



Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 20 May 2024
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Poots, Edwin (Speaker)
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Robinson, Alan (East Londonderry)
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Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 May 2024

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ní Chuilín] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, I inform you that the Speaker will not be in the Chamber today or tomorrow. He is in hospital undergoing a minor procedure and hopes to be back later in the week. We all wish him well.

Assembly Business

Committee Deputy Chairperson Appointment

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that the Speaker has been notified by the nominating officer of Sinn Féin that Ms Sinéad Ennis has been nominated as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Executive Committee Business

Hospital Parking Charges Bill: Royal Assent

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that the Hospital Parking Charges Bill received Royal Assent on 16 May 2024. It will be known as the Hospital Parking Charges Act (Northern Ireland) 2024 and is chapter 2.

Members' Statements

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

Lá Domhanda na mBeach

Mr Sheehan: Inniu Lá Domhanda na mBeach. D'ainmnigh na Náisiúin Aontaithe inniu, an 20ú Bealtaine, Lá Domhanda na mBeach le daoine a chur ar an eolas faoina thábhachtaí atá an bheach, faoi na bagairtí atá uirthi agus faoi na rudaí is féidir linn uile go léir a dhéanamh le cuidiú léi.

Cuireann gníomhaíochtaí an duine daonna, cuireann sin pailneoirí mar shampla an bheach, an féileacán agus an sciathán leathair i mbaol. Tá an pailniú riachtanach don bheatha, áfach. Mura mbeadh beacha ann, ní bheadh cuid mhór torthaí ná glasraí ann ach oiread agus ní bheadh 75% de bharr talmhaíochta in ann fás. Mar sin de, cuireann pailneoirí leis an tslándáil bhia agus leis an bhithéagsúlacht.

Beidh a fhios ag na Comhaltaí go bhfuil trí choirceog ar eastát Chnoc an Anfa. Tá siad ann le cúig bliana anuas agus, in 2023, ainmníodh eastát Chnoc an Anfa ina limistéar caomhantáis don bheach Éireannach. Is áis iontach na coirceoga sin a bheith againn, nó tugann siad seans do Chomhaltaí, do bhaill foirne agus do chuariteoirí a bheith ag foghlaim faoin bheach, agus cuireann siad daoine a smaoineamh ar na plandaí a chuireann siad ag fás ina ngairdíní féin.

Caithfidimid beart a dhéanamh anois le cuidiú leis an bheach agus leis na pailneoirí eile. Tá neart rudaí simplí, praiticiúla a thig le gach aon duine a dhéanamh. Mar shampla, plandaí dúchasacha a thagann i mbláth ag amanna éagsúla den bhliain a chur sa ghairdín; an féar sa ghairdín a fhágáil gan bhaint i mí na Bealtaine; agus fiú babhla beag uisce a chur amach sa ghairdín ionas go mbeidh deoch ag na beacha.

Ní tráth moille é, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Tá 35% de na beacha ar domhan i mbaol. Den bheatha an bheach. Tá traidisiún fada beachaireachta sa tír seo. Thuig ár sinsir a thábhachtaí atá an bheach. Má dhéanaimid uile

go léir beart anois, fanfaidh an traidisiún sin beo go ceann i bhfad eile, agus is fearrde sinn é.

World Bee Day

[Translation: Today is World Bee Day. The United Nations has named today, May 20, World Bee Day to make people aware of the importance of bees, the threats that they face and what we can all do to help them.]

Human activities put pollinators such as bees, butterflies and bats at risk. However, pollination is essential to life. If there were no bees, many fruit and vegetables would not exist, and 75% of agricultural crops would not be able to grow. Pollinators therefore contribute to food security and biodiversity.

Members will be aware that there are three beehives on the Stormont estate. They have been there for the past five years, and, in 2023, the Stormont estate was designated a conservation area for the Irish bee. Those beehives are a great facility, as they give Members, staff and visitors the chance to learn about bees and they make people think about the plants that they grow in their gardens.

We need to take action now to help bees and other pollinators. There are plenty of simple, practical things that anyone can do. For example, setting native plants in our gardens that flower at different times of the year; not mowing the lawn in May; and even putting a small bowl of water out in the garden so that bees can have a drink.

It is time to act, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Some 35% of the world's bees are endangered. Our very existence depends on the bees. There is a long tradition of beekeeping in this country. Our ancestors understood the importance of bees. If we all take action now, that tradition will live on for a long time to come and will be to the advantage of us all.]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Go raibh maith agat as sin, a Phat. *[Translation: Thank you for that, Pat.]*

Reginald McCollum

Mr K Buchanan: On Saturday past, I attended a service to commemorate the murder of Reginald McCollum, who was murdered 30 years ago on Saturday in Armagh. Reggie — I knew him as Reggie — was 19 years of age. Nineteen. He was two years younger than me. Reggie was a typical young fella: he worked on

a local farm and did all that young fellas did — probably things that they should not be doing — but his biggest crime was going for a night out to Armagh. That was his biggest crime. He was removed from a chip shop at two o'clock in the morning, tortured and murdered.

That is not all that the McCollum family had to suffer. Reggie's grandmother was blown up by a booby-trap bomb, a few miles from the village of Sandholes, and his brother lost his life to an IRA mortar attack in Keady, south Armagh. The crime that that young fella committed was driving a crane. That was his crime.

Reggie was 19 when he was murdered and tragically taken from us, but, as we hear from day-to-day, there was "no alternative". After all that trouble that the family went through, Reggie's father died of a heart attack, five months after Reggie died — the man did not die of a heart attack: he died of a broken heart.

The McCollum family was at the service on Saturday. I do not know how they did it. They went and they commemorated Reggie's passing 30 years ago. They are typical of families in Northern Ireland who suffered so much, but you do not hear them. They get on with life, day by day, and you do not hear from them. I pay tribute to them, and I pay tribute to Reggie, the young fella I knew when I was growing up. He should still be here.

Adult ADHD Services

Mr McReynolds: Almost one month ago, I was grateful to have the opportunity to present a petition to the Speaker in the Chamber on behalf of more than 3,500 people calling for the urgent commissioning of adult ADHD services in Northern Ireland. That is an essential first step to give hope and support to the, potentially, thousands of adults here who are living with ADHD and who have masked their symptoms all their lives while the science and evidence highlighting the condition has improved.

Today, I speak on behalf of those who have received that crucial and life-changing diagnosis but are now unsure of their continued access to medication, due to shortages. It is well known that that shortage is due to a global shortage of medication and the rise in those being diagnosed. However, here in Northern Ireland, we are more acutely affected because patients face significant difficulties in obtaining access to specialists to speak to about their ADHD. Over the past week, I have received messages from concerned and stressed adults

and parents who feel that they are on a countdown until they run out. Telling people to "seek advice from the specialist teams" is nothing short of laughable, with the majority of individuals unaware of what that means.

I am aware that the Health Minister is confident that the issue will be resolved by September, at the very latest, but that is four months away. That is not good enough. What happens if it is not resolved by then? What do people do until then? Is the Health Minister aware of the impact that having to withdraw from the medication will have? Is he aware of the impact that it has on the ability and performance of those who need it in schools and universities and of the anxiety that many are living with as they slowly run out of a product that allows them to function in their daily lives?

ADHD is a serious condition, but interventions can be relatively quick and easy. It does not require more money to be thrown at it. All that is required is the will and motivation to do what is right. I urge the Health Minister to do all that he can to address it, before September, alongside urgently commissioning adult ADHD services. People living with the condition are becoming desperate and feel forgotten about. The ripple effect that the lack of support has on people with ADHD is colossal.

Traffic Disruption: Bangor

Mr Chambers: In early March, the Minister for Infrastructure announced a £460,000 resurfacing project for Groomsport roundabout in Bangor. It was obviously an end-of-year budget-spending exercise, because nobody had asked for that work to be done. It was advertised as being due to start on 19 February and to last for six weeks.

Eight weeks later, I asked the Minister, through a question for written answer, when the job was going to be complete. He replied that it was substantially complete on 19 April: that was eight weeks after the start of the work. I asked the Minister a further question about when it was actually going to be finished and resurfaced. I got two answers on the same day. One told me that it would not be complete until 26 May, which is some 13 weeks from the start of the job. The other answer was to my question about what arrangements were in place to deal with the traffic disruption over the weekend, and I was rather shocked to get the reply:

"A full road closure has been planned to resurface the roundabout over two

consecutive weekends; 18th and 19th May, and, 25th and 26th May 2024, weather permitting."

The Minister gave some scant information on how his Department would meet the challenge of the traffic disruption.

On the weekend that the Department chose, what was happening in Bangor? The UK Pipe Band Championships was taking place, which brought large crowds into Bangor, and there were road diversions to accommodate it. There was also a junior Orange parade in Donaghadee on the same day. I witnessed that at least one of the roads in the vicinity of the roundabout did not even have a sign up to say that the road ahead was closed, and it was full of jammed traffic, including a Translink bus. I do not know how the bus driver eventually got out of that. Traffic was being diverted up a narrow country road, where heavy-duty agricultural vehicles were bringing in the silage. They were competing with long tailbacks. I have a photograph of one of the tractors jammed against a vehicle, with nobody able to go anywhere.

Next weekend, when the job is scheduled to be completed, is a bank holiday weekend. I wonder whether lessons will be learned. This weekend, the public were saying things such as, "This is shambolic", and, "This is a joke". However, they do not point the finger at the Minister or his Department. This institution gets the blame for that type of shambolic lack of planning.

ADHD Services

Ms Hunter: I also want to talk about those living with ADHD in Northern Ireland. People who have an ADHD diagnosis in the North are treated absolutely appallingly. They face an unbelievable level of challenges and a wait of years to even get a diagnosis. The lack of investment and support from the Department of Health for support services is absolutely shocking. There is also a huge lack of clarity on how to get a diagnosis, which leaves many worried and thousands uncertain about how to go for assessment. For those who go private, there are so many difficulties, including a lack of shared care between the public and private health services. That causes a lot of confusion specifically for concerned parents, young people and adults.

Last year, I met a student who was attending university and could not get access to specialist support on her university campus until her

private consultant liaised with her public GP. Sadly, at the time, her consultant had taken a long holiday and that resulted in a lack of the support that she needed on her academic journey. That is just one story among many. Children with ADHD are, sadly, wrongly labelled and seen as disruptive and problematic. For women and girls, it can be particularly difficult to be diagnosed as they often do not present typically or in the same way that boys and men do. Women and girls are more likely to be diagnosed with mood disorders or mental health problems.

12.15 pm

Parents are desperately seeking support, but so rarely do they get it. There is a huge amount of work for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and the Western Health and Social Care Trust to do in my constituency to support the families who are desperately seeking support for their children. In the absence of support via the trusts, I thank ADD-NI, which does an incredible job and incredible work with so little money to support and empower the children, young people, adults and families throughout the North who are affected by ADHD.

I learned recently that there is a genetic component to ADHD. We are not educated on that at school. It is important to raise it in the House. I met people from ADD-NI recently. We touched on the severe anxiety, which has been mentioned, among those with an ADHD diagnosis about running out of meds. Ryan Hendry, a man with ADHD, said that he has a daily fear of running out of his medication and that it feels like a "doomsday clock". Those shortages have lasted for seven months now. Patients with an ADHD diagnosis have endured that for seven months. The Department of Health has said that the UK-wide disruption should be resolved by September, but where can those people find support in the meantime? Where can they find the crucial meds that they are so dependent on? People who work full-time spend entire days looking for medication. The system is not fit for purpose. Medication helps those people to focus, and it helps them with their work, their life and with self-regulation. So many are struggling in its absence. I urge Members across the House to keep ADHD at the forefront of their mind and to continue the fight for appropriate services, and I ask the Minister to do all that he can to help.

Tyrone Under-20s All-Ireland Win

Mr Gildernew: Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le Foireann Thír Eoghain faoi

fhiche bliain d'aois. [*Translation: I congratulate the Tyrone under-20 team.*] I acknowledge and congratulate the Tyrone under-20 team, which yesterday secured an all-Ireland win in O'Moore Park against Kerry. That under-20 team started its campaign in October in Garvaghey and continued through the depths of the dark winter nights. I will give the context of yesterday's achievement. The team has been training three nights a week since October. That is on top of all the other club commitments. It is also on top of the fact that some of the team work, some attend school and they all have the other parts of their life to manage. As an example, footballer Ruairi McCullagh of Loughmacrory sat an A level this morning at 9.00 am and will sit another tomorrow.

The team have brought tremendous pride to their family, clubs, community and the entire county of Tyrone. However, yesterday's win was also tinged with sadness. GAA President, Jarlath Burns, said yesterday that there was at least one empty seat in the stadium; in fact, there were even more. John Rafferty, the brother of yesterday's under-20 captain, Michael Rafferty, was killed on the A5 in October 2022; in fact, John had represented Tyrone at under-20 level. Caolan Devlin lost his life in March. His brother, Niall, captained the Tyrone under 20-team when they last won the title, in 2022. The victory is bittersweet in that respect.

The game was a ferocious, end-to-end competition. I heard Michael Rafferty, the captain, speak this morning, and he described the intensity of the game. We saw incredible talent on display from both teams. Hopefully, it augurs well for Tyrone football, especially given recent MacRory Cup and Hogan Cup wins. Undoubtedly, many of those young players will soon be on Tyrone seniors and, hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, will play a part in bringing Sam Maguire back to Tyrone. Today, I congratulate the team. They should enjoy their victory. I also congratulate their management, mentors, families, friends, schoolmates and teachers on such a wonderful achievement.

Infected Blood Inquiry Report

Mrs Dodds: Today is an important day across the United Kingdom, because many thousands of people will hear the outcome of the infected blood inquiry. Across the United Kingdom, 30,000 people are estimated to have contracted HIV or hepatitis C after being given contaminated blood products in the 1970s and 1980s. Five thousand of those people will have suffered from haemophilia or associated

bleeding disorders. It is estimated that almost 3,000 have died before hearing the outcome of the inquiry.

All those who have been impacted will be anxious. In the words of a colleague and campaigner, Nigel Hamilton, they are also:

"frustrated that it has taken so long to get here".

For too long, those people have suffered from a lack of information, obstruction and prevarication from the world of medicine. They have waited a long time for the outcome of the inquiry. Hopefully, today, they will hear from the Government about a full compensation scheme. We think of those who have been impacted and, indeed, those who have not lived to see this day. Hopefully, it will be a satisfactory day, when people will get answers and the Government, medicine and the National Health Service will learn lessons on how to prevent this happening again. It has been a stain on our Government and health service for too long, and we hope that there will be a satisfactory conclusion.

Pollution: Six Mile Water River

Mr Blair: Over the weekend, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency confirmed a significant river pollution incident in the Four Mile Burn in Parkgate. That is another utterly appalling and environmentally devastating incident of pollution in my South Antrim constituency. It appears to have resulted in the death of well over 1,000 trout of varying ages. Anglers have reported that hundreds of young salmon also perished. That species is already seriously depleted in numbers and is protected by legislation. The incident came just days after I reported suspected pollution in the Three Mile Water river, which is not that far from the area I am talking about today, and follows a statement I made in the Assembly on 12 March about reported and confirmed pollution in the Six Mile Water river in the Ballyclare and Doagh areas. One of those incidents was later confirmed as being caused by slurry-spreading during the closed season. There is a serious and destructive problem here that needs to be addressed urgently.

The latest incident is all the more worrying as it happened in a river that is a tributary of the Six Mile Water river, which, in turn, flows directly into Lough Neagh. We know only too well the problems with Lough Neagh, as visibly demonstrated by the algal blooms last year, which severely impacted on the environment,

community life and businesses along the lough shores.

It has become clear, through the AERA Minister's answers and comments in this place, that an environmental improvement plan is awaiting Executive consideration, approval or both. There is no time to waste. Doing nothing is not an option. We cannot sit idly by while nature is destroyed and the threat to our native species increases. My call today is for the environmental improvement plan, as a crucial starting point and framework, to be urgently progressed by the Executive, so that interdepartmental actions can begin to deal with the problems that I have highlighted and the many other examples of such problems across Northern Ireland.

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

Mr Elliott: I bring to Members' attention issues with the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme: its slow approach in some instances and the fact that a number of people who should have benefited have not and that some have been refused. A very small number have been approved at this stage. One of the most frustrating aspects is the number of people who are still waiting, years after their application was made. I know of someone who has had their application in for over two years. They were injured — severely disabled — in a bomb explosion well over 40 years ago. They went through the process of application over two years ago. Their Capita assessment took place over one year ago. Now, the body has come back and said that it still does not have enough evidence, even though it is clear that the person is severely disabled and has not worked since the explosion in 1979. They are very frustrated. At this stage, the person and their family just do not know where to turn, because they feel that there is a lack of support and help from that body — it is nil — and they keep getting rejected. The process and the scheme have been in place long enough to be able to acknowledge people who are severely disabled as they should have been and to give them the payments for which they have waited for many decades.

Government: Institutional Reform

Ms McLaughlin: Like many people across Northern Ireland, when I watched the testimonies at the COVID-19 inquiry last week, I was left reflecting on what they said about our system of government. Brenda Campbell KC, in

her blistering summary of the evidence, spoke of:

"The impact of the three-year absence of our Assembly, the years of underfunding of our health and Civil Service, single year budgets, leaving departments ravaged and worn, the silo approach of the Department of Health and other departments".

In that summary, she rightly identified the challenges of an inherently and institutionally dysfunctional system in which party political interests are placed above the interests of the people whom we are elected to represent. Those attitudes have led to the stop-start system of government that has not only frustrated our attempts to improve our health and education systems but crucially undermined the capacity of our institutions and Civil Service to respond to the pandemic. That point was re-emphasised by the words of the First Minister, as she admitted that we have a:

"very siloed mentality, departmental structure".

Such acceptance of that shortcoming as an inevitable part of our institutional arrangements is a dereliction. We cannot simply resign ourselves to the silo mentality. It is the job of our political leadership to break down that mentality, which serves no Department, no Minister and certainly not the public whom we represent.

Since the Executive returned, the issue of reform has slipped down the agenda, and the Executive parties have refused to take any meaningful action. There is absolutely no sign of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee properly dealing with the veto issue. My party's ask on our first Opposition day motion is therefore as relevant now as it was then. We do not know what the next crisis will be. It may not be a pandemic, but something will definitely arrive and provoke instability in this place once again.

The truth is that the current structure of the institutions delivers bad government. If we do not use the opportunity to change the way Stormont works, remove the toxic veto and put the common good ahead of political party interests, we will once again be found sorely wanting. The COVID-19 inquiry should be another wake-up call to everyone in the Chamber to work together to reform the institutions. I hope that the biggest parties in this place will finally start listening and that they will step in and step up to the plate.

Irish Sea Border

Mr Allister: I wish to raise the veil of secrecy that has descended over the operation of the Irish Sea border. Before the implementation of that aspect of the laughably called 'Safeguarding the Union' paper, it was possible to ask and discover the number of checks on goods coming into Northern Ireland. I asked such questions. I discovered, for example, that, in January, there were 5,948 documentary and seal checks on agri-food and that there were 6,095 such checks on other goods. When I next asked, I was told that, following the implementation regulations, DAERA was no longer in charge and could not give the figures. When Baroness Hoey asked the same question in the House of Lords, the Government refused to answer, saying, "We do not disclose this information".

There has been a deliberate blackout, because these are protocol implementers who love darkness rather than light. This is what the DUP has brought us: it has not got rid of the Irish Sea border, just hidden it from public scrutiny. What is it afraid of?

I suppose that it is obvious: being caught out on the lie that the Irish Sea border is gone.

12.30 pm

Now, on top of all that, we have the gazumping of DAERA's powers by the Secretary of State on a vast range of animal health issues. That is all part of the DUP deal, yet, in 'Farming Life' on Saturday, I read William Irwin, a Member of this House, denouncing that transfer of powers. No doubt, that was from a press statement written by the same press office that, on a daily basis, defends and upholds the dud deal.

The DUP needs to own what it has done here, and we need to have openness and transparency. A vast array of DAERA powers have been removed from scrutiny in this House and from exercise in this House to hide them from public view. That happened because of directions issued by the Secretary of State. Those directions have not been published, but they must be published, and I call on the AERA Minister to publish each and every direction that has been issued that gazumps and takes away his powers. The public are entitled to know, and, presently, we are being held in total ignorance of matters that touch upon so many aspects of the daily lives of our people, particularly those in the farming community.

Education Support Workers: Strikes

Mr Carroll: This morning, I was once again proud to stand with the striking education workers at St Joseph's Primary School on Slate Street in my constituency and also outside this Building with workers who were striking from various schools. I want to say categorically that I support the strike. Disgracefully, the Education Minister sent a statement to MLAs, imploring us to support the strike's being called off. The strike will end, Minister, when workers are paid what they are owed.

In different schools and across constituencies, the experience is universal. Education workers are sick, sore and tired of being taken advantage of. When the Stormont Executive were cobbled together with much pomp and celebration, we were told all about workers' pay and how it and many other things would be a priority for this Executive, but, once again, education workers, cleaners, porters, drivers, escorts and assistants have all been forgotten about by this place. No Ministers have been listening. They have ignored the plight and fight of these workers for five or six years — same as it ever was.

However, it is OK for Ministers, who got a salary bump. Ministers who are on £90,000 a year have the temerity to tell workers, some of whom earn £1,000 per month, that they must take another year, two years or three years — who knows how long? — of pay cuts. It is completely unacceptable, and the reality for those workers is that they are underpaid for working in schools and educational settings but they do the essential job that they love while also working two and three jobs. They are working all the hours of the day just to pay their bills.

Today and this week, unions that represent those workers are demanding that the money be released for the pay and grading review. Ministers talked a good game when Stormont was down. Now that Stormont is up, the Finance and Education Ministers need to cough up the money, put it in the pockets of those workers and pay them what they are owed.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the time for Members' statements. I apologise: at least four other Members rose in their position but —.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Principal Deputy Speaker.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am not finished. I will bring you in in a wee minute, Matthew.

Apologies for that. Time was just not on our side.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. Apologies for cutting across you there.

It would be helpful to get advice from the Chair on whether it is in order for a Minister — in this case, the Minister of Education — to lay a written ministerial statement on an issue that is clearly of significant interest, namely the strike involving education staff, when he could have given that statement orally to the Assembly.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Matthew, I will certainly ask for advice on that.

Members, take your ease while we change personnel at the top Table. Thank you.

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

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Andrew McMurray be appointed as a member of the Committee for Infrastructure; and that Ms Connie Egan be appointed as a member of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee. — [Ms Bradshaw.]

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Trade and Business Development

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that they must be concise in asking their questions. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed.

Miss Hargey (The Minister for the Economy):

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in trade and business development sectoral format. The meeting was held in Armagh on 26 April 2024. Junior Minister Pam Cameron MLA and former Economy Minister Conor Murphy MLA represented the Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Peter Burke TD, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This statement has been agreed with Minister Cameron, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council welcomed the overall achievements of InterTradeIreland from 2021 to date and commended the valuable contribution that it has made through its trade and development programmes for small and medium-sized companies trading across the border and in both jurisdictions. Ministers recognised the positive impact of the innovation and technology programmes administered by InterTradeIreland and its support for building relationships between companies and researchers.

The Council noted InterTradeIreland's research priorities for 2024: a study of the business support ecosystem across the island; research into the changing nature of trade on the island; offshore wind and hydrogen energy; cross-border service trade; artificial intelligence; and access to funding. Ministers welcomed the work of InterTradeIreland, alongside Enterprise Ireland and Invest NI, in developing a cross-border enterprise cooperation scheme, which was recently awarded €30 million in Shared Island funding. The Council approved the InterTradeIreland business plans and budgets/grants for 2022, 2023 and 2024, which have been completed in accordance with agreed guidance issued by the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan

Delivery and Reform and have been agreed by sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers.

Ministers approved the InterTradelreland 2023-25 corporate plan, which has been completed in accordance with agreed guidance issued by both Departments and has been agreed by sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers. The Council noted InterTradelreland's annual reports and accounts for 2020 and 2021, which have been certified by the Comptroller and Auditor General and laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas, and the annual report and accounts for 2022, which will be laid shortly.

The North/South Ministerial Council approved the recommended increase in InterTradelreland's staffing complement from 42 to 65 to assist it in meeting the increased demand for its services. Ministers noted the position in relation to the Horizon 2020 programme and the progress and current position of North/South collaboration in relation to the Horizon Europe programme and welcomed the opportunities available following the UK's association with the programme. The Council noted the achievements and current position of the US-Ireland research and development partnership, noting that it has now provided over \$100 million in funding to researchers collaborating on 55 projects in the three jurisdictions.

The North/South Ministerial Council noted recent achievements of the InterTradelreland synergy programme, which includes the synergy flagship project, the fintech corridor. The Council noted the focus on sustainability as a cross-cutting theme in a number of InterTradelreland's programmes and its plans for upcoming research in offshore wind and hydrogen energy. Ministers agreed that officials and InterTradelreland will continue to engage to identify opportunities to address climate change and loss of biodiversity from both the policy and operational perspectives.

The Council agreed to hold its next trade and business development meeting in sectoral format in autumn 2024. I commend the statement to the Assembly and welcome engagement with Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for the statement, Minister.

Ms McLaughlin: First, I welcome you to your post, Minister. I very much look forward to working with you in the coming weeks.

It is good to see Invest NI and InterTradelreland working really closely together. How is that collaboration promoting the North's dual market access and, in particular, the advantage of locating in the north-west city region? Does the Minister agree that a specific plan should be put in place for the north-west city region that can exploit opportunities in a collaborative fashion?

Miss Hargey: Good work has taken place on looking at the opportunities that dual market access presents. InterTradelreland and Invest NI continue to work together to look at those opportunities and, importantly, at how we can profile them and alert people to them. A series of engagement events will be held over the next period in order to do that. That sits with the economic vision that Conor Murphy, as the then Minister, outlined in the Assembly a number of weeks ago. The Member will know that part of it involves addressing the regional imbalance that there has been for a long time. Part of the work will look at subregional economic development plans and ensure that all the networks and arm's-length bodies (ALBs) feed into those development plans and work with each of the localities, particularly through engagement with local councils, the local private sector and social enterprises in each council area. As the Member knows, in the north-west, that work is complemented by the task force that Minister Murphy set up recently.

Mr Middleton (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I thank the Minister for her statement and, on behalf of the Committee for the Economy, welcome her to her role.

I note from the statement that InterTradelreland has commissioned all-island research on offshore wind and hydrogen energy. Can the Minister outline what steps she plans to take to work with Westminster, given the fact that the UK Government are, in large part, responsible for that area of business?

Miss Hargey: We look to explore and take advantage of North/South and east-west relationships. That is important in the time ahead, particularly when we look at the climate challenges, in line with the climate legislation that was passed in the previous mandate, to ensure that we reach net zero. There will be ongoing engagement through arm's-length bodies such as Invest NI. I will continue to take any opportunities that I have as Minister to have direct engagement with Ministers in Westminster and Dublin and to ensure that we look through the lens of North/South link-up and

cooperation but, importantly, through the east-west lens as well.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her statement. What is her assessment of the British Government's delay in formally associating to Horizon Europe, and how that has affected local participation?

Miss Hargey: The UK formally associated to Horizon Europe on 4 December 2023 at the EU-UK Specialised Committee on Participation in Union Programmes (SCPUP). Scientists and businesses from here have been able to participate in Horizon Europe since the start of the programme in January 2021 through the UK guarantee scheme. Delays to formalising an association, however, have had a considerable impact on investment in science and research and on all potential all-island economic cooperation. InterTradelreland is committed to and focused on building cross-border momentum and boosting participation, and it is looking to seize the opportunities that are available through the Horizon Europe programme. Although there are delays, we are hopeful that, by working collaboratively and collectively, we can start to pick up the pace of implementation of programmes.

Ms Eastwood: I thank the Minister for the update. I wish her well in her new role and take the opportunity to extend my good wishes to Conor Murphy.

The statement references the achievements and current position of the US-Ireland R&D partnership, which is worth over \$100 million in funding. I welcome that. An excellent example of North/South economic working is the all-island oncology industry report.

Evaluating the current landscape and economic potential of precision oncology and digital health on the island of Ireland was indeed commissioned by the All-Ireland Cancer Research Institute, with support from InterTradelreland's synergy initiative, which is referenced in the ministerial statement. The All-Ireland Cancer Research Institute also recommended the creation of an all-island oncology innovation cluster. Will the Minister support that recommendation and make this a priority area of North/South economic and health partnership working?

12.45 pm

Miss Hargey: We will look at any opportunities that present themselves that have not only economic but social impacts across the island.

The Member picked up on an important issue around research and innovation and on shaping positive health outcomes for people who are impacted by such diseases. The research is important, and, going forward, the Shared Island Fund will bring an important injection of resources. We will look for any opportunity, and I am happy to correspond directly with the Member after this on the specifics around that work.

Mr Delargy: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she have any plans to request Shared Island funding for an expansion of the US-Ireland research and development programme?

Miss Hargey: As I said, there has been the announcement of €30 million in Shared Island funding, which we welcome. We also welcome InterTradelreland's work alongside Enterprise Ireland and Invest NI on cross-border enterprise and cooperation. The three enterprise agencies are now working to develop their proposals on that, and we are hopeful that anticipated spend around that can start to occur later this year.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the Minister to her position and send best wishes to Conor Murphy.

InterTradelreland's staffing is to increase from 42 to 65. Can the Minister explain how she justifies a 55% increase in staffing?

Miss Hargey: The maximum headcount for InterTradelreland was 42, and that number was from when it was established in 1999. Increasing the complement to 65 is in line with the business case that we received in terms of Department approvals and aligns with meeting the demands of the work that now presents itself. We have scrutinised the increased resource that is needed, and it is very much aligned to the work and the demand that is coming to InterTradelreland, which is a positive thing. InterTradelreland will make announcements on business impact across the island in the coming weeks.

Mr Buckley: Following on from the question from the Member for Lagan Valley on US R&D partnership, of the \$100 million in funding to research and collaboration on 55 projects, is the Minister in a position to outline how many of those projects pertain to Northern Ireland?

Miss Hargey: I do not have that figure in front of me now, but I am happy to correspond with you to give you those details.

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Minister for her statement, and I wish her well in her role. Can she elaborate on the discussions that took place regarding climate change and biodiversity loss?

Miss Hargey: Thanks very much for the question. There were discussions on the circular economy, looking at sustainability, which is of strategic importance to InterTradelreland. Looking forward, following the progress of planned research on offshore wind and green hydrogen, there was discussion on what more can be done around that. Officials in both jurisdictions are engaging on the research and looking at opportunities with the circular economy, which I touched on, and they will continue to collaborate on that. Sustainability is a cross-cutting theme in several of InterTradelreland's programmes and areas, and, looking at its central policy and research priorities going forward, we want to see a greater focus on partnership working and stakeholder engagement in the time ahead. Those were the broad areas of discussion at the last meeting.

Miss Brogan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister.]* Following on from the previous question, can the Minister outline what activities InterTradelreland runs to support environmental sustainability?

Miss Hargey: InterTradelreland has a range of programmes such as the 'Seedcorn Investor Readiness Competition', which has a €20,000 low-carbon green award recognising the importance of supporting high-potential sustainability start-ups. There is an 'Innovation Boost' fund, which funds a project manager and academic partner to implement 12- or 18-month innovation projects. Those include sustainability projects and sustainability-related process improvements. There is sustainability in specific areas within the 'Business Explorer' programme, with energy-efficiency requirements and carbon zero and digitisation plans among its priorities. In 2023, a pilot supply chain programme looked at the possibility of impact substitution, nearshoring and on-island supply chain resilience activities. As part of the 2024 research programme, InterTradelreland will continue to commission research into sustainability. The first of that is planned for offshore wind and green hydrogen.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for the statement and your answers so far. I join others in wishing you well going forward.

I congratulate InterTradelreland on its recent 25th anniversary. I was fortunate enough to attend an event that it had in Washington earlier this year, when it was outlined that a priority area was the potential for commercialisation of the research. The statement refers to \$100 million: Minister, will you outline the timescales under which that funding will be rolled out and how you will evaluate the potential for job creation, business growth and attracting external investment?

Miss Hargey: Work is ongoing on developing the resource and the plans. Once we have finalised them by way of spending prioritisation and have completed that stage of the assessment, I will write to you with more detail.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I welcome you formally as Economy Minister, but I hope that it is not for too long and that we have you back on the Finance Committee. Obviously, I wish Conor Murphy all the best for a quick recovery.

There are lots of things to agree with in the statement, but the economic vision of your predecessor — and, hopefully, successor — was clear about growing the all-island economy and maximising dual-market access opportunities. There are not, though, many specific actions in the statement that help to make that happen. Will you outline what those are? For example, there is the approval of backward-looking plans, budgets and grants for 2022, 2023 and 2024, but, on a forward-looking basis, what specific actions will be executed to maximise dual-market access and all-island opportunities?

Miss Hargey: Work is ongoing in looking at the action plans and the additional funding that has come through the Shared Island Fund. There is collaboration with InterTradelreland and Invest NI. We are also looking at our subregional economic plans to make sure that we have grassroots traction on the ground. We do not have specific details on going forward, but, once those are available, we will be able to share them with Members.

Mr Allister: Considering that the Minister was not at the meeting, I do not see a lot of point in asking her about what happened there. However, I will ask her a question that she was meant to have answered in the Assembly process last week but has failed to answer. What is InterTradelreland costing the Northern Ireland block grant, particularly now that we have had that colossal increase in staff? What is the cost of that body?

Miss Hargey: InterTradeIreland funding from my Department stands at a current level, in 2024-25, at £5.2 million.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): That concludes the questions from Members who were present for the statement.

Before we move to the next item of business, Minister, I associate myself with the good wishes expressed to you earlier and thank you also.

Executive Committee Business

Defective Premises Bill: First Stage

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): I beg to introduce the Defective Premises Bill [NIA 03/22-27], which is a Bill to amend the law as to liability for defects in the state of dwellings; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): I beg to introduce the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill [NIA 04/22-27], which is a Bill to make provision about the extension of pensions automatic enrolment to jobholders under the age of 22; to make provision about the lower qualifying earnings threshold for automatic enrolment; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, please take your ease to allow for a change at the top Table.

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

Pet Abduction Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions within the Pet Abduction Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 6 December 2023, dealing with pet abduction.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Muir: I am grateful for the opportunity to move the motion and speak about the Pet Abduction Bill, which creates new offences of abduction of dogs and cats. The Pet Abduction Bill is a private Member's Bill supported by the UK Government that is currently progressing through Parliament. It applies to England and Northern Ireland, and its clauses relate to devolved matters. For that reason, I seek the Assembly's legislative consent to the Bill's extending to Northern Ireland.

Before I get into the detail of the provisions, however, I emphasise the Bill's importance. I fully understand how important dogs and cats are to their owners in Northern Ireland. They are part of families, and they provide support and comfort when we are down, as well as companionship and joy. That is why it is so distressing for owners when one of their beloved pets is abducted or detained in what is a cruel crime. While information on the volume of pet thefts in Northern Ireland is not clear, responses to freedom of information requests to the police indicated that the number of recorded burglary, robbery and theft offences where the property was described as a dog was on average 35 per year.

It is important to note that each of those offences may have involved one or more dogs and that the actual number of dogs taken may, therefore, be higher. Unfortunately, there is no similar information for cat theft. Whilst the number of dogs abducted in Northern Ireland is relatively small, for each family that has a dog taken, the impact is significant.

1.00 pm

The Bill would mean that the abduction of a pet will not be treated the same as the theft of a television, mobile phone or power tool, all of which can easily be replaced. They may be worth a lot of money, and replacing them may be inconvenient, but the item itself is not affected by the crime, whereas a pet is. It is important to note that the intention of the Bill is to allow the courts to consider the emotional impact on the owner and the impact on the welfare of the animal when deciding the penalty. I therefore support the creation of a bespoke criminal offence of pet abduction in Northern Ireland. While there has not been time to carry out public consultation prior to introducing the new offences, I believe that they are likely to be welcomed by the public; indeed, as the Bill progressed through Parliament, pet organisations and welfare charities were positive about and welcoming of the measures in the Bill.

I turn to the details of the Bill, specifically as it will apply in Northern Ireland. Clauses 1 and 2 will create two specific offences of cat abduction and dog abduction. The Bill will make it an offence for a dog or cat to be taken from a person who has lawful control of the animal. In the case of dogs, the Bill will also make it an offence to detain the pet. It limits the offence of cat abduction to the taking of cats to take account of the different lifestyles of the animals, recognising the fact that, unlike dogs, cats roam without their owners, enjoy mixing in other households and probably get fed at every house in the street.

A number of safeguards and exemptions are set out in the clauses. That is because the Bill is intended to deal only with unscrupulous people who abduct a dog or cat; it is not intended to criminalise genuinely kind behaviour to cats and dogs by people who are not their owners. It is a defence for the person to show that they had lawful authority to take or detain a dog: for example, in instances when the animal is under the control of a vet, dog walker or pet sitter. That defence is also intended to protect police officers or district council officials, who may have authority to seize dogs under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

There is also a defence in relation to unaccompanied or stray dogs, such that a person charged with the offence of detaining a dog could show that they complied with the current notification requirements under the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 and made reasonable steps to comply with the requirements for the collection of the dog. That would also be relevant to a farmer who detains an unaccompanied dog that has been worrying his livestock. In such cases, should the farmer comply with all the legal requirements, they cannot be prosecuted for detaining the dog. The Bill does not seek to criminalise cases involving domestic disputes between partners. Therefore, no offence is committed where a dog or cat is taken from a household or detained, if it entered that household after the two people had started living together.

Finally, there is the fallback defence of "reasonable excuse", to ensure that we do not inadvertently criminalise well-meaning behaviour. The term "reasonable excuse" is deliberately not defined in the Bill in order to give courts flexibility to determine on a case-by-case basis whether the taking or detention of the animal is unlawful. For example, the defence may be available in a scenario in which a neighbour has taken in an injured pet to check on its welfare.

The maximum sentence attached to cat or dog abduction in the Bill is up to five years in prison, a fine or both. I appreciate that that is lower than what is currently available in the case of theft of property, including animals, under the Theft Act (Northern Ireland) 1969, which is 10 years in prison. However, as the new offences are centred on the impact on the animal, I consider that it is right that the maximum penalty aligns with other serious animal welfare offences under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which also sets a maximum of five years' imprisonment. For context, the maximum penalty for child abduction in Northern Ireland is seven years' imprisonment. I do not think that it would be appropriate to have a greater penalty for the abduction of pets.

The clauses also address the fact that pet theft and abduction do not currently have a unique identifier in crime data sets, which is why it is so difficult to identify the number of pets stolen every year. In many police records, it is impossible to distinguish between the theft of an inanimate object and that of an animal. Of course, a dog or a cat may be taken as part of a burglary or robbery, but the fact that an animal was involved will not be mentioned in all police records. Creating the two new offences of the abduction of dogs or cats will introduce new, unique identifiers that will help with the recording of such crime and help us to see the true extent of it.

At the moment, the Bill covers only cats and dogs, but it has enabling powers so that it can be amended to cover other animal species if the need arises. That is set out in clause 3, but the power is, in some ways, limited. My Department must first consider that animals of the species concerned are kept as a pet and that there is evidence of a significant number of or rise in cases of unlawful taking or detaining. Any legislation to extend the offence to other animals must also be considered by the Assembly.

Clause 4 provides for a consequential amendment to the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, with the effect that a defendant in Northern Ireland charged with a summary offence under clauses 1 or 2 cannot claim trial by jury.

Clauses 5 and 6 set out the territorial extent of the Bill and arrangements for commencement. If the Bill receives Royal Assent, the provisions to create a new pet abduction offence in Northern Ireland will not come into force until the introduction of a commencement order by my Department.

That concludes my overview of the Bill. It is a short, simple Bill, but its implications will be far-reaching in protecting animals and their owners. It shows that we will not tolerate the abduction of cats and dogs and the value that we place on them. It shows that we understand the needs of animals, giving them a voice in the most powerful way possible by changing the law to protect them. I hope that the legislative consent motion (LCM) will enjoy your support. Accordingly, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I thank the Minister for moving the legislative consent motion. I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee. Members will have had the opportunity to read the Committee's report, which was published on 10 May, on the legislative consent memorandum on the Pet Abduction Bill. On 11 April, the Committee considered a written briefing from the Department on the Westminster private Member's Bill and on the legislative consent memorandum. The Committee is aware that specific offences of abduction of dogs and cats have been under consideration for a number of years, following a recommendation from the UK pet theft task force in 2021 and support from animal welfare groups. The Bill recognises that pet animals are not just property but sentient beings and, in many homes, are considered part of the family. Therefore, it causes huge distress to owners if they are stolen.

The Department noted that it is clearly a devolved matter but wished the Committee to consider the advantages of agreeing to extend the offence to Northern Ireland as part of the private Member's Bill. The Committee recognised that, in the absence of an Executive at the time, Northern Ireland could not be included in the Westminster private Member's Bill. Officials, however, completed much of the necessary work to allow a decision to be taken by the returned Assembly. The Committee agreed in principle that it had no objection to the LCM. However, it wrote to the Department seeking information on the extent of its consultation.

On 2 May, the Committee considered the response to that letter and noted that no part of the UK had formally consulted on the contents of the private Member's Bill but that, previously, UK government officials had engaged with the RSPCA as part of the work of the pet theft task force. The Committee was somewhat concerned about that but was reassured by the fact that, when the Pet Abduction Bill receives

Royal Assent, it will require a commencement order and the Department intends to engage with key stakeholders at that point.

It is anticipated that the legislation will be popular. Even so, the Committee decided that it would be best to engage with some of the stakeholders. The Committee wrote to the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA), Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, the Kennel Club Northern Ireland and the PSNI to seek their views. On 9 May, the Committee considered the responses and took briefings from the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) and the Department. Members were pleased to see support for the Bill in those responses, which can be read in the Committee's report. The Committee was pleased to see that the offence will not apply in cases of disputes between persons from the same household. It was also pleased that a "reasonable excuse" exception is intended to allow the court discretion on a case-by-case basis; for example, where a neighbour allows a roaming cat to enter their premises now and again, which, I am sure, happens regularly.

At its meeting on 9 May, the Committee agreed to support the Minister's legislative consent motion on the Pet Abduction Bill. Members, however, wished to highlight a number of points that arose during its scrutiny. Those can be found in the conclusion of our report, but I will summarise them. Devolved matters should be legislated for in primary legislation made by the Assembly through the Committee, although the Committee accepted the arguments for this LCM. Sentencing may be lower than under current property theft law, but, as maximum sentences are rarely given out, the new separate offences in the Bill will allow the courts more discretion to consider the financial loss and emotional impact. The Committee recommends that the animal welfare officers in councils, DAERA and the PSNI consider how to improve coordination and that further work with the PSNI should commence on the implications of the Bill for data gathering. The microchipping of cats will soon be mandatory in England, and we recommend that the Minister considers following that path. It will be difficult to ascertain if a cat has been stolen without a microchip, given that their nature is to roam. Finally, the Committee supports a single point of access to the microchip database in use across the UK.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. [*Translation: Thank you,*

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister also.] The SDLP is broadly content to support the legislative consent motion on the Pet Abduction Bill. Obviously, we would prefer to see primary legislation from the Assembly on devolved matters, but, given the nature of the Bill and the widespread support for it in the sector, we support today's legislative consent motion. We will, however, continue to deal with LCMs on an individual basis, as and when they come before the Assembly.

Legislating for a new offence of pet abduction will recognise the impact on owners and animals of the stress and trauma of abductions, which the Minister rightly referred to. In many cases, a pet cat or dog is regarded as a treasured member of the family. Their loss goes beyond any monetary value, and they deserve to be treated in the law as much more than simply property.

The introduction of the new offence will open the way for more accurate figures to be maintained on the level of pet abductions and the breeds that may be specifically targeted. A figure has been made available by the PSNI for abductions of dogs in the North: 215 dog thefts over the past six years. On the point about the PSNI, in Committee I said that it was very important to connect with the PSNI to make sure that it has the resources to deal with this, given the serious cutbacks to community policing in some areas. That will be very important. The 215 dog thefts are a tiny percentage of the number of dogs in our society when you consider that 99,206 dog licences were issued by councils between April and December 2023. However, the impact of the loss in each case should not be underestimated. As far as I am aware, there are no comparable figures for cats or other pets. Statistics from the Dogs Trust indicate that fewer than a quarter of stolen dogs are, ultimately, returned to their original homes.

The Bill is not perfect, but, as the USPCA pointed out, it provides an opportunity to highlight the requirement to microchip dogs. Since 2016, it has been compulsory for all dogs in Britain and Ireland to be microchipped and registered on an authorised database by the time that they are eight weeks old. However, current microchipping systems and databases need to be reviewed, so that there are more opportunities to reunite pets and owners or identify the owner of an abused dog. There are a number of different manufacturers of microchips and databases. At least 14 authorised databases exist in the UK, but they are not always compatible, so, when they are scanned, the registered information may, in

fact, not show up. In addition, on the rest of the island of Ireland, dogs must be microchipped by the age of 12 weeks and registered on one of four approved databases, but, while the data on those is synchronised with Europetnet, it may not be compatible with the databases used in the North.

There is, therefore, a need to harmonise the databases used to register dogs and, if it happens in the foreseeable future, other pets. The USPCA has proposed a single microchipping database that all enforcement agencies, veterinary practices and animal welfare charities could access. It has also suggested that the Minister should bring in legislation on the microchipping of pet cats in Northern Ireland. I realise that that could be a bit of a task. None of that is possible with the legislative consent motion, as we are unable to amend the original Bill. However, highlighting these issues will, hopefully, improve the possibility that those matters will ultimately be resolved.

1.15 pm

Miss Brogan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister.]* As a member of the AERA Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the legislative consent motion on behalf of Sinn Féin. The Pet Abduction Bill was passed in the British Parliament last December. The Bill has seven clauses, and it creates two new offences: dog abduction and cat abduction. The Bill also gives the AERA Minister powers to create abduction offences for other animals that are kept as pets.

As other Members have mentioned, there are currently 99,206 dogs licensed in the North, and the PSNI has identified a total of 215 cases of dog theft. The Bill provides for those convicted of dog or cat abduction to be given the maximum prison sentence of five years, a financial penalty or both. Although the Bill is a necessary move to try to tackle the problem of pet theft, it is disappointing that it has not been done on an all-island basis and that there was no public consultation here. If the legislation had been passed through the Assembly, it would have given us the chance to have a public consultation and to better tailor the Bill to the needs of the people here in the North.

Currently, it is not mandatory to microchip cats. We encourage owners of cats to have their pets microchipped so that, should the animals, unfortunately, get lost or abducted, the legislation can fulfil its purpose. Theft of pets is a distressing experience for pets and owners.

The legislation aims to acknowledge that pets are more than property. It also aims to prevent people from abducting pets, and to punish those who feel that they can abduct pets. We support the motion.

Mr T Buchanan: I will be brief, as I do not want to repeat what the other Committee members have already said. As a party, we are content to support the motion.

No one could disagree with the sentiments or principles of the Bill, or what it is aiming to achieve, but nevertheless concerns were raised as to the outworkings of the Bill. One of those concerns related to the proving of whether a dog or cat had been stolen or whether it had simply strayed on to a neighbouring property. Take, for example, a cat. How do you prove that a cat has been stolen or abducted or has simply wandered on to a neighbouring property and the homeowner has done what everyone would do — feed it a little — and the cat remains? How do you prove that that cat has been stolen or abducted? That is one of the issues that was raised in Committee. The other issues related to the microchipping of cats, as there is nothing available at this time for the microchipping of cats, and the lack of a single national database between here and the UK. Those are some of the issues and concerns that were raised at the Committee. Perhaps the Minister will seek to address some of those issues in his closing remarks. All in all, we support the motion.

Mr Blair: This LCM, linked to the private Member's Bill that is moving through the UK Parliament, shifts the focus from the owner's loss to the welfare of the animal in the case of pet theft. Therefore I am grateful that Northern Ireland has been included in the scope of the Bill. The inclusion of specific offences for the abduction of dogs and cats acknowledges that pet animals are cherished companions and integral members of the family, rather than mere property. That development signifies a significant step forward for animal welfare in Northern Ireland and offers reassurance and protection for pet owners. Pet owners and many others would say that the act of taking someone's dog or cat should not be equated with stealing an item or an object. Our pets are living beings and deserve to be recognised as such by the law.

I am aware, and it has been stated here today, that some argue that this is a devolved matter and should therefore be addressed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. That may be a valid point, but we have to acknowledge that we are already behind in this mandate owing to a

stalemate that stalled the Assembly for two years. If we were to progress the legislation in the Assembly — primary legislation would be required — it would necessitate using a significant amount of time and resources, which are already stretched, to say the least. The mechanism before us expedites an outcome.

The reality is that the sooner that the law is brought into action, the better. According to the Kennel Club, the crime of dog theft affects 200 families across the UK every month, yet just 2% of cases in 2020 resulted in a criminal charge. The theft of a beloved pet is a despicable crime that causes immense distress to owners, who rightfully consider their pet to be part of their family. That is not to mention the extreme stress and fear experienced by the pets themselves as they are sold on to new families or subjected to even worse fates, such as being forced into dog fighting or into breeding in puppy farms.

Animal welfare charities such as the USPCA, Dogs Trust and Cats Protection have strongly advocated the change. They emphasise, for instance, that it will enable accurate data recording and build visibility of the true scale of pet theft, thus helping develop more effective preventative strategies and measures.

The change to the law will result in an increase in prosecutions, so it will act as a deterrent to those looking to exploit animals for financial gain, ultimately making pet theft a less low-risk but high-reward crime. I take the chance to express my sincere appreciation to the stakeholders that I mentioned a moment ago, as well as to all the others that have tirelessly campaigned for the change for many years. I also thank the AERA Minister for ensuring that the legislative consent motion has been brought before the Assembly and for all the effort that is being made in DAERA to enhance animal welfare standards in Northern Ireland.

As the Alliance Party AERA spokesperson, I hope that the Assembly will agree the legislative consent motion and enact the new pet offences in Northern Ireland as soon as we can.

Mr Allister: I have just a few short comments to make. I am sure that it will not go unnoticed that the greatest legislative output of the Assembly since its coming back — the Assembly that, we were told, was so needed — is the nodding through of Westminster legislation. A bit like nodding dogs, indeed. It is nodding through legislation that we could make here but that we will not bother to do because it is easier just to nod through some Westminster legislation.

Since coming back, we have now done that more times than we have legislated on anything ourselves.

The LCM is about the abduction of dogs and cats. Abduction is probably a subject that lies close to the Minister's heart, because he has had many of his powers abducted in recent days. Indeed, included in the powers abducted from the Department are those that touch on the animal health and welfare of dogs and cats, which are no longer within the Minister's purview. Under some secret, undeclared declarations and instructions, he has been stripped of those powers. It is perhaps a pity that he does not have a remedy that exists for a Minister whose powers are abducted.

We are told that the LCM will strengthen and improve the protection for dogs and cats. One of the points that puzzles me is that it is a criminal offence to steal a dog or a cat. The available penalty under the Theft Act 1968 is 10 years, yet we are going to pretend that we are increasing the protection for pet owners by decreasing the available penalty. Instead of someone whose dog is stolen being able to look forward to a Crown Court disposal that has an available sentence of up to 10 years, the totality of the sentence available is now five years. I do not get how that is increasing the protection. Arising out of that, I have this question for the Minister: when the legislation comes in, will it still be possible to be charged with the theft of an animal under the Theft Act, or will it be possible only to be charged under the new legislation? Will the prosecuting authorities have the option to choose whether to prosecute under the Theft Act or under this legislation, or does this legislation rule out the other? I hope that the Minister will answer that question shortly.

Mr Muir: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. It has been wide-ranging, and good points have been made, which really highlights the importance of animal welfare to not just us but our constituents. It is my hope that the legislation will be introduced for our constituents who are animal lovers, so that we demonstrate that we value our animals and that we will work together for the benefit of animal welfare.

The Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee outlined a couple of points. I read over the weekend the useful deliberation that the Committee had on the matter. One point that was raised was the comparison between legislating through a legislative consent motion and primary legislation. That was something that I gave

consideration to. The issue for me was about the time that was presented to us: should we do this now or should we wait for primary legislation? The reality is that, by the time that we scope out, consult on and develop the legislation, it could be a number of years before it is in place, so it is important to grasp the opportunity now to have this in law. I, as Minister, have a lot of ambition for legislation, but I am not going to be thran when it comes to getting things done. If a legislative consent motion presents itself as an opportunity for us to legislate on an issue in Northern Ireland, I am going to take that opportunity.

Another issue that was raised was the microchipping of cats. A number of Members spoke about the benefits associated with that. I am exploring that with officials. I will be looking at what we can do over the time ahead, given the legislative time frame and resources that we have, but I get the concerns around that. It is something that I am actively looking at.

Patsy McGlone talked about the police and resourcing, which is an important issue. It is an issue that affects every Minister. Essentially, if we agree the legislation and it passes through the Palace of Westminster, it will add to the toolbox of powers for the police to act in that regard. That can only be of benefit. He also raised good points about the microchipping of dogs and the different databases. That is something that we will explore in the time ahead in the wider sphere of animal welfare.

Nicola Brogan spoke about all-island issues and the benefits that would be associated with being able to make our own bespoke legislation. We need to recognise the benefits of North/South and east-west cooperation. As I said, ideally we would have done this through primary legislation, and it is my desire that we do that in the time ahead, but this opportunity presented itself to us, so, hopefully, we can do this now and also look towards primary legislation in the future. The point about the microchipping of cats was also raised. That is an important point that I will look to address.

Tom Buchanan asked about the feeding of cats and whether that falls within the scope of this legislation. The guidance that I have states:

"The Bill is not intended to criminalise the innocent feeding of other people's cats. However, it could be an offence to cause or induce a cat to leave the premises of a person with lawful control of it so as to remove it from their lawful control."

It also states:

"A defence of lawful authority or reasonable excuse may be available to any person charged with such an offence. It is for our Courts to decide on the facts of the individual case, and it is right that the Bill allows the Court flexibility in this regard."

The Bill, as it has been framed, has very much taken a reasonability attitude towards that. We know that there are many people in the House and in society who feed other people's cats. The legislation is about giving us powers to deal with more egregious elements, but there are flexibilities in law in such reasonability clauses.

John Blair spoke a bit about the reality that pets are sentient animals, and said that the legislation should take that into account. That is important.

I thank the stakeholders for their engagement. Obviously, there was no consultation on this because of the way in which the legislation was drafted, but the Department has given a commitment to do that engagement before commencement. We think that that is key.

1.30 pm

With regard to the comments from Jim Allister, as I have said, there is an opportunity for us to legislate from this. I will take every opportunity that I can, as Minister, to safeguard the welfare of animals, and, hopefully, we can take the opportunity presented today.

Mr Allister asked how the Bill interacted with the Theft Act. To clarify, stealing a pet is already a criminal offence under the Theft Act (Northern Ireland) 1969, as Mr Allister outlined. Offenders prosecuted under that legislation face a sentence of up to 10 years' imprisonment; more if it includes burglary or robbery. Theft deals with the deprivation of property, not the welfare of the stolen animal. It does not recognise the distress and anxiety that an animal suffers when it is taken by strangers. Contrary to the core offence of theft under the Theft Act, the new offences in this Bill will not require the prosecution to prove that the person taking or detaining the pet did so with the intention of permanently depriving its owner. The overarching intention is for the Bill to encourage the courts to recognise the particular impact on the welfare of the animal when deciding the penalties. Therefore, the maximum penalty aligns with other serious animal welfare offences in the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. There will be an option to consider whether to use this legislation, once

it is enacted, or the Theft Act. That will be decided when considering the offence.

Hopefully, I have given some clarity and the House can agree that we proceed in this manner.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions within the Pet Abduction Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 6 December 2023, dealing with pet abduction.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, please take your ease while we make changes at the top Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Defence Industries

Mr Buckley: I beg to move

That this Assembly is committed to realising the untapped potential of the aerospace, defence, security and space sectors in Northern Ireland; notes that these growing industries employed 9,000 people across Northern Ireland in 2022 and provided over 500 apprenticeships; further notes that technology produced in Northern Ireland has been a significant pillar of the UK's support for the defence of Ukraine; regrets the current low levels of Ministry of Defence spending in Northern Ireland, including in respect of small- and medium-sized enterprises; believes a concerted effort to incorporate Northern Ireland into the UK defence network will generate significant and lasting economic opportunities, as well as promote Northern Ireland as a global leader in innovative aerospace and security technology; welcomes commitments to strengthening Northern Ireland's defence industries in the UK Government's 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper; calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop an ambitious programme to showcase opportunities for investment in local defence industries and shipbuilding; and further calls on the Minister to work with industry, the Ministry of Defence and Executive colleagues to ensure our workforce has the skills required to scale up the defence and security industries in Northern Ireland.

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 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 time for the debate.

Mr Buckley: Today we will discuss an important motion that realises the untapped potential of Northern Ireland's aerospace, defence, security and space sectors. Those industries are not only vital to our economy but pivotal to the United Kingdom's national defence and global technological leadership, a point that was often reinforced from these Benches by our late colleague Gordon Dunne MBE, who served 30 years in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). In 2022, those sectors

contributed nearly £1 billion to the UK economy and employed 9,000 people in Northern Ireland. Moreover, they provide over 500 apprenticeships, reflecting their commitment to nurturing future talent. Despite those achievements, Ministry of Defence spending in Northern Ireland remains disproportionately low in comparison with that in other UK regions. Last year, the MoD's expenditure per person in Northern Ireland was a mere £100, starkly contrasting with £380 in Scotland and England and £250 in Wales. That disparity is even more glaring when we consider that, in Northern Ireland, SMEs, which form 95% of defence companies, received just £2 million in MoD contracts compared with £29 million in Scotland and a staggering £408 million in the south-west of England. We must address the imbalance and fully integrate Northern Ireland into the UK defence network. That is not only a matter of fairness but a strategic necessity. Northern Ireland has a proud tradition of contributing to the UK's defence, and our local industries have the potential to play an even greater role.

Northern Ireland has consistently punched well above its weight in its contributions to the UK's armed forces. Despite making up roughly just 2.8% of the UK's population, Northern Ireland has historically provided a higher proportion of soldiers. That speaks volumes about our commitment and dedication to national security. It is a timely intervention for us to debate the motion today, because it recognises that, in their economic contributions, our industries reflect the same level of commitment.

The UK Government's commitment in the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper to review and increase awareness of Northern Ireland's defence sector is a positive and promising start. The review aims to enhance public and commercial understanding of our capabilities, ensure equitable investment and leverage our academic and research strengths. Our cybersecurity clusters, academic centres of excellence and a steady pipeline of highly qualified STEM graduates uniquely position us to generate advanced military and security capabilities.

Prominent local companies like Thales, Harland and Wolff and Spirit Aerosystems exemplify the high calibre of work that is produced here. Thales, for instance, plays a crucial role in producing surface-to-air StarStreak missiles, which are vital to the UK's support for Ukraine. Harland and Wolff's involvement in the fleet solid support ship programme will not only create significant employment opportunities but reinforce our proud shipbuilding heritage. Spirit Aerosystems' advanced composite

manufacturing solutions are integral to the Royal Air Force's (RAF) future combat aircraft. However, the potential expands far beyond those notable examples. Northern Ireland SMEs, like Artemis Technologies, are at the forefront of digital manufacturing and technology, while our research hubs at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University drive forward innovation.

We must harness that ingenuity and ensure that our SMEs can connect with MoD initiatives and showcase their products on the national and, indeed, the international stage. To achieve that, we propose several initiatives. The first is establishing a dedicated hub to foster direct engagement between local SMEs and the MoD. That hub would act as a central point for information sharing, networking and collaboration and would help smaller companies navigate the complexities of defence procurement and identify opportunities for growth. The second is creating grant schemes to help SMEs attend MoD meetings and international trade shows, which would bridge the distance divide and enhance our global profile. The third is investing in skills development through partnerships like Thales's engineering and advanced manufacturing skills academy, which provides bespoke training and supports apprenticeships. A key focus of the Committee's work has been on those very skills and trying to promote the need for further advanced apprenticeships. Moreover, advanced manufacturing and engineering were highlighted in the DUP's 10X economic vision, a blueprint that championed sectors where Northern Ireland can excel globally. I call on the Minister for the Economy to reaffirm her commitment to that vision to ensure sustained innovation and growth.

The Northern Ireland Advanced Composites and Engineering Centre, part of the Belfast city deal's Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre, serves as a technology hub for research and development. Spirit AeroSystems, a key industrial partner, underscores the potential for collaborative ventures that drive technological advancements and economic growth. Thales has launched an engineering and advanced manufacturing skills academy in Belfast in collaboration with South Eastern Regional College in Bangor and Ulster University in Belfast. That academy currently supports 62 apprentices and plans to train over 170 apprentices over the next five years, creating a pool of specialists in complex weapons systems. It is a hugely exciting time for those who are getting involved. Thales engages in STEM outreach programmes in primary and secondary schools across Northern

Ireland, inspiring the next generation of engineers by encouraging students to identify and solve everyday problems through engineering.

To further solidify our position as a leader in the defence sector, we must leverage our academic partnerships. ADS, the representative body for the aerospace defence, security and space sectors, maintains strong links with Queen's University and Ulster University. Initiatives like the Schools Build-a-Plane project inspire young people to get involved in these fields, ensuring a steady flow of talent into those emerging industries.

While we celebrate those successes, we must not overlook the barriers that our SMEs, in particular, face in entering the defence market. A key concern highlighted in recent think tank reports and in evidence provided by representative bodies to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry is the difficulty SMEs in our Province experience in exploiting new opportunities and connecting with MoD initiatives and in showcasing their products and services on the national and international stage. To overcome those barriers, we must provide targeted support, including grants for travel to MoD meetings and international trade shows as well as enhancing networking opportunities to ensure that we connect SMEs with larger defence contractors. Furthermore, we must advocate a more significant share of MoD spending to be allocated to Northern Ireland. The current level of investment is disproportionately low and does not reflect the substantial capabilities and contributions of local industries. By increasing MoD spending in Northern Ireland, we can create more jobs, stimulate economic growth and ensure that our defence sector reaches its full potential.

Strengthening Northern Ireland's defence industries is not just about economic prosperity; it is about enhancing our national security and positioning ourselves as a global leader in innovative technology. By increasing MoD spending and investment, supporting our SMEs and fostering skills development, we can unlock significant economic opportunities and contribute more robustly to the UK's defence network. Let us seize the opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland's strengths and ensure that our industries thrive on a national and international stage. By working together — government, industry and academia — we can build a brighter and more prosperous future for Northern Ireland and reaffirm our place as a vital part of the United Kingdom's defence ecosystem.

1.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Mr Buckley, for opening the debate. I call Doug Beattie to move the amendment.

Mr Beattie: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out from "welcomes" to "Paper" and insert:

"promotes defence and security levelling up in line with the UK Government's announcement of an extra £75 billion increase in defence spending over five years with the aim of increasing Northern Ireland's economic input from defence rising from £1 billion to £3 billion per year;"

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): You have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Beattie: Some will view the motion through an ethical lens, and I will not be critical of anybody who does so, but I will view it through an economic and geopolitical lens in order to understand the wider issue. It is a much wider issue because the world is a far more dangerous place. Some will say that conflict is fuelled by the defence industry. Others will say that it is fuelled by profit or by the claiming of a country's resources and minerals to keep wider industry on the move, all of which fuel conflict. They are absolutely right — they do. However, that does not take away from the fact that we are in a far more dangerous place than we have been in many years.

At present, we have major conflicts and tensions in the Middle East, throughout Africa, between China and Taiwan, between North and South Korea and, clearly, the Russian expansionism in Ukraine. Countries are concerned. We are already seeing an increase in defence spending across the globe and an increase in collective defence: NATO; the European Defence Agency; Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS); the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); and the China-Russia economic pact. That is all fuelling the industry, which is a defence industry and an economic industry. The war in Ukraine has completely changed the geopolitical landscape. Many will view the world now in a pre-conflict stage. Since the Cold War, we have never been closer to global conflict than we are now.

I served during the Cold War. I know what it was like guarding Rudolf Hess in Spandau prison in a divided Berlin. I know what it was like to face off with Russians. When West Germany was divided from East Germany, I knew what it was like to stand opposed to the Russians. It was a dangerous place.

The present-day reality is that Northern Ireland has shown that it can provide high-quality defence equipment and development at pace, and that can be viewed as an economic opportunity. We heard from my colleague from Upper Bann about Thales, a first-class defence company that creates the next generation light anti-tank weapon (NLAW) that is used by eight countries around the world. It is the main anti-armour weapon being used in Ukraine. StarStreak, a high-velocity missile that is designed, developed and manufactured in Belfast, is used by 10 countries around the world. It is a portable air defence system. The RapidRanger is a mobile integrated defence control system, and there are space propulsion and satellite-based positioning systems. The propulsion competency centre was established because of the high-precision engineering skills here in Northern Ireland. Thales employs hundreds, puts millions of pounds into our economy and helps to build skills with apprenticeships through Ulster University and research through Queen's University. Thales has more capacity to create more jobs, more apprenticeships and more research and to put more money into our economy.

That is only part of the equation. The other part of the story is that the private defence industry accounts for £25.3 billion a year in the UK. Scotland has a turnover of £7 billion, which equates to £3.2 billion going into their economy. In England and Wales, the figure is £16.4 billion, and, in Northern Ireland, it is £1.9 billion, which puts only £0.9 billion in value into our economy.

Many people do not see how aerospace, defence and security are totally interlinked. Right now, as we sit here, cyberbattles are taking place right across the globe, this island and the United Kingdom, and they have lethal and non-lethal effects. There are people fighting cyberbattles today. It is as real a war as one that you would see on the television where man is fighting man.

Northern Ireland is uniquely placed to be at the forefront of that cybertechnology. We are already there. We should be able to garner from that more economic benefits. The United Kingdom Government have announced that they are increasing their defence budget by £75

billion over the next five years. That will have a huge impact, and it is vital that Northern Ireland receives its fair share of the moneys for defence manufacturing and development. That could take us from £1 billion per year to £3 billion per year for the Northern Ireland economy. I go back to what I said: I know that there is an ethical question here. I am not arguing against that. I am looking at the economics.

Northern Ireland must be an integral part of UK defence structures. That means upgrading Aldergrove station to revert it back to RAF Aldergrove and make it a home, once more, for fast jets. Upgrading Aldergrove would allow it to become a central hub for the rapid intake of forces and material from the United States and Canada into Europe if things were to get bad in Europe. That would be incredibly important globally. We have allowed that station to degrade over the years, but we can turn that around. Add to that an increase in the Royal Navy presence in the north-west and we will have the ability to cover the UK and the EU western approaches, particularly the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap and the underwater cabling from the US onto these islands.

I revert to what I said at the start of my contribution. I will not criticise anybody if they have an ethical stance on this, because war is absolutely abhorrent. Nobody should want to try to perpetuate war around the globe, but we have to live in the real world, and, in the real world, the defence, security and aerospace industry is absolutely massive. If, in Northern Ireland, we were to get our fair share of the UK's allocation towards defence spending and the wider private defence industry, it could be absolutely transformational for the Northern Ireland economy.

I see it as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to use Northern Ireland within the defence structures of the United Kingdom to bring more resource to this part of the kingdom. Rebuild RAF Aldergrove, have more Royal Navy assets, improve our private defence systems, improve our cyberwarfare capabilities, make Northern Ireland the hub for cybertechnology and actually bring more money into the economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for moving the amendment.

Mr McGuigan: Sinn Féin wants to deliver an economy that is based on creating good jobs, increasing productivity, tackling regional imbalance and transitioning to net zero to help improve the quality of life for workers and

families who live here. Given years of Tory austerity and their attacks on public services, and our budgetary challenges and limited powers, that will not be without its challenges. It will require a strategic and focused approach if we are to make a meaningful impact on people's lives.

That impact must be positive. It must be about improving people's quality of life. It has to include reducing poverty and addressing the existing skills deficit, and it should mean investing in all geographical areas of the North. Utilising and building on the potential of the all-island economy, we can grow our tourism and hospitality sector, our manufacturing sector and the green economy, which, as we have said in the Chamber on many occasions, has huge potential for our SMEs, our economy and our population.

I recognise the highly skilled engineering jobs and workforce in the aerospace and shipbuilding sectors, the employment and apprenticeship opportunities that they have created and the significant innovation, research and development into aircraft and shipbuilding as well as cybersecurity. However, it is the shifting of the focus in this motion, and therefore the limited economic resources towards strengthening Britain's arms industry, that I must take issue with. We can build a strong economy without endorsing or helping to grow the arms trade, an industry that, let us face it, depends on and, in fact, needs profits from the perpetuation of conflict, destruction and death. We can see that with devastating effect and, tragically, its impact on human life every might watching the news.

Sinn Féin is clear in its view that the USA and Britain must stop arming Israel, and it is also clear in its view that Invest NI government policy should not be supporting anything that ends up being used to carry out genocide. We cannot ignore Britain's track record in conflicts across the globe. In Britain's case, defence can mean intervening in conflicts or attacking nations around the world whenever and however it decides. Looking back at recent decades, let us not kid ourselves that any of these conflicts were about defending the shores of Britain.

At the beginning of my contribution, I stated that Sinn Féin wants to deliver an economy based on creating good jobs, increasing productivity, tackling regional imbalances and transitioning to net zero to help to improve the quality of life for workers and families here. I want to add to those factors and state that ethical procurement and ethical investment should be a key focus of

policy. There are many ways to grow our economy that do not make the North complicit in the promotion or expansion of Britain or any other nation's war machine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the Assembly takes it ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Sorcha Eastwood.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 6 and 12 have been withdrawn.

PSNI: Retirement Processes

1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Justice to outline her discussions with the PSNI and the Policing Board regarding improving the process for police officers applying for injury on duty (IOD) and ill health retirement. (AQO 438/22-27)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The Department is responsible for maintaining the statutory framework for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Police Service of Northern Ireland Reserve (Injury Benefit) Regulations 2006 for injury on duty awards and the police pension scheme in Northern Ireland for ill health retirement.

The Department plays no role in the application process for injury on duty and/or ill health retirement. That is an operational matter for the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). I am committed to respecting the role and independence of the board in that regard. My Department is responsible for appointing independent medical referees (IMRs) to decide appeals against the decision of the selected medical practitioners (SMPs).

My Department is considering the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) recommendations in its report on injury on duty schemes. The application process does not, however, form part of the review.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that answer. At a policy level, does she agree that it is counter-intuitive for the Policing Board, which is, after all, a scrutiny body, to get involved in service delivery, as is the case with injury on duty and ill health retirement applications?

Mrs Long: I do not agree with the Member, because it is a matter that was transferred from the Police Authority, as was, to the Policing Board at the time of the Patten review. The reason for that was that, as the employer, the

people on the Policing Board were best able to carry out the function. The Member will be aware that there has been ongoing conversation about that, but I would not want to prejudge the outcome of the various elements of that discussion.

Mr Allister: Given that the regulations give no function to the selected medical practitioners to determine the date of implementation of an award, yet that is what the Policing Board has been allowing them to do, surely, as a Minister with some oversight of and interest in that, she should be raising with the Policing Board why it is placing a reliance on the selected medical practitioners, who do not have the powers that they are exercising.

Mrs Long: The issue of the powers and duties of the selected medical practitioners forms part of the discussions that we are having with the IOD reference group. It would be fair to say, however, that we intend to put the guidance that is provided to the SMPs on a statutory footing. We hope to have that guidance before the Committee this month and to have the regulations laid in the Assembly by the summer.

Ms Nicholl: How has the Minister addressed the four recommendations from the Northern Ireland Audit Office that relate to police injury on duty?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. There were four recommendations. One was that a fundamental review of the PSNI scheme should be undertaken, similar to the ongoing review of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) IOD scheme by the Department of Finance. The second was that a review of the PSNI scheme should simplify and streamline the end-to-end process and consider the respective roles of the PSNI, the Policing Board and the Department. The third was that having a new case management system for the PSNI scheme would provide better reporting and analysis of management information. The fourth was that the Department of Justice, DOJ and the Northern Ireland Policing Board should act in the short term to mitigate issues arising from the current schemes, and the Audit Office gave a set of things that it thought that we would be able to do, including issuing clearer guidance to medical practitioners about their role as final decision makers and ensuring that the payments are in place and include offset provisions.

The Department has made amendment regulations to ensure that payments of all police pension schemes are considered when

calculating an injury on duty award, which is in line with the Northern Ireland Audit Office recommendation. We are consulting on potential changes to the IOD scheme more generally to reflect the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report.

Mr McNulty: Minister, what discussions have you had with the police and the Policing Board about the data breach and on how that might impact on possible ill health retirement? Moreover, how much of the policing budget will be spent on the data breach over the next five years?

Mrs Long: I have had extensive conversations with the police and the Northern Ireland Policing Board about the data breach. I obviously had to have those conversations in the context of the budget. I do not have a figure on the five-year requirement, but I know that, this year, the police have bid in year for around £116 million to cover the cost of the data breach in 2024-25. It is one of the considerable pressures facing the Department of Justice and the PSNI.

Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) Public Inquiry

2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Justice whether the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) sought legal advice when it decided not to proceed with the scheduled opening hearing sessions of the Curraghinalt Project (Dalradian) public inquiry in September 2024. (AQO 439/22-27)

Mrs Long: Whilst the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service has sponsorship responsibility for the Planning Appeals Commission, the commission is an independent appellant body. Thus, similar to the judiciary, it is completely independent of the Department in its handling of cases and decision-making. It is therefore not appropriate for me, as Minister of Justice, to comment on matters that encroach on the independence of the chief commissioner or provide commentary on or assessment of the commission's decisions.

Mr T Buchanan: Does the Minister accept that it was inappropriate for the Planning Appeals Commission to suspend the start of the public inquiry, contrary to the publicly expressed views of the three referring authorities — namely DAERA, DFI Roads and the DFI planning authority — which believed that the public inquiry should commence this September?

Mrs Long: As I made clear in my initial answer, I cannot give commentary on decisions made by the chief commissioner. The commission is entirely operationally independent of the Department, and it would be inappropriate for me to second-guess its choices.

Prison Staff: Support Services

3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the review of support services for operational prison staff. (AQO 440/22-27)

Mrs Long: It is vital that prison staff are supported to undertake their role of supporting and challenging people in prison to change and return to society equipped to make a positive contribution to their community. That is one of the reasons why, in June 2020, I commissioned a focused review of measures available to support prison officers. Two evidence-based reports, one on serving staff and one on retired staff, were published in January 2021, alongside implementation plans. The report made 12 recommendations for operational staff, which included the completion of a grading review, the further development of bespoke support services and the establishment of well-being hubs in our prisons. There has been substantial progress on those recommendations. By way of example, in 2023, over 400 staff were provided with bespoke training and support from the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT). That partnership continues to evolve and progress.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know the hard work that the Department has done on support for operational prison staff. Recommendation 6(c) of the report recommended that a human resources team be set up at Prison Service headquarters to deal with the bespoke matters in the Prison Service individuals' issues, which used to be the case. Does that mean nearly reverting to what we had previously, as opposed to issues being dealt with by the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) HR?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware that that position predated the current arrangements whereby this is an issue for NICS. At this point, it is not possible for us to bring the team back into the Department without considerable cost to the Department. One of the reasons for it being outsourced to NICS HR related to the terms and conditions of employment in the Prison Service. While someone is employed as a prison officer, they are employed under the terms and conditions of the Northern Ireland

Civil Service. The second reason was that considerable economies of scale were to be gained from having that done by NICS HR.

Work has been done on the transformation of the occupational health service (OHS), including a disciplinary occupational health and well-being advice service for the whole of NICS, including prison officers. Where we have raised specific issues with it about concerns that have been raised with us by the Prison Service, it has responded rapidly to those.

Ms Bunting: Prisoner numbers have been at almost 2,000 for a sustained period. Current officer recruitment will only bring levels to that required for a population of 1,450, leaving officers and regimes under considerable strain. What can be done to expedite recruitment to bring officer numbers to the level appropriate for the prison population, and is there sufficient money in the new departmental budget to do so?

Mrs Long: Of the many pressures that we face, the pressure in prisons is considerable. The prison numbers are not quite as high as the Member suggested, but they are certainly rapidly approaching the 2,000 mark. They are up 37% on what they were in 2020, for example. That is a considerable increase. It makes prison arrangements more challenging when it comes to what we can do to deliver rehabilitation, but we continue to prioritise the safety of those in the prison system, including officers.

We also continue, as we have continued throughout that period, to recruit officers at the pace that we can sustain. We will continue to do that for as long as possible, but it is fair to say that no additional resources are coming our way to fund that.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you said that our prison officers have a clear duty to care for and to provide safety and rehabilitation for our prisoners. In addition to the increase in numbers, can you outline what specific supports are available for prison officers, who face a range of stresses and concerns at this time?

Mrs Long: As you know, the Prison Service collaborates with the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust, following some of the work that I did in 2020-21. That continues to evolve. I already mentioned that 400 staff were trained and supported through PRRT, including through the preventative resilience training that is being delivered to teams such as those working in

care and supervision units (CSUs). That training is delivered right up to governors, as well as to new recruits. Last year, around 100 operational staff attended a new health and wellness day at PRRT, which was aimed at providing advice on a range of wellness issues such as resilience, diet, exercise and sleep patterns. Subject to the availability of funding, that programme will be rolled out further across the service.

Health and well-being services are available to all NICS staff. Those include the welfare support service, a self-referral facility, confidential counselling through Inspire and a number of other services. However, through our bespoke staff survey, we identified some additional measures. Results from that survey will be available to us by mid-May. It is hoped that, at that stage, we will be able to continue to evolve our cooperation with and support for staff.

Police Officers: Numbers

4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of how many police officers are required to enable the PSNI to discharge its duties effectively. (AQO 441/22-27)

Mrs Long: Resourcing in the PSNI is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I respect the Chief Constable's operational independence and the role of the Policing Board in holding him to account. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to make an assessment of that matter. However, I have repeatedly lobbied for the justice sector in Northern Ireland to be funded appropriately and will continue to work closely with the Chief Constable and the board to ensure that we have a Police Service that is properly resourced in all aspects for the challenges that it faces.

Mr Durkan: During the Assembly debate on South Armagh on 22 April, the Minister said:

"the most recent assessments suggest that a service of approximately 7,200 officers is needed." — [Official Report (Hansard), 22 April 2024, p45, col 2].

Minister, who made those assessments, given that they fall far short of the Chief Constable's assessment of 8,500 officers and the New Decade, New Approach commitment to 7,200 officers?

Mrs Long: First, the New Decade, New Approach commitment was to 7,500 officers.

The figure of 7,200 officers was provided by the previous Deputy Chief Constable, Stephen Martin, as advice on the numbers required. The figure of 6,900 to 7,200 came from the Leapwise report, which was commissioned by the Chief Constable and shared with the Policing Board and me. The conclusion of that report stated that policing numbers should be in the region of 6,900 to 7,200 officers.

Ms Forsythe: The police are obviously under immense pressure. In South Down, we face some very specific problems relating to the wide area that the constituency covers and the rural nature of our policing. Does the Minister have any indication of any specific areas of Northern Ireland in which there is a particular shortage of PSNI officers or of any regional or rural/urban disparity?

Mrs Long: The deployment of the operational resource that the Chief Constable has at his disposal is a matter entirely for him, and he would take that up with the board. I cannot advise the Member on where those stresses are likely to be most acutely felt. Furthermore, I am sure that she would not want us to name locations where people might feel somewhat less supervised in their activities, were we to disclose them. I encourage her to meet the Chief Constable if she has specific concerns about policing in her area.

Miss McAllister: Can the Minister clarify how many of the PSNI's pressures were included in her Department's bid to the Department of Finance for additional resources as part of the Budget-setting process?

Mrs Long: In total, the Department applied for £446 million, which is just over 40% of its baseline budget, for inescapable pressures. Those are issues for which we have no funding and for which we cannot avoid paying.

Of that £446 million, £318 million related to PSNI requests. Only £8 million related to pressures that, you could perhaps argue, were not inescapable, in that it was for the recruitment of new officers. However, given the low number of officers that we have at the moment, we decided to prioritise that request on behalf of the PSNI, given that Members have stated that they are intent on seeing the service grow, as have I.

2.15 pm

Justice: Budgetary Situation

5. **Mr Mathison** asked the Minister of Justice for an updated assessment of the budgetary situation facing her Department in 2024-25. (AQO 442/22-27)

Mrs Long: The Minister of Finance made a written ministerial statement to the Assembly on 25 April 2024, after which the Budget allocations were issued to Departments. My Department's allocation was £95 million or around 9.9% of the total funding available. That compared with our pressures of £446 million, which represented 14% of the total pressures reported by Departments. Had we been funded on a pro rata basis, our expected allocation would have been £134 million or £39 million higher than it was. The additional allocation of £95 million is only £9 million more than the funding of £86 million that was required in 2023-24 to meet the Department's pressures.

Against that marginal increase in funding, my Department is facing increasing demand for services and inflationary cost rises, as well as the impact of pay awards. I am very conscious of the limited funding that the Executive had available to allocate. However, whilst the additional £95 million of funding is welcome, it still leaves my Department facing pressures of £351 million in 2024-25. To put some perspective on the scale of the pressures involved, I will say that £351 million equates to the combined annual spend of prisons, courts and tribunals, legal aid, forensic science and the core Department. The severity of the financial position for Justice is exacerbated by the combined effects of historical underfunding compared with need for Northern Ireland and the demand-led structure of the majority of services delivered by justice organisations.

Mr Mathison: Can the Minister advise how those significant pressures can be managed and what the impact of that is likely to be?

Mrs Long: There is a major question about not only how they can be managed but whether they can be managed. However, it is my job as Minister to seek a way to do that. There is no recognition in the 2024-25 Budget settlement of the increased demand facing the Department. We have already heard mention in the Chamber of the 35% increase in prison numbers in the last three years, the fact that police officer numbers are at an all-time low of 6,394 against the New Decade, New Approach recommended level of 7,500, the 30% increase in legal aid costs and the significant backlogs in our courts.

Difficult decisions on prioritisation in service provision will be required, as the Department will have to manage those pressures in order to live within its Budget allocation. Given the challenging budgetary position, there will inevitably be a detrimental impact on the ability to continue to fund all the services that we currently deliver. That will inevitably result in the justice system slowing down, and, whilst that is regrettable and damaging to our citizens, it is unavoidable, given the scale of the financial pressures. However, more concerning is the fact that it will, without doubt, increase the risk of a catastrophic failure of the system, compromising our ability to preserve life, protect the public and keep people safe. It is around that that I am making my priorities.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I acknowledge that there is real constraint on your and every other Department's budget. That is obvious. It is true to say that, in this round, your Department has done slightly better than some other Departments, but it is worth acknowledging that that comes after years of constrained budget settlements. You mentioned that that will constrain and curtail services. Can you be more specific about which services you are looking at for prioritisation and, by extension, for de-prioritisation?

Mrs Long: I cannot be more specific, because, first, the budget allocations to the various arm's-length bodies (ALBs) and partner organisations have not been issued. Those will go out in the first half of this week. Secondly, I am working my way through a list of operational areas that are within the gift of the core Department and that I may wish to scale back or take forward more quickly in order to manage the budget. As I said in response to the original question, my priority is to do all that I can within budget without compromising our ability to preserve life, protect the public and keep people safe, which are our first and primary duties.

Mr Beattie: Minister, if — I repeat the word "if" — there is a major increase in funding through the June monitoring round and if you take that into account, do you believe that the Budget process that was run at the Executive should be delayed and rerun?

Mrs Long: There are two separate issues. First, we need to give certainty to the organisations that need a budget in order to be able to spend money this year. Secondly, we need to give my Department a definitive answer on the resource that it will have. We have to proceed with this year's Budget. It is essential that we do so.

As the June monitoring round comes hot on the heels of the Budget-setting process, it will be a supplementary process, to be honest. It is likely to be done shortly after the main allocations if not alongside them. I do not see that holding back one to do the other would be helpful. It is much better to give people clarity so that they have the maximum time to adjust to the new spending environment in which they will find themselves. If we get significant extra resource, it will be a matter for the Executive to decide where that is reallocated on the basis of the bids that we put in, any new bids that emerge and, indeed, any money that is surrendered by Departments, which, I expect, will be rather small at this stage in the year. We should do that process through the normal route.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Musgrave Street Police Station

7. **Mr Kingston** asked the Minister of Justice, further to the announcement of the closure of all other enquiry offices in Belfast police stations, for her assessment of whether Musgrave Street police station will have sufficient capacity to respond to in-person enquiries in a timely manner. (AQO 444/22-27)

Mrs Long: The decision to close PSNI enquiry offices is entirely an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. As I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the chief and the role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, it would not be appropriate for me to give an assessment of whether Musgrave Street police station will have sufficient capacity to respond to in-person enquiries in a timely manner. However, the Member may wish to direct his question directly to the Chief Constable. It is important to acknowledge that the resourcing challenges faced in policing are replicated across all parts of the justice system, and that, without additional significant resources for my Department, the current levels of service across the board will simply not be able to be maintained.

Mr Kingston: I appreciate that it is a matter for the Policing Board, but the Minister will be aware that it is a matter of great concern for communities that will lose the front desk of their local police station, such as at Tennent Street. Indeed, I understand that Musgrave Street will be the only station, not just in Belfast but in many surrounding areas, with a front desk for the public to call in. Will the Minister, along with

those with direct operational responsibility, monitor the waiting times at Musgrave Street and, if possible, explore whether some call-in function by arrangement can be made for people handing in 11/1 parade notifications or those required to sign in accordance with court bail conditions?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. There were five questions there, Minister. Answer which one, you feel, is fit.

Mrs Long: I will answer the question that said it is a matter for the Chief Constable to decide how this will be monitored. Of all the decisions that will need to be made, the closure of call-in front offices is probably one of the easier ones. My constituency has lost the call-in facility. I know that many Members feel the same way about it. However, they were prioritised for reduction on the basis that many are not frequently used and, therefore, do not represent a good use of limited resources. I am sure that the Chief Constable will have heard what the Member said today and will take it into account when he reviews the matter.

Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill

8. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Justice to outline her Department's preparations to ensure the swift implementation of the provisions in the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill. (AQO 445/22-27)

Mrs Long: While the legislation, once enacted, will automatically quash the convictions of all those who meet the specified conditions, we will need to identify and notify individuals that their convictions have been quashed and ensure that their records are updated. My Department has been working at pace with our operational partners to plan for implementation and identify any cases within the scope of the legislation. That work is ongoing. Although the number of cases that have been identified in Northern Ireland is relatively small, the hurt and distress that the Horizon scandal inflicted on the individuals concerned is no less significant. I am therefore keen to ensure that all those who have had convictions overturned or cautions deleted are notified as soon as possible and that those eligible to receive financial redress should be allowed to access that as swiftly as possible.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for her answer.*] Justice delayed is justice

denied. We know what those postmasters and postmistresses in the North of Ireland have suffered. What steps can the Minister take to ensure that they are compensated for their loss?

Mrs Long: The compensation scheme will operate on a UK-wide basis. The Department of Justice will have no role in the compensation scheme or in making it available to people. Our role is to ensure that the criminal records are suitably updated. We have already worked at pace with colleagues. Where we know that people have had a conviction that falls within the remit of the legislation, we will take steps to notify that person or a relative, if the person is deceased. As soon as we get Royal Assent, we will write to the individuals who fall into that category, within the scope of the Bill, stating that their convictions have been quashed and that their records will be amended accordingly. Some individuals who are in scope are not yet known to us, so we have not been able to identify where they are or how to reach them. We are working closely with the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), the courts and the national representative group for sub-postmasters to identify individuals to whom the legislation may be applicable but who are not known to the Department of Justice.

Ms Egan: I thank the Minister for her work in ensuring that the Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill applies in Northern Ireland. The Horizon scandal has been horrendous. How quickly will the people in Northern Ireland who have been affected by it find out that their conviction has been quashed?

Mrs Long: Two convictions have already been overturned by the Court of Appeal. We believe that that leaves us with around 26 cases that might be within scope. To date, we have also identified one caution on similar grounds. The legislation also allows anyone who thinks that they may be within scope to come forward and identify themselves to us, and, where they meet the conditions specified, we will confirm that that is the case. As soon as we reach Royal Assent, those who are known to us will receive a letter to notify them that their conviction has been quashed. I encourage anybody who believes that they are within scope but does not receive a letter to contact the Department. I encourage anyone who knows of someone who was affected and who may not have been engaged or who may have moved on and be living somewhere else to ask them to contact the Department, as we are keen to follow up and ensure that everybody who could benefit from the legislation is able to do so.

Mr McCrossan: I am sure that the Minister will agree that the impact on those affected has been profound. It has affected every aspect of their lives for many years. What would she say to the Post Office about how those people have been badly mistreated by a trusted institution that is used by our people every day? Has she met those from Northern Ireland who have been affected?

Mrs Long: Yes, I have met the representative body for sub-postmasters. It was pleased by the progress that had been made by the Department in getting the compensation and the convictions dealt with at a UK-wide level, because that is the quickest possible access to the redress scheme.

From my perspective, I have been clear about the impact that the situation has had on individuals' lives and about the fact that, in some cases, the loss of their business and the shame that it brought drove people to suicide. That is a serious issue. However, an inquiry is ongoing, and it would be wrong of me to prejudge the outcome of that.

Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy

9. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on a new domestic and sexual abuse strategy. (AQO 446/22-27)

Mrs Long: Together with the Minister of Health, I am finalising a new seven-year domestic and sexual abuse strategy, with input from the Department of Education, the Department for Communities and the Executive Office. The draft strategy is built around five pillars: partnership; prevention; children and young people; support and provision; and justice. It will provide the basis for a wide range of work to protect and support victims and address abusive behaviours. I thank voluntary and community sector partners for their invaluable input to the strategy and for sharing insights from those with lived experience. That has led to a more effective strategy that will make a meaningful difference to those affected by domestic and sexual abuse and their families. Health and Justice officials will brief their respective Committees on 30 May, we hope, and I intend to publish the strategy and action plan jointly with the Minister of Health in June.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Stewart, you have time for a quick supplementary, and, Minister, a quick response.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister. Will the Minister outline the Department's response to

the Leonard Consultancy report on multi-agency risk assessment conferencing (MARAC) services?

Mrs Long: I am committed to ensuring that the risks posed to victims of domestic abuse are assessed and managed as effectively as possible, so we are setting up a dedicated multi-agency oversight group to consider the report's recommendations and develop costed options for reform. That group will be informed by a number of working groups that will be established to report to it. The core membership will include DOJ, the Department of Health and the PSNI, with other organisations invited to contribute.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Perfect. That ends the period for listed questions. We move now to 15 minutes of topical questions. Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Hate Crime Bill

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Justice to state whether she agrees that we need a stand-alone hate crime Bill, in light of the fact that hate crime is clearly not going away — quite the opposite — with shocking examples of hate crime across the island, and to outline what has changed in her assertion that we need a stand-alone hate crime Bill, given that we are more than three years on from the publication of the Marrinan review, after which she was clear that we needed stand-alone hate crime legislation, albeit in response to a question for written answer from him and on the Floor of the Chamber, she cast some doubt over whether we will have a stand-alone hate crime Bill but said that it could instead amount to clauses that are incorporated in another Bill. (AQT 291/22-27)

2.30 pm

Mrs Long: First of all, what has changed is that we have lost two years of the mandate because the Assembly was suspended. Secondly, the resources in my Department are significantly constrained, including the human resource required to develop legislation.

The plan had been for five Bills in a five-year mandate, but that has had to be compressed. One of the Bills that would have been introduced in the latter part of the mandate was the hate crime Bill. However, to ensure that we do not fail in tackling the issue of hate crime, one of the options that we are looking at is a victims and hate crime Bill. We are also looking further at the potential to expedite Judge

Marrinan's key recommendation to have an aggravated offence model and bring that forward as part of the sentencing Bill, which would ensure that it is in place a year earlier. However, we are in discussions with officials and members of the sector to ensure that, whichever option we choose, we have the foundational hate crime elements that we would have had in primary legislation brought forward in this mandate.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Minister. Of course, we know that we have lost two years, but it is true to say that officials in your Department have been working on this since 2020, so it is not new to them. You were clear, some years ago, that we needed a stand-alone hate crime Bill. Last week, it was called the "victims and crime Bill", but it is now called the "victims of hate crime Bill", so it has taken on a new title but that is fine. Is it not the case that your officials have been working on this for four years? With respect, Minister, you campaigned loudly to get this job. People who need the legislation will be wondering what is taking so long and why we are not going to get a stand-alone hate crime Bill.

Mrs Long: To be clear, I did not campaign to get this job; I was nominated by a party colleague and accepted the position when the Assembly voted for me. I did not campaign to be Justice Minister. I want to be absolutely clear on that.

Whether this is stand-alone legislation or legislation that is developed by another vehicle, it will not change the import of the legislation or its implementation in the courts. The bottom line is that, in a restricted mandate, I have to look at what resource I have available to me. That may not be the reality of opposition, but it is the reality of government. Therefore, I have to find a way to manage the resource that I have in the way that is most impactful. The most impactful part of this for victims is having the aggravated offence in place, and that is the bit that I am absolutely focused on getting through in this mandate. My position on that and on hate crime in general has not wavered.

Retail Crime

T2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice, in light of an action plan recently launched by Retail NI to tackle retail crime, which highlighted alarming statistics, including that 67% of retail staff who were surveyed had been victims of violence and threats, to outline the steps she is taking to tackle the issue. (AQT 292/22-27)

Mrs Long: There are a number of issues. I was at the Retail NI launch, and the figures are absolutely disgraceful. I think that all of us in the Chamber would agree that it is absolutely abhorrent that anyone who provides a public service or serves the public should be subjected to any kind of abuse or attack while they do so. It is important that we look at what options we have during the mandate to redress that.

I had originally intended to have an aggravator in the sentencing Bill covering those who provide services in the public sector, particularly those who are involved in emergency response. We are looking at how we can widen that to encompass a wider group of people, including those who work in retail. The language for that would be about providing a public service or a service to the public. That would give protection not only to retail workers and first responders but to those who, for example, provide resources as a result of their charitable work. It would also cover people who work in transport, who have also come forward with fairly significant challenges.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her welcome answer. Does she recognise the frustration and vulnerability — it is true to say — felt particularly by the retail sector due to the lack of action to date and the fact that we are now the only part of the UK where assault on shopworkers is not a specific criminal offence?

Mrs Long: I understand their frustration and share it. Had we been able to get on with our jobs over the past two years, we might have been in a better place. However, we are where we are and my focus now is on making sure that we make as much progress as we can in the three years available to us.

PSNI Vehicles: Ramming Incidents

T4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the steps that she is taking to increase the sentences available to people who are found guilty of ramming PSNI vehicles, given that she will be aware of many serious incidents, resulting in some 77 police officers being injured, including in his constituency. (AQT 294/22-27)

Mrs Long: We had a useful debate in the Chamber on that matter only a number of weeks ago, during which I set out the particular offences that could be engaged in the prosecution of such offences. The issue of those offences being frequent is not unique to Northern Ireland, and nor are we at a legislative

disadvantage in taking forward prosecutions. I point to what I said about first responders and those who provide a service to the public: if they are injured in that context, that will be an aggravated offence, if the legislation goes through.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she accept that the number of police being injured in those circumstances is totally unacceptable and that more needs to be done to deal with it?

Mrs Long: What needs to be done to deal with it is that the public need to recognise that, when the police are doing their job, they are there to protect the public, preserve life and keep people safe. The public need to be supportive of the police in that. There has to be a culture in which we do not tolerate attacks on the police. We can all contribute to that in how we conduct ourselves when discussing such matters. There will be operational things that lie with the Chief Constable and the Policing Board that they may wish to pursue, but as it stands those are prosecutable offences in current legislation, and, after the passage of the legislation that, hopefully, will be passed in this mandate, they will also be aggravated offences.

Pavement Parking

T5. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on any talks that she has had with the Minister for Infrastructure or his Department on obstructive pavement parking. (AQT 295/22-27)

Mrs Long: The matter of parking is decriminalised, and, as a result, it is for the Department for Infrastructure, with local councils, to take the lead. The policy lead is not mine. The issue of obstructive parking is an offence that is particularly difficult to make out. Unless there are markings on the pavement, you require a police officer, the illegally parked or obstructive vehicle and someone being obstructed to be present before action can be taken. The Department for Infrastructure has not brought that to the Department's attention by way of wishing to look at what recommendations we might have on proportionate fines or offences or whether it wishes to restructure the offence in some way, as it is the policy lead.

Mr Butler: I think that the answer to that question is that there have been no talks at this point. If there are no markings on the road, it is for the police to uphold that. It is a serious public safety issue. Given the impact on people

with prams and the disabled, will the Minister give an undertaking to address the issue with the Minister for Infrastructure?

Mrs Long: If the Minister for Infrastructure prioritises the matter and comes to the Department of Justice to discuss it, I will be more than happy to have that discussion. However, as I said, the policy lead for parking and other roads issues is the Department for Infrastructure. I am well aware of the issues. I cannot say that I have no contact with the Department on the matter, because I have written to it frequently about the issue as an MLA.

Vagrancy Laws: Repeal

T6. **Mr Mathison** asked the Minister of Justice to confirm whether she plans to repeal Northern Ireland's archaic vagrancy laws in this mandate. (AQT 296/22-27)

Mrs Long: Work on the review of the Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy (Ireland) Act 1847 is ongoing. My intention is to repeal the provisions in those Acts that apply to Northern Ireland in the current mandate.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Minister for providing that confirmation. Further to that, does she agree that homelessness is not a criminal offence and that policy interventions, rather than criminal sanctions, are required to address it?

Mrs Long: I absolutely agree. It had been my intention to do that in the previous mandate. However, the limitations of the then re-scoped Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill and the subsequent engagement of the Department's policy and legislative resources in the delivery of that meant that it was not possible to do that. However, I hope that we will be able to do it on this occasion. I do not believe that being homeless, in and of itself, should be punished. The police should not be the lead agency in tackling it. There are many people who should engage with those who do not have shelter and accommodation before the issue finds its way to the police.

Criminal Courts: Delays

T7. **Mr McMurray** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the delays in the criminal courts. (AQT 297/22-27)

Mrs Long: Tackling delay is probably one of the biggest challenges facing the justice

system, and it is a key priority for me and the Department. COVID had a significant impact. We had backlogs from COVID that will take time to clear, and we did not receive the resources that we would have needed to do that. Before COVID, however, the Department's efforts to tackle delay were starting to have a positive effect, with the overall average time to complete a criminal case falling from 169 days in December 2018 to 149 days in March 2020, when lockdowns were first introduced. On the basis of internal management information, provisional statistics show that the average time taken for quarter 4 of 2023-24 was 191 days. That is down from the post-COVID high point of 232 days, which was recorded in quarter 1 of 2022-23.

Mr McMurray: Thank you, Minister. Will the Budget settlement for 2024-25 allow the system to recover?

Mrs Long: As I said earlier, one of the consequences of the limited budget that we have available is that everything will be slower. The opportunity, for example, to open more courts, recruit more skilled staff and enhance the throughput of the court system, including the payment of legal aid to those in need of financial support in order to access justice, will be incredibly challenging for all of us. There is also a corresponding resource challenge to, for example, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to enable him to prosecute cases. We have, however, prioritised a programme of work that is targeted at reducing avoidable delay in the system. There are five key work streams that we are working through now and will continue to take forward at pace, because, ultimately, if we can do more with less in the criminal justice system, we will endeavour to do that and make best use of the resources that we have available, but it will undoubtedly be incredibly challenging.

Journalists: PSNI Surveillance

T8. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Justice to give her assessment of the recent revelations about the police spying on journalists here — a shocking practice for journalism, democracy and human rights — and to state what should happen next. (AQT 298/22-27)

Mrs Long: First, I very much share the concerns that have been raised more widely about the routine surveillance of journalists and lawyers. Journalism is not a crime, and a free press is critical to having a free society. Similarly, solicitor and client privilege is essential if we are to have an effective justice

system that is trusted by the public. I have spoken to the Chief Constable and understand that a further report is due to be presented in June to the Policing Board in conjunction with our human rights adviser. The Chief Constable is taking the matter incredibly seriously, as rightly he should, and is considering other mechanisms to provide reassurance.

As the Member will be aware, the PSNI is operationally independent from my Department but accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board, so it is important for me to allow the Policing Board the opportunity to explore the issues thoroughly with the PSNI in the first instance. I am also aware that some of the allegations in part relate to the scrutiny of security matters, which is an excepted matter and, as such, falls to the Secretary of State, with whom I also intend to engage on the issue.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, you may or may not be aware that Amnesty International, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and others are calling for a public inquiry. Do you support that call, and do you support the release of the names of all the journalists and campaigners who were spied on by the police?

Mrs Long: There are two elements to that question. The first concerns a public inquiry. As I have said, I believe that, in the first instance, it is right to allow the Policing Board to review with the Chief Constable what actions may or may not be appropriate from it and, indeed, from him. Depending on the outcome of that review, I will stand ready to listen to any action that they wish me to take. I do not want to rule anything in or out at this early stage.

On the second part of the question, there are significant challenges to releasing people's details. People should be made aware by being informed personally. Whether publication of their details in the public domain would be wise, however, is mostly a matter for them, because of GDPR and because of any perceived risk to their person.

Prison Service Morale

T9. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of morale in the Prison Service. (AQT 299/22-27)

Mrs Long: I have been to prisons quite a bit since returning as Justice Minister. As in all parts of the public sector, things have been challenging in prisons, in particular, owing to the significant numbers of people there. I have,

however, seen good morale in many parts of the prison system and, I have to say, creative and innovative work being undertaken by prison officers. I attended Hydebank Wood and met the women there. Work that they have been doing on education on healthy relationships and coercive control has led to a number of the women in the justice system coming forward and making declarations that have now proceeded to prosecution. That is an example of best practice in the Prison Service, and people are genuinely still very motivated by the work that they do, but this is undoubtedly a challenging time.

2.45 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, John, you cannot get back in. That ends the period for topical questions to the Minister of Justice.

Communities

Conversion Therapy: Ban

1. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Communities when conversion therapy will be banned. (AQO 452/22-27)

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): A ban on so-called conversion therapy will require legislation to be agreed by the Executive and passed by the House. There are no definitive timescales for that.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his answer. A recently published study of conversion practices in Northern Ireland showed that seven out of 10 people had endured conversion therapy via a faith-based practice. What is the Minister's assessment of that newly published study? Does he acknowledge the importance of banning conversion therapy, and will he commit in the House to banning it in this mandate?

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for her question. I have received the report. I have started to read it but I have not made my way through it yet. It will be an important part of our overall evidence base but by no means all that we need, so I look forward to taking evidence from a number of sectors so that we can take the legislation forward.

Mrs Erskine: I appreciate that the Minister is taking views from other sectors. Will he confirm that, in any consideration of the matter, he will ensure that the rights to freedom of speech and freedom of religion are protected?

Mr Lyons: Yes. The Member is absolutely right to highlight that. We clearly need to protect people from coercive, abusive and humiliating practices, but that must not be at the expense of freedom of expression, freedom of belief, freedom of religion or freedom of speech. That is why it is so important that we have a proper definition of conversion therapy. That is what has tripped people up in the past and led to unintended consequences, and it is why there have been a number of problems in other legislatures that have tried to get legislation through on it — they have also had to grapple with some of those rights issues — so it is important that we get it right.

Mr Tennyson: Forgive me if I missed it, Minister, but I am not sure that you have answered the question. Will we see a ban on conversion therapy in your Department's legislative programme, and when can we expect to see that legislation in the House?

Mr Lyons: I do not have timescales for that yet. There is another process, of getting more evidence and of consultation, to go through. Ultimately, I cannot give a timescale, because it will need to be agreed by the Executive and then by the Assembly. That is not something that I am able to give a definitive timescale for at this point.

Mr Beattie: In April 2021, the House debated a motion that I proposed on the harmful practices of conversion therapy. It passed with a clear majority. Will the Minister detail what his Department has done since that vote?

Mr Lyons: Work has been ongoing. My predecessor commissioned and funded a report that academics have taken forward. I have only just received the report. My officials have been working with colleagues in other jurisdictions to learn from their experiences, and further stakeholder engagement will be needed as we move forward.

Mr Allister: Given the loose definitions that attend this subject and the aggressive agenda of some who promote it, does the Minister accept that, in taking any action, it is vital to fundamentally protect religious freedoms, including the right to propagate and defend scriptural stances?

Mr Lyons: I was clear in my answer to Mrs Erskine that we need to ensure that any legislation is rights-compliant and that we therefore cannot introduce legislation that puts a prohibition on freedom of expression or belief or on people's right to express their religious

beliefs. Those views may not be palatable to everybody, but, in a free society, we must have the freedom to express them even when others strongly disagree. That is why, for me, the definition of conversion therapy is so important.

‘Investing in Creative Delivery’: Progress

2. **Ms Mulholland** asked the Minister for Communities to outline what progress his Department has made to implement the recommendations of the ‘Investing in Creative Delivery’ report, since it was published in July 2023. (AQO 453/22-27)

Mr Lyons: The recommendations in ‘Investing in Creative Delivery’ have not yet been implemented, but the foundation of work to develop a comprehensive strategy for the support and development of the culture, arts and heritage sectors will be based on that work.

Ms Mulholland: Thank you, Minister. Given that we are now almost two months into the new financial year, can the Minister give any reassurances to the arts sector about the budget that it is to receive? Will the Minister agree to meet the group of representative organisations to hear their concerns?

Mr Lyons: Yes, I am always happy to meet those who have concerns or other issues that they want to raise with me. On the budget, it is important for the House to know just how challenging a budget settlement my Department has received. It will be difficult in many areas. However, I have already stated how important I consider the arts to be. The arts can have an impact on people’s development in their lives, especially young people, so I am determined to do everything that I can to support the arts in Northern Ireland. That does not just mean supporting the arts through the budget that we have. It means seeing what other funding sources are available to help the arts, and that is a conversation that I had in a recent UK Government Ministers meeting, which involved the other devolved Administrations as well. Scotland has been very effective at finding other ways to support the arts, and I want to see that replicated here so that we are not just dependent on the funding that comes directly from my Department.

Mr O’Toole: Minister, we often spend time in the Chamber comparing ourselves to down South or across the water. One area where there is no comparison is in arts funding. We spend less than half of what Wales spends,

which is the lowest spender in the rest of the UK. We spend a fifth of what the Republic of Ireland spends on arts, and, over the past decade, the arts sector has had its budget repeatedly slashed. I understand that budget pressures —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr O’Toole: — are where they are, but I ask the Minister to look creatively at other sources of funding, such as the Shared Island Fund or financial transactions capital. Alternatively, will he agree to ask the Economy Minister and Finance Minister to discontinue our subsidisation of non-existent flights for £2.5 million a year to North America so that we can give that money to our struggling artists?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, if you want, you can respond to —

Mr Lyons: Any of those questions.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: —
[Inaudible.]

Mr Lyons: Obviously, it is not for me to encroach on the work of other Departments. However, I agree that there is a disparity in what we spend on the arts. The Member is quoting the Arts Council or equivalent bodies. We spend a little bit more than that in some of the other sectors, but I take the point that our spend here is lower. It is not the fairest comparator, but it is a consequence of the funding cuts that have happened over a number of years. I absolutely want to be in a position to protect the arts, and, as the Member alluded to, I am looking for alternative sources and other ways in which we can support the arts to be sufficient, including other income streams, where possible.

Mr K Buchanan: Minister, do you recognise the need to ensure that arts funding is distributed in a fair and impartial manner across Northern Ireland, including in rural areas and in support for marching bands?

Mr Lyons: Yes, absolutely. I do not think that the arts should be the preserve of any one community, any one area or any one town or city. I want to support the arts right across Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that we can support the development and sustainability of the arts and encourage them to develop in areas where they perhaps have not been that strong in the past. I am committed to doing that.

The Member specifically highlighted marching bands. At the end of the financial year, I was able to allocate a small sum of additional money to help marching bands across Northern Ireland, because I understand the value that those bands bring, especially to young people who might not otherwise be involved in the arts. That should be encouraged, and I hope to see that happening again this year.

Mr Nesbitt: If I heard the Minister correctly, he said that, as yet, there has been no implementation of the report, so I will broaden the question. To what extent does he believe that creativity in the arts can help to deliver high-end Programme for Government outcomes?

Mr Lyons: I absolutely believe that it can, and I say this to the Member: the fact that we have not had progress on the direct delivery of the recommendations does not mean that nothing is happening. We are putting together the arts, culture and heritage strategy, and I look forward to announcing that to the House soon, once I get the agreement of the Executive. It is important that that continues. I absolutely believe that the arts play a role in many of the outcomes that we will want to see in the Programme for Government. I have said before that sport and the arts help people to show up, be committed and demonstrate dedication to something and to working together. Those are essential skills that will help young people in particular in their educational journey, but those outcomes help in other ways and take pressure off Departments like Health and Justice. I am committed to supporting the arts, because I see the impact that they can have.

Communities: Temporary Promotions

3. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Communities what action he has taken to reduce the number of staff in his Department who have been temporarily promoted for over three years. (AQO 454/22-27)

Mr Lyons: My officials remain engaged with NICS HR in order to progress recruitment competitions that will fill more posts substantively and to improve and speed up recruitment processes through the NICS people plan. Following the lifting of the pause on NICS recruitment in 2023, my Department has recently seen an increase in the number of substantive new starts.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give us some assessment of why he believes that there is a higher level of temporary promotions in his Department? Can he outline why he believes that there is an issue in recruitment and retention?

Mr Lyons: There are more in my Department because it is a bigger Department. The percentage across the Civil Service is roughly the same, and we do not deviate from that. However, I will take the opportunity to correct Mr McCrossan, if he does not mind. At a previous Question Time, he claimed that there were 4,520 temporary promotions in my Department. In fact, it is 1,764. He inflated it by two and a half times, so I just thought that it was important to put that on the record.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer

4. **Ms Brownlee** asked the Minister for Communities to provide an update on funding for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQO 455/22-27)

6. **Mr McReynolds** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the completion of the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQO 457/22-27)

15. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities to outline when local football clubs can expect to receive a grant from the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQO 466/22-27)

Mr Lyons: With Madam Deputy Speaker's permission, I will group questions 4, 6 and 15. The subregional programme is a priority for me. My officials have been working closely with clubs at all levels to build strong relationships and understand needs, and they have been developing proposals in partnership with an advisory working group. They are continuing to push forward at pace, and I plan to make an announcement in the coming days. Once final approvals are confirmed and proposals are secured, I will be able to provide a time frame for the process for applying for funding.

Ms Brownlee: I thank the Minister for his response. It is great to hear that, in the coming days, we will, hopefully, have some very good news. Minister, do you believe that £36 million is enough? What will your Department do to ensure that football clubs in our constituency, such as Barn United, can be supported as much as possible in order to ensure that

grassroots football is protected, preserved and promoted?

Mr Lyons: I agree with the Member. The £36.2 million is not enough, but it is a start. We have been waiting for too long and for too many years to get that money out. I am determined to make sure that we get it delivered, but I accept that it is not enough. It is a start, but it is not the height of our ambitions.

I will continue to get more for football right across Northern Ireland. I want to be in a position where the Executive are able to give more funding to the subregional programme. In addition, I raised the matter directly with the UK Government when the UK sports Minister Stuart Andrew was over here. I impressed on him our need for facilities right across Northern Ireland. I am determined to deliver not just for performance clubs and our national training centre but for grassroots clubs. That is what I look forward to doing for clubs such as Barn United.

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that £36.2 million was committed in 2011 to improve Irish League football grounds. A consultation on football stadia funding was launched in 2015, and four Ministers have been responsible for that fund since then — two from Sinn Féin and two from the DUP. It will be crucial for clubs —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Do you have a question?

Mr McReynolds: — across Northern Ireland, not least Glentoran Football Club in my constituency. Will the Minister confirm how much money is now needed —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: There you go.

Mr McReynolds: — 13 years later to meet the programme's original aims, and from where does he hope to obtain that potential extra funding?

Mr Lyons: We need substantially more than £36.2 million. That is why I am determined that we set out a long-term plan for football. This is a start. I want to see the £36.2 million disbursed soon, but it is not the height of our ambition. We will need more, and I look forward to working with premiership and grassroots clubs to deliver that.

Mr Chambers: Additional funding has been reported, with a speculative figure of £100 million mentioned. Given the financial pressure on your Department with the Casement Park project, is the additional funding for football achievable?

Mr Lyons: I am not looking at the short term or the next two or three years; I am looking at the longer term.

That sum of money was committed back in 2011. Nothing extra has been added in the interim.

3.00 pm

Yes: I believe that we can and should ensure that football has what it needs, not just so that we can meet the needs of young people but because it is an investment in our future. Getting more people more active more of the time is key for me because it will have impacts on the health service, education system and justice system. This will be a good investment. I look forward to delivering it.

Community Support Programme

5. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the support he is providing to the community and independent advice sectors through the community support programme to ensure their services are sustainable. (AQO 456/22-27)

Mr Lyons: My Department invests significant annual grant funding in the region of £6.6 million to support the delivery of independent community-based advice and debt services to people in communities across Northern Ireland. In 2022, my Department moved to a minimum two-year grant funding allocation, which will soon be extended for a third year, to assist with sustainability and stability of services.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Recently, I visited a couple of advice centres in my constituency. Their managers are concerned that they will lose talented and experienced advice workers if there is no firm commitment of continued funding. Can you advise when they will get their letters of offer?

Mr Lyons: Obviously, I received my Department's final budget settlement only in the past number of weeks. That is still being worked through. The Member will be aware of the funding that is being made available via the UK Government for that service. I hope that that

will be able to continue. I hope to be able to give clarity as soon as possible.

Mr Gildernew: In acknowledgement of the pressure that those staff are under, Minister, can you give a date of when you intend to publish the public consultation on the independent advice and debt policy and delivery framework?

Mr Lyons: My officials have worked with the advice sector and engaged extensively with stakeholders to develop proposals for how we will support the delivery of integrated advice and debt services in the future through our funding. I expect the consultation on those proposals to launch in the summertime.

Ms Forsythe: Will the Minister commit to working with third-party providers like Christians Against Poverty (CAP), who also play such a valuable role in supporting the most vulnerable people in local communities?

Mr Lyons: I absolutely agree with what the Member has said. I have worked with organisations, including Christians Against Poverty, in my constituency and can see the impact that they have had. I want to ensure that we can have partnerships and work with all those who are determined to help to address the issue right across Northern Ireland. We need to continue to look at best practice elsewhere, because there are issues with uptake of debt advice in Northern Ireland. That is where coordination with fantastic organisations like CAP can really make a difference.

Cricket Ireland: Support

7. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Communities to outline what additional support his Department will provide to Cricket Ireland in advance of the first five-day Test match to be played in Belfast in July 2024. (AQO 458/22-27)

Mr Lyons: I am delighted to hear that Northern Ireland will play host to its first ever Test match when Ireland takes to the field against Zimbabwe at Stormont in July. We know how important it is and what a feather in the cap it is for Northern Ireland.

Sport NI's chief executive has confirmed that, over the past five years, a total of just under £1.4 million has been provided to Cricket Ireland as the governing body for cricket. In addition, a total of 151 service days for sporting expertise have been provided to Cricket Ireland

team members since 2021. I welcome any contact from Cricket Ireland to discuss its plans. However, I would stress that there is still uncertainty regarding my Department's budget allocation and what additional support could be provided.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that answer. Just to clarify: is he basically opening the door for a meeting with Cricket Ireland to discuss the Test match and its funding?

Mr Lyons: I am more than happy to meet Cricket Ireland.

Mr Kingston: Does the Minister agree that we need a longer-term strategy for hosting sporting events in Northern Ireland, recognising our proven track record over recent years, which includes the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia, the UEFA Women's Under-19 Championship and, this summer, the men's UEFA Under-19 Championship?

Mr Lyons: Yes. We need a longer-term strategy so that we can host more sporting events like that in the future. I think of the Giro in 2014 and what a great success that was for Northern Ireland. It really put the spotlight on many of our constituencies. Sometimes, we can be limited in what we are able to do because we have only certain pots of money that are available to assist those who might want to host sporting events and tournaments here in Northern Ireland, so I think that it is important that we look at a longer-term strategy. I would also like to see the Executive have a separate funding pot so that we could specifically target and promote those larger sporting events and bring them to Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Toole: I strongly support the Test match coming. As someone who enjoys bowling fast balls at the Minister, I am glad to see that he is open to that. Does he agree, further to the question from his colleague Brian Kingston, that the biggest potential sporting event that would ever come to Northern Ireland is the European Championships in 2028, but that, for that to happen, we have to build Casement Park, and it has to be ready on time? Will he confirm that he supports the Euros coming to Belfast and that he and his Department will do whatever it takes to make that happen?

Mr Lyons: I am not so sure about the first part of his comment, which was about his fast bowling. I have yet to see evidence of that. *[Laughter.]* On the hosting of the Euros, I am on record saying that I think that it would be fantastic if we could be part of that tournament.

However, as we know, that is dependent on funding. That funding is not currently in place, and I await further clarity on that.

Social Housing: Intimidation Points

8. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities to provide an update on steps being taken to ensure the award of intimidation points for social housing is not abused. (AQO 459/22-27)

Mr Lyons: Intimidation in whatever form it takes is unacceptable, as is the impact that it can have on the wider community. As I confirmed during questions on 23 April, I am aware that there is significant concern that intimidation points are being abused. I confirm that the Housing Executive undertakes a robust verification process to ensure that points are awarded to those who meet the specified criteria. I believe, however, that change is needed to ensure that victims of trauma or violence, including victims of domestic abuse, are treated more consistently. People who are genuine victims of abuse must receive the priority that they deserve, and we must also ensure that the system cannot be abused. As part of the ongoing fundamental review of social housing allocations, I will consider the future options for intimidation points, and the independent research on this subject is close to completion.

Mr Easton: Can the Minister give a guarantee that he will carry out a review of all points allocations to try to ensure that points are allocated in a better way than they are currently?

Mr Lyons: The Member will be aware of the 20 proposals that were made for social housing allocations. Most of those were implemented, and one on intimidation has not been progressed. I am considering that. I have indicated that I think that there needs to be change in that area, so, once we get the report back and I get a further evidence base, I will make a decision on that.

Mr Buckley: Minister, the lives of some constituents who engage with me continue to be blighted by antisocial behaviour in their communities. What can the Minister and his Department do to ensure that we hold the Housing Executive and, indeed, housing associations accountable for those who commit antisocial behaviour and plague local communities?

Mr Lyons: The Member is absolutely right to raise this issue. It is of huge concern to many people who are having to live through some horrendous examples of antisocial behaviour and whose health and mental health are being impacted on because of the behaviour of some of their neighbours. In some instances, the Housing Executive and housing associations will have the tools that they need, and I want to ensure that they are using those tools to crack down on those who are causing issues. If further work needs to be done in this area and they need additional tools, I am more than happy to help them, whether that is legislatively or in any other way. I am sure that we have all had experience of good people who are terrified of living in their own home because of just one or two problem people and who cannot get anywhere else to go. There should be no tolerance of that whatsoever.

Ms Egan: Minister, you said that you condemn intimidation in all its forms, so will you agree that domestic violence and abuse is some of the most traumatic intimidation that a person can face, and will you commit to the review including intimidation points for victims of such abuse?

Mr Lyons: It is absolutely right for this issue to be raised again, as it has been before. It is horrendous when people are facing the threat of violence or violence from those outside their home, and it is even worse when it is coming from inside their home. We should not tolerate that in any way, shape or form. The Assembly has done a good job in standing together and saying that that is completely unacceptable, and it is absolutely right that we do that. I want to make sure that people who face that horrendous situation get all the help that they need, and that should be incorporated into how we allocate social housing.

UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

9. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Communities whether he plans to implement the recommendation of the Equality Commission to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities into devolved legislation. (AQO 460/22-27)

Mr Lyons: Ensuring that disabled people in Northern Ireland have the same rights and opportunities as the rest of our community is a key priority for me.

I am considering the next steps in the development of an Executive disability strategy,

which I intend to be taken forward at pace. The strategy will include consideration of the need for a review and reform of disability legislation, which will include consideration of the benefits to be gained by incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into devolved legislation. Final decisions on the timing of the implementation of the strategy will be subject to Executive agreement.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.]* Will the Minister give a timeline for the publication of the disability strategy, and will he give a commitment that those who were involved in the co-design process will be given the opportunity to view and comment on it before it goes out to public consultation?

Mr Lyons: It is really important that those who helped with the co-design of the strategy are kept up to date with what is happening, and for no other reason than to be a good sounding board for what we eventually come to, so I am more than happy to take that forward and discuss it further with those interested parties.

I do not have a timeline yet for the disability strategy, but it is important to me and is something that I will be looking to progress at pace.

Miss McAllister: With regard to recommendations that are contained in the strategy, do you anticipate doing an overarching piece of legislation or can we make headway on a number of recommendations before the strategy is outlined because they are already there and that can be done?

Mr Lyons: We do not necessarily need to wait for the strategy to be in place before we move forward on some of these issues. Some are straightforward and progress can be made on them. We will do that where we can. Any legislation that follows could be a substantial piece of work, but, of course, we will keep Members updated and involved in that.

Social Housing: Disability-friendly New Builds

10. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Communities to outline his Department's plans to further develop disability-friendly social housing for new builds and existing housing stock. (AQO 461/22-27)

Mr Lyons: New social housing units for people with disabilities will be delivered through the social housing development programme, subject to confirmation of the annual housing budget. Housing Executive place-shaping teams will continue to liaise closely with housing associations to ensure that the housing mixes that are agreed for new social housing schemes reflect the requirements of people with disabilities.

All new wheelchair-accessible housing must be designed in accordance with the housing association guide. Incorporating generic, flexibly designed, future-proofed, wheelchair-accessible housing into new housing schemes should address the majority of wheelchair users' needs. Over time, that will help to alleviate the demand on the housing waiting list for that type of accommodation. Progress against targets has been slow but the Housing Executive and housing associations continue to work to increase provision.

Mr Butler: People with a disability face challenges with accessibility. Last week, the Minister announced the intermediate-rent scheme. How many of the 300 properties that he mentioned last week have been assessed for disability access and will be available to people with a disability?

Mr Lyons: That will be part of the framework and discussions that go on whenever that scheme begins, which will be very soon, and we can absolutely have that discussion. Our social housing has to be fit for those who have disabilities and need adaptations, so it is right that some of the homes that are available for intermediate rent are the same.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Strabane Public Realm Scheme

T1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the public realm scheme in Strabane, given that the state of Strabane town centre has become a real issue of concern for local traders, local residents and investors, and is adding to the issues of dereliction and safety for local people. (AQT 301/22-27)

Mr Lyons: My Department is working closely with Derry City and Strabane District Council on its city deal proposals for regeneration. The council has now submitted the outline business

case for Strabane town centre regeneration for approval.

3.15 pm

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for that answer; unfortunately, it is the same answer as the one he gave me in the House six weeks ago. Has there been any update on that position? I was told that the business case had been sent to the Department of Finance for approval of the bid, but the Finance Minister has come back to me and said that such a bid has not been received.

Mr Lyons: I am happy to get clarity on that for the Member.

Principal Deputy Speaker, I may have made a mistake; I may have been talking about the city deal for Strabane. I am sorry; I have so much in my file about Strabane that I may have given the Member the wrong information. I apologise to him and to the House.

The final business case was submitted to the Department on 16 April 2024. It requires my approval as well as that of DOF. Obviously, I have to wait to look at the Budget outcome before I can progress on that.

Historic Environment Division: Planning Performance

T2. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the performance of historic environment division (HED) as a statutory consultee within the planning system. (AQT 302/22-27)

Mr Lyons: Yes. The current target for the historic environment division is to respond to 75% of consultations within 21 days. I am disappointed that its performance has fallen from 54% in 2022-23 to 37% in quarter 3 of 2023-24. Whilst that can be attributed in part to issues with the new planning portal, I recognise that it is not good enough.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Minister for his response. What will the Minister do to improve that situation?

Mr Lyons: First, I accept and recognise that improvement is necessary and that that performance is not good enough. It has fallen well below expectations, and I never want to be in a position in which HED unnecessarily acts as a barrier to development and growth because of delays in the system. I have

instructed officials to look at the issue. I want to make sure that HED is properly resourced and gets the issues around the interface with the planning portal right. I want to make sure that advice is given to applicants beforehand. It is important that we implement policy reasonably and proportionately. We can protect our historic environment without inhibiting growth. That is really important.

Carer's Allowance: Overpayment Debt

T3. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister for Communities to state why his Department does not intervene earlier to prevent recipients of carer's allowance from accumulating significant overpayment debt after breaching their weekly earnings cap. (AQT 303/22-27)

Mr Lyons: It is an issue of concern. I recognise the difficulty that it has caused for many people. We remain fully committed to assisting people who are repaying an overpayment debt and experiencing financial difficulties. The available support includes help to develop tailored and affordable repayment plans, waiving overpayment debt in exceptional circumstances and signposting people to independent debt advice. If the Member has any constituents whom he is concerned about and would like to refer to the Department's debt management team, I am more than happy to facilitate that.

Mr Tennyson: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. In GB, a computer system automatically flags when a carer exceeds their weekly earnings cap. Do we have a similar system here, and, if so, is it working properly?

Mr Lyons: I do not have specific details on that, but I am happy to write to the Member about it. He is correct to highlight the fact that we want to make sure that overpayment does not happen in the first place. Prevention is always better, and I am happy to look at that to see what we can do so that it does not happen again.

Local Government Reform: Update

T4. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the reform of local government. (AQT 304/22-27)

Mr Lyons: I understand that it is an issue of concern. We have had 10 years since the changes to local government took place. It falls under the remit of my Department, and we will take forward work on that shortly.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree that there is a disconnect between various councils that needs to be addressed?

Mr Lyons: Should the Member wish to raise any specific issues with me, I am happy to look into them, but I would like to think that there is no disconnect between councils and the people whom they represent. If that is what the Member is referring to, I am happy to discuss the issue further with him.

Thatched Properties: Planning Limitations

T5. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Communities whether he has discussed with the Minister for Infrastructure the planning limitations and restrictions associated with thatched properties, which can put an unnecessary burden on owners, given that he will be aware of questions for written answer that have been submitted to him about thatched properties, most of which are listed buildings with protected status. (AQT 305/22-27)

Mr Lyons: I have not had any meetings with the Minister for Infrastructure on that yet, but I am tempted to. I do not know what is behind this, but, all of a sudden, a number of Members have become very interested in thatched roofs, which I recognise from the very many questions for written answer that I get on the subject. I am more than happy to take the matter up with the Member, if he thinks that it can be dealt with through a change to planning laws to take the pressure off those affected.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: There are none in the New Lodge, Minister. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Butler: One of the pressures is that any new build is much too expensive. There is a loss of skills, which the Minister will know. I just want to get an undertaking from him that he understands the value of the thatched properties that we have and the fact that they are disappearing at an alarming rate. Would the Minister like to give that commitment today?

Mr Lyons: It is concerning. They have disappeared in the New Lodge altogether.

It is something that we need to look at. I am happy to see what we can do to help with the circumstances that the Member has raised. He is right to talk about the skills issue. In the Department, we are continually trying to make sure that people have the necessary skills,

especially to deal with some of the monuments in our historic environment.

Casement Park: Commercial Profit Recovery

T6. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Communities, having waited in vain since 27 February for the Minister to answer this as a priority question for written answer, to state whether, in respect of Casement Park, he has any plans to recover profits arising from the future commercial use of the premises. (AQT 306/22-27)

Mr Lyons: I apologise to the House. I was not aware that that question had gone unanswered.

A funding arrangement is in place for Casement Park that is similar to the funding arrangements that were put in place for Ravenhill and Windsor Park when funding was made available for their redevelopment. The Member will be aware, however, that the situation has moved on considerably since then and that any new arrangement that is come to for Casement Park would require the funding agreement to be looked at again.

Mr Allister: On the subject of unanswered questions, I will ask the Minister about value for money. I believe that the most recent project assessment review of Casement Park was in 2019. It raised red and amber signs about its viability. Have any more recent assessment reviews or value-for-money inquiries been carried out into Casement?

Mr Lyons: I am happy to write to the Member about that. If there have been, I have not seen them in the documents that I have received so far. I will be happy to clarify that.

Empty Homes

T7. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Communities whether he has assessed the number of empty homes in Northern Ireland, given that he will be aware of the housing pressures across Northern Ireland, the difficulties experienced by people in being allocated a home and the fact that many homes remain empty. (AQT 307/22-27)

Mr Lyons: It is difficult for us to quantify exactly the number of empty homes in Northern Ireland. Land and Property Services (LPS), however, has told us that there are 20,958 vacant domestic dwellings on its databases. That does not necessarily cover all empty

properties. Some owners will not declare their properties as empty, because there is not the same rating benefit from doing so, and there are other reasons that it may happen. The figure from LPS gives us an indication of just how many empty homes we have here.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is startling to hear that number of properties. Is there anything that you, as Minister, can do to reduce the number of empty homes by bringing them into use in order to alleviate the current housing pressures?

Mr Lyons: The Member is, I am sure, aware in his constituency, as we all are in our constituencies, of the extreme housing pressures that many people face. I am determined to address that. Empty properties are an important aspect of the issue. Given that we have constraints on the planning system and restraints on our waste water infrastructure, we should make use of the properties that we have, as well as building more. There is no point in those properties being left vacant. We can do that in a number of ways. It will be part of our draft housing supply strategy. We need to look at innovative ways, as they have done in other parts of the United Kingdom, to encourage those who own houses that are not being used to make them available for let or for sale. That may require some input from government. We also need to make sure that the Housing Executive is in a position to do the necessary renovations or refurbishment of empty homes so that they can be brought up to standard and rented out. Steps can be taken to take the pressure off the housing situation in Northern Ireland.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Grassroots Clubs

T8. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister for Communities whether his recent announcement will include good news for teams such as Banbridge Rangers in her Upper Bann constituency, representatives of which recently told her that they need to find a significant amount of money in order to meet IFA regulations and upgrades. (AQT 308/22-27)

Mr Lyons: The Member will not expect me to comment on individual clubs in her constituency. Actually, she probably does expect me to comment on clubs in her constituency, but I hope that she will understand why I will not do that. Yes, it will help clubs such as the one in Banbridge that she mentioned, because the subregional stadia

programme will help not just performance clubs but grassroots clubs. That is really important.

I do not want us to be in a position where we turn young people away from playing football because the facilities are not there for them. I have seen that in my constituency, where parents have had to take young people elsewhere. Some parents are not able to do that, and young people are missing out. I do not want that to be the case. Therefore, I want to make sure that the funding that is available helps not only our national training centre and performance clubs but the grassroots clubs that do so much good. I will make an initial announcement on the process for the £36.2 million. I hope that we will be in a position soon to extend that further so that we can get all our facilities across Northern Ireland up to scratch.

Mrs Dodds: That is, indeed, good news, Minister. It really recognises the importance of the grassroots game. Another developing aspect of the game is women's football. There is an urgent need, just as there was in rugby, which got a significant amount of money, to upgrade changing facilities etc. Will you be able to address that issue as well?

Mr Lyons: Yes, absolutely. The need is so big at the moment because we have seen incredible growth in the women's game, which has necessitated additional facilities, changing rooms and all the rest of it. It is fantastic to see. It is great to see more people, especially young girls, getting involved in football. I welcome that.

The Member is right about rugby: it has probably seen even greater growth. It is important that we have those facilities so that we are not in any way hampering or hindering that growth. That is why I am determined to deliver for people on the issue.

Supporting People: Funding

T9. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Communities whether, given inflationary pressures on project delivery and sustainability of services, including homelessness services and those offered by learning disability providers, his Department will provide an uplift in funding to the Supporting People programme. (AQT 309/22-27)

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have less than a minute. Go for it.

Mr Lyons: I have huge support for the Supporting People programme. It does an incredible job and helps people who would

otherwise need much more serious and much more expensive intervention. Budget conversations are ongoing. The Member will be aware of the tight budgetary environment in which I am operating. I want to be able to help the Supporting People programme, because it makes a real difference in people's lives and is far more cost-effective than the alternative in many cases.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Quick response.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Minister discuss the allocation with the Housing Executive as well as his Department?

Mr Lyons: Yes.

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

3.30 pm

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

Private Members' Business

Defence Industries

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly is committed to realising the untapped potential of the aerospace, defence, security and space sectors in Northern Ireland; notes that these growing industries employed 9,000 people across Northern Ireland in 2022 and provided over 500 apprenticeships; further notes that technology produced in Northern Ireland has been a significant pillar of the UK's support for the defence of Ukraine; regrets the current low levels of Ministry of Defence spending in Northern Ireland, including in respect of small- and medium-sized enterprises; believes a concerted effort to incorporate Northern Ireland into the UK defence network will generate significant and lasting economic opportunities, as well as promote Northern Ireland as a global leader in innovative aerospace and security technology; welcomes commitments to strengthening Northern Ireland's defence industries in the UK Government's 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper; calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop an ambitious programme to showcase opportunities for investment in local defence industries and shipbuilding; and further calls on the Minister to work with industry, the Ministry of Defence and Executive colleagues to ensure our workforce has the skills required to scale up the defence and security industries in Northern Ireland. — [Mr Buckley.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out from "welcomes" to "Paper" and insert:

"promotes defence and security levelling up in line with the UK Government's announcement of an extra £75 billion increase in defence spending over five years with the aim of increasing Northern Ireland's economic input from defence rising from £1 billion to £3 billion per year;" — [Mr Beattie.]

Ms Eastwood: We know that the defence industry in Northern Ireland is significant, employing and training thousands of people and enabling a wide range of supplier businesses to develop and expand. Defence

spending should be about protecting citizens from attacks by others, not furthering wars abroad. It is in that space that we want to ensure that the high-skill sectors of aerospace and defence in Northern Ireland are given a fair share of UK spending.

From the outset, let me say that the ethical questions about whom the UK trades arms with are a separate but critical issue. Domestic and international law requires the UK Government to prevent the transfer of military equipment, where there is a clear risk that exports might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law or international human rights law. We are clear that the UK Government must urgently ensure that they meet those standards and should cease the transfer of military arms to Israel. While the UK Government have signalled an increase in defence spending and a reconsideration of supply chains, there is a lack of clarity about how that is being paid for by the current Government. First and foremost, there needs to be an honest conversation about that to give clarity.

I will draw out key aspects of the motion and speak to them specifically. First, evidence has been given to the NI Affairs Committee on the social value aspect of defence contracts for local companies. The social value scoring of contracts should, when done well, incentivise and build our wider industrial base across Northern Ireland. It has to be the case that, when any significant contract is won, smaller suppliers feel the benefits as well. If a more strategic partnership approach is taken, the smaller suppliers will have greater confidence to expand and invest, and we will see our SMEs develop and win contracts in their own right. Social value scoring happens already, but the evidence made it clear that more needs to be done by the UK to ensure that social value is not just a part of the tendering process but a key part that is truly impactful.

The other area that I will focus on is skills. We need to ensure that our skills policies enable training providers to be flexible and to meet the needs of industry and society now and in the future. That is not just an issue in the aerospace and defence industries: I make that point clear. It means greater investment in further education (FE), completing the review of FE delivery and implementing the recommendations, and empowering and supporting small businesses to enable workers to undertake upskilling. It means a clear delineation of the roles played by schools, FE and higher education (HE). It means finally making some progress on improving careers

advice in schools, having a dedicated skills fund, the expansion of the apprenticeship programmes, a review of vocational —.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. I am particularly interested in the Member's comments about a review of how education, specifically apprenticeships, fits into all this. Does she agree that, if the UK Government are serious about levelling up and putting additional funds into levelling up, they must include Northern Ireland and address the apprenticeship levy?

Ms Eastwood: Absolutely. I concur entirely with the Member's remarks; indeed, I was about to move on to the reform of the apprenticeship levy. I hope that the Economy and Finance Ministers continue to make the case on it to Treasury.

While improving on what we do on a skills policy, we need to keep our skilled graduates and workforce here. That is as much about opportunity as it is about our health service and general standard of living. We also have a significant job to do to consider how we can attract more highly skilled people from the rest of the UK and Ireland.

Finally, while the motion focuses on defence, key points are raised that need to be applied across all our key industries. Most significant are the industries that will enable us to reach our climate targets. I would like to see greater focus on those.

Ms McLaughlin: As we speak, I am conscious of the thousands of people employed by the aerospace, defence and security industries in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is already a global leader in innovative aerospace and security technology, and it is a source of pride for many people throughout these counties that their work leads the world in those industries. I am also aware — I am sure that the Minister will articulate this later in the debate — that Invest NI is already undertaking extensive work to seek investment of that kind, particularly but not exclusively in and around the Belfast clusters. Those industries are growing, and areas of Northern Ireland are quickly developing specialisms in those sectors.

Of course, while we would usually welcome greater economic output, I think that everyone accepts that increased demand for the production of weapons due to increased global unrest is a cause not for celebration but for alarm. It is a sign of escalating conflict and of a brutal regime's oppression of its neighbour. A

strong and robust European defence policy is, of course, needed, and close cooperation between those nations is vital in order to protect peace and security.

The motion puts an emphasis on the skills of the future. I know that others in the Economy Committee are as concerned as I am that the Department has, in the past, been found sorely wanting when it comes to developing the skills pipeline that is needed to ensure that all our industries have the people that they need. I think that everyone on that Committee agrees that the Minister for the Economy should adopt a much closer working relationship with the Minister of Education to develop that pipeline and ensure that people of all ages can be skilled and reskilled for all sectors, including the sectors that, traditionally, have been neglected.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Sorry, no. This is a time of immense pressure on our public services. Our health system is on its knees, and our schools are literally crumbling. There is a long list of priorities in this place, and we are still waiting to find out the Executive's approach to addressing them. In that context, I would not find it prudent to direct resources that, Ministers repeatedly tell us, are scarce towards this endeavour. The ambition of scaling up defence spending in Northern Ireland is not one that we share, and I do not want the Minister for the Economy spending her time on that effort when so many other more pressing issues are across her desk.

I also take the opportunity to put on record our opposition to the 'Safeguarding the Union' paper, since it is referenced in the motion. This place is all about balance. That is how a fragile peace process has survived. I am profoundly uneasy at the British Government's actions when they roll out red, white and blue PR exercises to appease one party here. That threatens the balance of relationships in this place, and it is characteristic of the Government and shows no understanding of our current context.

Finally, the conflicts around the world from Gaza to Ukraine ask all of us not to explore the profits of war but to make every effort for peace, particularly in Gaza, where the unfolding genocide is a humanitarian catastrophe. The UK should immediately stop any exports of arms to Israel, a country that is raining down terror on innocent men, women and children. That much should be obvious to anyone. We will not be able to support the motion.

Mr Brooks: I declare an interest in that I have a close relative who works in Spirit Aerosystems, which I may refer to.

The Member who spoke previously shows concern around the British Government being unionist in their outlook. Does she show the same concern when the Irish Government work towards a united Ireland? That is not a concern that I have heard from those Benches.

As you might expect, as a Member for East Belfast, which has such a significant heritage but also present industry in defence, I fully support the motion proposed by my colleagues. When speaking about defence spending, I thank all those who serve in our armed forces for all they do at home and abroad to ensure the safety of our nation and that of our allies and neighbours.

In the 2023-24 financial year, the UK spent £54.2 billion on defence. That is expected to rise to £57.1 billion in this financial year. The Prime Minister has spoken of further increasing defence spending to 2.5% by 2030 and rightly so. In a world where the safety and freedoms of the UK and our allies are increasingly threatened in both traditional and new ways, it is vital that we uphold our NATO commitments on defence spending.

In the past, Northern Ireland has been undervalued in defence spending and procurement, with MoD spending per head of population much lower here than in other regions of the UK. We have, however, seen a 20% rise in that spending in the past year. The DUP, most prominently through our party leader Gavin Robinson's efforts at Westminster, has worked to champion and advance that growth and address the imbalance. Evidencing that work, the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper provides a commitment on strengthening Northern Ireland's defence industries, and we have seen the commencement of the inquiry into defence spending in Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster. The DUP has also called for the exploration of an MoD hub in Northern Ireland to help nurture and facilitate a strategic approach to supporting and developing the industry. East Belfast, which is already a thriving hive of relevant industries such as aerospace, missile systems, cybersecurity, shipbuilding and a range of other advanced manufacturing businesses, is ready to be at the centre of such a strategy.

In spite of what has been said in the debate, many of my constituents — "workers", to use the preferred terminology of some — are able

to testify that the defence-related industries have provided them with a good job and work from which they can take pride and, more importantly, provide income for their families.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I hope that he agrees that there was no attempt to be divisive with the motion; rather, the motion recognises a hugely innovative sector that has huge potential for growth in Northern Ireland. He mentions people having "a good job". We spend much time in our Committee debating what the Department for the Economy's definition of "a good job" is. Does he agree that, by their abject failure to support the motion, Sinn Féin and the SDLP are saying that a defence job is not a good job in Northern Ireland?

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

Mr Brooks: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Yes, absolutely, I agree with the Member.

As I say, many of my constituents are able to testify to the good jobs that they have secured because of the defence industries. There are good jobs, as we have heard, in Thales, which contributes over £77 million to Northern Ireland's GDP and employs over 500 people. We can be immensely proud of the role that that east Belfast workforce played in supporting Ukrainians defending their homeland from attack, notably with the new generation light anti-tank weapon (NLAW) that became so iconic of that resistance. There are good jobs in Harland and Wolff, the shipyard famed for its past but with renewed vibrancy today as a UK strategic defence asset. It is one of only three UK naval shipbuilders suitable for major MoD contract work and boasts two of the largest dry docks in Europe. It is part of a £1.6 billion contract to manufacture three 216 metre-long naval support ships for the Royal Navy. There are good jobs at Spirit Aerosystems. That global leader in the production of aerostructures already supplies 3,000 good jobs at its sites in east Belfast, Newtownabbey and Newtownards. While predominantly commercial, just like its predecessors on its Belfast sites, the company has a strong heritage in defence. There are good jobs at less familiar but no less formidable names like Vikela Armour, a business developing world-class body armour systems that provide advanced protection to our service men and women.

As has been stated, Belfast is a globally recognised centre for cybersecurity excellence. Cyberattacks by malevolent regimes and rogue

states do not just target the military; they have targeted the NHS, the police, councils, payroll operations and key private businesses.

Belfast's skill base can provide a key defence through more good jobs, which, the Members opposite tell us, they want. I am hugely proud of the role that east Belfast, our city and Northern Ireland as a whole plays in our nation's defence, and, like colleagues, I am keen to see us do more still.

I am delighted by the well-paid and stable employment that those industries provide to families here. If the constituents of the party opposite do not want those jobs, they can be sure that East Belfast does. I, of course, have a natural bias towards East Belfast, but there are many other examples across Northern Ireland. Given our skills base and huge untapped potential, I ask the Minister and colleagues across the Chamber to join us in realising that potential.

3.45 pm

Mr Honeyford: Last week, we talked in the Chamber about hospitality, which is a key industry and employer in Northern Ireland. Sorcha has laid out our position on this motion. I will focus on our economy and the wider aerospace industry as employers that are growing the GDP of the region and pushing for more success.

As has been stated, and as the motion says, aerospace employs approximately 9,000 people here. It does so across approximately 120 companies, whose uniquely close geographic proximity to each other, as well as the advanced engineering heritage that we have here, means that it is a thriving industry. Although parts of the motion read and are decorated as though they are a DUP manifesto, let us not forget the reality that our aerospace, technology and advanced manufacturing sector is much bigger than just the UK market. The cluster of companies that is based here exports to the world. That export means that we will see future growth, and, from future growth, we will see future wealth and more prosperity for the region. The aerospace industry should be supported to help it to sustain and create future employment, bring job opportunities, develop highly skilled pathways and apprenticeships, develop skilled jobs and support our local businesses to grow their exports. That will give us all the best possible chance of having a better economy. Alliance will always strive for better.

Given that a substantial percentage of the aerospace and defence companies are European, or at least trade with Europe, we must use and promote our dual market access. It is vital to this region. We should use that dual market access to our advantage to grow exports to GB and the EU, which will grow not only our UK and European markets but our international market. As the UK economy continues to stagnate and slowly decline on the world stage, we must support local businesses to export and to see the world as the stage on which to perform. Northern Ireland is recognised for its commitment to developing world-class innovative technology in the aerospace, security, defence and space sectors. It has a vibrant and rapidly growing industry that is founded on a really strong engineering heritage and backed by robust research, competence, collaboration and leading universities.

There are some fantastic local companies and employers in my Lagan Valley constituency. I have known Michael Maguire for many years now, having met as dads on the side of a rugby pitch. His company, Datum Tool Design, which is based in Lisburn, is a great example of success. It creates specialist tooling for the manufacturing process. Alongside Datum, we have other fantastic companies, such as Creative Composites, which is known as the most advanced composite manufacturer on these islands. In Dromore, we have the precision engineering company Green Energy Engineering, and, back in Lisburn, we have NI Precision, Rainey Engineering Solutions and McGowan-Smith. All those precision engineering companies have in-house design and manufacturing facilities. We also have Vita Materials, which produces aircraft seat cushions.

Those are some of our premier technology companies in Northern Ireland. We are proud to have them in Lagan Valley. They create jobs and offer highly skilled opportunities in my area, as well as training and apprenticeships. They are key to our local economy. I thank them for the work that they do and wish them all the best for the future. I hope that they will continue to thrive.

Aerospace is an area of our economy that we should be at the forefront of, further developing our rich heritage of engineering and technology development. It sits comfortably alongside this region's being the centre of secure information technology, with the growing cluster of companies that offers innovative cybersecurity solutions. They lead the way by creating jobs and giving us hope for a better and more

prosperous future. Our focus in the Assembly must be on creating opportunities and giving hope. It is certainly a highly skilled industry, and we should do all that we can to encourage and support it.

Mr Carroll: It is an utter shame that politicians are using manufacturing workers as political pawns as they beat the drum of war and ramp up military tensions. The motion mentions the 9,000 workers who work in the defence industry, but anyone who thinks that it is about the needs or desires of those workers clearly has not been paying attention. The media is awash with reports about putting Britain on a war footing. In Whitehall, there are open conversations about conscription and the need to ramp up war industries. It is in that context that the unionist parties and establishment and their Tory counterparts, with their Safeguarding the Union deal, are angling to integrate the North further into Britain's military defence systems.

We have seen that move before: 13 years after the invasion of Afghanistan and 11 years after the invasion of Iraq, and we know the repercussions. There are millions dead and countless injured, yet not a single worthwhile lesson has been learned by the Tories, Labour, the DUP or the UUP, because, at the end of the day, it is not politicians or the captains of industry who fight the wars that they create: the price is paid in the blood of countless, and, for the most part, nameless, working-class people, who serve in and are massacred by the armies of Britain and its imperialist allies. War is catastrophic and cruel. From Belfast to Baghdad and from Manchester to the Malvinas, the history of that warmongering is carved into tombstones across the world, and its memory is carried in the scars of the survivors.

At this very moment, Britain and its imperialist allies in the US are funding Israel's genocide in Gaza. Over 35,000 are dead, there are countless injured, hospitals, schools and universities have been destroyed and millions of Palestinian people are being forced to endure famine conditions. It appears that there is no end to the number of war crimes that Israel will commit or the number of countries that it will bomb, and it does so with the backing of Western Governments. Despite all the risks and warnings of a wider regional war, Britain, the US and others continue to add fuel to the fire. They know that Israel is a bulwark against democracy and the will of the wider working-class in the Middle East, and there is no depraved depths that the ruling class will not go to to protect their interests.

That has also been evidenced in Ukraine, which the motion is sure to mention. The British, European and American ruling classes are in the grips of a cold war-style panic over the war in Ukraine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Mr Carroll, will you return to the substantive motion?

Mr Carroll: Yes, but, respectfully, Mr Deputy Speaker, Ukraine is mentioned in the motion.

In the aftermath of Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine and despite NATO's support for Kiev, the war has been fought to a stalemate. Hundreds of thousands are dead and yet there are parties here that want more. To be clear, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was wrong. Ukraine has the right to self-determination, but that will not come about —.

Mr Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I heard you make a ruling and ask the current contributor to get back to the topic. Will you again examine what he is saying, and do you believe that he is speaking to the motion?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I am not sure that that was a point of order. Mr Carroll, I ask again that you address the substantive motion rather than wider global issues.

Mr Carroll: There is an entrenched power struggle between Russia and NATO and other imperialist interventions, which are tearing Ukraine asunder.

The reason the motion — the motion — speaks about Ukraine is twofold. First, it is because the UUP and DUP want workers to think that war is the best way to protect and provide jobs. That is not true. Secondly, the supporters of the Ukraine war have made a cynical, self-serving and morally abhorrent calculation. Those Governments that are arming Ukraine are fighting a proxy war with Russia because they have calculated that it is the cheapest way to protect their own interests. It is cheaper to arm the Ukrainian military because they believe that Ukrainian lives are cheaper than those of their own citizens.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member believe that the 9,000 people employed in the defence industry, whether it is in the aerospace, defence, security or space sectors, are in bad jobs? Does he not believe that they deserve the full support of the House to ensure that they can meet their true potential?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Member has an extra minute. My apologies to Mr Carroll: I should have said that you had an extra minute after the previous intervention.

Mr Carroll: Thanks, Deputy Speaker. I will come on to the intervention in a second.

What is needed in Ukraine is a ceasefire, which Sunak and Biden have opposed every step of the way. What is not needed is a further escalation of war or cynical motions like the one here today. That brings me on to the workers here, who were mentioned. When it comes to paying bills or putting food on the table, people tend to take jobs wherever they can get them. Therefore, the responsibility for the dead and the war casualties lies with the politicians and manufacturing bosses who profit from war, not with the workers themselves. People Before Profit has stood on picket lines with workers and told them much of what I have said here today. We can and do make a distinction between the workers, their welfare and the companies that they work for. We have openly told workers that their jobs do not have to be contingent on war.

Crucially, we believe that organised workers, with the power that they can wield, are best placed to break those factories from the war industry. In our view, those workers could be reskilled and those factories repurposed to create new, green jobs as part of a just transition that protects workers and our planet. The technological capacity of those industries could help combat climate change with the development of renewable energy initiatives and infrastructure. We think that we could demilitarise those factories —

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

Mr Carroll: — and use those workers and their skill sets for more peaceful purposes. In the interests of humanity —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Time is up, Mr Carroll.

Mr Carroll: — I will not support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the Minister for the Economy to respond. Minister, you have up to 15 minutes.

Miss Hargey (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and, if you give me a bit of flexibility, I will welcome to the Assembly the Japanese ambassador to

the UK, who is on a trade mission here today. I welcome him and the delegation.

The local aerospace sector is made up of over 100 companies, employing 8,000 workers and contributing £1.9 billion to the local economy. The sector is recognised globally for its world-class manufacturing and its innovation, which is founded on robust research, collaboration, world-leading academic institutions, skills and experience. As a region, we supply components and parts for all major aircraft programmes. Local companies manufacture one in every three aircraft seats for the global aerospace industry. The motion refers to apprenticeships, which are key to the success of the industry. The aerospace sector here has been at the forefront of providing over 500 apprenticeships to the local economy in the past few years, and work is ongoing to encourage young people into engineering and to showcase the sector as a future career for our school-leavers.

The motion also refers to support for SMEs. Our aerospace supply chain is dominated by highly productive SMEs that provide good jobs across the region. The North is the leading region in SC21 gold awards, a globally recognised accreditation in excellence for quality and delivery. Invest NI works closely with the sector to promote the supply chain and to explore new international opportunities through inward investment visit programmes. My Department and Invest NI work to support the sector through investment, research and development, training and international trade support.

Building on the sector's core manufacturing capacity, Invest NI has engaged with the sector to highlight diversification opportunities. Alternative high-value advanced manufacturing sectors include space, advanced air mobility, mid tech, EV infrastructure, robotics and the hydrogen economy. Opportunities in aligned high-value sectors could enable our supply chain to pivot and diversify its customer base, and a number of our companies are already seeing success in those sectors, including space, with Resonate Testing in Newry providing testing for the James Webb telescope programme and Springco providing springs for the latest satellite mission to Jupiter. I also welcome the sector's involvement in city deal projects that will result in an advanced manufacturing innovation centre in Belfast, offering major opportunities for SMEs to collaborate and to work with the leading research organisations.

The global aerospace industry has a commitment to achieve net zero by 2050. This

will be driven by our research base in universities as well as innovative solutions including hydrogen fuel, advanced composites and new aircraft platforms that are very different from what we see flying in the skies today. That aligns with the economic vision that Conor Murphy set out here a few weeks ago. My Department and Invest NI continue to support the local aerospace sector with the high-quality jobs that it provides.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Mike Nesbitt to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. You have five minutes.

4.00 pm

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the motion and the amendment make clear, this is an economic debate, and many Members have made that point. Moreover, as Mr Beattie and Ms Eastwood made clear, there is an ethical aspect to it. The ethics are separate from this debate, however.

In opening the debate, Mr Buckley, if I heard him correctly, said that the defence sector is worth about £1 billion to the Northern Ireland economy. Mr Beattie is ambitious and thinks that we could get that up to £3 billion. Is that possible? The Ministry of Defence projects that spending on defence in this financial year, 2024-25, could hit £57.1 billion. How much of that could we reasonably expect to attract to Northern Ireland? In a simplistic way, a sort of Barnett consequential could be applied. According to the Assembly, we have 3.4% of England's population, so that would give us £1.94 billion — very nearly £2 billion — of the Ministry of Defence's spending. I do not think that the Barnett formula is the way in which to look at it, however.

Is there a more appropriate argument? It may be more fitting to consider our expertise. As has been recorded, we have capacity and capability in shipbuilding, and we have Spirit AeroSystems. As the Minister says, we have about 100 companies involved in the sector. As the nature of warfare changes, and cyberattacks increasingly become an aggressor's weapon of choice, Belfast, based, to a large degree, on the Centre for Secure Information Technologies (CSIT) at Queen's University in Belfast, is a globally recognised cybersecurity centre of excellence.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he share my disappointment that the Minister's departmental response focused almost entirely on aerospace? I know that the

Member has probed the issue in Committee. Does he assume that jobs in other sectors may not be deemed as being "good jobs" for the Department for the Economy?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will leave his comments on the record. I acknowledge that this can be a difficult issue depending on one's political perspective, but, as I said, I understand that the motion and the amendment are focused on improving our economic conditions.

There is one other issue, which Mr Beattie raised, and it is the fact that we have many geopolitical issues today. They are many and varied, but they have a common ability, in that they are dangerous and pose a threat to the United Kingdom, to Northern Ireland and to world peace. As the Defence Secretary, Grant Shapps, said not so long ago, we have moved from a post-war environment to a pre-war environment. Mr Beattie talked about escalating the capacity and capability of the RAF station at Aldergrove and about the importance of the Royal Navy's being based in the north-west. I know that that will not please every Member of the House, but, on hearing that, I am reminded of the late Gerry Anderson on Radio Ulster, with his whimsical reminiscences about sailors based in what he called "stroke city" during the Second World War.

Geopolitics is important. Just over 30 years ago, the British Government said that they had:

"no selfish strategic ... interest in Northern Ireland."

Of course, that is different from having a strategic interest in the defence of Northern Ireland. We also have to figure in the fact that the Republic of Ireland is neutral on such matters. Thinking about that, I was reminded of something that I heard in Washington when the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, in referring to Ukraine, said:

"we know that an attack on the freedom of one is an attack on the freedom of all."

What is different between that and article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states:

"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more ... shall be considered an attack against them all"?

Is the Republic considering joining NATO? I will leave that as an open question. I support the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Gary Middleton to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Middleton: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, particularly those who stuck to the motion and recognised the intention behind it.

The aerospace, defence, security and space (ADS) sectors are a significant and emerging force in the Northern Ireland economy, accounting for more than 9,000 jobs, adding £1 billion to the UK economy and providing hundreds of apprenticeships and other skills development opportunities for people of all backgrounds across Northern Ireland. In recent years, a number of significant contracts have been awarded to major firms in the heart of our constituencies. Despite recent growth in those areas, there is still much untapped potential. The local ADS industries can play a much more prominent role in the United Kingdom's defence network.

In the past, Northern Ireland has punched above its weight in its contributions to the ranks of the armed forces, and it is now time to replicate that to a greater extent in equipment and technologies produced here in Northern Ireland. During our negotiations with the Government, the DUP secured a range of commitments from Ministers to advance that cause. The UK Government have confirmed that they will launch a review into increasing public and commercial awareness of the Northern Ireland defence sector; developing proposals to ensure that Northern Ireland benefits from investment in defence industries in the same way as the rest of the country; exploring how to leverage Northern Ireland's cybersecurity clusters; having an academic centre of excellence; and establishing R&D programmes.

In the 'Safeguarding the Union' paper, the Government also pledge to showcase the opportunities for investment in Northern Ireland defence industries and shipbuilding. It is important that those commitments to Northern Ireland are honoured, but there should also be a recognition that, in order to maximise the clear and sizeable opportunities that the success of our defence industries has, the buy-in of the Executive, of the Minister for the Economy and our homegrown and international firms will be essential.

There is no threat to the principle of consent from the Northern Ireland economy seeking to play a more active role in the defence economy

and the infrastructure of the United Kingdom. As has already been mentioned by other Members, the equipment produced here in Northern Ireland, such as anti-tank weapons, has assisted in the defence of democracy in Ukraine. Our skills have been used right across the globe to fight against terrorism and protect innocent lives. We cannot stand by or sit on the fence when it comes to defending peace and democracy across the globe.

The high-quality, well-paid jobs that the sector provides deliver prosperity for communities in all parts of the United Kingdom. It is clear that, while there has been a modest uplift in the proportion of UK defence spending allocated to Northern Ireland, the level of investment from the MoD in our Province is disproportionately low.

I will move on to Members' contributions. My colleague Jonny Buckley, who moved the motion, spoke of our late colleague Gordon Dunne MBE and the role that he played in championing those particular sectors. He highlighted the per head expenditure and the fact that Northern Ireland falls below the rest of the United Kingdom, the issue of imbalance and the need to fully integrate Northern Ireland into the defence network. He also outlined the difficulties that some of our SMEs and businesses face in trying to enter the defence industry but also highlighted some of the success stories that other Members went on to mention.

Doug Beattie spoke about the importance of viewing the motion through an economic lens, and I share that view. That was the intention behind the motion. He outlined the conflicts that are happening right across the globe, the increase in defence spending right across the world and Northern Ireland's contribution to the defence industry. He highlighted the contribution that many of our businesses made. He also spoke about how vital it is that Northern Ireland receives its fair share of the £75 billion being invested over the next five years.

Philip McGuigan spoke of the economic vision outlined by the Minister and the importance of the all-Ireland economy from his perspective. He recognised the skills in the cybersecurity industry as well, although he went on to raise political issues in respect of the USA and UK's role in Israel, protecting innocent lives and also ethical procurement and involvement.

Sorcha Eastwood spoke about meeting international law on the issue of arms sales to Israel and the need for more to be done from the UK Government's perspective on social

value. She also spoke about skills and the role of further education, schools and careers advice.

Sinéad McLaughlin spoke about Northern Ireland's being a global leader in the ADS industry, recognised the extensive ongoing work by Invest NI in that area, and said that the Department has been found wanting on the skills pipeline and should work more closely with the Education Minister in that respect. She also spoke of her opposition to the 'Safeguarding the Union' paper.

My colleague David Brooks spoke passionately about East Belfast and the heritage that exists, particularly around defence, in that constituency, and the need to meet NATO commitments. As my colleague Jonny Buckley did, he spoke of Thales, Harland and Wolff and Spirit Aerosystems.

David Honeyford spoke about the need to focus on employers growing GDP and the aerospace and manufacturing industries. He went on to speak passionately about areas in his constituency. I am still quite unclear about what his position is and whether Alliance will support the motion. He spoke positively. If the Member wants me to give way, I can. He spoke passionately about the sector but was maybe unwilling to say what he would do.

Gerry Carroll spoke on a number of issues that I do not believe were relevant to the motion. He was concerned about the ongoing situation in the Middle East and across the globe.

I want to bring the debate on the motion to a close. It is regrettable that some of the contributions tried to turn it into a situation that it was not intended to be. We should pay tribute to all those who are involved in the ADS sector. It is not the situation that people go into those jobs just because they cannot get anything else; those are highly skilled, highly paid and respectable jobs. As an Assembly, we should do all that we can to ensure that we are global leaders in that industry. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 40; Noes 27.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Beattie, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler,

Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dodds, Mr Donnelly, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Harvey, Mr Honeyford, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McAllister, Mr McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Nicholl, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Mr Nesbitt

NOES

Dr Archibald, Miss Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms Kimmins, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McGuigan and Ms McLaughlin

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 41; Noes 26.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Beattie, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dodds, Mr Donnelly, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Harvey, Mr Honeyford, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Miss McAllister, Mr McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Nicholl, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brooks and Mr Buckley

NOES

Dr Archibald, Miss Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms Kimmins, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mrs Mason, Ms Á

Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McGuigan and Ms McLaughlin

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly is committed to realising the untapped potential of the aerospace, defence, security and space sectors in Northern Ireland; notes that these growing industries employed 9,000 people across Northern Ireland in 2022 and provided over 500 apprenticeships; further notes that technology produced in Northern Ireland has been a significant pillar of the UK's support for the defence of Ukraine; regrets the current low levels of Ministry of Defence spending in Northern Ireland, including in respect of small- and medium-sized enterprises; believes a concerted effort to incorporate Northern Ireland into the UK defence network will generate significant and lasting economic opportunities, as well as promote Northern Ireland as a global leader in innovative aerospace and security technology; promotes defence and security levelling up in line with the UK Government's announcement of an extra £75 billion increase in defence spending over five years with the aim of increasing Northern Ireland's economic input from defence rising from £1 billion to £3 billion per year; calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop an ambitious programme to showcase opportunities for investment in local defence industries and shipbuilding; and further calls on the Minister to work with industry, the Ministry of Defence and Executive colleagues to ensure our workforce has the skills required to scale up the defence and security industries in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, please take your ease before we move on and to allow for a change at the top Table.

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

No-fault Divorce

Miss Brogan: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges that divorce can be a difficult process for any individual or family to go through; recognises that the current fault-based divorce process can often exacerbate conflict and have a hugely negative

impact on the well-being of children; notes that the no-fault divorce law, the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020, came into effect in England and Wales in 2022; understands that children who grow up with parents who have low parental conflict, whether together or separated, enjoy better health and education outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Finance to bring forward legislation to amend the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 to allow applications for a divorce without apportioning blame to either party.

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

Miss Brogan: Divorce can be a difficult process for any family to go through, especially when children are involved. The statistics for divorce show that, on average, 2,100 couples in the North will seek a divorce every year. The figure has increased over time as society has become more secular.

Under current laws, divorce can be granted only if the marriage has irretrievably broken down, with one party taking the blame. An applicant seeking a divorce must state the grounds on which they are applying, and they must provide evidence to the court to support their application. Divorce can be granted only if one or more of five separate grounds are met: they are adultery; unreasonable behaviour; a two-year desertion; a two-year separation if both parties consent; and a five-year separation if only one party consents. The process often puts the parties at loggerheads, creating feelings of resentment in what is already an emotional situation, and it could have a hugely negative impact on the children as well as on those seeking a divorce. Sinn Féin wants laws that encourage amicable and healthy relationships between former spouses that reduce conflict, particularly when children are involved.

Another aspect of our current divorce laws that causes great frustration is the time required to complete the process. Even in the most amicable separations, the current law requires former partners to live separately for two years before an application for a divorce can be considered. That increases to five years when one party contests the divorce. In fact, that traps former partners in a broken-down marriage and can have a hugely negative impact on the physical and mental well-being of

those affected. The process of divorce should be as efficient and pain-free as possible and should prioritise the welfare of those involved, particularly children and victims of domestic abuse.

Our current divorce laws came into force in 1978 and are outdated. We need modern divorce laws that reflect the society in which we live today. The motion calls on the Minister of Finance to legislate for no-fault divorce. No-fault divorce is a much more straightforward and amicable approach to separation. Under no-fault divorce, former spouses can file for divorce independently or jointly without the need for one party to blame the other. It ensures that divorces can proceed on a less contentious basis and within a much quicker time frame.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Miss Brogan: No, thank you.

No-fault divorce also prevents abusers from contesting a divorce, thereby preventing them from using the court system to further harm their victim.

No-fault divorce was recently introduced in England and Wales via the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020. It followed a Supreme Court case, *Owens v Owens*, in which a petition for divorce was contested and the court ruled in favour of the contesting party on the ground that they could not reasonably be considered at fault for the breakdown of the marriage. The Supreme Court judgement strongly recommended reform of the divorce laws.

The modernisation of divorce laws, particularly through no-fault divorce, is gaining traction across many jurisdictions. In addition to England and Wales, no-fault divorce has been introduced in countries such as America, Canada and Australia and in many European countries. Now is the time for the North to follow suit. I urge Members to support the motion.

Ms Brownlee: Marriage is supposed to be a happy and special occasion, when two people come together in front of their loved ones and commit themselves to each other. They set up their life together, but we would be naive to think that all marriages will last for ever. While no one sets out thinking that their marriage will end and no one wants their marriage to break down, none of us is indifferent when a couple's lifelong commitment sadly deteriorates after all avenues have been exhausted. Sadly, people change and circumstances change, and, sometimes, a life that may once have seemed

so perfect turns out not to be that way for ever. It is a sad circumstance, but the motion puts forward a solution that can help couples navigate an extremely traumatic and difficult time. There is no reason why, in situations where there is no fault, two people should be forced into a hostile situation in which they have to assign blame, keeping them married for longer and preventing them from moving on with their lives, which causes further distress to them and their families.

4.45 pm

Choosing whether to marry is a big decision, but choosing whether to divorce is an even bigger decision and not one that is ever made lightly. We should do everything that we can to rebuild the relationships before they become damaged beyond repair. More support should be allocated to counselling services to provide trained help for those in marriage difficulties and to prioritise saving a marriage. Counsellors help parties to understand the implications of what marriage means, the difficulties that will occur and what splitting up would mean for them, their families, their children and, of course, their wider families.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Brownlee: No, thank you.

They can also help people to consider what a split would involve practically with regard to contact arrangements and finances and consider whether the option of staying together might be something that they could look at. They can also give a couple the tools to work through the problems, as they may not have had that sort of role model in their life before. Anything to help to improve and preserve a marriage, where possible, should, of course, be explored.

We all know someone who has had a divorce, be that a parent, a child, a friend or even someone in the Chamber. When someone makes that important vow, they never plan or want to be divorced. The stress of the process can be detrimental to mental and physical health, as well as being a significant financial cost, and, in some circumstances, it leads to people feeling trapped and causes further pain and hurt. The motion can help reduce potential conflict and the detrimental impact that that can have on those involved, of course, but also on their children and wider families.

Mr Tennyson: The Alliance Party supports the introduction of no-fault divorce, as committed to

in our 2022 Assembly manifesto, and welcomes the opportunity to debate the issue. The existing procedure and law managing divorce and the dissolution of civil partnerships is not fit for purpose and is in clear need of updating.

The fundamental problem is, as has been set out, the requirement to prove that a marriage has broken down either by establishing fault on the part of one partner or by showing that the couple has lived separate lives for a prolonged number of years. Those who cannot afford to live in two separate households for years in order to prove that their marriage has broken down are left with the only option available to them, which is to establish fault. Establishing one of the three faults, be it adultery, unreasonable behaviour or desertion, can be difficult and often creates further tensions at a time when emotions are already incredibly high for partners and their families. Indeed, it can be an acrimonious, fractious and prolonged process, particularly for children. Some 21% of respondents to the Finding Fault survey stated that they believed that establishing fault had made it difficult to sort arrangements for children, and 78% said that it made the process more bitter.

As has been referenced, there are examples of separated couples having to resort to establishing fault that is not necessarily based on fact in order to speed up the process. There are also widespread concerns about the potential for exploitation of the current system, whereby it can be used as a means for a perpetrator of domestic abuse to continue to exercise coercive control through the legal process, resulting in a victim of domestic abuse being effectively trapped in a marriage for a prolonged period. Additionally, victims having to recount specific details of abuse through the divorce process can compound mental and emotional distress and reopen incredibly traumatising experiences. England and Wales have already moved to introduce no-fault divorce procedures, and we can and should learn from their experience and ensure that this is not another example of Northern Ireland being left behind the rest of these islands.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Tennyson: No, I will not give way. I am usually keen to give way in debate, but, when I last tried to intervene on the Member, he would not give way and engage in debate and was personally rude. I have no intention of giving way to the Member on this occasion.

In considering reform in this jurisdiction, we must deliver divorce laws that ensure that

couples can separate as amicably as possible; seek to minimise conflict; uphold and protect the dignity, human rights and equality of those involved; maximise the chances of agreement being reached; and keep the risk of domestic abuse as low as possible. Where children are involved, their interests must, of course, be paramount, and a safe and secure outcome for them should be promoted. There is a clear public interest, therefore, in supporting people to achieve amicable resolutions to financial and care arrangements following a separation.

The introduction of no-fault divorce is a clear step along the road in moving away from prolonged periods of animosity and blame. It is not, however, the end of the journey. Tackling some of the issues that have been raised — be it around inequality, domestic abuse, promoting healthy relationships and dealing with the well-being and life chances of children — will require a joined-up and cross-Executive effort, and I sincerely hope that the debate can be the start of that journey.

Mr O'Toole: The SDLP will support the motion, and I welcome the fact that it has been tabled. I look forward hopefully, in the Minister's summing up, to hearing about specific intent to legislate on no-fault divorce during this mandate.

The motion is right to acknowledge that divorce is a difficult, often traumatic, process for those who have to go through it. As Cheryl Brownlee said, no one undertakes or enters into a marriage expecting or hoping that that marriage will end, but the reality of life and human relationships is that relationships do end. It is in the interests of those people and, particularly, in the interests of any children who are involved and, indeed, their wider families and friends that, when those relationships come to an end and end in divorce, that process is as amicable and, frankly, as smooth as possible.

It is clear that our divorce law is a product of an earlier time, one with different moral and legal expectations. It is only right that we now update the legal framework to make the process much smoother. There are particular circumstances that need to be borne in mind and which argue for the introduction of no-fault divorce. One is —

Mr Allister: I am obliged to the Member for giving way. Can he think of any legal arrangement whereby someone objects to the dissolution of that arrangement but is denied the right to object and the right to have judicial arbitration or decision-making on their

objection? Is there any other legal arrangement where that applies?

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

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate the extra minute.

The Member has much more legal training than me. I think that the answer to the question is that no other contract exists in law that is like a marriage. No other contract in law is the same: a contract between parties that involves human emotion and, often, children in the way that a marriage does. To compare it to a deed to a house or anything else is, I am afraid, to completely miss the point. We are talking about human beings and their lives and children, so treating it like another matter to be litigated is exactly the problem in many cases.

There are situations in which, for example, one party — often but not always the woman — in the relationship is in an abusive situation. I am sure that most of us, as elected representatives, have dealt with constituents in the extraordinarily difficult — I put it far too mildly — life-altering and traumatic situation of being in an abusive relationship. In many cases, those people do not have the option of waiting for two years to have a separation period; nor, often, have they the financial or emotional wherewithal to find somewhere else to live, often with children alongside them.

When we legislate for people here, we are not simply legislating for dry, hypothetical or legally perfect situations; we are legislating for ordinary human beings. Everything at the front of our minds should be about making the lives of our citizens and constituents more straightforward and better and about reducing damage and difficulty for them when we can.

No-fault divorce will, frankly, make divorce smoother, simpler and cheaper for many people in the situation — a situation that is often sad and sometimes very sad — where a relationship has come to an end. It will make it as amicable as possible, which is in everyone's interests. It is in the interests of the couple who are sadly divorcing, and it is certainly in the interests of their children. Frankly, it is in the interests of society and of the legal system. We heard from the Justice Minister about the extreme burdens on the legal system and delays in the judicial system. Anything that we can do to ease that burden is an added benefit of introducing no-fault divorce.

I welcome the motion. It is, in 2024, overdue. It would be a positive sign that we in this place

have, at a devolved level, got our act together with moving forward practically with social reforms and that we have not become tangled up in the weeds of those reforms. The Opposition, including me, welcome and support the motion. We hope to hear that the Minister will be able to legislate on the matter quickly.

Ms Mulholland: The tension and hostility that can permeate a home during a marriage breakdown can have a really lasting impact on everyone, not least children, if they are involved. Even in the most amicable of situations, children can be left feeling confused, scared and emotionally distressed. That is the reality for so many families and children in Northern Ireland, and it is exacerbated by our current fault-based divorce system.

A change is long overdue. I thank the Member for tabling the motion. Currently, our divorce process incentivises making allegations about the other's conduct in order to avoid a prolonged separation period. That fosters acrimony and conflict, which causes unnecessary emotional pain and financial burden. The requirement to assign blame fosters a toxic environment, particularly for women and children, victims of domestic abuse and low-income individuals. Alternatively, couples may remain legally married and endure an unhappy coexistence due to the law requiring a separation period of two years by consent or five without. Those extended waiting periods exacerbate the difficulties experienced by those who are in an already vulnerable situation. I have seen that in my family networks, and it is anything but healthy.

A toxic divorce that is characterised by high levels of conflict and blame can, as I said, cause significant emotional and psychological harm to children. When parents are embroiled in those bitter disputes, the children often feel as if they are caught in the middle. Children may also be forced or feel forced to take sides and develop resentment towards one or both parents, which affects their long-term emotional bonds, trust and academic achievement. The long-term benefits of no-fault divorce and co-parenting cannot be overstated. When parents are not pitted against each other in a blame game, they are more likely to develop and maintain cooperative parenting relationships. That cooperation is essential for the healthy development of children, who benefit immensely from having both parents actively involved in their life without the shadow of ongoing conflict.

As has been said, it is not just children on whom the change will impact but victims of

domestic violence. Requiring fault-based facts in divorce petitions can, at times, escalate conflict and endanger survivors. If victims of domestic violence choose not to disclose that behaviour because they fear the consequences if they do, the extended waiting periods before divorce can allow abusers to maintain control over their life. Abusers can use that period to continue their coercive and controlling behaviour, further endangering the victim. We know that women in particular are most in danger when they have already chosen and indicated their intent to leave. Victims can be subjected to ongoing physical, emotional and psychological abuse during that waiting period. If we removed abusers' ability to contest the divorce, we would further prevent that manipulation and control, which would enable victims to rebuild their life with dignity and security. The reduction in conflict would also lead to lower legal costs, making the process much more accessible to all individuals, particularly those, as I said, who are in a vulnerable situation.

The introduction of no-fault divorce in England and Wales has been met with widespread approval. The Law Society of England and Wales has reported that the process has become less contentious and more focused on constructive outcomes, which is a positive for all. Other jurisdictions, such as Scotland and France, have long benefited from having much more straightforward divorce proceedings that do not rely heavily on fault.

By introducing no-fault divorce, we have the opportunity to align our laws with the realities that modern families face. The reform is not about making divorce easier; it is about making it less damaging. It will ensure that, when there is no other option and a marriage cannot be salvaged, the process of ending it does not inflict additional harm on those involved. The benefits of no-fault divorce are clear: reduced conflict; lower legal costs; better emotional outcomes for children; and a safer and more dignified route out of abusive relationships. We have seen the positive impacts of similar reforms, and I hope that we can work together to create a system that prioritises the well-being of families, reduces unnecessary conflict and supports individuals to move forward with their lives constructively and positively.

5.00 pm

Mr Allister: Marriage is a coherent thread keeping society and families together so it, inevitably, follows that, when you embrace easy, no-fault divorce, you cheapen marriage. Marriage is based on solemn vows, and no-fault

divorce demeans, diminishes and disregards those vows. It can inflict upon an innocent party in a marriage the greatest possible hurt. They who took their vows seriously could be faced with a situation, under no-fault divorce, where, in spite of that and contrary to their wishes, they can be divorced without the right to ever be heard. That is the point that cuts to the very issue affecting innocent parties.

Mr O'Toole: I appreciate the Member giving way. Given that people, often in tragic circumstances, are more likely to engage with divorce law in their lives than they are to be directly affected by — just to pick something at random — the regulation of goods moving across the Irish Sea, does he think it is more of a problem for basic rights with regard to, for example, one's ability to access divorce, that there should be a divergence in the law between Northern Ireland and England and Wales on divorce? Is that not a problem but divergence in the regulation of goods is?

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

Mr Allister: Divorce is a devolved issue and is entitled to be treated by the Assembly as it so wishes, but the fundamental is this: a party in a marriage could find themselves, under no-fault divorce, divorced without the right to ever object. Remember that section 1 of the English legislation says:

"An application" —

that can come from either party or both —

"must be accompanied by a statement by the applicant or applicants that the marriage has broken down irretrievably.

(3) The court dealing with an application ... must—

(a) take the statement to be conclusive evidence that the marriage has broken down irretrievably, and

(b) make a divorce order."

The biggest scoundrel who has ever been in a marriage, the biggest philanderer or the cruellest individual who has mistreated his wife and children for years, can suddenly present as a petitioner, claiming the marriage is irretrievably broken down, and the court is obliged to accept that without ever hearing from the innocent party or ever proceeding to make an adjudication. That is a step far too far. I can

understand it, from a legal point of view, if both parties to a marriage mutually want to make an application that their marriage is over, but the real menace in this is that the innocent party can have divorce against their will put upon them. Marriage break-up is the greatest cause of poverty in this country. A wife could find herself suddenly, against her will, divorced, maybe homeless and with her children falling into poverty. Why? Because the Assembly thinks it is a great idea to have no-fault divorce and enable that infliction upon families and children.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will give way.

Ms Sugden: Is it the case that the financial settlement is different to the actual dissolution of the marriage? The point the Member is making is contrary to the actual dissolution of the marriage.

Mr Allister: The ancillary relief follows from the divorce. Under the English legislation, you could be married today, initiate divorce tomorrow and, within six months, be divorced. The ancillary relief, the disposal of the assets, is next attended to. Do you think it will be an advocacy of contentment and ease of those ancillary relief processes to have a wife who did not want to be divorced and is probably on the lesser share of the ancillary relief to suddenly find that she has to face that, with the house that she thought was giving her cover gone? You are putting that woman in an impossible position.

Again, I come back to the point. If both of them want to say, "We want to disavow our vows; we want to end the marriage", that might be one thing, at a secular level. However, for one person to say, "In spite of you, I will inflict divorce upon you" — this is for anyone who thinks that that will make the ancillary relief easier — it will build up great hostility and far more difficulties in all of that. Children who might never have known that their father or mother was minded to go for divorce suddenly have that thrust upon them. The House should be very careful before rushing into the fashionable idea of saying, "What is marriage? Forget about it. Walk in one door, walk out the other, and who cares?". That is the attitude of no-fault divorce, illustrated by its proponents in the House who were not even prepared to take an intervention.

Ms Sugden: I support the motion. I will address a point that Mr Allister made, and I am happy to

take an intervention if he wishes to respond. A marriage is an equal partnership. Whether we like it or not, if my husband told me today that he wanted to divorce, I would not like that, but, equally, I am not sure that I would want to be in a marriage that my husband did not want to be in. Are we recognising the equal partnership that a marriage is? If that partnership becomes less equal because one of the individuals wants to divorce, do we not have to respect that?

Mr Allister: It becomes the ultimate inequality when one party, without consulting or paying any heed to the objection of the other, can impose divorce, and the objecting party can never even be heard. The law says that the declaration by the petitioner that the marriage has irretrievably broken down is taken as gospel. It cannot therefore be questioned, and the objector cannot say, "Hold on a moment. I want to be heard on this". That is the inequality.

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

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I appreciate that from a litigation perspective. However, in most circumstances, this is highly emotional. It is about relationships breaking down, and conversations about why the marriage is breaking down will happen in the home. As I will go on to say, by creating more hurdles, we are interfering. If this is about not interfering in family life, by being one of the only jurisdictions in the United Kingdom that does not have this, we are actually interfering in family lives. Mr Allister, I appreciate your perspective, but I do not agree with it. At the point at which a couple reluctantly agrees to divorce — there is a reluctance there — there is no opportunity for reconciliation, and, to an extent, we have to respect that.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: I will make some progress, if the Member does not mind.

I have been interested in this policy change since I was Minister of Justice. I have raised it with the Finance Minister, and I believe that she intends to move in that direction, which is very welcome. A lot of the motivation for my interest, albeit it did not fall within the remit of the Minister of Justice but to the Minister of Finance's responsibility for civil matters, came from the impact that the change would have on the courts and in relation to domestic abuse. We have heard other Members discuss that. It provides an opportunity to address social, legal and practical considerations, and it is

increasingly common across jurisdictions not just in GB but in international law, in which it is now standard.

There are many practical reasons for making the change that I will speak to later, if I have time. However, the most important and impactful reason is to reduce the adversarial nature of divorce, particularly when young children are involved. I recognise that the motion specifically refers to that. It removes the need to assign blame. It reduces animosity. It makes the whole process less contentious. Lowering the level of conflict during divorce proceedings helps to create a more amicable environment that is, of course, less damaging to the children. Bear in mind that that damage can exist long past the point of decree absolute. When a divorce process creates so much animosity, the damage and impact are lasting. It is difficult — I said that in my response to Mr Allister — and I really do not think that anyone considers it flippantly. At the point at which divorce becomes a serious option for a couple, I doubt that reconciliation is likely. It is not in my interests as a parliamentarian to consider whether a marriage is viable; that is entirely a matter for the couple. I acknowledge that there are cases in which, for many reasons, marriage does not work. In those cases, the state need not interfere by creating more hurdles than necessary, particularly when we have seen other jurisdictions progress. Our current process is now interfering in that way.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes, go ahead.

Mr Allister: Figures that were released in the House of Lords show that, in GB, between 2003 and 2016, 12,000 more divorce processes were commenced each year than were ever concluded. Is that not indicative of the fact that, very often, reconciliation can arise? If you create a system where there is no window for reconciliation, there is no compulsion to reconcile. If it is a case of being out the door within six months, there is no prospect of reconciliation.

Ms Sugden: Mr Allister, those are really interesting figures. However, how many divorces have proceeded and concluded? If there is an opportunity for reconciliation, it is my understanding that either party can look towards that in what they decide. However, again, Mr Allister, it is an equal partnership: if one individual in a marriage does not want to be part of the marriage, it is no longer equal and divorce is imminent.

Simplifying the grounds for divorce reduces the complexity of court cases, leading to quicker resolution and a smaller court backlog. In recent days, we saw news reports on our court backlog and how slow our system continues to be. Nothing has changed in the eight years since I was Minister of Justice — that was eight years ago. If anything, it seems slower, and we need to look at practical ways to address that. This will not fix it, but it will certainly help. That is how we can start to address these things in Northern Ireland and start looking to societal change and progress around our attitudes to marriage and divorce.

I really want to touch on domestic abuse before my time runs out. That is a really important reason why we should progress this issue. Speak to Women's Aid, Nexus and the organisations that know better than any of us in the House to understand how this small but impactful change could help victims in Northern Ireland.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Claire. I call the Minister of Finance, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, to respond. Minister, you will have 15 minutes.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): Thank you. I thank the sponsors of the motion for bringing it to the Floor. This is an issue that deserves further consideration by us, as policymakers.

The substantive law on divorce, for which my Department holds responsibility, in the context of private family law, has remained untouched since the matrimonial causes legislation that was passed in 1978. That is coming up on nearly half a century ago, and, as society has changed, attitudes have changed and the world around us has changed, so it is now right that we take the time to reflect on societal issues like divorce and assess whether the existing law appropriately reflects those changes.

It is an unfortunate reality of life that marriages sometimes break down. While many marriages endure and last a lifetime, there are others that, for a variety of reasons, will end. The same can happen with civil partnerships, and when relationships break down, it is our role as policymakers to consider how best to handle those circumstances. Our current law sets out a scheme that allows couples to divorce but also requires them, in certain cases, to show fault and attribute blame. That can lead to additional and unnecessary conflict. I believe that we need to assess our law in a way that minimises the potential for conflict.

Divorce can, at times, be a protracted, difficult and painful process that takes many months or, indeed, years, particularly if the divorce is grounded on a fault basis. The purpose of the motion is to consider how we can enable divorces to take place in the most constructive manner, thus reducing conflict and enabling individuals to move on with their lives. That is particularly important in cases where divorcing couples have children. I think that we can agree that a child's interests are best served when conflict is reduced or eradicated; when there is cooperation between divorcing parents, not tension; and when the focus of the legal process is not on apportioning blame but on helping everyone to move on in as smooth a way as possible.

Needing to cite blame when applying for divorce can lead to more difficult situations, especially for victims of domestic abuse, as a number of Members have said. There is potential for continued controlling or coercive behaviour. No-fault divorce allows divorce to proceed on a less contentious basis and avoids parties being trapped in a marriage. No-fault divorces are already in place in England and Wales and in the South, and I have noted the changes to divorce laws elsewhere.

I believe in the ability of the Assembly to consider and make laws that are appropriate to here. While I am of the view that the changes in England and Wales appear to be a positive step forward, I recognise that we might want to consider alternative approaches that reflect the values and views of our society and will deliver on the same goals of reducing conflict, being better for the parties divorcing and easier for children and minimising the harm that can, at times, follow from bitter and contested divorces.

5.15 pm

My Department has limited resources in this area, and the small team that has responsibility for private family law and a range of other civil law reform matters is developing legislation around our marriage laws that I hope will come before the Assembly in 2025. With that in mind, the issue is one that I am keen to develop as a priority later in the mandate. I believe that it is right that we examine the matter further and take on board the views of interested parties, key stakeholders, couples, children and all those involved in the process.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving way. I cut across her in mid-sentence there, which was a bit rude of me. Is the Minister suggesting that it may be possible to include a provision on

no-fault divorce in the law that is being prepared on marital changes, including reducing the age limit — sorry; increasing the age limit, to correct myself? It has been a long day.

Dr Archibald: As the Member will be aware, the legislation that we hope to bring forward in relation to raising the marriage age and in relation to beliefs marriage is well developed, and we hope to move forward with that quite soon. I do not want to hold it up while we consult and develop proposals in relation to divorce, but, as I said, it is an issue that I am keen to see taken forward later in the mandate. As such, I have already asked my officials to begin an engagement process with those who can make a contribution to the development of policy on divorce.

It is an area of interest not just for my Department on the substantive law side, but, as the former Minister of Justice said, for the Department of Justice and the Courts and Tribunals Service, which both have a very important role in the operation of the divorce system. There are others who will, I am sure, take an interest in any potential reform, and there are various agencies inside and outside of government that my Department will want to engage with. I hope that, as options are scoped and initial views are considered and assessed, we can begin to make progress towards reform. I believe that the time is right to begin that work.

Blame and its attribution can create division and resentment and, in virtually every case, it does not change or impact on the reality that a marriage is effectively over. We need to consider how we can look past that and allow couples to work together to agree post-split arrangements that are best for them, their finances and, where relevant, their children. I therefore commend the motion and will ask my officials to explore how we can develop policy options relating to this important subject.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Sinéad Ennis to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion. You will have up to 10 minutes.

Ms Ennis: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* I struggle to think of any circumstance where a person would be better off or happier being forced to stay in a marriage where, to quote Mr Allister, they were married to a "philanderer" who was mistreating them, but perhaps that is just me.

I thank the majority of Members for their thoughtful and pragmatic approach to the debate and for the recognition that, like so much of our legislation, the legislation around divorce is outdated and does not reflect the modern, evolving society that we live in.

In winding up on the motion, like other Members, I will draw Members' attention to the impact that separation and divorce has on children. It is a major concern. Separation issues are the single most common issue for advice from the regional parenting support line. At present, children and young people in the North caught in the middle of poorly managed, high-conflict family court battles are at risk of long-term trauma. The lengthy waits and acrimony involved in courtroom disputes often increase feelings of stress and anxiety for children and young people.

The breakdown of a marriage can be agonising for all involved, especially children. Therefore, it is important that we put the best interests and welfare of our children and young people first. When parents decide to live apart, children often feel as if their world has been turned upside down. They can experience a wide range of emotions, including loss, anger and confusion. While many children and young people can bounce back from a divorce, others may experience long-term emotional and behavioural impacts. Those can affect educational attainment and life opportunities and can even cause self-harm. Children's feelings are often made worse by the fact that many of them have to move home and sometimes school when their parents separate. Many families in that situation come under financial strain, even if they did not have money worries before. Even if a parental relationship has been very tense, children and young people may still have mixed feelings about the separation. Many hold on to a wish that their parents may get back together. Whatever has gone wrong in a relationship, parents still have an important part to play in their children's lives.

The current fault-based divorce process can exacerbate conflict and have a hugely negative impact. Research demonstrates that frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict impacts negatively on the young people who are caught up in such situations. Children and young people should learn that conflict can be managed and that many relationships, of all types, do not last forever. As a society, we should display kindness and understanding as well as assist families to manage breakdown.

Society in the North has changed and evolved. It has many new cultures and family situations.

Policy is not keeping up with the needs of the population, however. Despite the large number of children and young people who are affected, and the considerable impact on families and the state, there is a clear lack of policy to help support parents in order for them to be able to put their children's needs first. That is why the introduction of no-fault divorce legislation is essential. The Gillen review of civil and family justice recommended that parents and other married couples should be supported to separate or divorce amicably rather than be required to apportion blame for the purposes of legal proceedings. Anything that can be done to reduce the acrimony that couples endure and end the anguish that children and young people suffer is crucial. The motion is a step in the right direction to ensure better outcomes for all those who find themselves caught up in such a situation.

I am encouraged to hear that my colleague the Minister of Finance is considering amending the Matrimonial Causes Order to allow applications for divorce without apportioning blame to either party, thus easing the stress on couples and children. We owe it to our children and young people to approach conflict as a result of family breakdown differently in order to reduce the levels of anxiety for all who are involved and the mental health impacts, which can lead to self-harm and increased referrals to child and adolescent mental health services. I encourage everybody to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges that divorce can be a difficult process for any individual or family to go through; recognises that the current fault-based divorce process can often exacerbate conflict and have a hugely negative impact on the well-being of children; notes that the no-fault divorce law, Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020, came into effect in England and Wales in 2022; understands that children who grow up with parents who have low parental conflict, whether together or separated, enjoy better health and education outcomes; and calls on the Minister of Finance to bring forward legislation to amend the Matrimonial Causes (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 to allow applications for a divorce without apportioning blame on either party.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I heard just one dissenting voice.

Adjourned at 5.22 pm.