The benefits of the vaccines in preventing COVID-19 and serious complications associated with COVID-19 far outweigh any currently known side effects ... the safety of COVID-19 vaccines will be continuously monitored"*

by the MHRA

*"and benefits and possible risks remain under review, as with all vaccines and medicines".*

Anyone receiving a COVID-19 vaccination in Northern Ireland should also receive a leaflet advising them of the possible side effects, as well as how to report a suspect adverse reaction via the yellow card reporting scheme. The yellow card scheme is run by the MHRA and is the UK system for collecting and monitoring information on suspected safety concerns or incidents involving medicines and medical devices. It relies on the voluntary reporting of suspect adverse drug reactions by health professionals and patients. All COVID-19 and flu vaccinations administered to date in Northern Ireland have been entirely voluntary. COVID-19 and flu vaccines are made available to those considered at greatest risk on the basis of the recommendations of the JCVI. The general public continue to make up their own minds regarding the vaccines that they receive, and hundreds of thousands continue to take up the offer of vaccination when they are invited to do so.

Mr Frew will know that the vaccine damage payment is a UK-wide system that is set at the Westminster level. To date, my Department has not reviewed stepping outside what is a UK-wide system, given that COVID-19 vaccinations are administered through that system and the purchase that is supplied and regulated is done on a UK-wide basis.

I firmly believe that the provisions are vital and should be extended as proposed, that the COVID-19 and influenza vaccination programmes in Northern Ireland have made extensive use of those flexibilities and that their cessation would cause significant disruption to our programmes. I therefore commend the motion on the regulations to the Assembly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I thank the Minister for concluding the debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments Relating to Coronavirus and Influenza) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

## **Parental Bereavement Leave (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The next items of business are motions to approve three statutory rules (SRs), all of which relate to parental bereavement leave and pay. There will be a single debate on all three motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion and then call the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on all three motions, which are listed in the Order Paper. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. The process will be repeated for the remaining statutory rule. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** I beg to move

*That the Parental Bereavement Leave (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved.*

*The following motions stood in the Order Paper:*

*That the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved. — [Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy).]*

*That the Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay (Consequential Amendments to Subordinate Legislation) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern*

*Ireland) 2023 be approved. — [Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy).]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on all three motions.

**Mr C Murphy:** I seek the Assembly's approval for the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (No. 2) Regulations 2023; the Parental Bereavement Leave (No. 2) Regulations 2023; and the Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay (Consequential Amendments to Subordinate Legislation) (No. 2) Regulations 2023. The regulations were all made on 28 September 2023 and came into operation on 29 September 2023.

Members should note that there were a further three statutory rules that form part of the overall legislative package brought forward by my Department that are subject to either the negative procedure or, as in the case of the commencement order for the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, no Assembly procedure. A further two statutory instruments were made by HMRC with the concurrence of the Department for Communities and Treasury. This package of three sets of regulations is not the original regulations that were made in March 2022; it is the third additional version of those regulations. Each additional version was made to ensure that the right to parental bereavement leave and pay continued while the Assembly was not sitting. Those regulations ensured that hundreds of bereaved parents were supported over the last two years.

I will now outline the overarching background and the features of the right that cut across the leave and pay aspects. The policy to which the regulations give effect was subject to a full public consultation in 2020. At that time, my Department asked for views on whether it would be appropriate to introduce a set of rights for parental bereavement leave and pay akin to what was in place in Britain. The consultation found that there was unanimity among respondents that the introduction of parental bereavement leave and pay was the right thing to do. That sentiment was echoed across all respondent groups.

Sadly, there are around 250 child deaths a year in the North, including around 90 stillbirths. The intention of the new right is to support bereaved working parents by providing a new statutory right to leave for eligible employees as well as a statutory payment element. It was estimated

that that entitlement would support over 450 bereaved working parents a year.

Parental bereavement leave is a day-1 right, which means that eligible employed parents are able to take up to two weeks off work to grieve, no matter how long they have worked for their employer. Currently, eligible parents who have worked for their employer for six months or more at the time of their child's death will also be able to claim statutory parental bereavement pay. It is my intention to introduce further regulations that will also make that element a day-1 right. Officials are moving that work along to meet the target of April 2026.

Both the leave and pay elements can be taken at any time within 56 weeks after a child has died or is stillborn. It can be taken as a single block of two weeks or two separate blocks of one week each. Those rights to parental bereavement leave and pay make the North one of the few places worldwide to recognise and understand the effect that the death or stillbirth of a child has on parents. It also sets the minimum expected standard that employers must provide in support of those parents at such a traumatic and emotional time. The Assembly has made this one of the first places to offer a full two weeks of leave and to set a minimum level of pay, and, with the further changes that I plan to introduce, it will be one of the most wide-ranging entitlements to parental bereavement leave and pay in Europe.

I turn to the regulatory impact of the package and the new rights. While it is important to ensure that eligible employed parents are given the rights, it is also important to recognise the challenges that employers, particularly SMEs, face in delivering on their responsibility as employers in the current economic climate. The projected set-up and administration costs to employers are expected to be relatively small. Across all employers in the North, those costs are expected to amount to £279,000 in the first year for familiarisation costs and up to £85,000 per annum from then on for total payments. There are, however, allowances made for businesses by HMRC in how it is funded, including small employers' relief, which is available for businesses with less than £45,000 paid in the previous tax year for class 1 National Insurance. Those businesses will get help with the payments and any administrative costs. Guides, calculators and forms are provided by HMRC to assist in the decision-making and record-keeping requirements.

I will soon turn to the policy positions and features of each set of regulations, but I draw the Assembly's attention to a feature that is

present in all three sets of regulations that are before Members: the presence of transitional provisions. The transitional provisions were developed and introduced to ensure continuity of the right for parental bereavement leave and pay in the period between the first version of the relevant regulations and now, because the first sets would have fallen in late 2022, in effect ceasing the rights. The transitional provisions go further to ensure that a seamless process is in place for bereaved parents exercising their rights across the two-year period. That is because the entitlement period extends for 56 weeks after the death or stillbirth of a child, and, due to the multiple remaking of regulations and the various time-limited operational periods, measures had to be created to provide a mechanism to carry over that entitlement. Any steps or actions already taken by the bereaved parent were to be counted into the new version, thereby preventing bereaved parents from having to go through unnecessary steps and processes. Other than that change, the regulations are, in effect, identical in purpose and form to those shared with the Committee in draft form in 2022.

I commend to the Assembly for approval the following three sets of regulations. The first are the Parental Bereavement Leave (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023. They implement the powers of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 that were added by the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The regulations ensure that the right to leave is available to eligible employees on day 1, and they set out the requirements and conditions for being entitled to the leave; the relationship to the child who has died; how the request should be made; and options for changing the request for leave in the event that circumstances change. The regulations establish the available options for how the right can be taken, for example, in two one-week blocks or a single block of two weeks. Both options are to be taken within 56 weeks. The regulations also set out how the right interacts with other statutory leave rights and calculations for a week's pay in other circumstances to ensure that anyone taking the leave is not at a disadvantage. Finally, it sets the terms for an employee's return to work and the protections in place during parental bereavement leave. It also establishes protection from detriment from taking advantage of the rights, so that an employer cannot treat the employee less favourably as a consequence of their decision to take the leave. I commend this set of regulations to the Assembly.

The second set is the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023. The regulations implement the powers of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 that were added by the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. They also set the requirements and conditions for being entitled to statutory payment, including the relationship to the child who has died, notice periods and evidence requirements.

It also sets the requirement that an eligible employee must have worked for their employer for 26 weeks or more. Members should note that it is my intention to remove that requirement from April 2026.

### **12.00 noon**

Similar to the leave regulations, this set also establishes the available options for how the right can be taken: for example, as two blocks of one week or a single block of two weeks, taken within 56 weeks of the date of the child's death or stillbirth. It also includes the terms for continuous employment in relation to certain types of employment, dispute resolutions or transfers of contracts. That ensures that an employee would not miss out on the right because of those processes.

This also outlines and defines the requirement for earnings and sets the amount of statutory payment and the applicable percentage to be paid in the event that an employee earns less than the statutory payment amount. That is set at 90%. The current weekly rate is £172.48, and Members should note that that amount is traditionally uprated each year along with other statutory payment amounts through an amendment by the Department for Communities. I understand that the next uprating exercise will be made within the next few weeks for the new amounts to be set.

Finally, the regulations create the terms for HMRC in taking on the responsibility to make the payment to the employee when their employers cannot or are unable to pay. Those are in exceptional circumstances, for example, during a winding-up order, administration or a receiver having been duly appointed.

The third set of regulations is the Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay (Consequential Amendments to Subordinate Legislation) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023. These regulations make amendments to secondary legislation in consequence of the parental

bereavement leave and pay being created and operationalised. It is normal for that to occur when a new statutory leave and payment is created. These amendments were made with the approval of the relative Executive Departments as well as the necessary Whitehall Departments. For the first iteration of these regulations, a letter was sent to the other Ministers, informing them of the decision to make the regulations. This current version of the regulations maintained that principle in order to ensure continuity of the rights.

I am happy to hear Members' views in the debate, and I will make a winding-up speech at the end.

**Mr Brett (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** Mr Deputy Speaker, as this is the first opportunity that I have had to speak in the Chamber under your chairmanship, I congratulate you on taking up your role. I know that your family will be rightly proud of the office that you hold.

I will speak, first, on behalf of the Committee for the Economy. These three regulations are a package of measures that provide for two weeks of parental bereavement pay and leave, which may be taken in two blocks of one week or one block of two weeks, within 56 weeks of the death or stillbirth of a child, on or after 6 April 2022. The regulations also allow employers to claim statutory payments to cover the leave period.

The Committee for the Economy considered the rules on 14 February 2024 and noted that, during the period while the Assembly did not sit, the Department had revoked and relaid the regulations after each relevant six-month period. That relaying has occurred four times, but it was necessary in order to ensure a continuity of entitlement and processes for parental bereavement leave and pay.

The Committee commented that it had had very little time to consider the regulations, which were part of a group of 20 statutory rules that appeared in our first Committee pack. Members received those packs 48 hours before the Committee meeting. I should point out that the Department very helpfully offered to provide oral explanations to accompany the written briefings, and I thank the Minister and his Department for their endeavours with the Committee.

Members felt that, although they had no policy objections, thorough scrutiny of the regulations was simply not possible. Notwithstanding that, the Committee agreed to support the motions to

confirm the rules in order to avoid any delay that might generate legal uncertainty in respect of these important measures. It is on that basis that, despite those technical concerns, I indicate the Committee's support for these very welcome parental bereavement regulations.

I will now comment as DUP spokesperson on the economy. First, I will put on record my thanks to the Member for Upper Bann and the Member for East Antrim, the current Minister for Communities, who first introduced this legislation. As the Minister for the Economy rightly said, these measures make Northern Ireland a global leader in relation to supporting parents at what is a very difficult time. The Minister will be aware that, during his time in the United States last week, the House passed an amendment in my name and that of my colleague, calling for further progress in relation to similar arrangements for miscarriage leave. I know that he has said that he hopes to have that operational by April 2026, again, making Northern Ireland a leading light in providing certainty and support during those difficult times. Will the Minister update the House on the consultation exercise that took place and outline why 2026 is when he believes that this might be introduced? Could it not be done sooner? He will have the support of my party in trying to deliver it as soon as possible. I thank the Minister for his comments.

**Mr McGuigan:** Key to the success of the Assembly and Executive is proving to workers and their families that we are on their side, so I commend Minister Murphy for bringing forward these important paid parental bereavement regulations. Doing so in his first few weeks in office is a demonstration of his priorities. It underlines his commitment to supporting workers — in this case, parents experiencing the grief and trauma of losing a child — by granting them a statutory right to take up to two weeks paid leave from work in the 56 weeks following the death of a child under the age of 18.

These regulations, as has been pointed out, are from legislation passed in the previous mandate. They provide an excellent example of how all parties, working together, can deliver positive change for workers and parents here in the North. Whilst many employers are compassionate and will already have good practice in place, the legislation also provides employers with certainty.

Sinn Féin was at the forefront of this positive change. Through our proposals, we managed to secure agreement for the legislation, which goes beyond what workers are entitled to in

Britain. Our legislation is more compassionate and inclusive. Unfortunately, the absence of the Executive over the past two years has denied workers here the right to fully avail themselves of the new protections. However, once the legislation is implemented in full here in the North, we will, as has been pointed out, lead the way as one of the first places across Europe and, indeed, the world to introduce paid leave following a miscarriage. The legislation will provide paid leave to workers who suffer stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy or miscarriage within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. Those are important additions.

The grief and sense of loss for mothers and fathers as a result of miscarriage has often been overlooked in employment law. The numbers of stillbirths recorded can vary significantly from year to year. In 2018, there were 79 recorded stillbirths in the North compared with 102 in 2017 and 82 in 2016. The numbers of miscarriages are harder to ascertain. Regardless of the figures and numbers, those statistics represent real families, parents and workers who have to come to terms with such a tragic loss. Their inclusion in the legislation will help to remove what the Miscarriage Association identified as a feeling of pressure on parents to return to work before they are ready. The law will give important support to parents and help to put the support in place for parents who have lost a baby during pregnancy on a par with the support for those who have lost a child up to the age of 18 years old.

The regulations recognise that grief and trauma is not time-bound. They give parents the options to take the leave as two consecutive weeks or as two non-consecutive blocks of one week during the 56-week period.

I am delighted that the Minister has brought forward the regulations and pointed the way to the next stage of the legislation, giving workers this important support.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** There being no further Members listed to speak, I call on the Economy Minister, Conor Murphy, to conclude and wind up the debate on all three motions.

**Mr C Murphy:** I am grateful to the Members for responding to the debate. I am also grateful to the Committee for its consideration. I recognise that it is not the ideal situation, but I think that the Committee understood that there was a very narrow window in which to renew these regulations and put them on a more permanent footing than was the case in the transitional

phase that they have gone through in the past number of years.

The objective is that the end point is April 2026, but, if these actions can be taken quicker than that, I will be happy to get them done as quickly as possible, because I recognise that people are waiting on the support. I am grateful to Philip McGuigan for his support for the measures.

The regulations have introduced a new entitlement for employees who are bereaved parents to take two weeks' bereavement leave from work and also be entitled to a statutory payment. The policy objective is to provide support and create a baseline for employees who are bereaved parents who have tragically experienced the death of a child under the age of 18 or through a stillbirth.

The regulations are the first step to introducing a greater package of support through which those rights and entitlements will be extended to those who experience a miscarriage up to the end of the 23rd week of pregnancy, and it will be available from the first day of employment. It is my hope that the present regulations will continue to operate from now until then to help parents who suffer the loss of a child through death or stillbirth. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Parental Bereavement Leave (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved.*

## **The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The second motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved. — [Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy).]*

## **The Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay (Consequential Amendments to Subordinate**



## Legislation) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The third motion has already been debated.

*Resolved:*

*That the Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay (Consequential Amendments to Subordinate Legislation) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved. — [Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy).]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I ask Members to take their ease while a change is made at the top Table.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Private Members' Business

### Regulation (EU) 2023/2411: Applicability Motion

**Mr Buckley:** I beg to move

*That regulation (EU) 2023/2411 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 October 2023 on the protection of geographical indications for craft and industrial products and amending regulations (EU) 2017/1001 and (EU) 2019/1753 should be added to the Windsor framework by the United Kingdom and the European Union within the Joint Committee in accordance with article 13(4) of that framework.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that, as the motion relates to legislation, there will be no time limit on the debate.

**Mr Buckley:** At the outset, it is important to note that this is the first time that the Northern Ireland Assembly will vote on whether a new EU law should apply in Northern Ireland. That, in itself, Members, is a significant moment. Regardless of individual views that will be expressed in the debate, it is still significant.

The very fact that the Assembly is able to debate and express its view on the matter is something that many in the Chamber said should never happen and could never be achieved. The issue has been debated and voted on in this place over many years, and it is a matter for the record that there are parties present in the Chamber today that were cheerleaders for the undemocratic arrangements conceived under the original protocol.

They did not just tolerate the democratic deficit that deprived them of any say; they called for it to be rigorously implemented.

### 12.15 pm

The Democratic Unionist Party and wider unionism has made it a key objective from day 1 to tackle the democratic deficit created by the protocol. Today's proceedings are testimony to the fact that what our opponents said was impossible was, indeed, possible. I have particularly noted the comments from the leader of the official Opposition, Mr Matthew O'Toole, in recent days. They must be the only Opposition in the world who are not looking to debate an issue or scrutinise potential legislation. On one hand, I cannot understand

that, but, on the other, such was his concern about craft —.

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

**Mr Buckley:** I am happy to.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am happy to debate the issue at length today with the Member. Since we are talking about ironies, does he think that it is ironic that the DUP has tabled an applicability motion that it is going to vote against?

**Mr Buckley:** I will definitely come on to that, because it is an important point for clarity in the debate. However, such were your concerns for craft producers that you did not even table an applicability motion yourself. Where was the concern from the brave Mr O'Toole when it came to representing their cause in the Chamber? He also said that, if we do not debate the issue today, it goes ahead regardless; it does not apply. That is an important point for the Member to address in his remarks later.

The Member is right: bizarrely, the legislation that sets out the required procedures dictates that a motion is brought to the Assembly in the affirmative; in other words, it seeks consent for the rule to be added. While legislative procedures may dictate certain distinct phraseology, there can be no doubt about our motivation for bringing the motion to the House today. That speaks directly to the point that the leader of the Opposition raised.

The legislation is clear: any Member from any party can table an applicability motion. It is a means to an end. For our part, we will vote decisively against the motion and against the imposition in Northern Ireland of the new EU regulation. It is clear to the Democratic Unionist Party and all of those who will join us in the No Lobby that the new EU law would create a new regulatory border within the United Kingdom.

The legal position in relation to new areas of EU law is clear: the UK Government can add the new EU regulation to the scope of the framework only with the express consent of unionists and nationalists voting in the Chamber, save in exceptional circumstances or where the Government can demonstrate that a new EU law would not create trade barriers within the United Kingdom. However, we are not willing to contemplate a situation in which political forces, whether in Dublin or Brussels, can use the silence of the Assembly on this or any other EU law to exert pressure on the

Government at Westminster to abandon the principle of cross-community consensus.

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for giving way. He has made some important points about democracy and the issue of democratic consent. Does he agree that the greatest democratic deficit is the fact that hundreds of EU laws identified in annex 2 of the protocol are imposed on Northern Ireland, governing our manufacturing industry, our agri-food industry and where the EU customs code is applicable, and we can do nothing about them? Are our Government not responsible for a serious breach of sovereignty and democracy in Northern Ireland? Should that not be rectified?

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for her timely intervention. It is an issue about which she has spoken passionately to me privately, as well as publicly, during her time as a Member of the European Parliament. Her knowledge of such issues is extensive. In the constituency that we both represent, we have had many people who fall into that category: sadly, they have had laws imposed on them and their businesses to the detriment of the Northern Ireland economy.

On the wider point, the Member is absolutely right that democratic consent is something that no Member of the House should ever take for granted, regardless of the particular EU law that we are talking about.

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

**Mr Buckley:** I will, and then I will make progress.

**Mr Brown:** Does the Member recognise that there is a democratic deficit in that certain Members' votes will not be counted equally to those of others when we vote on the motion?

**Mr Buckley:** I can say only that I am working to the procedures that the Assembly has in place.

One of the key issues throughout the period of Brexit turmoil and turmoil in post-Brexit trading conditions has always been the concern regarding the cross-community consensus politics that we need in Northern Ireland. It has been repeated time and again in the House that not one unionist signed up to the original protocol or the provisions in it. That is an important point, because today we have the ability for the Assembly to express its view. I will wait to see the outcome of that vote, but, given the commentary that I have heard prior to the debate, I venture to say that it will be expressed clearly again in the House today that unionism

en bloc will, in all likelihood, vote against the recommendations.

The new EU law before the House is on the protection of geographical indications for craft and industrial products. What will it mean for Northern Ireland? A lot of people have been asking that question, and I have no doubt that the leader of the Opposition will come to that in due course. The new proposal would mean a substantial expansion of EU intellectual property law in Northern Ireland covering craft and industrial goods. It would add 56 pages of EU law to the Windsor framework, all under the oversight of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Most significantly of all, it would create a new and unacceptable regulatory border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

I give the following example for Members' understanding of the new regime. Fabric produced in GB might no longer be legally marketed in Northern Ireland. For example, if Donegal tweed obtained protection in the Republic of Ireland, UK authorities would be responsible for removing non-compliant products from our local market. That is just one example. We can talk about supply chains and about how, when there is availability of choice, we can drive down prices. Therefore — *[Interruption.]* I will come to the point in a moment. Therefore, when we limit choice, we increase costs. As I said, that is just one example. We can really comprehend in all of the issues — this is but one — how additional supply chain costs can be applied and put strain on local businesses. As elected representatives, we have not only a duty to act but a responsibility to do so.

According to the UK Government's explanatory memorandum, the regulation could mean new checks at ports, to the benefit of EU companies far more than their Northern Ireland counterparts. It could have implications for GB to NI movements. It could mean Northern Ireland being cut out from free trade agreements in some areas. It could even result in UK authorities having to police the websites of companies in Northern Ireland to see whether they are protecting the EU craft products, as per article 60 of the regulation.

**Mr O'Toole:** I appreciate the Member for being open to interventions and giving way. He mentioned Donegal tweed as an example and the UK Government being responsible for taking it off the shelves if it was not compliant. Would not that only be the case if it was non-compliant Donegal tweed? If it was Donegal tweed produced in a knock-off warehouse somewhere in the Midlands of England and

imported, it might be removed from the shelves. I presume that most of us in the Chamber care about the economic well-being of small producers in Donegal. It would be taken off the shelves only if it was not genuine Donegal tweed, and that is the whole point.

**Mr Buckley:** The point that I am trying to make to the Member is that the supply chain is complex. Often, some of our manufacturers will look for cheaper supply costs, and that can be, due to economies of scale, from across the United Kingdom. This regulation has the potential, as outlined in the UK Government's explanatory note, to cause friction and barriers. That is something that this party is firmly against.

It is hardly surprising that the European Scrutiny Committee in the House of Commons described it as a significant legal change. Surely, regardless of political views on Brexit or otherwise, Members can recognise the risks associated with the new EU law. Surely they can put the interests of local indigenous businesses before those of the unaccountable EU. It is not an isolated issue. As a member of the EU scrutiny Committee, I have had sight of potentially damaging EU law, ranging from dental fillings to vehicle standards and everything in between, that will require the House's full scrutiny in due course.

At this point, I put on record my sympathies to our Committee member Steve Aiken on the loss of his father-in-law. I know that this issue exercised Steve greatly. He spoke to me about it in private, and, indeed, I am sure that it will be reflected in his leader's comments.

The EU must understand clearly that our primary objective is the protection of our people and our businesses. It should be in no doubt that we will use every legitimate tool at our disposal to ensure their viability and prosperity.

It was always right for the people of Northern Ireland to have a say in preventing the application of EU law that is damaging to our economic rights within the United Kingdom. That is exactly why we will vote against the new EU law, which is being foisted on the people of Northern Ireland, and our hope is that others will join us in using the democratic mechanism to do the same.

**Mr McGuigan:** A Cheann Comhairle, *[Translation: Mr Speaker]* just last week, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with other Ministers and you, were out in the US promoting the North as a place to invest and do business in. I congratulate them all on that work

in what looked and sounded like successful engagements. Key to their message while there and what US politicians and businesses wanted to hear about was political stability and, most importantly, the North's unique selling point of dual market access to the EU single market and to Britain.

Today, we should be building on the success of that trip, talking up our potential and giving our young people hope; instead, we have this motion. In effect, it is a sham fight that only serves the purpose of undermining the good work of last week and could sow confusion among potential investors to the North when certainty and stability are needed. I emphasise the point again that dual market access is the key selling point in attracting potential investment to the North from the US and elsewhere, and we should all work positively in the Assembly to promote the benefits and to work constructively with our EU neighbours.

With regard to this legislation, why would we in the Assembly deny businesses in the North the potential of unique protections that could help to sell and protect their products? Ultimately, the debate is a distraction. It is politically motivated and will achieve nothing, as the issue will, in the end, be decided between the British Government and the EU in the Joint Committee.

**Ms Eastwood:** Apologies, my voice is a little weak today — a bit like the DUP position on dual market access. A few short weeks ago, we welcomed the return of the institutions. The public were maybe not delighted but certainly relieved that we had people in this place making laws that would help to make their life better. However, here we are, a few short weeks later, discussing again what appear to be internal DUP wranglings.

Just last week — Philip is right — we had delegations in the US talking about the benefits of dual market access to the North and celebrating the unique economic position of Northern Ireland. That is exactly what we should be doing in this place at this time. This is a compressed mandate, so we have short enough time as it is. I do not want to spend the next two and a half to three years relitigating Brexit. We could: we all have our arguments ready, and we know what they are. However, to be honest, I would much rather get on with the job of work that is at hand.

The legislation offers protections to businesses in Northern Ireland. We already know that, often, the ask and the offer of tourism and our economy are intertwined.

That is a good thing, and the danger of always automatically equating something that emanates from the EU with something that is bad is that it is wrong. Likewise, neither should we take the position that anything that emanates from the UK is automatically bad. The people of this place want us to go in and do the job at hand in a fair, cool, calm and collected way.

**12.30 pm**

**Mrs Erskine:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Eastwood:** I will surely.

**Mrs Erskine:** Does the Member not recognise that there are also people in Northern Ireland who want to ensure that we have democratic scrutiny of what comes before the Assembly and that it is therefore important that we have input into that as an integral part of the UK?

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the Member for her intervention. You know, I would take it a step further and say, "Let us have MEPs". Let us go the full hog here. Let us not be behind the door in coming forward. We are all up for engaging with the EU. We will take soundings from anybody, any time, anywhere, because we are not coming at this from an ideological perspective.

By the way, it is not a one-way street. We never hear about the fact that we have so many skills shortages and gaps in our economy because of people moving away after Brexit. We never hear of the damaging effect of UK immigration policy — from a UK Government who were responsible for driving through this hardest of hard Brexits. It is not a one-way street. Yes, we have a unique position in the North, and I will make sure that we make the most of that. We do not want to spend time arguing about the past, but it is not just all one way. I want us to spend the rest of the mandate delivering for everybody in the North and making decisions in a way that is best for business and best for people, not through a purely ideological lens.

We have an opportunity to make the most of what we have at hand. To be honest, my comments will be limited because we need to move on with the task at hand and continue operating together as an Executive. As I said, we have been at this for only a few weeks. The public were delighted to see us back. We have opportunities, and we can get together on the world stage. Let us not do this every single time that we have something coming forward,

because the public do not have the appetite for it. Frankly, I do not have the appetite for it, and there are much more important, pressing and urgent things for us to be getting on with.

**Mr Beattie:** This debate on EU regulations on geographical indications for craft and industrial products had a starting point, and that starting point was Brexit, which was always going to be destabilising. It created customs posts in our ports, and it has created trade barriers. From that Brexit, we got the Northern Ireland protocol, which was not a serious and sensible solution, as we pointed out in October 2019. It was never going to work. That begat the "son of the protocol", the Windsor framework, which was not the starting point that we wished to have.

Our approach to the Windsor framework has been clear. We need to provide governance and leadership, and we now have an Assembly to do that. We need to maximise the opportunities within the framework, and we are working on that together. We need to use the mechanisms of the framework to challenge any issues that arise, and that is what we have today from my colleague from Upper Bann. He is using the mechanisms within the Windsor framework. We said that the DUP should have used them a year ago.

It is good that people say, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink". In this case, I think that the opposite is true. Clearly, there are issues with the EU legislation on geographical indications, but what are they? Where was the scrutiny? There has been no scrutiny. Where were the experts in the subject matter to tell us the long-term effects of this? Where are the businesses telling us, "This is good" or "This is going to be bad"? What are the long-term implications of this EU regulation? We do not know, because there has been no scrutiny.

At short notice, the motion appeared in the Order Paper on Friday when a large proportion of party leaders and Ministers were in Washington celebrating St Patrick's Day. That is fine, but we still have not had the scrutiny that is required.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. On that point, all Members were made aware of this on 21 February, when the Cabinet Office sent correspondence to the Committee that included the UK Government's explanatory memorandum. That was copied, through the Speaker, to all Departments.

I think that the point that the Member is trying to make, which is an important point, is that the ability to scrutinise an applicability motion falls outside the powers of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee; it has no scrutiny role in this particular new EU law. We are therefore using the appropriate mechanism that is at our disposal, which is to have a debate in this place, in order to send a clear message, to both the UK Government and the EU, that we have a voice on this issue. We are putting it on the record.

**Mr Beattie:** Thank you. The Member is absolutely right that this did not sneak up on us. The Ulster Unionist Party MLA Steve Aiken raised it on the Floor twice over two weeks. He also raised it with the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee and TEO. The Member is, therefore, absolutely right that this did not sneak up on us, but we still did not scrutinise it; we are still none the wiser. The people standing up in this debate — myself included — are scrabbling for things to say, because we do not know the depths of this in the short, medium or long term.

**Mr O'Toole:** I thank the Member for giving way. This should not have come at such short notice, but there is a lot of information out there. I know that we were all busy during the St Patrick's Day weekend, but there is a lot of information out there, and this is not a huge deal, one way or the other; it is of medium-positive benefit to our producers. There is lots of stuff about it out there; whether it is the UK Government's explanatory memorandum or the EU Parliament analysis paper, the information is there.

We are deciding whether to say, in the Chamber, that this could be the end of the world and we are going to put a block to it. That seems to be the position that those two parties are taking. In my view, however, it is not correct that there is no information.

**Mr Beattie:** I think that the Member has got me slightly wrong. There are 90 MLAs here. Every one of those 90 MLAs can look at this and take a view on how it works, but where is the in-depth scrutiny? With any other law that would apply to Northern Ireland, we would have people giving evidence to Committees to make sure that we understand how it will affect them in the long term. That is the point that I am making, and we simply have not done that. How on earth can we vote in favour of something that we have not properly scrutinised? We could scrutinise this and suddenly realise that it is good for Northern Ireland, or we could

scrutinise it and realise that it is bad for Northern Ireland. We do not know.

I have heard the argument that the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee should not look at this. I disagree. It should look at this. There was a period during which we knew that this was coming up — we had two weeks — and I believe that we should have scrutinised it then. We did not. Have we learned nothing? In the long term, bad legislation will be bad for Northern Ireland. I am not saying that this is bad legislation, but it could be. This is a great example of how not to do legislation in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. This intervention may add weight to the Member's argument, but he can make his own mind up about that.

In Lisburn, there is a bakery, the owner of which has lambasted me for three weeks, because they cannot get a piece of machinery — a simple mixing bowl that costs £150 — for want of having to fill out extremely arduous paperwork. The lack of scrutiny and attention to detail in drawing up this legislation, particularly on the part of the EU and its requirements, is ridiculous. That points very much to the matter being debated today.

**Mr Beattie:** I thank the Member very much. That gets to the point about the in-depth knowledge that we need to have. That is the premise of what I am saying. So far, in the debate, I have heard, "I believe", "I think", "I hope", "It should", and, "It might". I have not heard, "It will". There is no "will" out there, and there is no, "This is what the legislation's going to do," because we do not know.

I am in no doubt —

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

**Mr Beattie:** Of course.

**Mr Allister:** There is one certainty with this legislation. If it were to be applied, you would discover that, under article 48, any Northern Ireland produce qualifying under it would not bear a Northern Ireland label; it would bear an EU label. That further illustrates the extent to which we have become captured by the EU. That is an unacceptable reality, is it not?

**Mr Beattie:** Yes, and is it not great that the Member has the ability to use the mechanisms of this place to express that point? That goes back to our position on what we should have

been doing with the Windsor framework a year ago. We did not do that, so we never had a say, and we are therefore still doing a bit of catch-up.

I do not want to labour the point, but I have to be clear to the House, and we have to be honest with ourselves: some people will vote no on this because it is EU legislation; some people will vote yes on it because it is EU legislation. However, we have to stop and think about it for a moment and ask whether we know the effects of this on businesses in the short, medium and long term. If the answer is no, then you cannot vote for it. I cannot vote for it because of that reason. There is no scrutiny, it is bad legislation, and you could not vote for it.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Mr O'Toole, I will say that there was an error at the top Table. You should have been called earlier. I apologise for that. Even we make mistakes.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was unaware, happily listening to the debate.

In answer to Mr Beattie's point, I will scrutinise a little bit of what is in the legislation, though we have had very little time to look at the detail. The detail is not mysterious or unknown to us. I will cover a little bit of the detail. We have not had very much of that in the debate so far. I am not an expert in the area, but I know a bit about it and I have done some research. I want to unpack, insofar as I can, some of the mistakes and claims that have been made.

Before I come on to the precise legislative and scrutiny procedures, let me say up front that, under the new rules, whether or not I agree with all the new rules, the DUP is entitled to bring this applicability motion. Having brought it, I am happy to debate it. I will be robust and specific. I will not simply make generic points about being pro-EU. I will engage in the specifics of what this scheme could mean for our local craft producers. I hope that those who brought the motion will consider seriously the upsides and downsides of the motion and not simply ideological points. I clearly have a strong anti-Brexit view, and my party is clearly strongly pro-European, but there are substantive and rigorous reasons why we should support this applicability motion. I am delighted to support this DUP motion, even though the DUP itself will not support it.

First of all, what are GIs? GIs are geographic indications. They are, in a sense, a device that allow products with a specific geographic origin to better market and sell themselves in given markets, whether that is in the EU single market

of half a billion people, which is the world's largest single market, or around the world via trade deals. They have traditionally and largely been used for agricultural products: food and drink. We, in Northern Ireland and, indeed, on the island of Ireland, being such talented producers of amazing food and drink, have benefited from them. We have several GIs that are still operational post-Brexit. Many of us thought that it was important to retain them. For example, Comber spuds, Lough Neagh eels and Armagh Bramley apples, which are produced in the Ulster Unionist Party leader and Mr Buckley's constituency.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he recognise that there is a distinct difference between non-agricultural GIs and agricultural GIs? Today's debate is not about the Comber spud. It is about non-agricultural GIs. It is important to put that on the record for clarity, rather than cascade different views.

**Mr O'Toole:** By definition, they are different, of course. We are debating non-agricultural GIs; that is the entire purpose of the debate. I was acknowledging the precedent that came from agricultural GIs. However, there is an important precedent, which I will link to the non-agricultural GIs, around all-island geographic indications.

People, including Mr Beattie, have said that we do not know what could happen in the future or the long-term effects. There are two all-island agricultural GIs. I am sure everyone in the Chamber knows what they are. One is Irish whiskey. I do not know whether, and would not presume that, Mr Allister partakes, but I am sure that the people who produce Bushmills whiskey would be very upset if Mr Allister were to say that Bushmills whiskey should lose its Irish whiskey designation. Certainly, Mr Paisley, the MP for North Antrim, has always been very clear that Bushmills, the oldest whiskey distillery in the world, should hold on to that special recognition. As far as I am aware, that has been his position. I am happy to be corrected if that is wrong.

The other one, which was agreed only recently after strong lobbying from the Ulster Farmers' Union, is all-island grass-fed beef. That was done on a cross-border basis, including with the support of the Dublin Agriculture Minister, Charlie McConalogue. There we have examples of all-island GIs. Why is that important for the non-agricultural GIs? It is because we do not know what could happen in the future. Theoretically, there could be all-island non-agricultural GIs. For example, in Northern Ireland, particularly in the

constituencies of Upper Bann and Lagan Valley, we produce lots of Irish linen.

I do not know, but, theoretically, there could be a future non-agriculture GI to protect the status of Irish linen in order to give it that premium mark of quality. We are talking about what happens in the future, so we have to legislate for potential future outcomes. If we are outside the scheme, that will limit the ability of Northern Ireland linen producers in the Irish Linen Guild (ILG) to be part of it. I am not making an assumption that that will happen, but it very much could happen, because there is precedent for all-island GIs for beef and whiskey. Those are some of the specifics.

### 12.45 pm

The Member for Upper Bann made great play of the potential regulatory border as one of the core reasons that the DUP will vote against its own applicability motion. He talked about the explanatory memorandum from the UK Government. What does that state about the effect on trade across the Irish Sea? It states, in black and white:

*"we expect this effect to be limited".*

On cost implications, the explanatory memorandum states:

*"we expect that ... this ... would have limited cost implications with respect to the administration of the scheme".*

The UK Government themselves — this UK Government — accept that, if the scheme were to apply in Northern Ireland, its effect would be limited. It is not the end of the world, one way or the other. It is a good thing for our craft producers — I will come on to talk about that — to have the potential advantage of recognition and a leg-up in the European single market of half a billion consumers and possibly beyond that market. That is a small but significant uplift. Why would we deny our consumers that, when the downside is apparently so limited that even this UK Government cannot bring themselves to complain about it and put that down in black and white? I do not see the horrible downside for what is called the "internal UK market" — east-west trade — and Mr Buckley did not explain to me what the potential downside is for the internal UK market, although I am sure that other Members who oppose the applicability motion will do so.

The only new Irish Sea border that I can foresee — it is detailed in the explanatory

memorandum — would be if some theoretical Del Boy were to set up a warehouse in the English Midlands and say, "I am going to produce knock-off Murano glass or Chantilly lace", presuming that those products get EU-protected status under the scheme. I am not an expert on either product, but that could happen, and he could say, "I want to market them in Northern Ireland". If we were part of the scheme, we would not be able to have knock-off Murano glass, which, for those who are not aware, is a specially designed type of Venetian glass, or Chantilly lace in the shops of Northern Ireland. Is that the terrible east-west trade disruption about which the DUP is so worried? I think not. There is a small but significant potential upside for our craft producers.

We know, as Sorcha Eastwood said, that part of our all-island tourism offer is craft production, not just of food but of textiles, ceramics, silverware: the stuff that people, when they holiday on the island of Ireland, whether they travel North or South, want to take back with them. I am talking about Irish linen, woollens and those kinds of things. It will not create tens of thousands of jobs, and it will not be a major boost to GDP, but it could be important to some of our generations-old craft producers, who will get a leg-up in the EU market, just as, as I mentioned, producers of Comber spuds, Lough Neagh eels and, indeed, Bushmills and other Irish whiskies produced in the North have benefited from that marketing potential. It is not transformational, nor is it the end of the world, but it is important. To reiterate what other Members have said, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and other Ministers have, in the past week in Washington DC, been selling Northern Ireland and its dual market access. Then, when we are back on Tuesday after the bank holiday, we debate this motion, which, if defeated, would undermine confidence in our participation in the single market, to no real benefit. When there is no real, discernible or proven downside to the internal UK market —.

**Mr Buckley:** I appreciate the Member's giving way. He and the Member from the Alliance Party mentioned the risk to dual market access. Given that the EU has brought forward an entirely new regulation, the divergence risk here comes not from the Assembly or, indeed, the UK Government but principally from Brussels. Given the Member's pro-EU disposition, has he had the opportunity to raise the matter in the same vein or will he do so with the European Union, which, rather than the UK Government, is, in a sense, diverging?

**Mr O'Toole:** The Member's point would be valid if the UK Government thought that the introduction of the EU scheme in Northern Ireland would have a bad impact on east-west trade, but they do not. They wrote an explanatory memorandum, and they do not say, "This will disrupt the internal UK market". If they had stated that, the debate might be different, and people like me would have to answer that point, but they did not. As I said, Del Boy and Rodney, making their knock-off Chantilly lace and Murano glass, would be able to —

**Mr Buckley:** Will the Member give way on that point?

**Mr O'Toole:** — import it into Northern Ireland were we not in this position.

The Member for Lagan Valley puts her head in her hands. It is important that we debate the detail of this stuff, and all that I am doing is debating the detail.

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

**Mr O'Toole:** I will give way to Mr Buckley, and then I will give way to Sorcha Eastwood.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. I notice the eye-rolling from the Member from the Alliance Party, but this is politics. This is debating the real-life issues. You said that you did not want to look back but wanted to look forward. This is a new EU law. This is not something that has happened in times past, so the Assembly is having its say and rightly so.

Mr O'Toole, I know that you mentioned — through the Speaker; sorry — the considerable issue of the Del Boy and Rodney who maybe wrote the UK Government explanatory note, but they are not categorically sure that some of the impacts will not cause friction in Northern Ireland. That is the point that Mr Beattie raised. They are important points to debate, and I am sure that the Member will not rubbish those concerns completely.

**Mr O'Toole:** The concerns are very minimal and they are [*Inaudible.*] In the interests of having a fulsome debate, I am happy to give way to Ms Eastwood, if she wants to say something.

**Ms Eastwood:** Thank you. I am all for debate, but I will tell you what it is: we are not going to sit here today, after this place has been down for a lock of years, and turn round at the first opportunity, after people have made the best impression about Northern Ireland in the US in



trying to get jobs, trying to get trade, trying to make sure that we increase the people we have here in work, making sure that we tackle the absolutely awful problems that we have with our health service — I look forward to the day when we make sure that we discuss those things with the exact same vim and energy.

**Mr O'Toole:** That was a bit of a speech. I am happy to give way for Members to make interventions that are specifically about the debate. I do not think that the DUP motion and motivations today are the right ones, but I am here to debate the substance because that is what is in the Order Paper. Those of us who believe in the EU single market and dual market access need to make the arguments and need to be specific about them, so I am taking on some of the wrong information and claims that have been made today.

Members will be relieved to hear that I will now come to a conclusion. This is a potential upside for our craft producers. They can participate in a GI scheme that can give them a leg-up in the largest single market in the world. The UK Government themselves say that there is a very limited downside. Why would we deny this to our craft producers? The idea that it is some horrible imposition of new EU law is simply not borne out by the evidence, and I honestly, honestly plead with my DUP colleagues and, indeed, Ulster Unionist colleagues not to simply fall into the trap of trying to appease Mr Allister and his new friends in Reform UK. Let us bear it in mind that his new allies in Reform UK, Mr Tice and Mr Habib, have done something that no one else in the Chamber can claim to have done: they voted for the protocol.

We should be about trying to maximise opportunities and benefits for our businesses, including the brilliant, small craft producers all over the island but specifically in Northern Ireland. I do not think that this will be transformational, but it could be one small positive benefit. If we cannot be serious and if the DUP playbook is to be simply to drag issues like this, which should be relatively uncontroversial, into stunt politics on the Floor of the Assembly every other week, we will have a problem, I am afraid. This is not what we should be doing after being away for two years. I am happy to debate and to use the democratic scrutiny mechanism that exists now — the applicability motion. I will never shy away from debate and will never say that people should not debate the issues, but I will come here and talk in substance about the potential benefits and send a clear message to people that our dual market access is here to stay and that it is a positive thing. I will do that on the basis of the

detail, because the case that the DUP is trying to make today simply has not been made. Therefore, we will support the DUP applicability motion and will support our dual market access and our amazing local craft producers.

**Mr Speaker:** The next Member to speak is Patrick Brown, but, before I call you, Mr Brown, I have to say that we will stop at 1.00 pm for the Business Committee meeting. Will you be finished within six minutes?

**Mr Brown:** I am not sure, to be honest, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Well, then, I would rather not disrupt you midstream, so I will call you after Question Time. David Honeyford will be the first Member to ask a question, and Mr Brown will be the first Member to speak after Question Time. Thank you.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.53 pm.*

On resuming —

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Economy

#### Renewable Electricity Support Scheme

1. **Mr Honeyford** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the progress of developing a renewable electricity support scheme. (AQO 175/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** The Department is developing a renewable electricity support scheme (RESS) to incentivise investment, ensure a fair price for electricity that is produced locally and encourage diversification to support security of supply. Following a recent consultation, officials have been working with consultants to define the optimal scheme structure. High-level design for the scheme will be published this month as part of the Department's response to the consultation. The next phase will involve modelling and a financial impact assessment alongside the establishment of a legislative pathway, state aid approval and institutional roles and responsibilities that are necessary for delivery. Stakeholder engagement will be essential as we move forward to deliver a final scheme design, maximising the community benefit opportunities and ensuring prosperity for all.

**Mr Honeyford:** I welcome the Minister's response. However, given that our economy is made up mainly of small businesses and microbusinesses, can the Minister confirm that the scheme will also include support for smaller-scale projects from half a megawatt up, and not just those from five megawatts, as was previously said?

**Mr C Murphy:** Options for microgeneration support, including domestic renewable generation, such as solar panels, will continue to be evaluated as part of our net zero ambitions. The Windsor framework enables the extension to the North of the VAT relief for energy-saving materials that was previously available only in Britain. That means that people here will also be able to apply zero rates of VAT to the installation of energy-saving materials, such as heat pumps and solar panels. Homeowners may wish to seek independent advice on solar panels, heat pumps and other energy efficiency matters from organisations such as the NI Energy Advice service. Those technologies have the potential

to provide an attractive payback to homeowners without grant support.

**Mr McGuigan:** Will the Minister outline how his Department's proposed scheme differs from other renewable electricity schemes across these islands?

**Mr C Murphy:** The proposed scheme will have similarities to RESS in the South and the contracts for difference scheme in Britain. Similar auction-based schemes have also been successful across other European countries and are a well-established option for incentivising renewables. Previous research that was commissioned by the Department identified that type of scheme as being one that would provide the optimal form of support for the North, and the recent consultation confirmed it as the preferred option of the power sector stakeholders. From that, a bespoke local scheme is being developed. Any scheme that we introduce will take account of the lessons that have been learned from other schemes on these islands and will address the specific needs of our local market.

**Mr O'Toole:** A previous iteration of the protocol, now the Windsor framework, omitted guarantees of origin from the North being sold into the South and more widely onto the electricity market in Europe. Will the Minister explore with his officials getting that added to the protocol so that we can benefit from our access to the single European market?

**Mr C Murphy:** As I said in my previous answer, some of those issues have been addressed by the Windsor framework. If, as we move through the design of the scheme, there are outstanding issues, we are more than happy to take those up with the relevant authorities in London and Brussels.

**Mr Allister:** I want to ask about another renewable scheme, namely the non-domestic renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme. When can one expect the publication of the consultation report? Is there any hope of a realistic tariff for the users that is comparable to what exists elsewhere, or will we continue the folly of sending back money that has been unspent in that scheme?

**Mr C Murphy:** I believe that the RHI scheme should have been concluded some time ago in the previous mandate. It is my intention to bring the matter to as speedy a conclusion as I can in as fair a way as possible. That will in turn allow us to access other available funding that has

not yet been taken up and to look at other renewable schemes.

## Business Improvement Districts

2. **Miss McAllister** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of the business improvement district (BID) process. (AQO 176/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Business improvement districts are the responsibility of the Department for Communities. As Economy Minister, my assessment is that they are an excellent example of local collaboration and cooperation. BIDs enable local businesses to take decisions on the issues that matter to them and about which they know best. They can be drivers for the regeneration of our towns and city centres by making our towns and cities more attractive to visitors and creating a positive trading environment that helps local businesses to thrive.

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Minister for his answer. While I recognise that business improvement districts fall under the remit of the Department for Communities, does he agree that working hand in hand with the Department in order for our local areas to thrive is very important and that working further with the Department for Communities on the establishment of additional business improvement districts would add to our local economies?

**Mr C Murphy:** I am very happy to work cross-departmentally on anything that could improve our economy. Previously, I had a strong working relationship with my colleague Deirdre Hargey when she was Minister for Communities and I was Minister of Finance. Equally, I hope to have a strong working relationship with Gordon Lyons now that he has taken up that post.

One of the processes that I outlined in my vision for the economy was regional balance. When we have local actors deciding what the local priorities are with the support of government, we will get a much better policy outcome when it comes to local needs. If there is a case for more investment in business improvement districts, I am very happy to talk to the Minister for Communities about that, but the more that we have people who are active and working in the local area deciding on the economic future and the best policy for that specific area, the better the outcome will be.

**Ms Flynn:** Will the Minister provide an update on the high street task force?

**Mr C Murphy:** The report 'High Street Task Force: Delivering a 21st Century High Street' will be of interest to a number of Departments. I have asked my officials to take forward the recommendations that are relevant to my Department. I understand that the Executive Office Ministers will shortly write to Executive colleagues inviting them to consider how they can take forward the findings of the report.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Minister join me in commending the work of the Newry BID? During the recent floods, Eamonn Connolly was there with his sleeves rolled up, carrying sandbags and doing immense work to protect local businesses and stand up for them when they were under huge duress.

**Mr C Murphy:** I certainly will. He was very much at the forefront of that work, as was the BID organisation in Newry. Local elected representatives, volunteers and many others were also out helping at that time. It displayed the true spirit that is in our areas and many others. When those types of crises come along, people pull together to provide support to each other. I hope that, through the scheme that I funded, which is being run through the council, the level of support that is required for businesses will be delivered as quickly as possible.

## Tuition Fees

3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the assessment he made before indicating that he would not consider raising tuition fees. (AQO 177/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** My assessment is that students already take on a significant level of debt in order to access higher education and that adding to that debt is not the right approach. I am committed to working with the higher education sector to embed sustainable funding arrangements that enable it to thrive and create more opportunities for our students.

**Mr Beattie:** Thank you, Minister. That was not a challenge; it certainly is not my party's position of intent. I spoke to the vice chancellors of Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast, who are really concerned about the number of student places in Northern Ireland. We haemorrhage an awful lot of students overseas. Does the Minister have a plan to increase student numbers?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, I have spoken to both vice chancellors on a number of occasions prior to and since taking up office. I agree that we need collectively to work on the funding of students, access to university and the number of students going on to higher-level education. We are operating within very limited and constrained public finances. I hope that the situation improves as our negotiations with the Treasury develop, but I want to look at the matter as imaginatively as we can to ensure that the universities have the resources that they need and can take in more students in order to avail themselves of the facilities that they develop. We should look at doing that in such a way that means that students can access those facilities without an additional burden being placed them.

**Mr Delargy:** Will the Minister consider increasing maintenance support for students?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, I will. We are looking at ways to provide support to students, and I have asked officials to identify options for that. As I said in my previous response, however, the ability to increase support is limited by the very difficult circumstances that we find ourselves in as a result of 10 or 12 years of austerity. Nevertheless, I hope that the Executive can get a positive outcome in their negotiations with the British Government on this matter and that we get more support to enable us to support students.

**Ms Bradshaw:** In my constituency of South Belfast, we have a lot of newcomer families. We know that education is the gateway to prosperity for families. What support can the Minister give to the universities to encourage more entrants from that section of the community?

**Mr C Murphy:** Both universities have very good programmes, some of which are run directly on the ground in South Belfast, to encourage more inclusion. I expect that those programmes include people who have arrived in this country to try to access further and higher education. There are inclusion programmes, and both universities are very proactive in that. If the Member or others sense that there is a gap where people who have come into the country need support — sometimes support is needed with translation and other services that may be provided by different Departments — I would like to hear about issues that arise in that regard, and I will be happy to speak to the universities about their programmes. However, I know that they are very proactive in that area.

## Assured Skills Academies

4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of assured skills academies. (AQO 178/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Assured skills academies are very effective in providing a successful pathway for individuals who are seeking a new career. Since 2011, 183 academies have been delivered, upskilling more than 2,900 individuals. All those who were trained were guaranteed a job interview, with over 2,500 gaining employment, which was a success rate of 86%. That has been a success for the local economy, with starting salaries totalling £55 million generated between 2011 and 2023.

Academies address the skills needs of investment companies and existing local companies by ensuring a pipeline of potential skilled, job-ready employees. The academy model is agile and is responsive to local economic and workforce needs, and it will continue to adapt.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. *[Translation: Thank you, Minister.]* You have partly answered my question, in that you mentioned large local companies. Will you, however, ensure that the assured skills academies will, in conjunction with the potential opportunities that big companies and, indeed, FDI may bring, continue to have your support for local opportunities?

**Mr C Murphy:** The Member is correct: in the past, the assured skills model was primarily used for larger companies and FDI. Working with a single company meant that it was easier to identify the number of vacancies and to secure a guaranteed interview. I have asked my officials to gear more academies towards SMEs throughout the North by getting multiple small companies to come together and collectively identify their needs. That has already started to happen. For example, in response to increased demand for skilled welders, more than 180 people, many with no previous experience, have completed welding training, with 150 hired by participating companies. In the current financial year, three collaborative assured skills welding academies have been launched for delivery by the South West College, providing employment opportunities in Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt. Work is ongoing with the six further education colleges to identify suitable collaborative proposals to meet the skills need of smaller companies in all sectors.

## Social Enterprise NI

5. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of the role of Social Enterprise NI in developing the social economy. (AQO 179/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Growing social enterprise is a vital part of my economic vision. Social Enterprise NI, which delivers the social enterprise work programme, has a key role to play. As an initial measure, I have increased the budget for the programme. My Department will now work with Social Enterprise NI to develop an ambitious action plan to further grow the sector and to take forward the recommendations from the community wealth-building report, which was commissioned by the previous Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey.

**Mr Kearney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. *[Translation: Thank you, Minister.]* Minister, in developing policy and strategy around social enterprise, will you give greater consideration to stronger support for workers' buyouts?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes. I have commissioned research on that. I am aware of that facility in my constituency where that has happened very successfully.

It is a process that is not often followed and does not seem to be promoted much, yet the benefits of securing employment and of workers having control of their own employment are undoubtedly evidenced in areas where it has been successful. I have been alerted to the fact that there is not a significant uptake of that because there is a lack of information. On the work that I am doing here, we have commissioned research and will continue to make sure that that is available to more people to understand that that option may be available to them.

2.15 pm

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

## Students: Financial Assistance

7. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the financial support provided by his Department to students in further education, as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. (AQO 181/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** The cost-of-living crisis continues to have a significant impact on many sections of our society, including students at

further education colleges. Student support officers based in every college help students to access further education grants, and the hardship fund, the Care to Learn scheme, childcare, the education maintenance allowance, home-to-college transport and free school meals are also available. That total support is about £10 million a year. In recognition of the current difficulties, additional support totalling £1.7 million has been provided to colleges. I have also asked for a review of student support in further education to ensure that support measures are being targeted as well as possible on the basis of need.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Gabhaim buíochas leat as an méid atá ráite agat. [*Translation: Thank you, Minister. I thank you for what you have said.*] Thank you for the amount of detail that you have given us. Your recent announcement, Minister, of financial support for students at universities did not contain further financial support for FE students in particular. Is there any reason why they were left out of that announcement?

**Mr C Murphy:** As I said, we announced £1.7 million additional in recent times for further education students. There is a recognition that the costs attached to higher education are more significant for many students, but I want to ensure that there is a level of support available across all. If we had more money, we would certainly put more money into hardship funds to ensure that people have that. Getting people opportunities to get back into work and to get education and skills is vital. The further education colleges will play a key role in all that, and we need to ensure that we create pathways for people, on their own terms and bearing in mind that many have other responsibilities in their lives, to access skills, education and the ability to get back into the workforce. Part of my vision is about good jobs and better jobs for people and regional balance. Those things will all contribute to that. We are intent on doing as much as we can in that area in the time ahead.

**Miss Hargey:** How many students benefit from existing financial support measures?

**Mr C Murphy:** As I said, the Department funds around £10 million per annum to provide a range of ongoing financial supports for further education students, including further education grants, the hardship fund, Care to Learn, home-to-college transport, free school meals and clothing allowance. Education maintenance allowance is also available for eligible students. A further £4.5 million per annum is provided to the further education colleges to provide

support to students with a disability. In the 2022-23 academic year, further education student support measures supported close to 13,000 students.

## Spirit Aerosystems

8. **Mr Brooks** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what engagement he has had with Spirit Aerosystems on the impact a potential acquisition by Boeing will have on its Belfast operations. (AQO 182/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** The Department is aware of the ongoing discussions between Boeing and Spirit Aerosystems about a potential acquisition. The Department is not aware of any immediate impact on its Northern Ireland operations, and it would be wrong to speculate on potential outcomes for Spirit locally as the discussions continue. My office is already engaging with Spirit to confirm a date for a meeting to discuss the current situation.

**Mr Brooks:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I encourage and ask the Minister to keep an eye on the situation and to continue to engage with Spirit. We know that speculation, as it may be, may lead to nervousness amongst the workers at a key employer in East Belfast and in Northern Ireland generally. I ask him to continue that engagement, as I know my party colleagues Phillip Brett and Gavin Robinson MP have been engaging with him.

**Mr C Murphy:** I understand that, from the Member's constituency perspective and generally across Belfast, there will be concern when there is an acquisition about what the future is for the people who work there. People are entitled to be concerned about their future, and, obviously, our intent is to try to ensure support for as many workers as we can. It is early days in those discussions. When I was in the States, I took the opportunity to mention the potential takeover by Boeing so that, if issues arise, we have access to discussions with senior people in America in order to protect jobs as best we can.

**Mr McReynolds:** Will the Minister confirm if he will commit to working closely with the Department for Business and Trade on the matter?

**Mr C Murphy:** We will work with whomever we can. At the moment, it is a commercial discussion between two companies. We are concerned about the implications for the economy, jobs and the presence of that

manufacturing in Belfast. It is probably early days to decide whom we need to speak to. When we get a sense of what is shaping up — we have asked for a meeting — if we have to go to London or America to talk to people, that is what we will do in order to protect jobs and the economy.

## Corporation Tax

9. **Mr Brett** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of the economic impact of reducing corporation tax. (AQO 183/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Tax is one of several factors that companies consider when making investment decisions. However, the way in which Treasury proposed to deduct funding from the Executive block grant at a time of public spending cuts meant that reducing corporation tax was not affordable. That will remain the case unless the British Government change their approach to funding public services and to adjusting the block grant for devolved taxes. In the meantime, it is my intention to create an attractive investment proposition for firms by improving skills and ensuring that companies can take full advantage of the dual market access opportunities that exist through the Windsor framework.

**Mr Brett:** I thank the Minister for his response. Can the Minister put on record whether it is his position that there should be an all-island harmonisation of corporation tax?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes. That should be our ambition, because it would be beneficial to the proposition that we sell internationally. The way it has been presented to us by Treasury from as far back as 10 years ago — I was involved in the discussions at that time — makes it unaffordable. It was unaffordable then, and it is probably even more so now. If that situation changes, we can pursue the opportunity. However, as it sits, it is not affordable for us. I think that that view is broadly shared across the Executive. I remember a previous Minister for the Economy, from your party, outlining the same view when she was asked about the potential for a reduction in devolved corporation tax.

**Miss Brogan:** Following his engagements with companies in the US last week, does the Minister believe that the North is an attractive place to invest?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, absolutely. The visit was very successful. I spent time in New York

engaging with businesses there. Corporation tax was not significantly raised; I struggle to remember it being raised at all. The key issues were the skills of the people who work here, dual access to British and European markets and the fact that we have an Executive back in place, which meant that people had the confidence to engage with us at the right level to make enquiries and approaches about their business interests. Those are the key factors. There is significant interest. The dual market access has piqued a certain interest not just in America but in Europe. It is our duty to exploit that in the fullest way we can.

**Mr Elliott:** I will follow up on Mr Brett's question on harmonisation with the Republic of Ireland. If the circumstances were correct, would the Minister support a lower corporation tax for Northern Ireland than ROI, which would give businesses a huge advantage compared to those in ROI and GB?

**Mr C Murphy:** I do not believe that we need to be in competition. It has been the mindset here for too long that we are competing. We benefit much more from collaboration. International investment is an easier proposition if you have a single tax rate across the island. I would not argue for a race to the bottom. Corporation tax reduction interests companies and can attract more investment, but it is not the silver bullet. When I was in America last week, people talked to me about skills, dual access to the markets and the Executive being in place; those were the key factors that they were interested in. I do not believe that we should be in a competition. If Invest works collaboratively with IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, we will get a much better outcome than we would from trying to compete with each other.

## Childcare Sector: Business Support

10. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he will provide business support to the childcare sector. (AQO 184/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Ensuring that working parents have access to high-quality, affordable childcare is a priority for the Executive. We need a childcare solution that aligns with my economic goals of good jobs, increased productivity and regional balance. To that end, I am committed to working with the Minister of Education as he develops and implements the early years and childcare strategy.

**Ms Forsythe:** I thank the Minister for that and welcome his commitment to the childcare

strategy. Further to that, is he willing to engage with the sector or provide any business intervention support? The number of nurseries closing down is rising, and Employers For Childcare reported today that about half the childcare providers in Northern Ireland are struggling or distressed. Will the Minister consider meeting them and discussing a potential business rate relief or some other sort of support?

**Mr C Murphy:** I thank the Member for her question. I understand fully what she is saying. I have engaged strongly with the childcare sector over the past couple of years, so I know the pressures that it faces. Some of the solutions that the Member has outlined fall to the Department of Finance, and some may be the responsibility of the Department for the Economy. The lead is the Department of Education, and that underlines the sensible proposal that the Executive have agreed that we all have an input and that we try to have it as quickly as we can. One Department having its solution and another Department having a different solution is not what the childcare sector needs. We need it involved in the design of a strategy that will support not just childcare providers and those who work in the sector but parents who are trying to access childcare. Regarding my particular interest, the more people we have available to come back to work and allowed to get back into the workforce, the better for the economy overall. It is a multi-departmental approach, and we all have our part to bring to the solution. I am willing to do that on behalf of the Department for the Economy.

**Mrs Mason:** In addition to assisting the Education Minister, are there steps that the Minister can take in his Department to improve childcare provision?

**Mr C Murphy:** Part of the solution is what firms, particularly firms that are well established and in good economic shape, can bring to it. I also think — we have had this discussion with business — that employers need to consider how they allow women in particular to re-access work. If it is an all-or-nothing full-time job offer only, people have to make the sometimes difficult decision to leave their childcare responsibilities and go back to full-time work. We have had that conversation with employers, and we need to continue that dialogue. They have a responsibility to provide childcare for the staff whom they are keen to get and hold on to and to allow women in particular back into the workforce. There need to be more options than simply a full-time occupation on offer to them.

**Ms Hunter:** We know that the childcare sector is in absolute crisis and needs support now, and we heard warm words last month about that. What steps or immediate actions has your Department taken since last month to support the sector?

**Mr C Murphy:** One that I have just outlined is dialogue with people in the private sector to ensure that that sector plays its part. The private sector tells us all the time that it cannot get the people whom it needs and that it needs more people with skills. It has a contribution to make to ensuring that people can access education and skills or move directly into work. Childcare is a significant issue in all of that, and affordability means that many people who have that responsibility cannot leave it and go back into work, because doing so would be to the detriment of their available family resources. We have already begun discussion and dialogue in that regard, and we will continue to work at pace with the other Departments around the Executive table to make sure that we bring forward a bespoke childcare strategy to suit the particular needs of here.

## Economic Productivity

11. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline his plans to raise economic productivity. (AQO 185/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Raising productivity is one of my four economic objectives. It will require action on a wide range of policies, such as trade and investment, including making the most of dual market access; skills; leadership and management of business; investment in innovation; entrepreneurship; and a policy for high-potential sectors and businesses. I will take actions across all those areas. I will liaise with the expert critical friends that I have asked to advise on my economic vision about those actions to ensure that they have the impact that is needed.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you, Minister, for your response. Further to last week's US visit, can you give us an update on the Department's efforts to attract more US investment?

2.30 pm

**Mr C Murphy:** There is an element of attracting inward investment here, but there is also an element, which we were involved in over there, of allowing our firms to be involved in export to the States. A growing number of them are doing



that now. In that regard, the economic adviser, Joe Kennedy, has been very helpful in making sure that the firms that go over get access to the people that they want to talk to. It is a two-way street. It is not about going over with a begging bowl to ask for inward investment.

Of course, a strong part of the trip last week was about talking to people over there. It was also about having people who are already doing business here. The biggest selling point of doing inward investment is the fact that 70% of the companies that come here stay and further invest. At one of the events last week, which was probably the most powerful, people who have done that gave their testimony, rather than us selling. They did a terrific job of talking about their experience of working here, the people and the ethos here and how those were beneficial to them and their companies. We will continue to do that.

As I say, it is a two-way street. We want to create opportunities for local companies to be able to export to the States and elsewhere abroad and to take full advantage of our dual market access.

**Mr Speaker:** That brings to an end our time for listed questions. I commend the Minister and Members for getting to question 11. It was a good, interactive exchange. We now move to topical questions.

### **Further Education Lecturers: Pay Parity**

T1. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he agrees with the principle of pay parity between further education lecturers and school teaching staff, given that he will be keenly aware of the challenges facing further education lecturers and their ask for that pay parity. (AQT 121/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** I had an opportunity to meet the trade unions in the first week that I was in office. I told them that I shared their ambition to get further education lecturers on a trajectory where their pay is linked to teachers' pay. What we are trying to do with the amount of money available is get a settlement for this year to try to give people some support and agree together to set the trajectory of aligning their pay with teachers' pay for future years. That is my clear objective. I know that they are considering that offer. I hope that they take it up. Nonetheless, regardless of what happens this year, I have made my objective for further years very clear to the unions that represent the further education lecturers.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Minister, I am pleased to hear that that is the direction of travel. However, you will appreciate that lecturers are absolutely livid at the minute about the differentiation in pay between teaching staff and those in colleges. They are teaching people on the higher level apprenticeship programme who are being paid more than them. Is there anything that you can do now to step in and support that sector as it struggles to get pay parity?

**Mr C Murphy:** I fully understand their frustration with how things have developed over the years. I have seen people from my local college on picket lines over the years. Their demand is legitimate. What we are trying to do is get, with the envelope that is available to us, an award made to them that will improve circumstances for this year and then work closely with them to get them on the right trajectory for future years. That is all that is affordable to us this year. We got an uplift in public pay. That was defined by the British Government — the Finance Minister has stretched it as far as she can — and it gives us a set amount with which to play.

I fully understand. The argument that they have made for where they should be is very supportable. I share that view and want to get them to that place. I would like to get a settlement this year and then continue to work in that direction.

### **BT/EE: Enniskillen Site**

T2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he personally has met management from BT and EE to discuss the potential closure later this year of the Enniskillen site. (AQT 122/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** I have not met them directly, but my officials and my special adviser have. He is aware that I have written to them. They have also engaged with the trade unions representing people there. I understand the concern in the Enniskillen and Fermanagh area about potential job losses. BT is in an international downsizing exercise, and there is serious concern. It is not simply about the potential loss of jobs in Fermanagh but about the impact that that has on regional balance. We want to see jobs retained in local areas.

We are awaiting the outcome of the consultation. As a result of our intervention, the date for that was pushed back two weeks to allow for further discussions. That is due to close on 28 March. We are happy to engage

with it. We will see what recommendations flow from that. We recognise that issue very clearly. That was the tone in which I wrote to BT, advising it that it was a very bad idea and that it very much cuts across our strategy of trying to support more jobs in regional areas.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for the position that he has taken. Has he had any feedback on what might happen after the consultation is over? One of the big uncertainties for the staff is what will happen after the consultation.

**Mr C Murphy:** No, I have not. As I said, following our intervention — the day after I wrote to them — they extended the consultation process by a further two weeks. That is due to end next week; on the 28 March, I think. We will have no insight before that on what propositions may be put on the table. We will keep a close eye on the situation, and we are determined to support the people from Enniskillen as far as we can. BT is a private company, but we are, nonetheless, determined to support the people who work in that facility as best we can and to provide as much encouragement as we can to BT and EE to keep the jobs that they have there.

## USA Trip: Engagements

T3. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the engagements that he undertook during his visit to America, mindful of his earlier comments that he did not go there with a begging bowl and that it is a two-way street. (AQT 123/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** We had a number of engagements in New York, which were primarily business-focused, before we went to Washington for the events there. Some of those were with businesses from here that were out there, such as First Derivative, but others were with businesses that may be considering investing here. Some of what was discussed is commercially sensitive, so they were private discussions.

The objectives were to promote the idea of people investing here, to give greater certainty and information in relation to the Executive being back and what that meant and to outline what dual-market access would mean for them. Those were the key areas of interest for them. As part of a Tourism Ireland event that I attended in New York, I met tour operators that bring people to Ireland from America. I had very useful dialogue with them on the issues that they face. They raised a number of issues, and,

of course, electronic travel authorisation (ETA) is a concern for them.

There was a positive mood there about the Executive being back up, a significant degree of certainty being brought to dual-market access issues and the potential for people to get involved, not only in doing business in the States but in bringing business from there to here.

**Mr McHugh:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. [*Translation: Thank you, Minister.*] We can all appreciate how critical dual-market access is to expanding all the business communications that we have, not only with America but with other places. How vital is that access to our trading relationships, and how important is it that it is dealt with in such a way that creates an environment that allows business to take place?

**Mr C Murphy:** I find that most businesses want as much certainty as they can get for their investment decisions. Of course, the United States has been a critical trading and inward investment partner for us. A debate is ongoing in the Assembly today in relation to these matters, but anything that undoes the certainty that currently exists does a disservice to our ability to grow the economy here, attract investment and grow our exports into other markets.

Part of the attraction of the offering from here was that people had more certainty about what dual access looks like and what it would mean for their businesses. Ongoing attempts to thwart the progress that we have made only does us a disservice and creates more uncertainty. That is not the type of atmosphere that businesses want to be engaged in.

## Further Education Delivery Model: Review

T5. **Ms Eastwood** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he agrees that it is inappropriate to continue with the voluntary redundancy scheme for further education staff and potential campus closures before the review of the further education delivery model is completed. (AQT 125/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** If I took the Member up right, that is the same question that Sinéad McLaughlin asked in relation to pay matters. Is that correct? I beg your pardon; I did not catch the first part of the question.

**Ms Eastwood:** No, Minister. It is to do with the potential redundancy scheme and potential campus closures before the review of the FE delivery model has been fully completed.

**Mr C Murphy:** The redundancy process had already started. Expressions of interest went out to staff, and there was a significant number of returns; there were many more than the number of places that the colleges were looking to remove by redundancy. One college also considered compulsory redundancies, and we ensured that that option was taken off the table. We ensured that there were only voluntary redundancies, that there was a regional spread and that redundancies were only from courses that were no longer required or for which there was a very poor uptake rather than from key positions within the further education structures.

The process was already a significant way down the tracks, and, in my opinion, it could not be halted at that stage, so we tried to make sure that it would not do any further damage to provision. It is my intention to reinvest whatever money is saved from that process in the further education system.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the Minister for his response. The substantive point is that the review of the FE delivery model has stopped and started over the years, so what does his Department intend to do to bring it to a conclusion?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, there is no doubt that there have been difficulties. My clear view, which I think the FE sector shares, is that FE colleges are underutilised and we need to find ways to get more people into them. That means making courses more accessible, trying to get more resources into them, ensuring that staff are properly paid for the work that they do and that their career progression is comparable to that of other teachers. There is work to be done. We will engage with the colleges and the representative body to make sure that we work collaboratively on all this.

There is also work to be done between the higher education sector, the further education sector and the education sector. I see that. I have already had conversations with the Education Minister about that. We need to make sure that there is a seamless join between them so that the pathways for people going through our education system run right through the three sectors that are involved.

## **BT/EE: Enniskillen Site**

T6. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of a recent response in which he said that Invest NI is continuing to engage with BT, to state what that engagement looks like and to outline whether Invest NI is looking at different properties that BT could go to in Enniskillen, albeit she would say that the previously mentioned extension has created further uncertainty for the workers, which is obviously detrimental to their lives. (AQT 126/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** We are trying to understand what the rationale for a change in Enniskillen might be and what it might involve. A two-week extension might create more uncertainty, but it might also buy some more time to allow the company to come at the situation in a more supportive way for the staff that are there.

If the issue is property, we will be happy to work with BT to identify what property might suit its needs down there. Whatever is presented to us as being some of the issues that are causing it to reconsider its operation in Enniskillen, we are happy to work with it. We have not got the full sense of that yet, but Invest NI remains ready to engage with BT, and it has engaged with it. We have also engaged with the unions there to try to get an understanding of what issues might be at the back of any decisions that might be taken and how best to offset them.

**Mrs Erskine:** Conflicting information constantly comes out in relation to BT. As I said, that is to the detriment of employees. In Enniskillen, we are seeing some jobs being re-advertised already. Again, that creates confusion. I urge the Minister to ensure that he does everything that is in his power to keep those jobs in Enniskillen. The Communication Workers Union has found that the jobs create £9 million for our economy in Fermanagh.

**Mr C Murphy:** I hope that the company will be as clear as possible and that we do not add to the uncertainty and, undoubtedly, the stress of the people who are waiting to hear the outcome of the review. I will ask my officials to make sure that the company is as clear as possible and does not end up adding unduly to people's stress.

Our primary objective is to retain the jobs there, and if BT identifies particular issues, to try to work with it to resolve those issues. The restructuring issue that BT is dealing with is global, and we are in the situation where we are reminding it of our commitment to jobs in the regions here, particularly west of the Bann. If it was considering something that is detrimental

to that, it would be going against our entire economic policy.

Yes, we will have those conversations, and we will continue to have them in the days ahead.

## Credit Unions

T7. **Mrs Dillon** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he will bring forward the recommendations issued today in relation to credit unions. (AQT 127/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** I am happy to speak today at the event in the Long Gallery involving the credit unions. They have played a vital role in the provision of financial support for families and small businesses for 65 years. They are a cornerstone of that local financial support for people. Yes, they have identified issues in their manifesto that they want to work with us on. We have committed to putting together a group to deal with the issues and to trying to bring those recommendations forward.

2.45 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Members, please take your ease for a moment while we change the top Table.

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

## Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn, and Maurice Bradley is not in his place for question 1.

## Opposition: Resourcing Entitlements

2. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Assembly Commission to outline when the official Opposition will be resourced in line with the 'Report on the outcome of the independent Review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition at the Northern Ireland Assembly'. (AQO 191/22-27)

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for his question. The Financial Assistance for Political Parties Act (Northern Ireland) 2000 provides the mechanism for the Assembly to agree funding to be made available to political parties for the purpose of:

*"assisting members of the Assembly who are connected with such parties to perform their Assembly duties."*

That includes payments to parties that are the official Opposition. The payments are delivered under the provisions of the financial assistance for political parties (FAPP) scheme 2016.

While the current FAPP scheme already provides payments to official Opposition parties, it is recognised that those payments are different from those contained in the 'Report on the outcome of the independent Review of the adequacy and effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Assembly Commission agreed to review the FAPP scheme in 2020 to encompass a wide variety of issues, including the level of funding that could be made available for official Opposition parties. The review has been informed by the aforementioned report, which was debated and agreed on by resolution of the Assembly on 9 November 2021.

Since then, while the Assembly Commission has considered a number of papers on the matter, the Assembly Commission thought it inappropriate to conclude its deliberations when the Assembly was not sitting. However, since the resumption of Assembly business, there have been a number of discussions between Members and officials in advance of formal discussion at the first meeting of the newly constituted Assembly Commission this afternoon. Once the review of the FAPP scheme has been completed, the Assembly Commission will bring the revised scheme before the Assembly for its approval.

**Mr O'Toole:** I thank Mr Clarke for that answer. On 3 February, we were nominated as the official Opposition, and I took up the role as leader of the Opposition. Although I am sure that it causes occasional irritation to colleagues, that is a role that I have been charged with doing. As yet, we have not received a penny of the assistance that the Assembly agreed in 2022 that we should be allocated. Of course, it is not money for us as individual MLAs; it is for basic research to do our jobs. Mr Clarke, can you confirm that the allocation will match what was agreed under the independent review in 2021? Can he confirm when it will be brought back to the Assembly to be agreed properly and formalised, and will it be backdated to 3 February?

**Mr Clarke:** On the first point, as I have already said, the Commission is meeting today to

discuss how to advance that. The date of its commencement will be decided by the Commission, and no decision has been taken on that yet.

## Parliament Buildings: Accessibility Adaptations

3. **Mr Allen** asked the Assembly Commission whether there are plans to consider further adaptations to Parliament Buildings to improve accessibility. (AQO 192/22-27)

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission is very aware of the need to ensure that Parliament Buildings is accessible to people with disabilities, and a number of alterations and improvements have been carried out for that purpose in recent years. Physical alterations to Parliament Buildings have included the installation of external and internal access ramps, alterations to staircases and lifts, the installation of the Changing Places facility, the upgrading of hearing loop systems and the provision of automatically opening doors in the basement, ground floor and first floor corridors.

The head of facilities management has commenced discussions with the Department of Finance property division on the commissioning of a disabled access survey to determine whether further improvements could be made to enhance accessibility in Parliament Buildings. Following the completion of that survey, Building Services will examine possible improvements and consult Members as necessary.

**Mr Allen:** I thank the Member for her answer, and I thank the Commission for its efforts in addressing the accessibility problems in the Building. Is the Member aware of any accessibility problems for wheelchair users accessing the upper floors that affect the number of wheelchair users who can be present at events on the upper floors of the Building at any time? If there is such a restriction, will it be addressed through the survey that she mentioned?

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am aware that one of a number of issues to be given consideration is the accessibility of corridor doors on all the remaining corridors, including those on the top floor. I will give the issue high priority in my role as an Assembly Commission member. When the Commission meets later today, I will bring it up as a matter of urgency.

## MLA Security Budget

4. **Mr McReynolds** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an update on a security budget for Members. (AQO 193/22-27)

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission takes the security of Members extremely seriously. It was on the agenda of recent meetings before the Assembly Commission was reconstituted. The PSNI has historically taken the lead on personal security and crime prevention advice, providing that on an individual basis to Members on request. It has included carrying out survey visits to constituency offices and providing advice and recommendations relative to personal and physical security measures.

On 21 December 2023, the Clerk wrote to the Chief Constable to highlight further concerns raised by some Members regarding their personal security and that of constituency office staff and to enquire about what more might be done by the PSNI by way of advice and guidance and whether the PSNI was in a position to offer further security surveys at constituency offices and Members' private dwellings. The Chief Constable subsequently confirmed that the PSNI would take that forward. Personal security training for Members and their staff will be provided by the PSNI in Parliament Buildings on 30 April 2024. That will include the provision of advice on personal security and lone working and will provide an opportunity for Members only to directly request security surveys of their constituency offices and homes. The PSNI advises that a number of surveys have already been carried out at Members' request.

In August 2020, the Assembly Commission published the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) (Amendment) Determination (NI) 2020, which increased the quantum of constituency office establishment expenses from £2,000 to £4,000 specifically to provide additional funding for health and safety and security measures for Members. The determination also specifically permitted Members to recover the cost of security measures from their £7,000 constituency office operating expenses allowance.

At its meeting on 29 November 2023, the Assembly Commission discussed initial proposals to further increase constituency office establishment expenses for exclusive use in the provision of additional security measures and

intends to consider that further at its next meeting.

**Mr McReynolds:** I thank the Member for their response. Will the Assembly Commission update the minimum standard of security to be expected at constituency offices?

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As the victim of an attack in my constituency office, the perpetrator of which was recently given a custodial sentence, I assure him that I take the issue seriously, as, I know, do other Commission members. I assure him that we will discuss that today and at further meetings. I will write to the Member to give him an update on those discussions, but I concur with the premise of his question.

## **Net Zero Targets: Parliament Buildings**

5. **Mr Blair** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an assessment of how it is progressing with its net zero targets. (AQO 194/22-27)

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission strives to be an exemplar organisation in sustainable development and has implemented a range of measures to enhance energy efficiency and improve the environmental performance of Parliament Buildings. They include installing a building energy management system to better manage the time schedules for heating and ventilation, the installation of lower-power LEDs and becoming a conservation area for native black bees.

The Assembly Commission sets ambitious targets in relation to energy use, waste generated and paper consumption and is committed to achieving year-on-year reductions. For example, for the reporting year 2022-23, we managed a 29.4% reduction in electricity usage, an 8.6% reduction in gas usage and a 51.6% reduction in waste generated, against the baseline year of 2008-09.

The Assembly Commission's sustainable development unit works closely with a number of partners to introduce energy-saving solutions and ensure continuous improvement in our energy efficiency. One such example is working with the Department for the Economy in relation to the geothermal technology on the Stormont estate and investigating possible options for heating.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Commission member for that answer. As part of the aim to reach net zero, are there any plans to review the electric vehicle charging provision at Parliament Buildings and, perhaps, to extend it to e-bike charging?

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his question. It is a really good question. That will be kept under review by the Commission. It is a valid point, and the Commission will visit it this afternoon. I will make sure that it is on the agenda at that point.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn. I will move on. Questions 7, 8 and 15 have been grouped.

## **Maternity and Parental Leave: MLAs**

7. **Ms Hunter** asked the Assembly Commission to outline what plans it has to introduce maternity and parental leave arrangements for MLAs, in line with provisions in other legislatures. (AQO 196/22-27)

8. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Assembly Commission to outline its plans to bring forward maternity provision for elected representatives. (AQO 197/22-27)

15. **Mr Mathison** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an update on maternity provision for MLAs. (AQO 204/22-27)

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Members for their questions.

The Assembly Commission has had a number of discussions on the matter. It is important to make Members aware that the Assembly Commission's remit relates solely to the provision of allowances to enable Members to exercise their functions as Members. The Assembly Commission has the ability to provide additional support to a Member who is absent due to parental leave to carry out the constituency work that a Member would otherwise have undertaken. Additional support could be made available to assist with constituency work through an increase to the staffing costs that are made available to a Member under the provisions of the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016. Any such change to facilitate paid support for Members on parental leave could be made by the Assembly Commission through the publication of a revised determination.

The former Assembly Commission considered the matter in detail at its meeting on 9 February 2022 and agreed a set of principles for additional financial support. However, it was also agreed that a revised determination to provide the additional financial support should only be published once progress is made at the start of this Assembly mandate on a Bill to reform the functions of the independent financial review panel. The Assembly Commission therefore intends to return to the matter once progress on the Bill has been made. The Bill is on the agenda for this afternoon's Commission meeting.

The Assembly Commission is also aware that there are likely to be issues related to a Member's work here in Parliament Buildings arising from periods of maternity or paternity leave, adoption leave or shared parental leave. There is very limited provision for Members' absences in Standing Orders as regards, for example, participating in debates or voting. Procedural matters would, in the first instance, be for the Committee on Procedures. Such issues are not within the responsibility of the Assembly Commission. For instance, any proposal to allow a replacement Member to be put in place to cover for a period of parental leave would require a change to the 1998 Act, which is outside the remit of the Assembly Commission. The Assembly Commission has no role in determining the salaries or pensions payable to Members. However, it should be noted that the salary of a Member is not reduced as a result of them deciding to take parental leave.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the member of the Commission for his answer. Does he agree that the lack of maternity leave for Members can put young women off getting into politics? Will the Commission consider looking at other strategies such as those used in Westminster and provide additional moneys for women who need maternity leave?

**Mr Clarke:** As you will have gathered from my previous response, Commission members previously considered all those points, and they see merit in what has been put forward today. All those things will be considered going forward.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Commission member for the answer. Last week, we had International Women's Day, and we debated women in politics and increasing the number of them. Has the Commission ever reached out to women MLAs who have had children — quite a few are

having children — to see what facilities they may need and what may be needed in the future?

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for the question. I am not aware of any specific time that the Commission has written to Members who have had children, but I am sure that Commission members are listening today, taking that on board and will follow up on it.

**Mr Mathison:** I thank the Commission member for the answer. In the interests of trying to create as family-friendly a working environment as possible in the Assembly, would the Commission consider undertaking a review of the adequacy of baby-changing facilities in the Building?

**Mr Clarke:** I am happy to take the Member's view on board and ask the Assembly Commission to consider it for a response.

**3.00 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 8 has already been answered, so we will move on to question 9.

## **Portraits: Parliament Buildings**

9. **Mr Allister** asked the Assembly Commission whether it will consider displaying a portrait of the head of state within Parliament Buildings. (AQO 198/22-27)

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Member for his question. He first raised the issue in a question for written answer on 15 January 2024, and, as he will know, he then wrote to ask the Assembly Commission formally to consider the proposal. His correspondence is tabled for the Assembly Commission's meeting later today, at which it will be given initial consideration.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Member agree that, given that the walls of this place are bedecked with portraits of the great and the not-so-good, it really is a shame that the head of state is not included in the display? Is the Assembly ashamed of that situation? When will it be addressed so that, in this devolved Assembly, there will at least be a portrait of His Majesty displayed?

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As I said in my previous response, we will meet for the first time as the new Assembly Commission and will give the matter initial consideration. The

Member will recognise that significant work was undertaken in the previous mandate to review the items that are displayed in the Building, and, as a result, there is a carefully balanced collection of items and images, taking account of all political perspectives. It has been received well by visitors. We will discuss the matter later today, and I am sure that the Member will be given an update as soon as possible.

## Roof Repair: Parliament Buildings

10. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on repair work to the roof of Parliament Buildings. (AQO 199/22-27)

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for her question. The Assembly Commission has obtained expert advice on the necessary repairs to the roof of Parliament Buildings. Any urgent holding repairs that have been identified by those experts have been carried out, along with some temporary protective works for health and safety purposes.

Until recently, the Assembly Commission had refrained from undertaking a full range of remedial works, based on advice that doing so could prejudice the Commission's legal position. As the Member will be aware, the Commission has issued proceedings against Hamilton Architects LLP and Tracey Brothers Ltd for negligence, breach of statutory duty and breach of contract arising from roof defects. The Assembly Commission recently received advice that the ongoing deterioration and associated health and safety concerns now meant that the legal position had changed and that a full suite of remedial works should be pursued. As a result, the Assembly Commission is now moving to appoint contractors under a construction and procurement delivery framework to undertake repairs, prevent any further deterioration and ensure the health and safety of all Building users. Those repairs will address the issues that relate to damaged stonework and resolve the ongoing issues of water ingress in Parliament Buildings. The Assembly Commission will continue its legal action against Hamilton Architects LLP and Tracey Brothers Ltd to recover the full cost of those repairs.

**Ms Forsythe:** I thank the Member for his response. Does he have an indication of the timescale for the completion of those works?

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for her supplementary question. Unfortunately, at present, the Assembly Commission is unable to determine the timescale for the work to

commence. The timescale can be determined only when the scope and requirements for the works, taking into account the availability of materials, especially the stonework, disruption to Assembly business, health and safety and so on, have been finalised.

**Mr McCrossan:** This is an important matter for the Assembly. It has been going on since 2014-15. Can the Member shed any light on why it has taken so long to get to this point and, indeed, to take legal action?

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his question, which is valid. The delay has, at all times, been informed by legal advice. For the Assembly Commission to have proceeded with the repairs without allowing the parties to inspect the damage and obtain their own advice on liability would have prejudiced the Commission's legal position.

**Mr Allister:** Can the Member advise the House precisely the stage that the legal proceedings have reached? Are pleadings closed? Has there been a review of the case before the judge? At what stage are we?

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his question. He has asked many questions on that very matter. Given that the legal proceedings are in train, I suggest that the Commission consider the question and write to the Member.

## MLA-sponsored Events: Parliament Buildings

11. **Mr Beattie** asked the Assembly Commission to outline how many MLA-sponsored events were held in Parliament Buildings between March 2022 and March 2024. (AQO 200/22-27)

**Mr McGrath:** Between March 2022 and March 2024, there have been 582 Member-sponsored events.

**Mr Beattie:** Thank you. I knew that the answer would be very much to the point. Will the Commission look at bids to run events that could not get cross-community support? If we do not want this place to be a cold house for certain groups, we need to look at other means of doing that. I will give a clear example: some military veteran groups feel that they cannot get cross-community consent to hold an event here. Will the Commission look at that?

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The Commission is



going to look at reviewing the policy. A number of issues need to be addressed as part of that, not least the imbalance in the number of events that are organised by particular political groupings. Some political parties have sponsored five times the number of events compared with others. The 'Events in Parliament Buildings and its Grounds Policy' is due to be reviewed in May this year. If the Member were to write to the Commission, those views could be considered as part of that.

## Youth Assembly: Update

12. **Mr Middleton** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an update on the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. (AQO 201/22-27)

**Ms Ennis:** The Northern Ireland Youth Assembly successfully recruited its second cohort of 90 Members aged 12 to 16 in October 2023. As with the first cohort, the new Youth Assembly Members are a diverse group of young people from every constituency and represent all applicable section 75 groups. The first plenary meeting of the second mandate of the Youth Assembly was held in Parliament Buildings in December 2023, during which former Youth Assembly Members officially handed over to the new Members, who spoke on their hopes for the new mandate.

In January 2024, the Youth Assembly conducted its Big Youth Survey. Almost 1,800 young people shared the issues that they wanted their Youth Assembly to focus on. The second plenary meeting, chaired by the Speaker in February 2024, gave Youth Assembly Members an opportunity to debate the issues from the Big Youth Survey and vote on their top three priorities. Based on those priorities, three Youth Assembly Committees have now been established: Education, Health and Rights and Equality. With the recent resumption of normal Assembly business, the Youth Assembly Members are looking forward to engaging directly with Assembly Committees, MLAs and Ministers on those issues and others as their work programme develops.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for her response. I put on record our thanks to the Assembly staff for the fantastic way in which they run the Youth Assembly and that initiative. Can the Member shed any light on plans to engage harder-to-reach young people who do not necessarily put themselves forward and to ensure that harder-to-reach groups in our communities benefit from the Youth Assembly as well?

**Ms Ennis:** I take the Member's point. When it comes to how Youth Assembly Members are selected, the recruitment is a random process. It was co-designed by the young people. First, all applications were anonymised, and 54 Members were then selected on a constituency basis. It was about trying to ensure geographic spread, but I take the Member's point. It is good that we are including the section 75 categories when it comes to such things as gender, religious background, race, care experience, disability and so on. When it comes to geographic spread, it is clear that we need input from every section of society, whether from areas that are rural or urban, hard-to-reach or otherwise, or in towns or cities. I take the Member's point. When further discussions come before the Assembly Commission, we will be sure to raise the points that he made.

## Printers: Constituency Offices

13. **Mr Frew** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an update on replacing constituency office printers. (AQO 202/22-27)

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission has been engaging with parties and independent Members on the provision of constituency office printing capability. That engagement, which took place in October and November 2023, made it clear that a new print solution is overdue and that Members have additional requirements to support, such as scanning.

A survey of all Members was issued on 10 November 2023 to better understand their requirements and preferred approach to delivering printers in constituency offices. At the Assembly Commission's meeting later today, it will consider the provision of constituency office print capability, and, in the meantime, the support contract for the existing constituency office printers has been extended until November 2024.

**Mr Frew:** If I am hearing the Member correctly, that means the extension of the contract will delay the roll-out of new printers. Is that right?

**Miss McAllister:** Thank you for your supplementary question. Unfortunately, during the period in which the Assembly was not functioning normally, the Assembly Commission was reluctant to replace the existing printer fleet. The traditional approach of providing a standard printer for each constituency office is outdated. So, as part of the ongoing discussions in the new Assembly Commission,

we will be looking at a wide range of requirements and at whether it may be better to allow Members to procure their own constituency office print capability. I understand that the delay until November 2024 may not satisfy the Member. However, if we do change things in the new Assembly Commission, that may enable Members to procure better and more suitable printers. In the meantime, if you do not need to, do not print.

## Family and Carer Friendly Hours

14. **Mr Kelly** asked the Assembly Commission to outline what measures it has taken to provide family and carer friendly working hours for Assembly staff. (AQO 203/22-27)

**Mr Butler:** We do not often get to question 14. I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission recognises the substantial impact that being a carer can have on an employee's working life, and the important contribution that carers make towards the economy and wider society. The Assembly Commission has a specific policy entitled, 'Support for Carers: Guidance for Managers & Staff', which sets out the support that is available to staff with caring responsibilities.

On the support that is available, the Assembly Commission has a flexible working and partial retirement policy, which allows a member of staff to adjust their working pattern either permanently or on a temporary basis. The special leave policy gives staff the statutory right to time off for care of dependents. Although the statutory right is to unpaid time off, the Assembly Commission may, in certain circumstances, give staff a limited amount of paid time off work. In addition, the policy provides for non-statutory time off for domestic reasons. Extended unpaid special leave can also be granted, subject to business need. The parental leave policy enables an eligible staff member to take a set period of unpaid leave from work in order to take care of a child. The shared parental leave policy sets out the rights of staff members to take shared parental leave. That allows staff to choose how to share the care of their child during their first year or first year of adoption. The annual leave policy makes provision for the carry-over of annual leave, which may assist staff who are aware that they will need a long period of annual leave during the following year for caring purposes. The staff hours at work policy affords a staff member the opportunity to accrue additional time worked, which can be taken during recess or when business is quieter.

I have summarised the main policies for staff, but, of course, we recognise that, as a political institution, it is often the case that staff support is required out of hours.

**Mr Kelly:** Thank you for the answer. Do you know the number or percentage of staff who have taken advantage of the flexibilities, which, I understand, are quite comprehensive?

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I have some details here. A total of 73 Assembly Commission staff currently have flexible working arrangements in place, of whom 28 are male and 45 are female. If the Member needs any more detail, I am sure that the Assembly Commission will be happy to write to him.

**Mr McCrossan:** What plans does the Assembly Commission have to provide crèche facilities for the children of staff members?

**Mr Butler:** I may have covered that in an answer to a previous question. It is something that the Assembly Commission will be looking at.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 15 has already been answered. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Before we return to the debate on the applicability motion, I advise Members that I have been notified that the proposer of the Adjournment topic will not speak on Craigavon City Park and Lakes today. I understand that the Member intends to reschedule his topic to a future date. That will be a matter for the Business Committee.

## Private Members' Business

### Regulation (EU) 2023/2411: Applicability Motion

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That regulation (EU) 2023/2411 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 October 2023 on the protection of geographical indications for craft and industrial products and amending regulations (EU) 2017/1001 and (EU) 2019/1753 should be added to the Windsor framework by the United Kingdom and the European Union within the Joint Committee in accordance with article 13(4) of that framework.*  
— [Mr Buckley.]

**Mr Brown:** As is probably clear already, my party will vote for the motion, although, in somewhat bizarre circumstances, those who tabled it will not. As a member of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee, I feel that it is important to note that applicability motions fall outside the remit of that Committee and serve only as an advisory function to the UK Government on whether new EU regulations should apply in Northern Ireland.

It is important to be clear that, while the motion is neither binding nor definitive, it is true that the UK Government cannot apply any new EU legislation until an applicability motion has been heard.

### 3.15 pm

The First Minister and deputy First Minister should have tabled the motion, and, whilst Members have referred to the fact that those who support the motion's intent could have tabled it themselves, it would have been wholly more appropriate and sent a much more positive message if the First Minister and deputy First Minister had jointly tabled the motion within two weeks of notification, as set out in the Windsor framework. Instead, we have an unfortunate precedent in which individual Members may seek the mirage of shooting down EU law in the Chamber when the motion does nothing of the sort.

Ultimately, the UK Government can choose to override the direction of any applicability motion that is passed today, should the Joint Committee decide that the law would not create a new regulatory border or if exceptional circumstances apply. Those criteria must inform our comments and how we vote today, and I have heard nothing substantive from those who

intend to vote down the motion about how the regulatory border would exist, except to protect the integrity of indigenous craft products. Even then, as others have outlined, such an approach already exists for agricultural geographical indication (GI) products such as certain whiskies, apples and potatoes.

The debate also takes place in the lamentable context where the votes of 20% of Members will count for less, as the anachronistic demands of cross-community support devalue the votes of those of us who do not define ourselves on a binary nationalist or unionist basis. Whilst our votes will be counted, that fact reflects the continued democratic deficit in the Chamber, something to which the Member for Upper Bann made clear his aversion in an entirely different context several times in the debate.

The DUP may think that it has secured some sort of trump card on influencing the applicability of any EU law when all that it is doing is sending a message to businesses that the Chamber does not know where it stands. Are we supporting dual market access and all the benefits that it brings?

**Mr Kingston:** Will the Member take a point?

**Mr Brown:** Certainly.

**Mr Kingston:** Will the Member accept that we have a duty to protect our place in the United Kingdom internal market, which was damaged by the Northern Ireland protocol? While there may be advantages to having access to the EU market and any other market, that cannot be at the expense of our place in the UK internal market, which is where the majority of our trade is done.

**Mr Brown:** Any damage that emanates from what the Member is talking about is solely a result of Brexit. That is the Brexit that his party supported and the hard-right Tory Brexit that his party pushed through and that had its origins in the confidence-and-supply deal under the May Government and further Tory Governments. Our primary responsibility here is to protect businesses in Northern Ireland, and that is exactly what the legislation sets out to do.

Are we supporting dual market access and all the benefits that it brings, the very thing that the DUP leader is on record as supporting and that senior members of the DUP and other parties were promoting in Washington all last week? Or are we going to jingoistically and ideologically try to vote down any legislation that would support and enhance dual market activity and,

in the case of the motion, rule out valuable protections for Northern Irish producers? You cannot have it both ways, and the message that we send out today, on the first of what will likely be many applicability motions in this mandate, is the same one that we send to investors, industry and, indeed, our home-grown craft businesses. We know where we stand as a party on the benefits of dual market access, and it is clear that the DUP and others do not.

The new regulation would establish a new EU-wide system placing additional regulations known as "non-agricultural geographical indications" on craft and industrial products where their origin is of intrinsic value to the quality, brand and significance of that product. Examples of Northern Irish products that may fall under the scheme might include Irish linen, and, in GB, it could apply to products like Sheffield steel, Harris tweed and Savile Row apparel. Similar statutory protections already exist in the UK to safeguard traditional food and drink products, such as Cornish pasties, and the new legislation will simply extend a similar principle to manufactured craft or industrial products. Such safeguards protect valued local industries against cheap knock-off merchandise from those in other countries or, indeed, from within the UK market — the leader of the Opposition rightly identified them earlier as the "Del Boy industries" — that may opportunistically seek to trade on their brand value, which we should all, surely, be keen to guard against.

The leader of the UUP said that he has not had the time to scrutinise the legislation and indicated that, as a result, he will vote against the motion. I asked him whether he had read the comprehensive information pack provided to Members by RaISe or the UK Government's explanatory memorandum to the legislation. He rightly pointed out that we must stop and think. Well, we have, and it was not difficult or complex for our party or, indeed, others to conclude that the legislation would have a limited but important and positive impact on local craft and industrial producers in Northern Ireland.

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

**Mr Brown:** Certainly.

**Mr Beattie:** I will raise two points. First, an applicability motion is different from an EU regulation on geographical indicators for craft and industrial products. I said that the regulation needed to be scrutinised, not the applicability motion. Secondly, please list the

firms that you have spoken to and asked about the effect that this will have on them in the medium to long term — not today but the medium-to-long term — a list that you can stand over.

**Mr Brown:** I am satisfied on the basis of information that has been provided to me and, indeed, all Members in the Chamber that the legislation can have a positive impact on local producers in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, it is up to each Member to make their decision, but has the Member read the briefing pack, which gives consideration to the potential positives and negatives of the legislation?

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

**Mr Brown:** Yes.

**Mr Beattie:** The answer is yes, of course, I have, as has everyone else. Everyone who has read it is coming up with a different interpretation: 90 MLAs with different interpretations. That does not answer my question. My question is this: which subject matter experts and businesses have you spoken to about what the long-term effects will be? Please, list them for me.

**Mr Brown:** It is clear that it will have a relatively minimal impact on producers in Northern Ireland. That is clear from the briefing that we have seen, but we see the positive benefits from the agriculture geographical indicators that protect whiskey products, apples and potatoes in Northern Ireland. This is like-for-like legislation for these protections; it is just extended to craft and industrial products.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. It is important that we draw the distinction between non-agriculture GIs and agriculture GIs, because that is the point of the debate today. What is the view of the Alliance Party on democratic scrutiny? We have listened to the Member and, indeed, the Member for Lagan Valley Sorcha Eastwood rubbish the democratic scrutiny processes that are in place. Mr Beattie is right that this is an applicability motion: a Stormont brake for another situation. Does the Alliance Party support democratic debate and scrutiny of the regulations in the Chamber? Does the Member believe that the EU should be above and beyond and that we should just take it on goodwill that Europe is acting in our best interests and let it get on with it?

**Mr Brown:** What we are doing right now is democratic scrutiny, and I am pleased that, after almost two years of being an elected MLA

for South Down, I am finally able to fulfil that role.

**Mr Buckley:** What businesses have you engaged with?

**Mr Brown:** I have not directly engaged with any businesses. Has the Member for Upper Bann?

**Mr Speaker:** Through the Speaker, please.

**Mr Brown:** I will continue, Mr Speaker, as I have taken quite a few interventions.

After all, the approach taken by the legislation follows that established by the existing GI schemes for agri-food, as I mentioned, and wines and spirits. Therefore, we can only deduce from the DUP and the UUP that they would be against the GI schemes for our agri-food sector and drinks sector if they were presented today. We see clear evidence that those opposing the motion are not doing so because of a considered view of its merits but because it carries the label of EU law. That is no basis for the Chamber to make decisions that impact on people's lives and livelihoods. The Member for Upper Bann talked of the imposition of checks. The DUP seems to have arrived at a position where any checks on goods entering Northern Ireland are a bad thing; that trade friction is a bad thing. If only we had an economic union that would allow frictionless trade with our most important and significant trading partners.

The DUP talks of the cost of policing the outworkings of the legislation, but one Member's policing is another Member's protection. In prioritising anti-protocol rhetoric over facts and evidence, we risk losing sight of the merits of the legislation in front of us. Applying the legislation here via the Windsor framework will allow these home-grown products to benefit from dual market access. Indeed, it is highly likely that similar GB-based products will also seek the benefits of dual market access anyway, as the UK Government have made clear via their explanatory memorandum that GB products will have their own protections but will still be able to seek access to the new EU scheme and the export benefits and protections that it brings. Similarly, Northern Irish non-agricultural GIs will continue to have a route to trade and seek protection in the GB market as well, and it is not anticipated by the UK Government that that will create insurmountable practical issues for east-west trade, as clearly demonstrated by the current coexistence of trademarks with existing GI schemes for agricultural products. It is clear in

the explanatory memorandum that the direction of travel in terms of UK Government policy is to avoid any new regulatory border of any substance. There is therefore little in that regard for the Joint Committee to consider when it considers the applicability motion.

This is a highly niche area, blown out of proportion as the first public test of the Donaldson deal. The real impact is the message that we send to craft and manufacturing businesses and the wider private sector around the stability and regulatory certainty of investing and thriving in this place, a message that we should all reflect on deeply today.

**Mr Allister:** Mr Brown has tempted me into some preliminary remarks before I come to the substance of what I want to say. We have just had 10 minutes of exposition of the value of the geographical indicator legislation and a tirade against anyone who could ever be opposed to it. The astounding thing is that the proponents of it were prepared to see it fall, because they did not table a motion to approve it. If they had read the Windsor framework regulations, they would know that regulation 18 says that, if no motion of approval is brought, the regulation in that sense falls. The effect of voting it down today is the same as never having brought an approval resolution under regulation 18.

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

**Mr Allister:** When I finish the point. Mr Brown tells us how foolish we are not to approve something that he had no convictions about, because he did not bother to table a resolution to approve it. I will give way.

**Mr Brown:** Clearly the Member was not paying attention to my early comments about my preference to have seen this tabled by FM and dFM. Is the Member aware of the provision that, if no Member tables an applicability motion, it defaults to the Speaker to table it anyway? There are safeguards to ensure that the applicability motion is heard.

**Mr Allister:** The Member misunderstands the regulations. The motion can only be brought initially by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Failing that, it can be any Member, including the Member for South Down Mr Brown. "Mr Brown can table a motion", the regulations might as well say. However, Mr Brown chose not to table a motion, because, despite all he says here today, Mr Brown was not in the least exercised about this. He was happy to see it fall, and then suddenly, when a

motion was brought, he discovered an interest in this and an enthusiasm for it. He had no courage of his convictions to table the motion in the first place, and therefore, under regulation 18, he was prepared to see it fall. He is really in a pretty untenable position as far as his approach to the debate today is concerned.

Coming to the debate itself, I welcome the token resistance to EU colonial rule. For me, the fundamental issue, whether there are merits or demerits in this proposition, is the constitutional issue that we are being governed by laws that we do not make and cannot change.

Even today, we cannot change that which is before us. That is why I describe it as EU colonial rule. They made the law. It is their law, not ours. It is a law that we cannot even change. Regardless of the merits or demerits, it does not deserve democratic assent, because to give that consent is to consent to colonial rule. I welcome the token resistance that it represents in that regard.

### 3.30 pm

I also welcome the progress, in a sense, that it represents for the DUP, because the last time that we debated the applicability of EU laws in the House was on 8 December 2020, when we had a DUP Minister, quite astoundingly from my point of view, propose the imposition of not one but 45 different EU directives into our domestic law. What Mr Lyons said on that occasion was:

*"They will ensure that Northern Ireland's primary legislation that governs plant health and animal health and welfare continues to operate ... in a way that aligns with the Northern Ireland protocol." — [Official Report (Hansard), 8 December 2020, Bound Volume 133, p476, col 1].*

It certainly is progress to have the DUP table a motion today disavowing alignment with the EU protocol. It certainly is progress that it has learnt, I hope, a lesson from December 2020, when all Members of the House, with the exception of Mr Wells and me, voted to impose 45 animal health and plant health measures, including the measure that you cannot have British soil brought into Northern Ireland. It is progress that the DUP has woken up to the issue and is now seeking to resist additions to the protocol.

**Mr O'Toole:** I appreciate the Member giving way. Speaking of people who voted to impose things, though he calls me, along with other

parties, a protocol implementer, I never had the opportunity to vote in total and overall to implement the protocol, which is a good thing in the context of Brexit being a very bad thing. Has he spoken to his new colleagues and friends Mr Habib and Mr Tice who, unlike anybody in the Chamber — unionist, nationalist, Leave, Remain, other — did something that none of us ever did, which was to vote to make the protocol law? Is he aware that his new partners did that? Certainly, no one in this Chamber can make that claim. Has he raised that with them?

**Mr Allister:** The Member, if he wants to learn from Mr Tice and Mr Habib, could do very well, because they have discovered emphatically just how pernicious and how constitutionally destructive the protocol is. If Mr O'Toole has seen the light in respect of these matters and wants to come on board on the right side of the argument, he would be very welcome indeed.

I welcome the progress that has been made. The watershed moment was in December 2020, when the DUP foolishly voted into play 45 EU directives. There was another detrimental watershed moment, and that was when, under the Donaldson deal, the DUP accepted annex 2 of the protocol. Yes, we have all these measures on applicability resolutions for future EU law, and we have the Stormont brake, for what it is worth, for amendments to existing law, but, as Mrs Dodds pointed out this morning, we have the entirety of annex 2 of the protocol. There are 287 laws in annex 2 — I printed off the titles of them; pages upon pages upon pages — that are entirely beyond the reach of this House and that are applied automatically in perpetuity, with no consent ever sought or obtained from the House. The reality of the Donaldson deal is that not one syllable of any one of those 287 laws is disapplied; rather, those are now accepted in the Donaldson deal. They are not some incidentals. Amongst —

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

**Mr Allister:** Yes, certainly.

**Mr Kingston:** Something that we and all unionists in the Chamber will agree on is the damage done by the Northern Ireland protocol, which was imposed on this country by Boris Johnson and his colleagues in the Conservative Party. The question for those of us on the unionist Benches is this: what are we doing about it? The stand that the DUP took delivered change. The EU said that it would not renegotiate the deal, but it came back to the negotiating table because of the stand that the

DUP took. Even then, when we got the Windsor framework, and then when improvements were made to it, we held out for more, and we worked with our Government. Will the Member not recognise the progress that was made in 'Safeguarding the Union', which will be implemented and from which we will see an action plan?

Although we have disagreements on tactics, will the Member not recognise that the DUP twice obtained substantial progress on restoring Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom internal market and within the UK? He should give us credit for the progress that was made.

**Mr Allister:** I recognise exactly what the DUP is doing. Under the Donaldson deal, it is implementing the protocol. By accepting annex 2 and its 287 unaltered and unalterable EU laws, it is now implementing, not opposing, the protocol. To be a Minister in this House, you must, by law, implement the protocol. That is the product of the case of *Rooney v Poots*. That was the ruling in the High Court. It is the product of the Pledge of Office that every DUP and other Minister has taken. They have pledged to implement the protocol as part of the law, and they are doing so today without one syllable of annex 2 having been altered.

What does the Donaldson deal include? This is the point to which I was coming. It includes the most constitutionally devastating part of the protocol. It includes the imposition, in annex 2, under article 5(4) of the protocol, of the customs code of the EU, thus making Northern Ireland subject to a customs code that decrees unambiguously that GB, as a non-EU member, is a third or foreign country. This is what the DUP is now implementing: a protocol that states that, under the customs code, GB is a foreign country, and hence the border in the Irish Sea and hence —

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Allister, just a moment.

**Mr Allister:** — the need for all the checks that are there.

**Mr Speaker:** This is a really interesting debate, and I am quite enjoying it, but it is not really on applicability, so I ask that we get back to the subject of the debate and not broaden it to the extent that you are currently doing.

**Mr Allister:** I am sure that Mr Kingston will take the rebuke for having misled me down that particular path. *[Laughter.]* Let us be very clear, however: that was a watershed moment. That

was when the DUP swallowed the camel of the protocol, and today it is implementing it.

In that context, yes, it is good to see this token resistance to EU law.

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

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Ms Sugden:** I always like to consider such matters practically, so, to take the Speaker's point and return to the subject of the debate, what is the impact of the motion? Ultimately, for me, the motion is talking about protecting Northern Ireland within the EU market. Will it have an impact on our internal UK market, however? That will determine how I vote today. For those makers of crafts or of whiskey, is the biggest market that we are trying to protect for them the UK market or the EU market? Can someone answer that for me? If it is the UK market, perhaps we need to be voting alongside the DUP.

This is about practical outworkings for businesses on the ground. If businesses are better protected in the EU market because there is more of an outcome for them there, do we go with that? It is about looking at this in the context of how it impacts on people on the ground.

**Mr Allister:** It is certainly not about whiskey. Rather, it is craft matters that are covered. Where it impacts on us as part of the UK internal market, of which we are supposed to be part, is as follows. If enhanced protection is given to a product that has a GI, anything that competes with that product in the NI market, because we are regarded as part of the EU market, because this is EU law in that regard, is put at a disadvantage. That is why it would be disadvantageous to our general UK market and is capable of creating further restrictions and fettering of trade coming from GB.

With respect, the more fundamental question is whether it is right that we, in the House, sit like nodding dogs, nodding through legislation that we have not made and cannot change. What are we here for? We are here as lawmakers to make laws for our people in Northern Ireland. Under the protocol, we are inhibited from doing that. The majority in the House say, "What about it? Just nod it through". No. It is, above all, a democratic issue. We should not assent to laws that we do not make and cannot change. That is enough to guarantee my vote in the No Lobby.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Buckley to make a winding-up speech.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank all Members for their contributions. Whether we agree or disagree on the content of particular non-agricultural GIs, it is important to say that the very fact that we are having the debate in the Chamber is progress, which is to be welcomed.

I take on board Mr Allister's point about regulation 18: whether or not there was an applicability motion, the impact is the same. I tend to look at this from a very honest perspective, and I believe that, wherever we have the opportunity to put on record our concerns about, or acceptance of, a particular issue, it is only right and fitting that we do so in the House. We have done that today.

I appreciate that this is a hugely technical piece. Ms Sugden highlighted some of the technicalities. Looking at the evidence that is in place and at the UK explanatory memorandum raises varying levels of concern, albeit that Members can look at it from different perspectives, as they have done throughout the debate. The Democratic Unionist Party tabled the applicability motion using the affirmative procedure — that is, procedurally, how it had to be tabled — but will ultimately and decisively vote against the regulation because of the potential that it will create a trade border and regulatory border.

At its core, the rationale for today's debate is quite simple. The Assembly will vote on the motion about the proposed regulation, and it will be clear whether it enjoys cross-community support. Those watching today's proceedings, whether they are local constituents, UK Cabinet officials or even Brussels legislators, should be under no illusion: the votes that are cast in this place matter; the voices of the elected representatives in Northern Ireland matter. For that reason, this exercise is worthwhile. It is worthwhile if for no other reason than Members will democratically express their viewpoints.

I recognise the points that have been made across the House about the lack of information and the lack of scrutiny that preceded today's debate. That is very much against the grain of how we do business through the Committee scrutiny and the debates and votes at First Reading and Second Reading. However, these are the procedures that are laid in front of us, and it is only right that we go through them.

We are serious in our desire to protect Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom and its



internal market. Today's debate and vote will be proof of that.

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

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 49; Noes 32.*

## AYES

### NATIONALIST:

*Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Miss Brogan, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mrs Mason, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.*

### OTHER:

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

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Mason and Mr O'Toole.*

## NOES

### UNIONIST:

*Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mr Beattie, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Robinson, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Harvey and Mr Middleton.*

*Total Votes 81 Total Ayes 49 [60.5%]*

*Nationalist Votes 33 Nationalist Ayes 33 [100.0%]*

*Unionist Votes 32 Unionist Ayes 0 [0.0%]*

*Other Votes 16 Other Ayes 16 [100.0%]*

*Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).*

**Mr O'Toole:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order — I ask for your advice on this — given that the overwhelming majority of the Assembly voted to maintain our dual market access and benefits for small craft producers, that you write to the UK Minister of the Crown, who is named in the relevant legislation, to ask whether —

**A Member:** That is not a point of order.

**Mr O'Toole:** — this is a point of order — that Minister will give clarity on whether they genuinely believe, unlike what is stated in the explanatory memorandum, that this represents a new regulatory border? Thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** That is not a point of order. The motion is negatived.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In light of the discussion during the debate from Mr Brown and others, could you clarify for the House the effect under regulation 18 of the Windsor framework regulations? Is the effect the same when there has not been approval for a motion such as today's, which has been declined on a cross-community basis, and when a motion has never been tabled? Is the net result the same?

## 4.00 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Paragraph 18(1) of schedule 6B to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a qualified duty on the UK Government to not agree to add a new UK Act to the Windsor framework unless the Assembly has indicated support for its application by passing an applicability motion. That duty arises irrespective of whether or not an applicability motion has been tabled and debated.

**Mr Brooks:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For clarity on a question that I asked the Economy Minister earlier and to keep myself right, I declare an interest as I have a close family member who works in Spirit Aerosystems.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Mr Brooks. That is noted.

Members may take their ease while we change the top Table before the motion on holiday hunger.

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

## Holiday Hunger

**Mr Baker:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly recognises the high levels of child poverty and the increasing costs associated with sending children and young people to school; further recognises that the rising cost of food is putting many families under huge financial pressure; acknowledges the importance of children and young people receiving a nutritious meal and the role that plays in their learning and development; agrees that the cut to the school holiday food grant scheme has had the most impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward a plan to end holiday hunger.*

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

**Mr Baker:** Children and young people deserve the best start in life. As workers and families continue to face financial pressures, our most disadvantaged children are paying the price. Savage Tory cuts to vital programmes in schools, such as holiday hunger payments, Healthy Happy Minds, the Engage programme and extended schools, have targeted the most vulnerable children and young people. Along with the rising costs of school meals, uniforms and transport, those cuts have left workers and families in crisis.

We know that children who receive free school meals have lower attendance rates and are more likely to leave school without any GCSEs. We must do all that we can to support our most disadvantaged children, address inequalities and give them every opportunity to flourish in life. Working together across the Chamber, we can stand up collectively and fight back against the toxic Tory cuts that have pushed more and more children into poverty. We can help workers and families and ensure that they no longer have to choose either to heat their home or to feed their children.

During school time, schools work hard to take extra steps to ensure that children receive a meal. Some schools provide free breakfast clubs, and others have tried to extend free school meals where possible, but schools cannot do that themselves. Their efforts to feed children have resulted in higher expenses. Some principals have even paid for extra school meals from their own pockets.

I commend the small businesses and community and youth groups that have gone over and above to ensure that children do not go hungry over the holidays. In my constituency, local groups, clubs and businesses are supporting schools, helping to give children a breakfast and ensuring that young people are ready to learn. Monkstown Boxing Club has been a shining example in the effort to support children and families. In the past year alone, it has supported many children and families by ensuring that they have meals during the school holidays. As Tory cuts continually let down our young people, our community, youth and sports groups have stepped up during the holidays to feed our children, educate them and ensure that they are safe and happy.

Let us commit to ensuring that our schools, community groups and youth clubs no longer have to support children by themselves. Let us commit to working across party lines to deliver real change for our children and young people. I urge the Education Minister, working alongside the Executive, to bring forward a plan to end holiday hunger and give our children every chance to flourish in life. It is the least that our children deserve. I ask Members to support the motion and the amendment.

**Ms Nicholl:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*After "plan to end holiday hunger" insert;*

*"and urgently progress and publish the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals."*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Kate. You have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to wind. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

**Ms Nicholl:** I thank the proposers for tabling such an important motion. As an Assembly, we have so many issues and priorities that we need to address, but few are as important or urgent as poverty, specifically child poverty. As

Danny said, our children deserve the best. When children have a good start in life, a safe and stable home and emotional support within their families and communities, they are more likely to thrive and have better outcomes throughout their life. The Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) report on child poverty, which showed that 20% of our children are living in relative poverty, is deeply concerning. Those one in five are not just a statistic; they are real people whom we are failing. In 2024, it is wholly unacceptable.

The purpose of the motion is not to address the root cause of poverty. We know that we need a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy. Moreover, we know what has to go into that strategy, because the sector and the expert panel have told us and been very clear about what we need to do. The motion seeks to recognise the very real impact that the cut to the school holiday food grant has had, call for interim support and recognise the contribution that the voluntary and community sector has been making. They have shouldered the burden in the absence of our action.

The rising cost of food is putting many families under huge financial pressure. People are struggling. We see and hear about it every day in our constituency offices. Food bank usage is at an all-time high. I read an article a few months ago by a principal in Craigavon who described one of her pupils fainting from hunger and a parent who literally had 16p in their purse. The only food that they were able to take home was a hamper that the school had collected for. That is shocking.

I remember sitting and listening to the news while I was feeding my son porridge. Dr Julie-Ann Maney came on the radio, and she talked about the reality of child poverty and hunger in the hospitals. Toddlers and children were squirreling food away in their nappies so that they would have something to eat later on. It struck me that, for so many children in our city and across Northern Ireland, it is just not getting any better. The numbers have been so high for so long, and there is no movement on that.

When schools close for the holidays, it should not signal the end of support for children who need it most. No child should have to worry about going hungry over the school holidays. The reality is that the cut to the school holiday food scheme has had the greatest impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable children. We support the motion's call for the Minister of Education to bring forward a plan to end holiday hunger.

There is also a gender element. Research by the Women's Regional Consortium and Ulster University found that the impact of the cost-of-living emergency is forcing women to skip meals and go hungry in order to feed their children. Anyone who has experienced poverty and the all-consuming, debilitating shame that comes with it knows that it does not just impact physical and mental health; it often results in people getting into deeper debt. The school holiday food scheme payments have been a lifeline for so many people.

The Alliance amendment seeks to:

*"urgently progress and publish the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals."*

I wish to concentrate my remarks on that matter. Children from working families on low incomes are often not in receipt of free school meals and are going hungry. Teachers on already stretched budgets are doing what they can. In my constituency of South Belfast, the principal of Malone Integrated College, Mrs Moore, has been using grant money to provide free food for pupils. She said that if they did not get that meal in school, they would not get one hot meal that day. We need to address that. My colleague Nuala McAllister told me of another example in North Belfast, where one school was able to use money from Belfast City Council to provide a free meal for all pupils for the month of January. Every single child in that school, bar one, availed themselves of that. The criteria therefore really need to be amended.

I have spoken about childcare investment being an anti-poverty tool, and it is welcome that there was cross-party support for that. We have also recently spoken about school uniforms being made more affordable. Hopefully, the debate will contribute to how we as an Assembly address the multiple levels of vulnerability. There is no silver bullet for this. Rather, it is about how we address the multiple levels of vulnerability.

I will finish by reading something that Sheena McMullen from Action for Children said:

*"We know that child poverty ruins childhoods and damages children's life chances. Children who experience poverty and hardship do worse at school, earn less as adults, suffer poorer health and are more likely to need help from a social worker. This hardship is resulting from structural and systemic barriers within the welfare and economic system, which most families have no say in. But you, and your Assembly and Executive colleagues, do."*

She is right. We must do everything that we can to eradicate child poverty, to address inequalities and to ease the burden of impossible choices that people in 2024 have to make. To heat or eat is unacceptable.

**Ms Brownlee:** I support the motion and the amendment, and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

It is the job of a Government to protect the most vulnerable in society. Children, by their nature, are vulnerable. They cannot support themselves by getting a job and securing an income, so they must rely on others to provide them with the basic necessities of life. It is a parent or a guardian's duty to provide that support, but, in the past few years, doing so has become very challenging for many, particularly those in low-income households.

Poverty rarely has a single cause, and it can be difficult to separate causes and effects. It is clear, however, that factors including low wages, worklessness, childcare, opportunities and the rising cost of living are all significant drivers of child poverty. It can be a vicious circle: adults who grow up in poverty tend to earn less, to have a higher risk of unemployment, and therefore pay less tax over their lifetime, and to be more likely to need much more support. As a party, we are committed to working with the Executive to support children and young people and families who are in poverty and to breaking that cycle. It is therefore crucial that all Ministers take a collaborative approach to tackling the issue.

As is stated in the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report:

*"Siloed working can lead to siloed interventions and ultimately to poorer outcomes. Children experiencing poverty interact with multiple services, across both the statutory and voluntary and community sectors, therefore effective partnership working is key to improving outcomes."*

I welcome the earlier acknowledgement of Monkstown Boxing Club, which is very much at the heart of the community, helping everyone. I commend all the voluntary groups who do that daily.

It is also critical that clear monitoring mechanisms be co-designed and understood in order to measure objectives and outcomes and to enable data to be collated and reported in a timely fashion, as well as for accountability and

ownership from various Departments to be understood clearly by all involved.

There is growing evidence of a link between poverty and educational underachievement. That evidence shows that there is a massive 24% gap in the attainment of GCSEs for those children who are receiving free school meals. The NIAO publication reports a gap of 11 to 15 years in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas. It also shows that children from deprived backgrounds are four times more likely to develop a mental health problem by the age of 11.

It was also shocking to read that, in the past five years, the inequality gap in the proportion of P1 children who were classed as being obese widened from 45% to 93%, owing to the increase in obesity rates in the most deprived areas, while there was no notable change in the least deprived areas.

Those facts are terrifying and cement my opinion that we need to take action to address the issue. The question is not whether we need to act but how we act. During the pandemic, direct payments were made to eligible families through the Education Authority (EA), partly because it was the most convenient and efficient means of delivering that vital lifeline in extremely difficult times. I want to recognise the work on that scheme by previous Education Ministers Peter Weir and Michelle McIlveen.

#### 4.15 pm

We need to deliver a sustainable, data-based plan to address holiday hunger at the point of need but also to address the range of factors that can cause this need. In other parts of the UK, including England and Wales, previous holiday food grant schemes have incorporated a number of delivery models, including vouchers that can be exchanged for food and combining access to good meals with holiday activities and summer schemes. It is vital that we address all available options to ensure that we deliver the best scheme here.

We have spoken in the Chamber in recent weeks about the need to invest in special educational needs (SEN), the need to invest in our schools estate and the need to support families with uniform costs, these holiday payments and childcare. I know that the Minister will want to do all those things, but I know, of course, that we will need substantial funding to deliver on them.

I reaffirm my support for the motion. I welcome it, and I want to see as much progress as possible on the matter.

**Mr Elliott:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this significant debate. It is absolutely right that the Assembly and, indeed, the Executive coalesce on issues relating to any child going hungry — something that should not happen in today's society in Northern Ireland or, indeed, anywhere else throughout the world. It would be remiss in the extreme not to delve deeper and try to understand what is wrong. That, in 2024, we are aware that any child is going hungry suggests to me that we have much work to do and that we must not stop in our efforts to end childhood hunger in Northern Ireland.

I will quote a short portion from an article in 'The BMJ':

*"Holiday hunger is an under-researched phenomena; it is a contemporary term, but policy makers have been concerned about food insecurity during school holidays since the start of the 20th century. On 27 March 1914, for example, Bradford MP Fred Jowett proposed a bill to 'enable meals to be provided for underfed children during school holidays.' He became concerned about the problem after consulting with a school medical officer who observed a decrease in children's weight during the school holidays."*

Whilst we can rightly wonder at and appreciate the speed of modernisation, regrettably and bewilderingly, it is somewhat incomprehensible that, 110 years from the MP's proposed Bill, we are still debating holiday hunger in relation to children here in Northern Ireland.

The reality is that, when we do delve deeper into the issue, it is not just the child who could go hungry. We know from research and true testimony that, in some instances, parents and carers also skip meals to ensure that their child is fed. I want to pay tribute to all those in community initiatives and groups who not only provide activities and, often, educational events during holidays but offer healthy meals to children the length and breadth of Northern Ireland. We have heard some of these referred to already. However, in regard to tackling the stigma and protecting the dignity of parents in low-income households, it is absolutely on our shoulders, in this Assembly and Executive, to develop strategies and interventions that ensure that no family has to make a decision on whether to eat due to finance.

We have often heard the phrase "heat or eat". It is arguably worse that, in some instances, we have a parent or child who does not even have that choice. Skipping meals for growing children is not a decision that any parent should be faced with in 2024 in any part of the world, least of all here in Northern Ireland. In the longer term, I would love the education system to assess the full value of every child receiving at least one nutritious, balanced and tasty meal every day, not only ensuring that children have a full stomach but that they enjoy healthy, nutritious food and that we revisit and revalue the societal and psychological benefits of eating and sharing together.

I am also concerned that we have the potential for the situation to get worse. If local food production here in Northern Ireland is significantly reduced due to climate change legislation, we could be faced with importing quite a number of food products from other parts of the world that would not be of the same quality as food that we produce here in Northern Ireland and would be more expensive and add many more food miles to the situation. I ask that Members support the motion and the amendment.

**Mrs Mason:** Families are already struggling with the rising costs of uniforms and childcare, never mind the rising costs of everyday bills and utilities. Food poverty can affect all of us at some point. I have seen that all too often with families in my constituency of South Down. The loss of a job, a reduction in earnings or a cut in hours can lead to significant financial challenges for parents and families. As the purse strings tighten, those who suffer are the most vulnerable in society, but, no matter what, every child should have access to a good meal.

We are lucky to have the Patrician Youth Centre in Downpatrick, which provides a safety net for families so that their children have access to a good meal. Its work does not go unnoticed, but so much more needs to be done. A high-quality and affordable childcare system is one way that we can address the systemic issues of child poverty and holiday hunger. That will put money back into the pockets of working families and improve the outcomes of vulnerable children.

The cut to the school holiday food grant scheme has had a devastating impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people and should never have occurred. We should be removing barriers for families and young people by ensuring that there is a statutory obligation to ensure that children do not go without a good quality meal.

Child poverty, through food hunger, can lead to educational underachievement, learning loss and poor physical and mental health. At a time when children and young people should be focusing on their futures, they are forced to focus on where and when they might get their next meal. That is unacceptable, and I urge the Minister to put a plan in place to tackle holiday hunger. We must give children a level playing field and help the most vulnerable through challenging circumstances.

**Mrs Dodds:** I add my support to the motion and the amendment. I will say a few words on this really important issue.

We have all had to deal with high inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. The cost of food, particularly for families, has rocketed dramatically. In recent times, food inflation has peaked at 19.1%. That is a significant additional burden for families, but it is also a burden for the Department when it is administering any scheme. We also understand that, in Northern Ireland, the number of families now visiting food banks has increased by 175% compared with five years ago. That is an extraordinary increase in the number of families who require additional help.

Between 1 April and 30 September, almost 10,000 people were forced to turn to a food bank. Research by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network found that nearly one in eight children — 12%, which is around 50,000 children — is materially deprived, which means that their families cannot afford the basic items and activities that we consider to be essential for a healthy and happy childhood. The 'Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2021/22', found that 15% of children in Northern Ireland are in absolute poverty and that 18% are in relative poverty. That means that almost one fifth of children in Northern Ireland are living in those circumstances. The issue of holiday hunger becomes really important in the context of those figures.

I stress that, while this is a matter that the Education Minister is here today to deal with, it is important for every Department across the Executive. It is not just for one Department to deal with the levels of child poverty that we are experiencing in Northern Ireland. That is very important. It is also very important to acknowledge that many teachers to whom I speak are tired of the expectation that they solve every problem that comes across their desk.

We all know that the holiday hunger scheme came about during COVID, but, in order to reinstate it, we must stress today the need for an adequate budget for the Department of Education. If we are to really address the issue — if we are to be serious in addressing it — that underinvestment in education must cease and we must be willing to support the Minister in his drive for additional funds so that he can assess the problem and see how to address it.

**Ms Mulholland:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Principal Speaker. Did I get that right? Is that the right order?

Today we address an urgent issue that affects the very fabric of our society: children going hungry. It is a travesty that, in our supposedly advanced society, children and young people in Northern Ireland are still going hungry during school holidays. The Assembly must recognise the severity of the issue and take decisive action to end it now. We have made significant strides here towards peace and prosperity, yet, underneath the surface, there is a stark reality that we cannot afford to ignore. Poverty continues to cast a long shadow over the life of children and young people, depriving them of dignity and the opportunities that they deserve. The statistics are stark: 18% of Northern Irish children live in relative poverty before housing costs; and 8% of children live in persistent poverty. Over 35,000 emergency food parcels that the Trussell Trust delivered in Northern Ireland in 2022-23 were for children. In my constituency, the Mid and East Antrim Community Hub, through its affordable food club, has delivered hundreds and hundreds of food parcels to children, but that funding has now ended and there is no replacement in sight for the next school holiday. The Trussell Trust also highlights the fact that food banks in Northern Ireland have seen the greatest long-term increase of any region and that one fifth of those who use food banks are from a working household. It is no coincidence that we are the only nation without an anti-poverty strategy.

We need to address the reality that children do not exist in silos. We need a joined-up approach to their well-being that factors in their educational, social and health needs. Whilst the motion is directed to the Minister of Education, I also call on the Minister for Communities to act now and to publish an anti-poverty strategy that is fully holistic and factors in input from all Departments. The lack of an anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland strikes at the heart of our values and our sense of justice. We cannot ignore the human cost of poverty. It manifests in children going to bed hungry and families facing impossible choices, as we have

heard, between heating their home or putting food on the table.

**Mr Delargy:** I thank the Member for giving way. As a teacher, I saw at first hand the impact that children coming to school hungry has on their education and everything that they do in school. Does the Member agree that it is on all parties and all Departments to work together to collectively deliver on the policy?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sian, you have an extra minute.

**Ms Mulholland:** I could not agree more. That was the point that I was making about children not existing in silos. We cannot play politics with the issue. It has to be cross-party, cross-departmental and cross-service. There needs to be a holistic approach to protecting our children from this hunger. I thank the Member for his intervention, because this is not just hyperbole. The statistics make the case for us. Providing a nutritious meal for children is not just sustenance; it is the fuel that powers their development. By the age of three, children from low-income families have heard, on average, 30 million fewer words and have half the vocabulary of children from higher-income families. Children who receive free school meals are two times more likely than their more affluent peers to leave school with no GCSEs. There is a 24% GCSE attainment gap for children who receive free school meals.

The recent cut to the school holiday food grant has exacerbated an already dire situation. The cut has hit the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged, leaving them without access to the meals that they so desperately need. Poverty and educational underachievement are clearly intertwined; the research is there. The removal of vital support schemes only deepens those disparities. The repercussions of child poverty extend so far beyond just the immediate suffering of those who are directly impacted; they reverberate through our society, undermining social cohesion and economic progress. When a significant proportion of our population is held back by poverty, we all suffer consequences, whether it is reduced productivity, an increased drain on public services or heightened levels of inequality. The estimated annual costs of child poverty are up to £1 billion.

#### 4.30 pm

I call on the Education Minister to act swiftly and decisively. We need a comprehensive plan to end holiday hunger once and for all. It must

include measures to reinstate and bolster the school holiday food grant scheme and urgently progress and publish the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals, ensuring that no child is left behind.

Additionally, we must explore innovative solutions to address the root causes of poverty and food insecurity, working collaboratively with all stakeholders, be they community organisations, businesses or anyone and everyone who has a part to play. This is one element of a larger picture. We have to push services and Departments to work together to build a future where poverty is no longer a barrier to our young people flourishing and thriving. Only then can we truly claim to live in a just and equitable society. We already see the cost of inaction in our poverty statistics, and that is to our shame.

**Mr Carroll:** Is there anything more abhorrent than the fact that at least 100,000 children have gone hungry, thanks to the action and inaction of government parties here? Can you imagine the hardship and suffering faced by 100,000 children with empty bellies and their families? Despite the motion before us today, do the new Executive care? If they do, what will they do about it? When the cut to holiday hunger payments was implemented and the DUP persisted with its reckless boycott, we had at least a partial answer to that question. However, that still does not account for the punishing and anti-working-class policies that have been pursued by parties here when Stormont was functioning and up and running.

One hundred thousand kids are just the tip of the iceberg. Conservative estimates tell us, as Members have mentioned, that one in five children here lives in poverty. In working-class areas, which have been decimated by years of austerity, the figure is even higher. There is no way to explain that figure without reference to low wages, service cuts, the deepening housing crisis and the devastating welfare reforms, like the two-child tax limit, that were implemented by parties in this Building.

Just recently, I saw a shocking report by the End Child Poverty Coalition that said that one in 10 children here lives in a household impacted by the two-child tax limit. That means that at least one in 10 children here has been plunged into poverty by the policies and actions of the DUP, Sinn Féin, Alliance and others. I agree with anti-poverty campaigners that it is time for welfare reforms like the two-child tax limit to be scrapped.

If the Executive are truly committed to lifting people out of poverty, they need to give people more than empty words. It goes without saying that I endorse today's motion and amendment, but it is important to stress that the number of families who might receive holiday hunger payments pales in comparison with the number of children and families who go hungry daily. Today's debate has already been outstripped by the hardship and poverty facing our communities. Members will know that some schools — youth organisations were also mentioned — already offer free meals to all pupils. I commend those schools for taking practical steps to alleviate child hunger — fair play to them. However, is it not a shame that those schools are being forced to absorb costs that should be covered by the state and the Department of Education?

I reiterate my support for today's motion, but it lacks a bit of ambition. It is a missed opportunity to call for universal free school meals. That would not only lift people out of poverty but give pupils the best chance at a decent education. I have no doubt that most MLAs and Ministers here, with their big salaries, have no idea what it is like to truly go hungry and no idea what it is like to try to think, learn or function on an empty stomach. That is the reality facing countless working-class people here every day. That is the reality for workers who have to skip meals to feed their kids while their pay is cut directly by the Executive. That is what life looks like for the family of four who have had their meagre benefits slashed and a safety net removed by parties here.

Universal free school meals is not an outlandish proposition. It has been a long-term demand of trade unions like Unison and others, which represent thousands of working-class adults and children across these islands. The Welsh Government plan to offer free school meals for all pupils. Stormont needs to urgently follow suit. The failure to do so is not about a lack of foresight. Parties here, who have failed to alleviate poverty for more than a decade, know what is required to stop people going hungry but refuse to do what is required, because doing that would mean challenging the right-wing economic logic that underpins the actions of the Executive and their regressive counterparts in the Tory Administration. Parents across the North struggle to put food on the table. Universal free school meals is an effective and invaluable way to start addressing that problem. I ask all Executive parties to seriously consider that as a mechanism for feeding the hungry and addressing the poverty that Stormont has wrought, or are they too afraid of upsetting the Tory bean counters?

**Ms Hunter:** First, I thank those who tabled the motion and the amendment. I also thank the groups that work so hard on tackling child poverty: Save the Children, Action for Children, Barnardo's and women's groups, to name just a few. They have continued to highlight child poverty and the impact of food poverty on young people.

Children experiencing hunger outside term time is a significant concern. That greatly worsened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The extent of food poverty experienced by children can be evidenced in the large number of families not only struggling with the cost of living but having to attend food banks. I thank the Limavady Community Development Initiative (LCDI) food bank, which does a fantastic job in my constituency, and its staff in supporting families and young people.

On visiting schools across my constituency, I have been told by principals and teachers, some of whom were about to retire, that, in their entire career, they had truly never seen poverty as they do now, and they feel that children experience the worst of it. Of course, food poverty ties in with adverse childhood experiences. For many young people, even though they are so young, they can really feel the financial stress that is on the shoulders of their parents due to their inability to access food or have a lunch like their peers. That is an important point to add.

The school holiday food grant scheme was a crucial lifeline for vulnerable families that ensured that children had access to nutritious meals during school holidays. The initiative acknowledged the stark reality faced by many households across the North where financial strain worsens food insecurity outside term time. For numerous children, school meals represent their primary source of balanced nutrition, making the absence of those meals during holiday time such a concern.

The scheme bridged that gap, offering essential support to families who might otherwise have struggled to afford sufficient nutritious meals. Over a quarter of families in the North with children who attended school were eligible for the grant: well over 90,000 children were entitled to that. We see an acknowledgement of the impact of food poverty when we look at things such as the NHS Healthy Start scheme's recognition of the need for nutritious meals for pregnant mothers and for young children. Therefore, it is really important that we are having today's debate.



There are so many challenges affecting working families, including the cost-of-living crisis. The withdrawal of the funding will have a disproportionate impact on low-income families and on children who have a disability or food allergies, for example. Due to inflation, the cost of food that is dairy-free or gluten-free continues to rise, and that can cause challenges. I know from the constituents who contact my office daily that that struggle is real. The rising cost of childcare is coming at the same time, which causes immense pressure.

Research has shown that some low-income families in Northern Ireland have to spend up to 46% of their weekly income to afford healthy food. That is a shocking statistic. Families have to account for what they spend on breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. The scheme provided a much-needed degree of comfort that could help those parents to relax a little and know that money was coming in to support the feeding of their young people.

Even when I was shopping last night, I saw that the cost of things such as fruit is through the roof. I met a childcare provider who said that they had to limit the number of berries because they could not stretch to feed children in the way that they could maybe a year or two ago. The cost of living continues to provide such stress for so many. I spoke to mothers of children with autism and sensory needs who like specific branded foods, and that can create even more challenges, especially if they have an additional allergy, for example.

The scheme stretched beyond the nutritional value of meals for children and could empower parents to provide for the family without another source of stress. It provided them with a level of dignity that is, I know, impossible to put a price on.

While I welcome the motion and the sentiment behind it, we must go further. This needs to translate into real and tangible legislation, with real support for real families who struggle every day. If this area is not legislated for, children will continue to go hungry and working families already struggling under the weight of inflation and childcare costs will have yet another issue to contend with. We need to do all that we can to tackle that.

The SDLP will support the motion and the amendment. Today's debate speaks to the urgent need for an anti-poverty strategy. We know that one in four children in Northern Ireland lives in poverty. It is well past time that we tackled that, and we can do it together.

**Mr McCrossan:** This is an important debate. Mrs Dodds was right to point out that the issue stretches far beyond the remit or responsibility of the Department of Education; there is a collective responsibility on the Executive to resolve the problem. Just last week, we saw a stark and hard-hitting report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office, pointing to a real crisis facing our children, young people and families, particularly working families. That report contains a recent estimate that it would take £825 million to £1 billion a year to start to resolve the problem.

This is a major cross-departmental crisis. First and foremost, we need to acknowledge that there is a responsibility on all Departments to work collectively to resolve it. If anyone in the House thinks that firing a few pounds into the scheme will resolve any of these problems, they need to waken up. The reality is that the scheme does not even scratch the surface. It is welcome, and it is important. It is better to have the scheme than not to have it, and people miss it now that they no longer have it. I would like to see it reinstated. We are clear about that in our support of today's motion and amendment. However, we need to look beyond that. The Department of Education here has been majorly underfunded for decades. Until we wake up to that reality, we will not properly prioritise the needs of our children. We must address hunger and the various holistic values that are important to our children's development.

Any Member who listens to educators — our teachers and classroom assistants — hears from them about the real problems facing children and young people across Northern Ireland on a daily basis; they could write a book about them. As well as being educators, they have been acting as social workers. They support children emotionally and provide food for children who come to school hungry in the morning and for children who may not have enough for lunch or dinner, because their parents cannot afford to buy it and do not meet the threshold for free school meals provision.

I have spoken to principals who, often, can easily identify those children. They have had to go the extra bit to ensure that no child goes hungry. The reality in today's society in Northern Ireland, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis, is that the issue is being exacerbated. That should not be the case. Our children are the most important and valuable asset in our society and community. It is for the House to ensure that our children have the basic needs of society and that we pave a way out of poverty for children, supporting them into a future that is much better than that of their

parents or previous generations. If we cannot do that simple thing, we are failing future generations.

The motion is important. I know that the Minister feels strongly about the issue; I have heard him and other Members across the House speak about it. No one will disagree with the motion or the amendment in principle. That is, quite simply, because of the importance of it. We have to call these things what they are, however. The motion will not go far enough in addressing the fundamental problems of poverty and child poverty.

Food banks have never been as busy. I see that in my constituency. I listen to and speak to community workers daily, and I hear about many working people — both parents working, some in multiple jobs — who are forced to go to food banks because of the cost of childcare. Their priority, financially, is childcare. They are left without any spare cash to provide the basic need — food — to their family. The reality for many children is that the only nutritious meal they get is in school. That is a damning indictment of this place and of how we are failing.

We, as MLAs, should come together to ensure that no child ever goes hungry. That should be our core aim; we should work towards that. To do that, we first and foremost need an anti-poverty strategy. There has not been one over the past two years, during the cost-of-living crisis. That is entirely regrettable and embarrassing, but there is an opportunity for the House, now that it is functioning, to work collectively to resolve the problem. That is the very least that our children deserve, and I hope to God that they get a whole lot more when the House does what it should.

**4.45 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call the Minister of Education, Paul Givan, to respond to the debate. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

**Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion and engage on what is a very important issue. At the outset, I recognise the pressure on families, especially those with school-age children, from the rising cost of living and, in particular, increasing food costs.

Recognising the challenges facing parents of school-age children, I set out, in the debate on 5 March, my intention to bring forward

proposals to help reduce or limit the costs associated with purchasing school uniforms. My Department also has a range of policies and interventions in place to support children who may be impacted on by social disadvantage or poverty. Those include funding for schools that we have worked hard to protect, as far as we could, given the very constrained Budget settlement in the 2023-24 financial year. Policies include the £75 million for targeting social need, which is provided to schools through the common funding formula. That funding provides for a wide range of interventions, including teachers, other education professionals, special educational needs support, and literacy and numeracy support at all Key Stages. There is £8.1 million for the extended schools programme, which supports over 400 schools, 200,000 pupils, 80,000 parents and 30,000 community representatives. Again, those interventions are wide-ranging and include breakfast clubs and after-school activities.

Over £700,000 is provided to full-service schools in North Belfast and West Belfast to provide further support for children and young people in those particular areas through transition support, breakfast clubs, literacy and numeracy support, GCSE revision classes and many other supports. My Department also continues to support school-age children through the provision of free school meals to low-income families in receipt of certain benefits. I recognise the educational benefits that that provision brings to those children, particularly to their ability to concentrate, their behaviours and, ultimately, their learning outcomes.

Holiday hunger is an important issue, and one that many Departments have been seeking to address for a number of years. The pandemic exacerbated the issue of food poverty across our society. Although the rising cost of food has resulted in all of us paying more in the shops, it has been especially difficult for families on a low income, where making ends meet can be a daily struggle. As an Executive, I trust that we will seek to support low-income families with the range of pressures that they face. For many families, that is particularly challenging outside of term time, when their children are not able to access a daily free school meal in the way in which they can during term time. That continues to be a significant issue for many families in Northern Ireland.

In recognition of those challenges, in 2020, the Executive decided to establish a school holiday food grant scheme. The scheme was funded by the Executive to provide payments to cover the

cost of food during school holidays for pupils who were entitled to free school meals. The Education Authority already had in place an established payment mechanism, so the Department of Education was identified as the interim lead Department to take forward the scheme. It was agreed by the Executive that a wider strategic decision on the way forward with tackling food poverty, including holiday hunger, was required, including the identification and resourcing of a lead Department. That interim approach was agreed by the Executive to run up until Easter 2022. In the absence of an Executive, my predecessor as Minister of Education, Michelle McIlveen, approved the extension of the school holiday food grant scheme up until March 2023. The necessary ring-fenced funding was made available each year to the Department of Education to undertake those payments on behalf of the Executive. As a result, around £20 million was provided in each year of the scheme to low-income families to help with food costs outside of term time. The ring-fenced funding ceased, however, and was not part of the 2023-24 Budget that the Secretary of State set. With no ring-fenced funding in place, the permanent secretary had little choice but to discontinue the scheme in March 2023.

Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, support for families with the cost of food for children during school holiday periods varies. In Scotland, where there is a more generous financial settlement from His Majesty's Treasury relative to need, funding for food is provided to low-income families during school holiday periods, and Social Security Scotland provides the Scottish child payment of £25 a week for each child of those who are in receipt of certain benefits. That is to help with the everyday costs of supporting children. In Wales, however, the holiday free school meals scheme for payments to families entitled to free school meals was discontinued in May 2023. In England, a holiday activities and food programme funds local authorities to offer holiday club provision, and those who are entitled to free school meals receive a free meal if they attend that programme.

No child in our society should go hungry, and although my Department continues to support school-age children during term time to access healthy, nutritious meals, initiatives to tackle holiday hunger or provide support with food outside term time need to be aligned to social welfare support for families. It is therefore appropriate that the Executive take a wider and more holistic decision about how they tackle the issue of food poverty across society.

What has been characterised as "holiday hunger" for children outside term time should be an important consideration in the context of the Executive's anti-poverty strategy. Seeking to isolate holiday hunger for children as an issue that stands alone, apart from the greater impact that food poverty has across society every day of the year, is an imperfect and disjointed solution to what is a wider societal challenge. Food poverty is an issue that cuts across all age groups every day of the year, and the Executive should seek to address it as part of their wider anti-poverty work for all our citizens. In reality, although the Executive can fund almost anything that they wish to, they simply cannot fund everything that they would wish to. Difficult choices therefore have to be made.

The proposed amendment to the motion calls on me to:

*"urgently progress and publish the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals."*

The Department's review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals and uniform grants continues to examine a range of options for increasing the numbers of children and young people who are able to access free school meals and uniform grants. My officials are engaging with officials from the Department for Communities in seeking to update the modelling that will be used to inform the review. That is particularly relevant as families migrate from legacy benefits to universal credit.

The options being considered by the review include raising the income thresholds that apply to some of the means-tested criteria, the introduction of universal free school meals provision to pupils in some school years and options that are a combination of the two. Ahead of any decisions on changes to the eligibility criteria, a full public consultation on the options and associated impact assessments will need to be undertaken, and I plan to do that as soon as possible. However, a key issue in the review that we cannot simply ignore is affordability. The Department of Education faces significant funding pressures and is struggling to support existing key services. Increasing the number of children who are eligible for free school meals has potentially significant budgetary implications, and I will need to take those implications into account before taking any final decision.

Let me conclude by reiterating a point that I have made previously. I trust that, if Members back motions such as this one, they will also ensure that they support the provision of the funding necessary to make laudable motions a

reality in practice; otherwise, they will reduce the Chamber to a forum for virtue-signalling, where they will be the ends but not the means. That is not practical politics and is of no use to the people who send us here. I will support the motion and the amendment, but we need Members, particularly those in the Executive, to support me.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Nick Mathison to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Nick, you have five minutes.

**Mr Mathison:** As Members across the House have stated, there is widespread support for the motion and the amendment, and that is welcome. I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Holiday hunger is a critical issue that we, as an Assembly, need to try to address.

I do not want to go through each contribution one by one. We can summarise them fairly quickly by saying that absolutely everybody here agreed that tackling child poverty should be a priority for every Member. Everybody has agreed that a cross-party approach is needed. Everybody has also agreed that the community and voluntary sector does an awful lot of heavy lifting in this space and has had to do that in the absence of a functioning Executive, which is not acceptable. There is widespread agreement on those points, so, on that basis, I will not go through each contribution.

I do, however, want to make a few comments about our amendment and the substantive motion and maybe respond to some of the Minister's comments. There are approximately 96,000 children in Northern Ireland who are entitled to free school meals. The latest figures show us that there is only about a 79% uptake of free school meals, which means that about 20% of children who are entitled to those meals are potentially missing out.

The 'Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2021/22' shows us that, during that period, there were approximately 83,000 children living in relative poverty and approximately an additional 68,000 living in absolute poverty. That means that there could be in the region of 55,000 children measured as being in some form of poverty in Northern Ireland who are not currently accessing free school meals. We know that there are many reasons why that might be the case, but we need to think seriously about how we address that and whether auto-enrolment for free school meals could be considered. We also need to prioritise policies that improve ease of access to free school meals and ensure that free school

meals are as widely accessible as possible. That was the thinking behind our amendment.

The Minister highlighted his intention to act on the issue and on some of the wider costs of accessing education that the motion references, but I really want to draw attention to the wording of our amendment, which is about urgency. Unfortunately, I did not pick up a huge sense of urgency in some of the Minister's remarks, and I want to emphasise that a lot of families will be looking to the summer and will be deeply concerned about holiday hunger. We want to see steps being taken to progress the review of the eligibility criteria as urgently as possible and steps to bring forward the wider strategy on holiday hunger, as the motions call for, as quickly as possible.

I will pick up on Gerry Carroll's comments. Last week, I sponsored the UNISON All We Need is Lunch campaign, which focused on UNISON's call for universal free school meal provision across Northern Ireland. I hope to see, out of the wider review of the free school meals programme, options on moving towards a universal provision. It is important that that is given serious consideration and is brought to public consultation as soon as possible.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Member for giving way and for his work on that campaign. Will he agree that we cannot just use the criteria of economics to count the importance of investing in universal free school meals? That is sometimes the approach that is taken by the Department and even officials.

**Mr Mathison:** I agree, and I will probably not be able to take any more interventions because I will not get any extra time. The cross-departmental aspect of this has been raised. This is not just about educational outcomes. It is about health inequalities, so the whole issue has to be taken in the round. I agree on that point.

When the Minister makes points, we should all take them seriously. All parties need to coalesce around these issues with a united voice, but all Departments need to do that. This is not just a matter for the Department of Education. It is a matter for the Department of Health and the Department for Communities, so I call on those Departments to get behind the motion and look at what they can do on a wider anti-poverty strategy to ensure that we can deliver real progress in this space.

I pay tribute to Children in Northern Ireland and the work that it has done on the active holiday hunger project. I hope that, when the Minister

brings forward a plan to tackle holiday hunger, he will consider the sort of interventions that that project has made in communities.

I have many more things that I could say, but time is against me, so I will conclude by confirming very clearly that Alliance was delighted to see the needs of children and young people being brought to the fore in the debate. I also hope that our amendment will receive support and that tackling food poverty among our children all-year round will be priority for every Member.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Pat Sheehan to make a winding-up speech on the motion. Pat, you have up to 10 minutes.

**5.00 pm**

**Mr Sheehan:** The motion is about giving children and young people the best start in life. Approximately 100,000 children and young people in the North are entitled to free school meals. The free school meal programme is designed to support families on the lowest incomes. It takes away a significant expense for parents whilst ensuring that children get a nutritious meal. Sinn Féin has been trying to make progress on tackling holiday hunger for a number of years. Unfortunately, it took the onset of a global health pandemic to finally see action on it with the introduction of direct payments to families in lieu of free school meals during school holidays. While that approach was welcome, it was not legislated for, so there was no certainty for families from term to term about whether the financial support would be there. I acknowledge the fact that the Executive made ring-fenced funding available for holiday hunger. Two DUP Ministers introduced that. I am fairly confident that, had any Minister been in place in March 2023, that funding would have continued.

I attempted in the last mandate to introduce a private Member's Bill to make holiday hunger support permanent, but, unfortunately, we ran out of time before it could be introduced. A few years ago, Marcus Rashford, who scored a couple of goals at the weekend, received widespread publicity in the media, was feted in 10 Downing Street and got a gong from the Queen, as far as I know, for his campaign to introduce holiday hunger payments across the water. The Executive and Assembly introduced holiday hunger payments before that. Of course, the local media here were tripping over themselves to congratulate the Executive and Assembly for bringing that in — no, I do not

think that they were at all. I do not think that they even mentioned it.

Given the publicity around and the popularity of Marcus Rashford's campaign, it is clear that people see it as an important issue. In my research for my private Member's Bill, I found that children who have access to a varied and wholesome diet perform better in school than their peers who, unfortunately, do not have access to the same diet. While the links between educational underachievement and deprivation are well known, the evidence also suggests that, when those children return to school after the holidays, they can often be weeks or months intellectually behind classmates who have access to a more wholesome diet during the holidays. Therefore, from a strategic policy point of view, tackling holiday hunger is essential. If we are serious about giving our children the best start in life, tackling holiday hunger is essential. If the Department is serious about its vision, which is that:

*“Every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding”,*

tackling holiday hunger is essential. If children are going to school hungry, they will not be happy, learning or succeeding.

Poverty and educational underachievement are inextricably linked. Young people from working-class backgrounds enter our education system already at a disadvantage when compared with many of their peers. It is well known that the best predictor of a young person's educational outcome is his or her socio-economic background. Why is it, then, that, when it comes to budget cuts, the programmes that support our most disadvantaged are always first in the firing line? We remember all the programmes that had their funding withdrawn or cut last year. Holiday hunger, of course, was one of them. Another was the Engage programme, which helps young people who have fallen behind in their learning to catch up. Healthy Happy Minds assists children who have emotional and well-being issues. There is also a programme that provides free digital devices for children. There is Bookstart, free period products, extended schools and sports programmes. Of course, the cuts to all those programmes disproportionately affected those who are already the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. If there is one achievement that the Minister could have during the mandate, it is that the type of wrap-around support that is needed for children who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or are falling behind is put on a

statutory footing, so that, when it comes to making cuts, it will not be the low-hanging fruit.

It just makes no sense educationally to cut all those programmes. As we know from evidence, where children fall behind in school and do not get extra support to catch up, the likelihood is that they will not catch up. They are the young people who leave school without qualifications. Of course, the evidence also tells us that young people who leave school without qualifications are more likely to be unemployed, to have mental health issues, to have chronic physical ill health issues and to end up in the criminal justice system. Society pays for it in the long run. It makes no educational, social or economic sense not to support the children who need that support in our schools.

The bottom line in all that is that the British Government have failed to properly fund public services. Over a decade of Tory cuts has stripped hundreds of millions of pounds in real terms from the education budget. A few short months ago, the British Government acknowledged that this place was underfunded. That should have been a turning point, but, instead, their disregard for people here continued. Just last week, we debated their sleight of hand on the Fresh Start money, which should have been spent on building integrated and shared education schools but is now plugging gaps elsewhere instead. That is why it is absolutely crucial that parties continue to work together to bring pressure on the British Government to live up to their obligations to the people and public services here.

The current context also makes it imperative that the Communities Minister bring forward an anti-poverty strategy as soon as possible. That strategy will have an impact on all the issues that we are talking about: childhood hunger, the cost of education, educational underachievement etc. I appeal to the Education Minister to engage meaningfully on all those issues with his counterpart in the Department for Communities. The appeal has been made for Ministers and Departments to work together as if it is just a good idea. No — it is a statutory obligation. Under the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015, Ministers and Departments must work together on cross-cutting issues. There are no more important issues than poverty and hunger among children and underachievement as a result of the lack of support in school.

The motion has at its core low-income families who are struggling to make ends meet and 100,000 children who face a cliff edge at the end of term. Let us all work together to ensure

that no child goes hungry and give those families the support that they need.

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

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

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly recognises the high levels of child poverty and the increasing costs associated with sending children and young people to school; further recognises that the rising cost of food is putting many families under huge financial pressure; acknowledges the importance of children and young people receiving a nutritious meal and the role that plays in their learning and development; agrees that the cut to the school holiday food grant scheme has had the most impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward a plan to end holiday hunger and urgently progress and publish the review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members may take their ease as we change the top Table for the next item.

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

## **Job Creation: Ambitious Targets**

**Mr Middleton:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly supports an innovative and inclusive economy that provides opportunities for all; highlights the need to create more and better jobs across the skills spectrum; supports, in particular, growing key sectors such as digital, agri-tech, advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences and fintech; is clear that the benefits of new employment must encompass rural communities as well as our towns and cities; stresses the importance of understanding and addressing the needs of businesses and employers; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to set ambitious targets to grow the Northern Ireland economy in this Assembly term, including through creating 5,000 new tech jobs.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a

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

**Mr Middleton:** As we embark on a new chapter in the Northern Ireland Assembly, we have an opportunity to make Northern Ireland an even better place in which to work, live and invest. The new Executive, working together, can make a positive difference to the economic and social well-being of so many across our society. It is imperative that we set about growing the economy through ambitious targets that will drive growth, prosperity and opportunity for all our people. The motion that we have tabled calls on the Minister to set ambitious targets and to create more and better jobs, which, in turn, will lead to better prosperity for those whom we serve.

Over the past 15 years or more, there has been significant progress. We must recognise how far the Northern Ireland economy has come. Since 2007, Invest NI has created over 50,000 jobs and punched well above our weight in the UK by securing record levels of investment. We have seen positive change in our infrastructure and public realm and our education sector and skills and training. We have seen investment in our universities and further education colleges. That, of course, should not be the limit of our ambition. More can and should be done to ensure that the benefits of new employment and opportunities are felt by the most disadvantaged in our society.

Our Executive and the Economy Minister must work together to address the inequalities that continue to exist. That means work that encompasses rural communities as well as our towns and cities and encouraging investment in all of Northern Ireland — north, south, east and west. It means focusing on need and targeting areas of higher deprivation. That does not mean penalising or taking away from our areas of higher economic activity. We need our capital city to thrive. The success of some of the investment and major employers secured there can have a ripple effect throughout the Province. As the phrase goes, a rising tide lifts all boats.

We must recognise, however, that there have been areas that have been left behind. The Economy Minister and the new Executive now have a chance to build on the work that has already been started and to chart a new path to ensuring that no part of our communities is left behind. Growing the economy requires us to

listen first and then to respond to the needs of our constituents, businesses, educators and investors. From a north-west perspective, we have seen at first hand how business and education leaders, politicians and agencies working together can deliver real change on the ground. It also means talking up our offering and our strengths rather than talking down the place that we want to see prosper. That collaboration is a model that can be built upon, and, if we lean into that, we can see new opportunities ahead. That, of course, means acknowledging that, where things can be improved and done better, they should be. We must ensure that those who advocate for Northern Ireland overseas have the tools that they require to promote all parts and regions of our economy.

### 5.15 pm

The Lyons review of Invest NI was a timely opportunity to take stock and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation, whilst acknowledging the clear value of the work that it does. I was encouraged to hear from the new Invest NI chief executive, Kieran Donoghue, at the Economy Committee. I have no doubt that his experience will be invaluable in bringing new ideas and new life to Invest NI. We cannot expect investors to choose Northern Ireland if they are faced with a raft of new restrictions. We should take best practice from other countries in how they have made strides towards regional balance, whilst welcoming all investment opportunities to our shores.

One of the most important ways to create jobs is to support our small businesses, which are the backbone of our economy. We must make it easier for small businesses to start up, grow and succeed. We need a continuous focus on entrepreneurship and start-ups. I urge the Minister to work with our SMEs to create an environment where innovation can flourish and businesses of all sizes can thrive. That means working with the Department for Infrastructure and local councils to address frustrations around the planning system. Too much investment has been lost because of unnecessary delays and burdens on those who want to invest and create employment.

At the Economy Committee last week, we heard from Renewables NI about the lack of investment here due to delays, costs and bureaucracy. If we are to meet our net zero targets, we need urgent change. It also means working with the Education Minister to ensure that we have a pipeline of skilled workers who are educated and trained to meet the demands of the future. It means working with the Health

Minister to invest in the health and well-being of our citizens to ensure that they live long, healthy and productive lives. It means making work pay and improving workers' rights across the board.

Of course, we live in a rapidly changing global economy, where technology is transforming industries and creating new opportunities at an unprecedented pace. Our Province has become a global leader in cyber, fintech and advanced manufacturing. At the centre of the 10X economic strategy was a clear commitment that we must focus our attention on the emerging sectors that are best placed to add value to the regional economy and consolidate Northern Ireland as a global destination for investment and as a small, advanced economy.

The 10X strategy noted the potential for there to be a demand for thousands of new employees in the 10X sectors every year for the next 10 years, including 2,500 in digital, ICT and the creative industries, 1,500 in advanced manufacturing and engineering and 1,000 in agri-tech. In fact, the 5,000 new tech jobs target cited in the motion and our manifesto is likely to be an underestimate of the potential growth in those priority sectors. We will be more than happy to work with the Minister and other parties to advocate being even more ambitious.

Of course, if jobs are to be created, the talent and skills on which they depend also need to exist. The 10X skills strategy noted:

*"Northern Ireland's tech sector is growing and provides one of the focal points for Northern Ireland's 10x Economy, yet, the sector is struggling to recruit the talent needed to fulfil Northern Ireland's potential."*

Our people are our most valuable asset. We must invest in their education and training so that they have the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the 21st century economy. It is crucial that careers services are fit for purpose and support young people and those who seek to upskill or reskill to choose appropriate and high-value pathways in job quality and growth potential.

In the remaining time of this Assembly mandate, we have an opportunity to create an environment where businesses can thrive and people can find good and well-paid jobs. That is why we are calling on the Economy Minister to set ambitious targets for job creation in Northern Ireland. We have the talent and the determination, but we need the Executive and His Majesty's Government to deliver the

resources. I am confident that, by working together, we can meet the targets.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "Minister for the Economy to" and insert:*

*"produce ambitious, time-bound and measurable targets to grow and regionally rebalance the Northern Ireland economy, including through creating 5,000 new tech jobs, with an associated financial stimulus package."*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** You have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to wind. All other Members who speak in the debate will have five minutes.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I welcome the motion and our amendment on the need for ambitious targets for job creation. It is often said that what you do not measure, you cannot achieve, and that is no truer than when considering the change that is needed in our economy. Whether that change is to our stubbornly high rate of economic inactivity, which remains at 6-8% higher than the UK average, to our low productivity, which remains at 17% below the UK average, or to the unacceptable disability employment gap of 44%, there is still a lot of work to do to ensure that our economy truly works for all. The reality is that none of those gaps will be closed if we do not measure the progress that we are making. If we do not set targets, how do we know whether public policy is having an impact? Without a target, how would any business know whether it was on track to make a profit? More to the point, how would any family know that it was able to stay within its own budget? Those are targets that can apply to every sector.

Although our amendment did not propose to remove from the motion the figure of 5,000 technology jobs, as we have no particular objection to it, the truth is that it is a largely arbitrary figure and that the process of determining targets should be more thought through. Targets should be set for all sectors, recognising the unique selling points of different regions. Although there is often a focus on the technology sector, each region and each industry has a particular contribution to make to Northern Ireland. Those contributions should be recognised in the targets that we set, and we also need to go beyond targets for job creation in order to deal with the challenges that I have mentioned.



The aim of the targets cannot just be to grow the economy. Otherwise, we are in danger of continuing the perverse imbalances and inequalities that exist today that allow those areas that are doing well to do even better still while places such as Derry and elsewhere in the west are allowed to fall further and further behind. The aim instead must be to grow and rebalance the economy, to end the postcode lottery of jobs, opportunity and investment and to reverse the regional inequalities that have been allowed to fester and that have created a two-tier economy, in which wealth is concentrated in some places and not in others, in which the difference between the council areas with the highest and lowest levels of economic inactivity is over 10% and in which the difference in the levels of gross disposable income is over £4,000. If you are from the most deprived area of Northern Ireland, you are three and a half times more likely to have no education qualifications at all and twice as less likely to be degree-educated. Most of all, people living in the areas with the highest levels of deprivation are likely to die up to seven years earlier than those in the most affluent areas.

Targets must also apply to our economic development agency, Invest NI. It really is unacceptable that recent figures demonstrate that only 7-9% of visits by foreign direct investors hosted by Invest NI over the past 10 years took place west of the Bann. Those figures include only 14 visits to Fermanagh and South Tyrone and only 13 visits to West Tyrone.

The targets must therefore be subregional, time-bound and measurable. It is only through measuring targets and identifying need that we will be able to put in place the kind of deliberate and intentional interventions that are needed in the places where the market and policy have failed. I call those kinds of interventions positive discrimination, because that is what is needed when decades of neglect and failed economic policy have left communities struggling in generational cycles of poverty. I listened very carefully to Pat Sheehan in the previous debate, and I could not agree with him more. Poverty destroys lives and destroys communities. Job creation is about wealth creation, particularly for our most deprived communities, so that people can escape those cycles of poverty. For me, targets are about tackling inequities and interjecting when market failure is happening. It is at the heart of economic and social justice.

It is welcome that the Minister has committed to subregional targets, at least for Invest NI, particularly given his predecessor's reluctance

to do so. In the previous mandate, I was told time and time again that investment is demanded, that businesses follow that demand and that government's job is not to direct investment. That analysis ignored any need for government to create the conditions necessary for that investment. It appears that the tune has finally changed.

I cannot help but feel, however, that we are behind the curve, given that we are still debating whether to introduce economic targets. Let us look elsewhere. The South is light years ahead. Its economic development agency, IDA Ireland, already targets half of all FDI investments to regional locations. The South's national planning framework targets five cities for 50% of the overall national growth, specifically targeting regions that have been left behind.

Even closer to home, we have seen how targets can orientate the Government's thinking. Scarcely a week goes by in this place when we do not talk about the climate targets, about how much the Government have yet to do to meet them and about the consequences of failure if we do not. The climate targets have become a northern star for Departments and strategies. If it is good enough for the climate crisis, why is it not good enough for the economy?

Of course, targets are meaningless without action, and we have all become far too familiar with the news about missed targets for hospital waiting lists and public-service reform. We cannot allow targets to become yet another casualty of the dysfunction here. There must be consequences for missing those targets. In our view, the consequences should take the form of financial stimulus packages. Therefore, when a target is missed, a financial stimulus package should be put in place in that sector or place to reverse the failure.

All of that should be underpinned by ambitious and binding legislation, and although the motion calls on the Minister for the Economy to act, we need to recognise that he cannot do it alone. Every Department needs to adopt a subregional approach to its policy, strategies and plans. That will require strong leadership from the Department for the Economy, and it needs everyone to buy in. We need to measure life expectancy in different places; set targets for more investment in the health and social care trusts; measure infrastructure deficits; intervene in the west, where the need is greatest; and measure school attainment to set targets where our children are being failed and are falling behind. We need everyone to join in this endeavour through statutory obligations, annual

reporting and a legal framework on how regional balance is addressed by the Government.

By introducing that kind of legislation, we would be following the example of Governments from around the world that have acted before us. I have already outlined the approach of the South, but there are countless other examples. For example, Finland's Regional Development Act (No. 602 of 2002), which required the Government to set national development targets, or the Regional Development Victoria Act, 2002 or the commitment to regional balance in Germany's constitution. Those countries recognise that a person's life chances should not be determined by their postcode, so why cannot we?

I invite the Minister, once again, to accept the need for the legislation in his response to the debate. In summary, I commend those who tabled the motion, and I ask the Assembly to support the call in our amendment for regional balance. Only through finally measuring how far we have yet to go can we move forward towards a vision that we all share, which is an economy that works for everyone.

**Mr McGuigan:** The Economy Minister set out his economic vision a month ago today. That vision was based on creating good jobs, increasing productivity, tackling regional imbalances and transitioning to net zero. Therefore, Sinn Féin will support the motion and the amendment today. We can absolutely endorse the calls for an inclusive and innovative economy that prioritises jobs and investment.

It is only fair to point out that the previous seven Ministers responsible for the economy have been members of the DUP. I also note that the 10X strategy, which was overseen by the previous three DUP Ministers and constantly referenced, did not set targets for job creation in new tech, or any other sector for that matter. It is great, therefore, to see that, after just six weeks in post, the DUP finally has such confidence in an Economy Minister that it can come to him with a motion that references 5,000 new tech jobs. That is very good.

The Economy Minister has set out a positive vision and step change for the economy, and that should be our focus.

In the past, we have seen investment and economic policy being shaped on the premise that every job was a good job. That resulted in businesses being given financial support to create jobs that were low-paid and insecure and offered little opportunity for career progression.

The current Economy Minister's focus on good jobs should be commended by all parties as a means to ensure that funding for jobs assistance by Invest NI and others is linked to the quality of those jobs. That will mean that jobs created with the help of public funding pay the real living wage and give workers secure terms and conditions. I note the overlap between that objective and the Minister's intention to introduce an employment Bill to improve the rights of workers by banning things like zero-hour contracts and fire/rehire practices and by improving workers' rights through a better work-life balance and the ability to organise via trade unions. Improving those rights through legislation is the basis for delivering good jobs across the skills spectrum, as mentioned in the motion, and improving the rights of workers should be the basis of any economic policy.

Another key aspect of the Minister's vision is the focus on net zero and delivering green jobs and a just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy. A shortcoming of the previous 10X strategy was its lack of focus on green skills and renewable energy. Despite the vague mention of new tech, the 10X strategy critically overlooked the importance of the green economy and the job opportunities in it. Studies by the Nevin Economic Research Institute show the vast potential of the green economy. There are around 5,000 people employed in full-time green jobs in the North. However, that number is expected to grow as more jobs become available in areas like renewable energy, manufacturing, retrofitting and conservation. The number of jobs created in a circular green economy could and should be substantial. Rather than trying to set arbitrary targets on job creation, as the motion seeks to do, let us look at the evidence and the need to move to net zero and work together towards that. That said, Sinn Féin will support today's motion and amendment, and we look forward to the Economy Minister implementing the vision that he announced some weeks ago.

**Ms Eastwood:** Alliance will support the motion and the amendment. You would be hard-pressed to find anybody who would stand up and say that they do not support more job creation. I echo some of what Sinéad McLaughlin, the Member for Foyle, said about the earlier debate on education and poverty when she was moving her amendment. Do you know what? That is the most important thing we can take away from this. We can talk about job creation all we want, and we can talk about skills, but unless we get it right downstream and make sure that the workers are there, we will never get to the place where we can support

ourselves and have a thriving economy in the North.

I could pluck another figure from the air, as we all seem to be doing today, and say that we have a really high number of people who are economically inactive. For a lot of the people in that cohort, that is genuine, and they absolutely need to be supported. However, we will not be able to take the other people within that who want to work and say, "Right, you have now moved from that register, and you are in a tech job". We will not be able to do that because we have not spent the time getting them to a place where they can be conversant with the technology and be confident in themselves. I went to school on the Falls Road, and I am telling you that there were people I met from schools in that area a few years ago who said that they could not get their kids to get the bus into a different part of the town, because they were anxious and did not feel confident enough to do so. That is really what we are talking about at the bare bones of the issue. We need to speak to that social inequality.

There is another thing about the postcode lottery. David and I are very privileged to be in Lagan Valley, which is one of the wealthiest areas in the North. It is probably one of the greatest super-output areas that has the fewest areas of deprivation, but there are pockets of deprivation there, just like everywhere in Northern Ireland. Someone said to me, "I could take a child, and, given their postcode, I could plot out their educational pathway." That pertains to this day. Unless we get a grip on the importance of Education and Economy working together, we will never crack this nut.

We have had a wee bit of politics across the Floor, with "You held Economy for this" and "You held it for that". Grand; love it; here for it. But the main thing is that, if we constantly collapse the place, we will never accomplish anything. That is the bottom line, and that is why we need to move to reform as a matter of priority.

When we talk about opportunities for all, it is important that we are inclusive, but we also need to look at where we are. The stark reality in Northern Ireland is that we have the biggest number of disabled people who want to work but are not able to. In fact, I think that we have the highest number of disabled people with a third-level qualification who cannot find work because they are not adequately supported by the system. That needs to change.

There is talk about good jobs, and that makes my teeth itch a wee bit. You are getting it all

today. The main reason for that is this: what is the indicator or metric behind a good job? One time at the Committee, there was a bit of a conversation about wages and the median wage. A lot of people will never be able to earn that, and that is not what I want for them either. If we start bandying about the claim that a job with such a wage is a good job, we should look at health and social care. Look at the number of debates that we have already had in this short time and will continue to have about health and social care and other critical social and economic infrastructure. Those workers will never make that wage in a month of Sundays, and that is not right. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that, when we talk about tech, we also need to talk about people and our society, because every one of our family members and our constituents will need to rely on health and social care workers in the days and months ahead.

I welcome the remarks from Sinn Féin on green skills. We had an amendment on that, but it was not selected. Green skills are incredibly important, because we need to move ahead at speed. We had the Utility Regulator and people from Renewables NI at the Committee last week. We know that we are in a race against time when it comes to meeting climate targets. Unless we start educating and transforming our education system and economy, we will never get there.

We need to look at careers advice in schools. I go on about that all the time and will continue to do so. It has been on the table since 2013, and now we are hearing about a portal. The portal was talked about at least 10 years ago. I urge

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that careers advice in schools is critical and that it is appalling that some schools in Northern Ireland will not point their students in the direction of appropriate careers advice?

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

**Ms Eastwood:** I agree entirely with the Member and thank him for his intervention. We have the 14-19 strategy, the 16-19 framework, the 2022 independent review of careers advice and now the independent review of education. We know what they are saying, but we need to get on and do it now. I, for one, and Alliance will stand with the Minister and, indeed, all other relevant Ministers to try to make that happen,

but we must move to that place of action now and not just have words.

**Mr Elliott:** It has been an interesting debate. There has even been a little politics in it, which we got out of somewhere. It is great for a community when it has a number of jobs and the choice of employment, whether that is in the public sector or the private sector. You know that communities are thriving when you see people who are positive about that. It is great for the Members for Lagan Valley that they live in one of the wealthiest areas of Northern Ireland, but think of the rest of us out in the west — Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Foyle or wherever — which does not have the wealthiest areas. I do not agree that, just because you live in those areas, you can plot your way forward from a young age. People develop at different stages of life, and they take up different skills at various stages. Some great entrepreneurs have come from places that are not as wealthy as Lagan Valley. There are people from the west of the Province and other areas who have done exceptionally well.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the Member for giving way. The point that I was simply trying to make was that it is not right that we have educational inequality to the extent that it impinges on life chances and that is what we need to get right. Yes, there is a regional imbalance, but I am sure that the Member will agree that we need to make sure that, wherever you are, your postcode does not dictate your quality of life or your educational or job prospects.

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

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

I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, of course, your life should not be determined by your postcode or where you were born or live, but a lot of people ensure that that is not how their life evolves. They make their own choices in life.

There are skills that are not in Northern Ireland — at least, they are not here in great quantities — that we need to develop. I hear the figure of 5,000. I am not sure where that figure has come from, to be fair. However, if a business came from America in the morning offering 5,000 jobs of a specific type, could we fulfil that? I do not believe that we could at the moment, and that is one of the dangers.

We have to look at employers as well. Where are the skills required? I hear employers say, "I

can't get the lorry drivers", "I can't get the people to do the office administration" or "I can't get the healthcare workers whom we have heard about." There is a huge dearth of some skills that has not been identified. I have to be fair to the regional colleges. In a lot of instances, they have moved on from the old technical colleges that I remember. They provide a much wider range of skills now, but that requires further development, particularly in areas that need specific skills.

I point to Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The south Tyrone area has huge numbers involved in food production, but it also has small engineering firms that require the skills that need to be provided by the regional colleges. That is important as well. I always like to support indigenous businesses. We have witnessed so many foreign direct investors coming into Northern Ireland, but they last for a short time and then they are gone, whereas those indigenous businesses, grown in the communities, survive for much longer.

I cannot not mention BT/EE, which is reviewing its situation in Fermanagh and Enniskillen but without giving out enough information. I heard the Minister say earlier that even he cannot get some of the information that the employees would like. I accept that it is a private company, but I just wish that, at this stage, it would be more open and transparent with its loyal employees. They have been good to BT and EE over the years, and they now deserve the respect of at least being given the information.

There needs to be a balance here. We need to upskill young people and make sure that they are ready for the job opportunities that will be there. However, it is also about supporting employers, because, often, employers feel that they are in a position where employees are dictating to them. I have to tell Members the story of an employer who was chatting to me. Just by chance, he said to me that his eight or nine employees had told him that they were going down to a four-day week. They just told the employer. It did not matter what the employer thought or whether he thought that they should still work their five hours on a Friday. He was just told that, and he felt demoralised by it. He said that it seemed like the tail wagging the dog. He did not have a huge amount of pressure to exert on them, so he felt unable to say, "Well, look, you just can't do that", and he felt lonely and isolated.

**Mr Delargy:** I want to focus on two areas: productivity and regional balance. I will begin by echoing a lot of what Mr Elliott said, as I have heard in my constituency about skills gaps and

the fact that colleges have stepped in ably to plug those gaps and be responsive to the economic needs in the area.

One issue has been our relatively low productivity levels. Employers continue to want to hire more staff to grow and to invest but struggle to get people with the right skills. We have seen that the North has lower productivity levels than, for example, Britain and that successive DUP Economy Ministers have failed to get to grips with that, despite holding that portfolio for a number of years.

Improving access to skills will be key to narrowing the productivity gap further in the coming years. The Minister has already indicated his intention to improve the opportunities for people to upskill and reskill through a range of programmes, including all-age apprenticeships, which will be a game changer for skills and will mean that workers, in later life in particular, can earn as they learn and can reskill and upskill without having to pay for their apprenticeship learning.

#### 5.45 pm

Notably, the productivity gap has closed slightly in recent months. However, productivity remains, on average, 11% below the rate in Britain and, according to a recent study, almost 40% below the rate in the South. I trust that the Economy Minister's vision and the policies that will stem from it will close the gap further. That means utilising dual-market access to grow domestic exports and attract highly productive FDI. It means developing all-Ireland clusters in high-productivity sectors that are key to driving economic progress and productivity.

As my colleague Mr McGuigan said, Sinn Féin will vote for the motion and the amendment, outlining the need to promote regional balance and to tackle the regional and rural inequalities that have, for so long, kept our economy from being inclusive. If I were an investor and I was sitting here, I would want to hear the positives and the benefits coming from Derry, the north-west region and regions across the North. I am proud to be from Derry. I am proud to call that place home. It is a fantastic place in which to live, work and build a life.

I concur with the comments made by my colleague Mr Middleton. We need to start talking up areas such as Derry. We need to start making sure that areas across the North are spoken about positively in this place and that we talk up the place, its positivity and its people.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. He makes an important point. Quite often, in the Chamber, we are subjected to negative comments about the Foyle constituency and that region, when, in reality — I think of Mr Elliott's comments about Fermanagh, as well — there are some hugely successful businesses and entrepreneurs from those regions who have had a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland economy and, if given the opportunity, could do much more.

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

**Mr Delargy:** I totally agree. I have spoken to people in dozens of companies — FDI companies in particular, but also regional companies — who have spoken about that. Dozens of them can bear testimony to the fact that they have set up a business in Derry, grown that business and created a huge number of regional jobs. The thing that they say all the time is that they are here because of people; they are here because of what we have to offer and what is unique about us. I totally agree with that point. In my constituency, I hear, all the time, that people want to talk about the future and to hear about the positive opportunities that we have. That lines up exactly with what Conor, as Economy Minister, set out with regards to looking at how Invest NI does business and at regional balance, investing in City of Derry Airport and growing places at Magee. We have a lot to talk about and to talk up in our region.

The Minister's vision also talks about transforming and reorganising Invest NI into new regional structures. That is dedicated to home-grown small to medium-sized businesses and start-up companies. Once implemented, those forums will enable Invest NI to operate regional offices across the North that will work on an inclusive basis, in partnership with councils, the business community, trade unions and local enterprise agencies. That model will be a game changer. It will decentralise Invest NI and provide greater focus on investor visits, job assistance and job creation being delivered more equally across the North.

I will not dispute the relevance of any of the industries in the 10X vision — that has been covered in detail — but I will say that, when I speak to people and business owners in my community, they are quick to point out that the 10X strategy never focused on construction, tourism or social enterprise. All those sectors have huge job opportunities, labour shortages

and skills progression. I think that we will see a lot more of that in the future, which would be a positive development. The Minister's vision goes beyond that to create an economy that will benefit workers, families and businesses of all sizes and in all sectors.

**Mr Honeyford:** I feel unwell, but I am trying to be positive about this. To be honest, when I read the motion, out of frustration I did not know where to start. We will support it — anybody would support it. I do not think that any of us would disagree with anything in a motion that calls for more jobs. However, the focus should be on how we deliver, rather than on a randomly plucked figure. The motion leaves us none the wiser. It has to be about delivery, not words.

I will start by getting the elephant out of the room. The line:

*"addressing the needs of businesses and employers",*

is interesting coming from the party that campaigned and voted for Brexit, and therefore for trade friction, and that took the huff for two years, pulling the Assembly down and leaving our business community to get on with it and sort out issues for themselves. Now, when we have an election coming up, there is a road to Damascus conversion.

I said that I was not sure where to start, but I will start by saying that business need us to start by reforming the Assembly, so that no single party can collapse this place and we guarantee stability for our business community. It is the business community that creates the jobs; it ain't us. That is the point that is missing in this. Any business will tell you that the starting point is to give inward investment the security of stability to invest. Stability is the starting point. We all want 5,000 new jobs. Pluck a figure — why not make it 10,000? We absolutely all want our economy to grow, but surely we should agree the changes that are needed to grow our economy and then measure the outcomes of those.

This is like giving a football team that is down the divisions a target of winning the Premier League without giving them any help, any resources or anything else to change. You just give them a target of winning the Premier League. It is completely unrealistic unless you make the changes that are needed. I hope we can all stand and support the policy changes that will be needed for our business communities to flourish. I hope that the Minister will bring those policy changes forward quickly,

because we have a limited window of opportunity. It needs to happen now. Our job here is to set the conditions to allow it to happen.

The past 15 years have been talked about as some sort of romantic notion. Recent reports have said that we have actually been below the UK average over the past 15 years. The UK is hardly the benchmark that we should base our growth ambitions on. The potential that we have here needs a holistic approach that addresses every element of our economy. Part of that may be, as my colleague Sorcha said, about higher education. All of this is interconnected.

What is really important is that those changes are not held back and restricted by constitutional ideologies. We need to get serious, leave our political ideology at the door and start to create the conditions that our business community need. If we do not, we create barriers before we even start. If we continue doing what we have been doing, this will be nothing more than a pipe dream. It is a road, and our business community needs the Chamber to build it. We need to be in one lane, providing public services, and stay out of the way of the rest to allow our business community to flourish.

We need major change. Alliance wants to see that change and to look at where we can work in partnership across this island and within these islands. I ask the Minister what actions have been taken to deliver essential collaboration between IDA Ireland and Invest NI, because those actions are needed right now.

We need financial investment into skills and apprenticeships and to create more opportunities, including in technical universities in our FE sector. I have raised that before. What is the Minister doing to develop that sector? Those are questions that we need answered and the things that we need to discuss. A great start would be to value our FE staff and enhance their pay and conditions.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I thank the Member for taking an intervention. Does the Member think it is negative to state facts or that it is OK to come in here and brush over actual economic facts? It should be about delivery. We are not saying it in a negative sense. We are saying that this needs to be fixed. We, collectively, need to fix it now. We cannot come in here and blow smoke up everybody's whatever. We need to deal with what is straight in front of us, be realistic and start working together.

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

**Mr Honeyford:** I absolutely agree. You can only start from where you are. The fact of where we are is that we are one of the poorest regions of Europe. We need to work and grow from that point. That is where we are, and that is what we need to do. I totally agree. You have to be realistic about your starting point and your end goal.

How does business create 5,000 new jobs without the financial support to grow and without access to bank funding and debt markets so that businesses can actually invest in themselves? How does business create 5,000 new jobs if our current planning system, which, at best, can be described as seriously lacking in delivery, is still in place? How does business create new tourism jobs when the electronic travel authorisation has been enforced by GB? Although we have, for example, a Wild Atlantic Way product across the rest of the island, it —

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

**Mr Honeyford:** — stops at the border. Alliance will always be up for creating the conditions for our economy to grow, and our vision is based on evidence for growth. We support the motion, but we need to get real.

**Mr Dickson:** I will continue in the vein of my colleagues who have spoken in the debate. In reality, an ambition for our economy that is without direction is pointless. The journey ahead of us demands a clear focus on not just the quantity but the quality of the jobs across the skills spectrum. Despite our stop-start politics, we have made strides in some areas. For example, we have made a start on bridging the rural-urban digital divide. Much more needs to be done to accelerate that, however, in order to ensure equal opportunity in an increasingly digital economy, especially as more people than ever want to, and do, work from home.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept and acknowledge the fact that broadband connectivity in Northern Ireland is now a huge selling point, particularly for jobs in more rural, isolated areas, as we tilt towards a more technology-driven economy?

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

**Mr Dickson:** Absolutely. The Member has just repeated the words that I said.

Other work is needed, however, to grapple with the systemic issues that continue to cast a shadow over our potential. The economic inactivity to which Members have referred, particularly among the long-term sick and those with disabilities, remains stubbornly high, providing a key opportunity for organisations such as the many social enterprises that operate and deliver across Northern Ireland. I hope that this mandate will give the Minister the opportunity to make more legislative provision to support our social enterprises.

Productivity continues to lag, and the ongoing brain drain has been detrimental to our skills economy, as young people continue to leave to seek better opportunities elsewhere, attending universities in the rest of the United Kingdom or Ireland or, indeed, emigrating with their qualifications. It is important that we endeavour to create a more balanced, productive economy that is in step with the demands of decarbonisation and our increasing difficulties with the environment, that is ready to face the challenges and opportunities that climate change offers and that will deliver for each person, for us all and for the world of work.

Achieving that will require us to go back to basics. Look at the cost of division in our education system: if we could invest that money in our education system to deliver for our young people and spend it on a more focused education system that delivers for all, not only would we give people the best chance in education but we would have a much better qualified workforce that would be attractive to business in Northern Ireland. Delivering reform of the Assembly will provide that assurance to business.

To deliver more and better jobs across the spectrum, we need to ensure that there is no hierarchy of qualification but rather that qualifications meet the needs of business and people and that we do not put all our eggs in one basket. We must consider the vast range of qualifications equally. Be it an NVQ, a primary degree, a diploma-to-apprenticeship pathway or a PhD, we need to deliver for everyone.

More than that, let us not forget our unique position post Brexit. With our dual market access in the UK and the EU, we are perfectly poised to drive growth, attract investment and create jobs. We need stability in this institution to achieve that and to give us a more appropriately qualified workforce that is ready to meet the demands of both markets. As we look

to the future of our economy and job creation, we need to set targets that are not just ambitious but SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound — and that reflect our unique position in the UK and the EU. Those targets must be underpinned by planning and adequate resources. There is no point in bringing in that which is good today but will not be here tomorrow. Rather, it is about providing opportunities that will be valuable and adaptable to our citizens not just today but down the line.

With that in mind, I call on the Minister for the Economy to go beyond the usual metrics and instead let us devise a strategy that is resilient, that builds on our strengths and that creates lasting benefits in order to build jobs for all in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** All Members who expressed a wish to speak have done so. I therefore call the Minister for the Economy to respond. Minister, you have up to 15 minutes.

**6.00 pm**

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** I thank the Members for the debate. It was very informative, and a lot of very good points were made. I apologise that I missed the debate last week, when I was away on travels, but the nature of the debates, particularly on the economy, has been very constructive. I hope that we continue in that vein and collectively realise that, if we pull together, we can make a distinct improvement on some of the problems.

I do not underestimate the challenges and problems in particular areas of our economy, and that has focused my efforts on trying to provide strategic focus to the Department. I outlined that vision with a focus on good jobs, regional balance, productivity and decarbonisation, and I was glad to see that, in this and previous debates — I am aware of the debate last week — there has been a high level of consensus on that.

The ambition is to create 5,000 jobs, and some Members wondered where that figure came from. It may follow on from an ambition set out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I like Stewart Dickson's approach of SMART targets rather than just arbitrary targets; nonetheless, it is useful to have targets. New Decade, New Approach set out to achieve 5,000 cybersecurity professionals by 2030, and, currently, there are approximately 10,000 people employed in the software sector and

15,000 employed in fintech or financial services. The rise of digitisation and AI means that there will be tech jobs in nearly every sector of our economy, from retail to agriculture to advanced manufacturing and cybersecurity. The challenge is to manage that revolution in technology in a way that supports good jobs, innovation and productivity, regional balance and a transition to net zero.

A key indicator of a good job is the level of pay. Currently, 15% of jobs here pay less than the real living wage, and that figure must come down. I want everyone to earn at least the real living wage. The sectors highlighted in the motion are higher-paying, so growing those sectors should increase the number of higher-paying jobs in the economy.

While developing the sectors, we must be aware of the need to ensure that women and people with disabilities can access opportunities. There is a gender employment gap of around 7% and a gender pay gap of approximately 8%. Evidence suggests that that gap is connected to the higher prevalence of women in part-time employment: 23% of part-time jobs are low-paid compared to 6.4% of full-time jobs. Part of the solution is more affordable childcare support, and I am keen to work with the Department of Education to take that forward. People with caring responsibilities would benefit from more-flexible working patterns. Members are aware that I will bring forward a wide-ranging good jobs Bill during this mandate.

The Assembly debated a motion last week on the importance of protecting workers' rights, and while I could not be in the Chamber for that debate, I was pleased to hear the level of support across the Chamber for ambitious, new employment rights legislation. Flexible working arrangements will be included in the consultation, which will inform the content of the Bill, because remote or hybrid working, along with flexible working patterns, provide opportunities for more people to take up employment.

The sectors outlined in today's motion are high-productivity industries that will improve our overall economic performance. Our dual market access, as a result of the Windsor framework, provides us with a significant opportunity to grow exports on both a North/South and east-west basis. To maximise the benefit of that unique market access, we will need to have the right level and mix of skills demanded by those sectors. That means supporting higher-level skills development and ensuring that our skills system is responsive to evolving need. Our city



and growth deals provide a platform from which to grow jobs in those sectors. Again, provision of relevant skills for those investments will be key. My Department will enable clusters of companies, universities and colleges to flourish regionally and on an all-island basis. That will build on the previous work on priority sectors and will be a key driver of exports, job creation and regional productivity growth.

The motion highlights the need to ensure that good jobs are available in rural as well as urban locations, and the amendment highlights the need for targets to address regional imbalance. Regional balance is one of my core priorities. My Department, along with Invest NI, will work in partnership with local councils, local enterprise agencies, the business community and the community and voluntary sector to identify regional challenges and strengths. That collective effort will enable targeted action to develop local businesses and incentivise investment in areas with real regional strengths. While high-quality FDI has an important role to play, the majority of job creation over the next few years will be from our own indigenous entrepreneurs.

We already have significant assets at local level. Our regional further education college network, in particular, is an asset that we can further leverage for economic development. I think that that was a point that Mr Honeyford made. I have discussed the need for targets on regional balance with the new chief executive of Invest NI. Those will be aligned to a wider regional plan, which will be co-designed with regional partners and stakeholders.

Although it is not mentioned in the motion, some Members raised the issue of decarbonisation, which offers opportunities to realise policy goals, as well as being necessary in its own right. We have a legal and moral obligation to drive down emissions and meet our net zero commitments. We can and must do that in a way that creates more and better jobs. The green economy is an area of enormous potential. We already possess specialities in areas such as green hydrogen. The green energy sector will be a source of productivity and job growth across the region. We have the capacity to become a global leader in the green economy by developing locally the solutions, products and services that will be used around the world. We have the resources, including wind, biomethane and geothermal, to become not only self-sufficient but an exporter of affordable renewable energy. We have the strategic opportunities to collaborate across the island through the single electricity market to support those aims.

A huge number of issues were raised by Members during the debate, most of which I agree with. Gary Middleton raised points about areas of deprivation and regional balance. I am glad that he welcomed the appointment of the new CEO of Invest, who brings experience to the role, including experience of the South, where regional balance has been achieved more successfully than it has been here. I agree with Gary Middleton and the many others who mentioned the need for the skills pipeline. I think that Sorcha Eastwood said that the skills pipeline will be served if we get back to the starting point, which is by ensuring that children get the best possible start, young people get the best possible careers advice and all the pathways that are available to people throughout their lives are offered to them. We must ensure that children and young people and their parents are fully aware of those pathways. That is something that I have already spoken to the Education Minister about. I am very happy to take up an area of work with him in that regard to ensure that our colleges, our university system and our schools are fully utilised to make sure that the best opportunities for our young people emerge.

Sinéad McLaughlin mentioned the subregional issue and Invest NI's track record on visits. I accept that that does not make for good reading. That has to change. Invest NI already has the power. Many agencies that promote jobs and the economy use their own financial incentives to ensure that government policy is met. That is what I expect Invest NI to do in future. We have had a commitment regarding regional balance in the Programme for Government for, I am sure, almost a decade now. Departments should be adhering to that. We need to make sure that all Departments step up to the plate in that regard.

I think that Sorcha Eastwood and Stewart Dickson mentioned the ability to return to work and the value that social enterprises play in that regard. The difficulty is that we have lost EU funding, which supported that endeavour. That has been replaced in a very sporadic and uncertain way by the Shared Prosperity Fund. Part of the discussion that we will have with Treasury in the time ahead will be about getting more certainty in relation to that funding. That is, clearly, a significant gap that has been left in the Department for the Economy's budget. We managed to plug that during COVID, but it has now been left unfilled. That is something that we want to concentrate on in the time ahead.

Sorcha Eastwood also mentioned the definition of "good jobs". As she said, it is about much

more than simply pay. There are other factors that act as indicators, such as demands not being excessive; employment security; opportunities for career development; discretion over how work is organised; social support from management and co-workers; union representation; participation in organisational decision-making; work being safe to undertake; and work-life balance being provided for. I have asked Dr Lisa Wilson to work with the Department to review those indicators and help us to establish the best means of monitoring the creation of good jobs. Dr Wilson will also help us to produce data to allow for more analysis of that issue. As I said, there is much more to good jobs than simply a wage packet.

I take Pádraig Delargy's point about positivity about the region. Of course, we have to talk up our areas. We have to ensure that, when people go to them, we have a good story to tell, so that they want to support them. However, we do not ignore the challenges that there are across the region. Those challenges are found in some urban areas of this city, where there is also deprivation. We need to be mindful of promoting the positives while not forgetting the challenges. I accept that, at the end of the three years, we will be judged on what we have delivered against the targets that we set out. I accept that and am quite happy to be judged on what we have produced at the end of the three-year period.

David Honeyford's point about stability — I think that Stewart Dickson made the same point about political stability — was one of the main aspects of the discussion that we had in the States this week; we talked about dual market access and political stability. Those are critical in trying to develop that programme of work, just as they have been to many others that sought to reform the health service or education service. All those programmes require political stability. They also require funding. That is another matter that the Executive have to work on with Treasury. They require more than an annual budget, which does not allow for longer-term planning. We have said that we are happy to discuss how we achieve political stability for the institutions. We are here for the long haul to do that job.

Some of the other points related to the FE sector. Quite clearly, we need to continue to work with our FE sector. It has accepted, and I have accepted, that it is underutilised. It has a significantly good estate, which previous Economy Ministers invested in. I acknowledge that. We need to ensure that that is linked in right through our education system. It is a critical, key component in what should be a

seamless education system from nursery school right through to the end of people's academic pursuits.

I am glad to see that there is not only general agreement about the type of economy that we must aim for but wide recognition that we must consider inclusion, whether that is of women, people with disabilities or those from rural or more deprived areas. I welcome the substance of the motion and hope that the Assembly recognises that it aligns well with the economic vision that I have set out. I am focused on taking a comprehensive approach that will result in a highly productive, zero-carbon, regionally balanced economy that provides good jobs.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call Mark Durkan to make the winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has up to five minutes.

**Mr Durkan:** I welcome and support the motion. I am glad of and grateful for the support that has been expressed for my party's amendment. It is imperative that the Executive do all that they can to create jobs and opportunities. That means not just employment to help people to keep themselves and their families but employment and opportunities to help to keep people here.

The motion lists a number of sectors that are ideal for growth. While that list is not exhaustive, it is correct to identify jobs of the future in dynamic and tech industries. Pathfinders here have already made huge progress, and there is every reason to support the innovators of today to create the industries of tomorrow.

Our universities need to be supported not only to grow but to evolve, providing cutting-edge courses and producing more creators of ideas, employment and wealth that can be retained locally. When I say "locally", I mean "locally". The concentration of around 90% of university places in Belfast is not just detrimental to regional balance and the economic and social well-being of my constituency and constituents in Derry and many other areas across the North but holds Northern Ireland back.

Nobody here will be surprised therefore that the amendment calls for the economy to be not just grown but regionally rebalanced. Everywhere and everyone should enjoy any new opportunities, especially in areas that have been deprived of so much for so long. In the debate, Mr Middleton spoke of the need to address inequalities and to have ambitious

targets. That made me wonder and regret why previous DUP Economy Ministers were so reluctant to address targets on a subregional level. My party colleague, when proposing the amendment, pointed to effective economic policies that have been adopted in other jurisdictions and that have fairness at their core.

Philip McGuigan emphasised the importance of the green economy not just to saving the environment but for the economic opportunity that it can and undoubtedly will create.

Ms Eastwood felt lucky to hail from a more affluent area but demonstrated great empathy for and understanding of those languishing in economic activity, unable to access work even when willing. She touched on the point about political stability and rightly so. You would not build a house on shaky foundations, so companies will be an awful lot less willing to invest where there is political instability and uncertainty. We have seen and heard a lot of positivity on that front recently, but we have seen it before. Potential investors have seen and heard it before as well.

#### 6.15 pm

Messrs Elliott and Delargy heralded the role of our regional colleges and the further education sector in upskilling our workforce to match the needs and demands of the market. I agree with my constituency colleague Mr Delargy on the need for positivity, but there is and always will be a need for honesty. Derry has been failed, and we want to fix that. I welcome any prospective investors who are watching the debate to come and play their part in an exciting new chapter for our constituency and the North.

Mr Honeyford was also guilty of a wee bit of realism. He touched on the value of the FE sector and the need for fair pay for those working in it. The Minister, like others, wondered exactly where the figure of 5,000 jobs came from. I think that it came from a DUP manifesto pledge. We have seen that pattern over the past couple of months from the big two parties: picking motions based on manifesto pledges in areas for which their Ministers are not responsible. I do not know whether the figure is a case of saying, "We will build 5,000 jobs" and "We would make 5,000 more". Given that it was a manifesto pledge, I do not know whether it was based on a five-year term. Therefore, is it even more ambitious now that we only have three years left? Maybe Mr Buckley, who is no stranger to ambition, could touch on that when he is winding up the debate.

He is no stranger to winding up either.  
*[Laughter.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I am about to ask him to do that. I call on Jonathan Buckley to conclude the debate on the motion. The Member has 10 minutes.

**Mr Buckley:** Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for Foyle for that grand introduction. At this stage, we are in an almost unique situation, given that I am the third Member to wind up the debate: the Minister stole those clothes, then there was the Member for Foyle and now me. It has got to the stage where everything has been said but not everybody has said it.

I enjoyed the debate in which the members of the Economy Committee have engaged. To a large degree, there is a real sense of energy and need. I will not go into the specifics of what every Member said, because other contributors have done so. The debate clearly set out to me — I very much agree with the Member for Lagan Valley Ms Eastwood on this — the connection between careers, education and the jobs of the future. It is so important that we get that right in order to go forward. Everybody can have ambitious targets for job creation, and, if we break it down, we are looking at a changing economy. Jobs of the future are not the same as jobs of the past.

Mr Delargy mentioned the skills gap and productivity. It was important to raise those two key issues. He said that addressing those issues is about preparing our people for future employment. In order to do so, however, we have to have a careers service that is fit for purpose and enables our employers to look to the workforce to fill the jobs of the future. That is very much what the intention of the motion was. It was about looking at creating the conditions for employers to be able to fill new and emerging jobs in new and emerging sectors. Going forward, it will be so important that those jobs enter the mix. They already have to some degree, but there is much more work to be done.

When proposing the amendment, Sinéad McLaughlin said:

*"what you do not measure, you cannot achieve".*

That is a fair comment. While we may look at the 5,000 jobs as a manifesto commitment, the aspirations for this place are endless, if the Assembly gets it right, but we have to put in

place a structure that allows employers to benefit from areas of economic inactivity. The Minister and Ms Eastwood touched on the point about the number of people who are disabled and could contribute to the workforce and close that productivity gap. We could put people to work in creative industries and in the jobs of the future. That is admirable.

I go back to the start of the debate in relation to careers services. It will be so important to have that vital link-up. We said in the Committee that we were not reaching our young people early enough to enable them to steer a path towards a good job. I know that we are open to a debate on what a good job is and how that is defined, but, in a sense, everybody should have the ability to access a good job.

**Ms Eastwood:** Will the Member give way, before my voice gives way?

**Mr Buckley:** Yes, absolutely.

**Ms Eastwood:** I agree with Jonny. One of the great things that we have done early doors in the Committee — Mr Brett is not here at the moment, but he has been supportive of this — is the fact that we are going to have a joint session with the Education Minister and the Economy Minister. I know that all members were in agreement with that. I would love for us to maybe have another debate in the House off the back of that meeting at the end of the year. I get the feeling that there is consensus from Education and Economy to drive that forward, and it is up to us, as the scrutineers, to push that.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for her intervention, because that is crucial, if we are to target those industries. We should not shun industries such as digital, agri-tech, advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences and fintech. Those are the careers of the future, but, if we are not getting that message downstream quickly enough, as the Member mentioned, we run the risk of exacerbating the productivity gap. That comes down to the targeted message.

Ms McLaughlin touched on the point well in relation to the postcode lottery. It should not be about a postcode lottery, but, in the same sense, I agree with Mr Elliott's comments — he has just entered the Chamber — that there are people who have existed in those pockets of deprivation and isolation in rural constituencies and, as entrepreneurs, have been far ahead of those in urban areas and town centres in being able to grasp the jobs of the future.

I remember having a conversation with a significant business owner in Fermanagh, in hospitality. I presumed, because I felt that it was very much the case in town centres and cities, that people working from home had devastated town centres. In many cases, it has, because the workforce no longer supports other indigenous businesses. The view was different in Fermanagh, however. He was able to point to the fact that people who had worked in London or Cardiff had come home and were supporting his indigenous business. One size does not fit all. When we go forward, we need to look at the different aspects and the way in which our citizens can put themselves to good use and have a career of the future in a good, well-paid job that enables them to develop into something else.

The motion mentions ambition. The Sinn Féin Members mentioned the growth of jobs in the renewable green sector. They will be vital in the mix, if we can get issues such as planning in order to enable those jobs to become a reality. That is a real opportunity for Members from all parties to grasp.

The Democratic Unionist Party welcomes Members' genuine engagement on the issue. We remain unashamedly committed to growing the Northern Ireland economy, and we want to see an ambitious approach taken to creating better, well-paid jobs, which, in turn, will lead to greater prosperity for all. I take the point — it is something that we need to focus on — that it is very easy in geographical locations for individual Members to talk places down. That is normally because we are dealing with negative circumstances, where we feel emotive and need to speak out. When it comes to international investors, however, whether or not it concerns a local constituency, the point is that they need to hear that there is a workforce — our people are our skill set — and it is our job to make sure that people are well equipped and prepared for the jobs of the future. That will ensure that we can not only have ambitious targets for job creation but realise that potential of job creation.

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

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

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly supports an innovative and inclusive economy that provides opportunities for all; highlights the need to create more and*

*better jobs across the skills spectrum; supports, in particular, growing key sectors such as digital, agri-tech, advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences and fintech; is clear that the benefits of new employment must encompass rural communities as well as our towns and cities; stresses the importance of understanding and addressing the needs of businesses and employers; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to produce ambitious, time-bound and measurable targets to grow and regionally rebalance the Northern Ireland economy, including through creating 5,000 new tech jobs, with an associated financial stimulus package.*

*Motion made:*

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

## **Adjournment**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Members, as you were advised earlier, the Speaker has been notified that the Member will not speak to the Adjournment topic in the Order Paper.

*Adjourned at 6.25 pm.*