



Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 22 March 2021
Volume 137, No 3

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 March 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Murders in Newtownabbey

Mr Speaker: Ms Paula Bradley has been given leave to make a statement on the murders in Newtownabbey, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Ms P Bradley: It is with great sadness that I bring this Matter of the Day to the Chamber. Before I begin, I offer my sincere condolences to the families of those who lost their lives in Rathcoole and Glenville Road on Friday night.

This time last week, we had a Matter of the Day on the murder of Sarah Everard. Little did I expect that I would be standing here today to talk about two women who were murdered on Friday night in my constituency.

The news that two women have been robbed of life has sent shock waves through the wider community and beyond. While such extreme incidents are, fortunately, rare in Northern Ireland, it is a stark reminder that we are not immune to such violence. Domestic violence and the threats of violence against women and girls are a very topical subject at the moment, and this brings home the reality that we need to do something to tackle it.

These abhorrent murders will leave an indelible mark on the victims' families, as well as the wider community, which will feel the loss deeply. Violence in all forms, but particularly towards women and girls, is completely unacceptable and can affect anyone or any home in our society.

In May 2011, my colleague Pam Cameron and I tabled a motion on domestic violence for our

maiden speeches. Whilst some progress has been made, we still have a long way to go as an Assembly and as a society as a whole. We cannot allow Stacey Knell and Karen McClean to become yet another statistic; we cannot wait for another mum, daughter, wife or girlfriend to die.

There are families grieving this morning, and my heartfelt thoughts are with them as they try to rebuild their lives in the days, weeks and months ahead.

Ms Dillon: I support the comments of my colleague in my condolences to the families of Karen and Stacey and particularly to their two young daughters, who have been left without their mummy.

As outlined, we are here again talking about violence against women and girls. I am acutely aware that a motion on that is being brought to the Assembly tomorrow, and I welcome that. It was raised with the Justice Minister when the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill was going through that we need a strategy dealing with violence against women and girls. Whilst that Bill was not gender-specific, that was because it was a much wider Bill, covering all familial relationships. However, we need a strategy on violence against women and girls, and it has to be cross-cutting across all Departments.

Whilst the Justice Minister will need to take the lead, we do not want to fill our prisons with perpetrators. We want to stop women and girls becoming victims in the first place. We do not want to see incidents like this where women are killed and their families are left and their daughters are left without their mummy. That has highlighted yet again that we will have a trans-generational impact on those two young women, who will have no female to look up to, no mummy there to rear them, to be there for them and to teach them how to deal with life.

As an Assembly and as leaders in our own communities, we have to take responsibility to show those young women that we will not

tolerate this and that we will not allow their mummies and family members to be just another statistic with all the others. Whilst it has been said that this type of incident is rare, one is one too many, and two in one weekend, on one night, is far too many. Families and communities are destroyed, and we need to take it seriously.

I hope that tomorrow's motion will get support. I sincerely hope that the Justice Minister and the Executive as a whole will take the issue and grapple with it. It does not take away from all other violent acts. These things are not competitive, but we have to acknowledge that violence against women and girls is all too common and is destroying our communities. Violence within the home is not a problem just within the home; it is a problem for entire communities and one that we all need to deal with. We are talking not only about domestic abuse but about violence against women and girls in every facet of life. Whether it is in their home, on the streets, in their workplace, in their place of education or wherever it may be, we have to deal with the issue, and we have to deal with it now.

Ms Mallon: My thoughts and those of the SDLP are with the friends and family of the two women who were brutally murdered. I cannot imagine the pain and hurt of losing a loved one in such horrendous circumstances. It appears that, yet again, two women have lost their lives in a violent attack. That cannot continue to happen. We must work together to address gender-based violence.

The truth is that our society has a deeply rooted problem of misogyny and violence against women. The brutal murders of Stacey Knell and Karen McClean on Friday brought into sharp focus the clear inadequacies of the systems that are designed to protect women.

As Members said, you will be aware that the SDLP tabled a motion calling for an immediate introduction of a robust strategy to address violence against women and girls. We must see legislation that makes misogyny a hate crime. We must, as a society, do all that we can to erode sexism and protect women. We must do it for Stacey and Karen, for their families and for the many other victims who should have been protected but were not. We must do it for the many women and girls who are continuing to suffer.

Mr Beggs: I pass on condolences, on this occasion on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, to the family and friends of the individuals who so tragically lost their lives over the weekend in

what appears to be murder and suicide. Two women have lost their lives as the result of stabbing. The police stated that they have launched a murder inquiry but are not seeking anyone else in connection with it.

Drug addiction has been highlighted as a related factor. We as a society must work to reduce the prevalence of both drug addiction and violence against women and girls in relationships and, indeed, against all who are involved in relationships when they break down. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families. We as an Assembly and an Executive must try to work to reduce the prevalence of such incidents and prevent them happening again. We must work to improve the education of our children and young people so that mature relationships will exist in the future and these tragic events will be less likely to occur.

Mr Blair: In addressing a reflective Matter of the Day, I first express, on behalf of the Alliance Party, my deepest condolences to the families of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell. It is an absolute tragedy that, for a second week in a row, the Assembly is condemning and reacting to domestic abuse or violence by men against women in which women have lost their lives. These killings have brought grief to the families affected, shocking many people and, of course, bringing sadness to the wider community.

Karen McClean, who, along with her family, was known to me, and Stacey Knell have become the sixth and seventh women to die in suspected violent circumstances in Northern Ireland since the start of the coronavirus lockdown. Their killings must be a catalyst for change to end male violence against women. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without a specific strategy to tackle male violence against women. Interdepartmental efforts are urgently needed on a cross-cutting strategy that is properly resourced and that takes on the views of the third sector. We need to put in place stronger early interventions and tougher sentences to avoid tragedies like Friday's double murder.

I welcome the comment made over the weekend by the Justice Minister that this week she hopes to put before the Executive a paper on a strategy to protect women and girls from violence. I welcome the opportunity to have further debate on the need for such a strategy and to highlight what more there is that men can do to be better allies in addressing and challenging problematic behaviour from fellow men.

We must expect interdepartmental and inter-agency responses on these issues. Such issues impact every community and walk of life. They are also issues on which every person in every place can take action to tackle societal problems and to challenge attitudes. I look forward to working with colleagues to further address these issues.

Miss Woods: My thoughts are with the family and friends of the two women, Karen and Stacey, who lost their lives this weekend. I offer my sincere condolences to everybody who has been affected.

It is most shocking that we are here again this week, the second week in a row, to discuss yet more violence against women. Last Monday, through another Matter of the Day, we discussed the murder of Sarah Everard and the lack of a violence against women strategy. We know that this is not a rare event. Violence against women is endemic in our society and across our globe. We must recognise that.

Without a gendered resource strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, the issues are not addressed properly. A strategy that is not gendered does not state the facts or name the structural inequalities that exist, let alone deal with them. The Executive must act. Societal problems like domestic abuse and sexual violence are gendered issues. If we fail to recognise that in government, we fail to effectively tackle such issues.

Again, I offer my thoughts to the family and friends of everybody who has been affected. If you do need support, please reach out to the many support agencies that are out there.

Mr Allister: I join in the expression of condolences to the two families who have been ripped apart by these gruesome murders. I suspect that we all struggle to understand how anyone can kill their own mother and their own loved one. It is such a horrendous act that it is quite chilling even to think about it, and yet these horrific offences take place in our society. Through the relatively short passage of time, the victims become mere statistics, which is a tragedy in itself. When violence is resorted to so readily, a great change of attitude is needed. This past weekend is yet another tragic example of that.

12.15 pm

Of course, we come from a society in which young mothers were killed for political reasons. We have just passed through the census

weekend. Forty years ago, a young mother from Londonderry, Joanne Mathers, was deliberately and consciously murdered in the pursuit of some perverse and wicked political end. Her death continues to cause shock throughout this community. Sadly, the shock did not end further such deaths. My prayer and hope is that the shock of this occasion will contribute to there being no further deaths of this nature, but, in this flawed society, that is probably too much to hope for.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Thank you, Paula, for raising this Matter of the Day. Before I watched your interview and the interview with Noreen, I heard the chilling news on the radio of a double murder-suicide. I understand that it was the early days of the investigation and that perhaps the facts were not known, but I wished and hoped that those words had been used for the last time.

Karen and Stacey lost their lives as a result of murder in their own homes. We can only imagine the terror and the thoughts that went through their heads. As many others have said, two generations of a family are now bereaved. In the middle of this is a bereaved nine-year-old child who will be trying to understand.

I appeal to everyone to keep their attention on what happened at the weekend in Newtownabbey and Whiteabbey. Anyone watching the debate will want to know that we will do our best to make sure that Karen and Stacey are the last women about whom we speak in the Assembly who died as the result of violence at the hands of a man. For me, any other suggestion or quip demeans what happened to these families and, indeed, to the whole community. I offer my condolences not only as an elected rep for the area but as a woman. As a mother and a grandmother, I can only imagine what the families are going through.

I am also concerned at the plea raised by the father about his nine-year-old daughter. That is really concerning and needs to be thoroughly investigated. When anybody approaches me with concerns of that nature, as an elected rep, I encourage them to go to the PSNI and social services. We need to find out what happened.

I join with others in saying that it is regrettable and heartbreakingly that, just a week on, we are again talking about the death of a woman. However, we will all have an opportunity tomorrow to join in support of the motion on ending violence against women and girls and, indeed, violence against men. The difficulty with that is that, at its root, the majority of this

violence is perpetrated by men; the statistic that I heard is 96%. We have a big job of work to do. No one wants to hear about where the responsibility lies. The issue needs to be funded and the Executive need to own it, lift it and resource it. Let us focus on reflecting on what happened at the weekend, and let us offer our support to the community and the families.

Dr Aiken: I, too, state our condolences to the families on the loss of Karen and Stacey. I note the remarks of our Mayor of Antrim and Newtownabbey, who has talked about the sadness and shock that this has caused across the whole community. The fact that here we are talking in the Assembly about violence against women in its worst form underlines what a significant issue we have in Northern Ireland, particularly with domestic violence and violence against women. The fact that we are having to debate this when we are still waiting for a strategy to deal with crimes against women says something about all of us: we have failed.

This kind of thing should not happen. When concerns are raised with authorities, they should be dealt with and dealt with swiftly so that such tragedies do not occur. We have a variety of issues that we need to deal with. We need to deal specifically with hate crime legislation. We need to make sure that misogyny is not used as an excuse for violence. There is too much violence in our society. There is far too much violence against women. What do we — particularly the men in Northern Ireland — say to our young daughters, our wives, our mothers and our sisters? We have to acknowledge that we have a significant problem and have to deal with it. There is no point in putting it off further and further. We must all work collectively to make sure that such tragedies do not happen again. We must make sure that the authorities, no matter where they are, really listen and deal with the issue when people come to them and say that there is a significant issue that needs to be dealt with.

I do not want to stand here again expressing our condolences after cases of domestic violence and violence against women. It is time that it stops. It must stop. Let us make sure that the Justice Minister fast-tracks legislation so that we get to that point.

Mr Speaker: That ends the discussion on the Matter of the Day.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Ban Conversion Therapy

Mr Speaker: Ms Paula Bradshaw has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Ms Bradshaw: I am proud to present the petition, which has received over 24,300 signatures to date, calling for a ban on so-called conversion therapy in Northern Ireland. I put on record my huge appreciation to all those who signed the petition and, in doing so, showed their compassionate support for the ban. The petition was started by the chair of the Alliance Party LGBT group, Micky Murray, who is a passionate campaigner for improved rights on behalf of all LGBT+ people in Northern Ireland. I am especially privileged to have him as a member of staff. I also put on record my appreciation to the Rainbow Project and TransgenderNI for their work on the issue.

The UK LGBT rights charity Stonewall defines conversion therapy as:

"any form of treatment or psychotherapy which aims to change a person's sexual orientation or to suppress a person's gender identity."

The practice is based on the repugnant belief that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have a mental illness that can be cured. Let us be clear that a person's sexual orientation or gender identity is not something to be ashamed of, something to be denied or something to be hidden. It is certainly not something to be cured.

Conversion therapy is a cruel, homophobic practice that exists only to erase the LGBT+ community and its culture from existence. It has no place in Northern Ireland or any other tolerant society. The practice's detrimental effects are evidenced in the 2018 faith and sexuality survey conducted by the Ozanne Foundation, which found that more than half of those who had tried to change their sexual orientation reported mental health issues as a result. Furthermore, the UN independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity recognises that the practice may constitute a form of torture, depending on the severity of the therapy and the impact on the

individual. He has called for a global ban on conversion therapy.

The petition calls for the introduction of legislation to ban conversion therapy, but it must be robust and fit for purpose. It would be heartening if the Communities Minister, on behalf of the Executive, were to proceed with haste on the issue and send a message that attitudes in Northern Ireland have moved on.

No one should be encouraged to deny their sexual orientation or gender identity. Our citizens should have the freedom to be themselves without undue influence.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to make arrangements to submit the petition to my office electronically. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once received, I will forward it to the Minister for Communities and send a copy to the Committee.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to ask how the Assembly Commission, which you chair, hopes to carry the confidence of the unionist community —.

Mr Speaker: I will stop you there, Mr Allister. Resume your seat, please. That is not a point of order, as the Member is well aware.

Mr Allister: It is an embarrassment for you, sir,

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order, Mr Allister. I am moving on.

Mr Allister: It is an absolute shame that the centenary of Northern Ireland, by virtue of the Commission that you chair, is denied to be celebrated within the premises of Stormont.

Mr Speaker: Do not accuse this Speaker of being unfair or of abusing his position. Please do not do that. I advise you not to do that.

Mr Allister: The Commission is unfair.

Mr Speaker: I advise you not to do that.

Mr Allister: It is a scandal.

Mr Speaker: The Commission is made up of five parties. Its members work very hard to reach agreement on a wide range of issues. I commend my office's officials for assisting the parties in reaching an agreement recently on the centenary, for example, and other matters. I defend the right of Commission members to

agree or disagree, but I affirm to the House that they work hard, despite their political differences, to reach agreement on a wide range of matters. I will not have them insulted in the Chamber. I am not raising any more discussion on the issue. I have made my point.

Mr Allister: Sinn Féin tramples in the gutter the rights of unionists.

Mr Speaker: That is OK.

Committee Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is a motion regarding Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Gary Middleton replace Ms Paula Bradley as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Mr Gary Middleton replace Mr Paul Givan as a member of the Committee for the Economy. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

Mr Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is the motion to extend the time frame for the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. It will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that, unless it previously resolves, the time frame for the existence of the Ad Hoc Committee, appointed by the Assembly on 31 March 2020 for the purpose of receiving oral statements from Ministers on matters relating to the COVID-19 response and questioning Ministers on such statements, be extended by six months until 30 September 2021. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Mr Speaker: Members, take you ease for a moment or two, please.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)

12.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Ms Hargey: These regulations will increase the value of lump sum payments that are made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) Order 1979, known as the 1979 scheme. The uprating of the scheme stands apart from the main social security benefits uprating procedure, and there is no statutory requirement to increase the rates. However, as in previous years, it has been agreed to increase the amounts payable from 1 April in line with inflation. The payments will be increased by 0.5% in line with September 2020's consumer price index. This is consistent with the uprating of the industrial injuries disablement benefit, to which the 1979 scheme is linked.

These regulations will ensure that lump sum payments here are at the same increased level as those in the corresponding schemes operating in Britain. The purpose of the 1979 scheme is to pay compensation to people who suffer from certain dust-related diseases or their dependants. The five respiratory diseases that it covers are mainly related directly to asbestos exposure and include mesothelioma, diffuse pleural thickening, primary carcinoma of the lung, byssinosis and pneumoconiosis, which includes asbestosis.

The lump sum payment scheme is intended to compensate people who are or during the course of their work have been exposed to asbestos or other listed agents but who have

been unable to seek compensation from their employer even though the disease was contracted as a result of working for that employer. Due to the long latency period of these conditions, symptoms tend not to appear until many years after exposure. By that stage, the employer may have ceased to be in business. To be eligible for payment under the scheme, there has to have been no current or previous claim for damages in respect of the disease for which the person is claiming. There must be no relevant employer who can be pursued through the courts. The person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit.

The lump sum compensation is paid in addition to the weekly disablement benefit and is for the same disease. Dependents of the sufferer can make a claim if the person has passed away before they were able to make the claim themselves. Payments of the lump sum are based on the age of the person with the disease and their level of disablement at the time of the diagnosis. Higher amounts are paid to people on higher levels of disability whose condition is diagnosed at an earlier stage. Lower amounts are payable to dependants who can make a claim after the sufferer has died.

The maximum amount that can be claimed under the 1979 scheme is increased this year to £94,296 for a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis. This helps to ensure that the compensation provided under the order maintains its value. I am sure that Members will agree that no amount of money can ever compensate a person who has been affected by this terrible disease. However I am also sure that Members will want people who are making a claim on or after April 2021 to receive the higher amounts and that Members will therefore support these regulations.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee considered this statutory rule on 11 March 2021. The statutory rule is made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979. Pneumoconiosis is a group of lung diseases that can happen when a person breathes in dust particles such as asbestos, coal dust or silica, usually from a workplace. Symptoms include difficulty breathing and a cough. It is not curable but is medically managed. The order provides for lump sum compensation payments to sufferers and also makes provision for payments to dependants, as defined by the order, where the sufferer did not receive compensation payment under the order before their death.

As Members will be aware, the rates of most social security benefits, pensions and lump sum payments are reviewed each year. These regulations are one of a series of statutory rules relating to that annual review and uprating. They amend the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988 to increase the amounts payable under the order from 1 April 2021. Although there is no statutory obligation to increase the level of payments under the order, the amounts are usually increased each year in line with the rate of inflation as measured by the consumer price index the previous September, which was 0.5%. As payments made under the order are in respect of people who have been disabled by that disease through work, they are uprated in line with other disability benefits.

The Committee agreed to recommend that SR 2021/55 be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak, so, to wind on that expansive debate, I call the Minister for Communities.

Ms Hargey: I thank everybody across the Chamber. I also thank the Chair and the Committee for Communities for their prompt consideration. The safeguards and the amounts of compensation payable are to make sure that they are not devalued by inflation. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members should take their ease for a few minutes — we are running a bit ahead of time — to allow the Finance Minister to come to the Chamber.

The draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment)

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there shall be no time limit on this debate.

Mr Murphy: The draft regulations before the House today are to be made under the powers conferred by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The Act gives my Department the power to modify secondary legislation regarding fees or other charges that were created pre-Brexit using powers in the European Communities Act 1972. The draft regulations were laid before the Assembly on 4 March 2020 under paragraph 12(3) of schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. That Act requires that regulations follow the draft affirmative procedure.

Prior to the end of the implementation period, the regulations would have been made by negative resolution under section 2(2) powers of the European Communities Act 1972 and it is unlikely that we would be debating the issue today. Equivalent legislation is passing through the Westminster Parliament for data that is registered against properties in England and Wales. Scotland operates its own energy performance buildings register and is not covered by the regulations.

The purpose of the draft regulations is to reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is registered for energy performance certificates (EPC), display energy certificates and air conditioning inspection reports for properties. There are two classes of data registration to which fees are applied: domestic properties and non-domestic properties. The draft regulations propose to reduce fees by 12% from £1.86 to £1.64 when data is lodged for domestic properties and to reduce the fees that are charged for non-domestic properties by 81% from £9.84 to £1.89. The Energy Performance of Buildings Regulations implemented the certification and inspection requirements of the energy performance of buildings directive, which include the production of EPCs, that is, energy performance certificates, display energy certificates, air conditioning inspection reports and recommendation reports. An EPC is required whenever a building is constructed or for an existing building before it is marketed for sale or rent. It gives the prospective purchasers or renters the ability to determine how efficient a property might be and to make comparisons between properties. A property owner can consider the recommendations that are in an EPC to help inform decisions in order to

improve the property's energy efficiency. Display energy certificates, which we see in buildings, are also required by regulations, and they provide public services and air conditioning inspection reports in order to further support energy performance assessment and encourage improvement. The Energy Performance of Buildings Regulations also provide for the establishment and maintenance of a register of the data that is used to produce the certificates and reports and for charging fees for entering data on that register.

The Climate Change Committee reported that, in 2016, buildings accounted for 16% of our total emissions. Assessing the energy performance of our individual buildings and ensuring that our buildings are as efficient as possible will help to reduce those emissions. The fees that are charged to register data on the local energy performance certificates registers were last adjusted three years ago. Officials in my Department, alongside their counterparts in England and Wales, calculate the appropriate level of fees each year in order to ensure a cost-neutral service. A reduction in fees is now possible because the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, in partnership with my Department, has invested in new cloud-based digital platforms and has moved away from the fixed hardware model that had been in place since 2008. The changes should provide a more user-centred and future-proofed service as well as better value, which is demonstrated in the fee reduction.

The new fee rates that are set out in the draft regulations will allow operating costs to continue to be met without generating a profit or subsidising a loss. The costs of the service have been calculated in line with government policy, the principles that are set out in 'Managing Public Money' and with stakeholders in the property and energy professions. The Finance Committee considered the draft regulations on 3 March, and it agreed that they could progress to the next legislative stage. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has considered the draft regulations and has not raised any issue in her report.

In conclusion, the draft regulations serve a specific purpose, which, as I said, would previously have been dealt with as a routine matter by negative resolution in order to reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is registered for domestic and non-domestic energy performance certificates, display energy certificates and air conditioning inspection reports. I commend the draft regulations to the House.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. The Committee considered the draft rule at its meetings on 3 March and 10 March 2021. As indicated, the rule will reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is registered for domestic and non-domestic energy performance certificates, display energy certificates and air conditioning inspection reports.

Members indicated some concerns about the other costs to prospective households that are associated with energy performance surveys, which can exceed £50. It is also understood that the Department for Communities may be considering a minimum energy performance certification level for rental properties in order to improve the energy efficiency of private rented stock. That, although interesting, is, of course, not in the regulations.

Officials also advised the Committee that, because the European Union's energy performance of buildings directive is not covered under the Northern Ireland protocol, the legislation being considered today sits outside those considerations. Therefore, after consideration, the Committee agreed that it was content to recommend that the Assembly affirm this rule.

12.45 pm

Mr Catney: I have no issue with the statutory rule. It follows changes that have already occurred in England and Wales. There is a question of why the fee for non-domestic certificates needed to be as high as £9.84 in the first place. If we have been able to reduce it by 81%, was this being used as a source of income generation for the Department?

In broader terms, the Department needs to urgently carry out a wider review of how building regulations can further improve the energy performance of buildings. At the start of the year, we had discussions about what the Department would bring forward to reduce the energy needs of buildings to nearly zero. While the rest of Europe has moved on, Northern Ireland and the Republic have set highly ambitious targets. A €9 billion refitting programme is to provide half a million buildings with insulation, and installing 400,000 heat pumps will have a huge impact on the efficiency of buildings. This is a key cornerstone of the green economy that we should be working towards. It has implications not just for the climate emergency. We, of course, must do all that we can to make our environment greener

and reduce our impact on it. It also has huge implications for how we tackle fuel poverty. An estimated 42% of households in Northern Ireland are affected by fuel poverty. That is the highest in the UK. A huge number of people spend a significant proportion of their income on heating their home. We have winter fuel payments, and we have set ambitious regulations for the building of zero-energy homes. We could lift thousands of people out of fuel poverty and give them more money in their pockets.

Mr Frew: It would be remiss of me not to mention and welcome back my colleague and Chairperson of the Finance Committee. I hope that he is making a speedy recovery, and it is good to have him back.

The debate on the value of certificates took up a bit of Committee time. There is value in the collection and registration of data on energy efficiency. There is no doubt about that, especially when you consider that our heavy industrial users — the non-domestic side and our biggest employers and manufacturers — pay so much for their energy bills. The Assembly should be grappling with that. Most years, Northern Ireland competes with Italy for which country is the most expensive for large industries. There is no doubt that those industries employ people specifically for the collection of data on energy efficiency. They have to do that because of the cost of their energy bills. Many will go off-grid, which increases the costs for the businesses who stay on-grid.

Energy efficiency is paramount, and it must be an important focus of the House. I welcome the fact that we can reduce some costs. When we look at the figure of 81%, we think that is a massive drop, but, in a business sense, we are talking only about pennies. It is small fry in the cost of the certificate. The gathering of data will be a full-time job for at least one person, and that will be a cost in itself. However, the bills that energy users have to pay are massive. They are massive by European standards.

In the domestic setting, our housing stock is getting older. As my colleague Pat Catney has already said, fuel poverty is an issue for many people who are just about managing. They are increasingly finding that they are not heating their home efficiently because heat is being let out elsewhere and thus wasted. We should be grappling with that issue more. Bringing our housing stock up to an acceptable level is going to be a massive problem for the Assembly. We need to assist people who are living in properties that are not their own or who are

having to rent. That in itself is a massive issue for Northern Ireland. I therefore welcome this movement, albeit it is small fry. It should, however, trigger bigger debates about how we effectively manage energy costs in this country.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. I join the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Finance in welcoming back the Committee Chair. It is good to see him back in the Chamber.

The proposed statutory rule will reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is lodged to the energy performance of buildings register. The reduction is possible because my Department has worked jointly with the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government to modernise the register by using new information technology and the latest software development techniques. The register service is now hosted on a cloud-based digital platform that is managed in-house with lower running costs, the benefit of which can be passed on to fee payers. That perhaps addresses Mr Catney's point about previous costs. The registering of data is to be cost-neutral, so it was not a moneymaking exercise, but we are now in a position to be able to reduce the cost, albeit, in monetary terms, the fees are small. It is important, however, that they match what is required. There are no alternative or non-legislative options to reduce the fees, other than by a statutory rule that is approved by the Assembly. If the statutory rule is not approved in its present form, the current higher fee rates will remain in force until a remade statutory rule is approved and signed into law.

Much of the debate focused on broader points about energy efficiency and the implications for fuel poverty. Mr Frew correctly pointed out that the gathering of data is very important. How will we benchmark improvements in future? How will we know that we are becoming more energy-efficient, particularly as buildings contribute to 16% of emissions? How will we measure our movement towards zero carbon in 2050? We need data in order to measure it. Data collection and management are very important for assisting us in adhering to the rules on the longer-term reduction of emissions, in making buildings more energy-efficient and in eradicating fuel poverty by improving our housing stock.

The changes will ensure that the energy performance certificate register can continue to operate on a cost-neutral basis. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Climate Change Bill: First Stage

Ms Bailey: I beg to introduce the Climate Change Bill [NIA19/17-22], which is a Bill to enable the mitigation of the impact of climate change in Northern Ireland; establish a legally binding net-zero carbon target for Northern Ireland; provide for the establishment and powers of the Northern Ireland Climate Commissioner and Northern Ireland Climate Office; guarantee existing environmental and climate protections; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while a change is made to the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

1.00 pm

Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition

Ms Bradshaw: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises there has been a failure of leadership to deal with issues that arise around flags, identity, culture and tradition in Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report, and to bring the report recommendations to the Executive for review, to provide funding and to take forward in order to ensure leadership on these issues and to move Northern Ireland forward together as a united community.

Mr 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. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to propose the motion and am happy to accept the amendment.

The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition was formed in June 2016. It held a series of useful events around Northern Ireland and brought together key interests not only to

discuss what may be perceived as the obvious issues of the display of flags and emblems — perhaps predominantly in urban areas — and memorials — perhaps more so in rural areas — but to look at the range of issues arising from culture, identity and tradition that have, it must be said, been at the heart of much of our division and conflict.

What was striking was how well mannered and, indeed, positive much of the commission's engagement was, but we have not yet had sight of its report. It seems to have disappeared into the Executive Office with no hint of when, how or even if it will emerge.

The commission's work, given its timing, has also become embroiled with the very existence of these institutions. The debate on an Irish language Act was central, rightly or wrongly, to their non-existence for three years. I myself engaged with the parties during 2017 and found that the engagement was mostly positive. The outcome, albeit with extra bureaucracy thrown in, was the agreement in New Decade, New Approach. That, too, however, has disappeared into the Executive Office.

With time now short until the end of the mandate, we have still not seen any draft legislation emerging. Of course, we now have DUP sources briefing journalists, proposing an outright breach of New Decade, New Approach. That could be achieved only with yet another use of the sectarian veto, the exact opposite of legislation that is supposed to deliver for all. How ironic.

The report and the legislation are strands of the same comprehensive agreement on how to take our culture, tradition and identity forward, including how those are reflected in flags and emblems flown from public property, and in language. As ever, that can still be abused for crude political purposes.

It is simply not good enough, five years from establishing the commission, to receive in response to a question for oral answer about the publication of the outcome of its work that a working group is being set up. Note, not even "has been set up", merely "is being set up", and fully five months after a response to another question for oral answer stated that they were considering next steps, and more than a year after the Executive came into office.

That is all an excuse for the usual endless inaction, not a route to delivery. What, exactly, is so time-consuming that the report, which took £800,000 of public money to produce, must be concealed from the public?

The culture of taking things into the Executive Office for them to reappear only on the basis that "One for you, one for us" is agreed is no way to provide good government. It merely shows that a system that is based on sectarian veto has nothing to offer us at all. It is hardly "together: building a united community".

The very point of the motion is that it is hard to have a debate on issues when we know that, after a painstaking and thorough process, a report on them has been produced but we literally cannot see it. Let us at least ask Members whether they agree on the basics. First, with regard to flags and emblems, there is no current lawful authority — "lawful authority" is the key term — for the display of flags and emblems on public property or the constructing of memorials on it. Does anyone dispute that? Secondly, the erection of flags promoting what we call paramilitarism is illegal under the Terrorism Act 2000. Surely, no one in the Chamber would have a problem with enacting and enforcing that Act. Thirdly, the display of flags, emblems and memorials should take account of the effect that it has on businesses, tourism and, ultimately, neighbourhoods. Does anyone challenge that?

The absence of lawful authority does not make it illegal per se, and cultural expression through the display of flags, emblems and memorials is a democratic right. However, no one supports flags becoming rags, and a legitimate democratic right that also requires a democratic responsibility to tolerate displays that we would rather not have to tolerate must be balanced with the need for such displays to be reasonable, focused and time-bound. What that shows is that the lack of a regulatory framework through which flags and emblems can be placed on public property for celebration and commemoration is not viable. The Executive Office should be working on the provision of such a framework.

What should never be tolerated is the erection of flags or emblems or, indeed, memorials as a means of intimidation, deliberate exclusion or mockery of victims. That is where the line must be drawn. Yet we are about to enter, again, the time of year when we meekly tolerate those. Under the Terrorism Act, it is illegal to display emblems of any kind that support proscribed organisations; a law that is taken seriously in Scotland, but is largely ignored here. Why does that continue? Ultimately, as with any rights, there are also responsibilities. Any displays need to take account of local people and their livelihoods. That point really should not need to be made.

It should be emphasised that, in many instances, flags, emblems and memorials represent underlying issues and, occasionally, tensions around culture and tradition, and, indeed, society and the economy, which, themselves, need to be tackled. That is why it is important to recognise that what came to be known as the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) is about more than just flags. The leadership that really seems to be lacking is the one that recognises that Northern Ireland is a crossroads where English, Irish, Scottish and, increasingly, other people have come together to create their homes. As long as we fail to respect the impact of all those who have made their home here and as long as we fail to respect our own and others' responsibilities to respect and, indeed, promote all aspects of culture, tradition and identity that come from that patchwork of diversity, we will get nowhere.

We also need to get away from the notion that language, culture, heritage and tradition are necessarily a single package. In particular, we frequently hear the phrase "Ulster-Scots language, culture and heritage", yet many people who enjoy Ulster-Scots heritage do not speak the language. Others may well speak or understand the Ulster-Scots language while not otherwise considering themselves to be Ulster Scots when they reflect on their own cultural heritage and traditions. More than a few people who speak some Ulster Scots and regard their own heritage to be Ulster Scots take great pride in Irish dancing, celebrating St Patrick's Day and other cultural traditions. In other words, we have to get away from seeing identity, culture and tradition as a set menu, selected solely along sectarian fault lines. Instead, we need to see it as an à la carte menu that has the potential to enrich us all.

What I hope we will hear at the end of the debate is a new determination from the Executive Office to prove that it can get things done, alongside immediate publication of the FICT report, imminent publication of the culture and language legislation as set out in 'New Decade, New Approach', complete with clear allocations of funding and responsibility to ensure actual delivery.

There should be a commitment to develop a framework through which the display of flags and emblems can take place as a matter of commemoration or celebration in a focused and time-bound manner. That is what is meant by the notion of leadership. To enable that, I urge unanimous support for the motion and the amendment, which, rightly, proposes the swift

establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

Mr McGrath: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "review," and insert:

"to honour their commitments within New Decade, New Approach and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, and to provide the necessary funding for these outcomes to recommit ourselves to reconciliation, peace and stability."

Mr Speaker: You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to move the SDLP amendment to today's motion. Our amendment will, I believe, complement the motion. We are supportive of the motion but feel that it does not go far enough and does not place sufficient impetus on our First Minister and deputy First Minister to respond to the contentious issue of flags, identity, culture and tradition; rather, there is a need to remind the First Ministers of the responsibilities that they willingly signed up to in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

When it comes to rights, language and identity, what have the respective Departments in the Executive delivered in the past year? What about the new framework for rights, language and identity, an Irish language Act and the Ulster-Scots language Act? What about appointing a commissioner for the Irish language or Ulster Scots or a central translation hub? Not one thing in that strand of New Decade, New Approach has been delivered.

Issues such as flags, identity, culture and tradition are essential for the lived experience of people in the North. They provide a sense of community, of belonging, of being valued and connected to their communities' histories and having a place in the story of their future. History teaches us that each generation of our society inherits a new challenge, a new concern and a new fight for their future, and, often, the youth of that generation are the ones who identify that concern. In present times, our young people want to see outward-looking policies and progressive politicians. Such politicians and policies may be shaped by our past but are not restricted or defined by it. The

concerns of our young people have been identified and focus on the issues of rights, identity, politics, better housing and a commitment to fight back against the deadly effects of climate change. In many ways, we have come full circle since the civil rights struggle of yesteryear.

Today's debate focuses on identity and provides a suitable vehicle for us all to remind ourselves of the various traditions that exist in the context of the North and to reaffirm that it is healthy to have a sense of national identity of whichever strand. It is healthy to take a position on the constitutional question, given that it is a question that all of us will have to answer some day, sooner than many of us may think. A sense of national identity should provide us with a grounding in where we have come from and where, as a collective society, we want to go.

In the SDLP, we have always been committed to that vision and ideal. From the earliest days of our party's inception, there was a recognition that a number of traditions and identities existed across the North and there was a need to find consensus and common ground. Political giants from all quarters of the House, some of whom are still with us, offer much that we can learn from and helped to broker the peace deal that handed us a new Northern Ireland, one in which our children could live and grow as equals, no matter what their flag is, no matter what their sense of national identity is, no matter what their expression of culture is and no matter what their community's tradition is. That generation — indeed, your generation, Mr Speaker — taught us why discussion and debate are essential to the furthering of our society.

Only a few generations back, countless men, women and children from different backgrounds and traditions marched together in defiance and dissent against the status quo. They marched for the civic rights of the individual and for adequate housing, and their dissent won that day. A generation ago, another band of brothers and sisters marched against the status quo of violence that paramilitary organisations continued in our society. Those organisations laid down their arms, and, again, that dissent won the day. In the previous generation's time, understanding had to be sought, peaceful resolutions made and compromise agreed on. Against all the odds, they achieved what many had written off as impossible. Our time, however, expects and demands action from us. Regardless of the differences in our society and the depth of our dissent from each other, we must show society as a whole, particularly our young people, that change is possible and,

when it is for the betterment of our society, inevitable.

1.15 pm

Ahead of the talks process preceding 'New Decade, New Approach', the SDLP had a number of key asks. We wanted equal marriage to be delivered and, if it were done through the Assembly, the democratic will of the people to be respected. I am delighted that equal marriage was delivered, although I regret that I was not able to cast my vote to support it. We want to see the beginning of a process to decide on the content of a bill of rights, and I am delighted that that work is ongoing. We are committed to the establishment of a single equality Bill and an all-island charter of rights.

For the time being, however, we are here to deal with the issue of the day: the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. The establishment of such an office is founded in the Good Friday Agreement, our pathway to peace:

"It is the firm will of the Irish nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions, recognising that a united Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island."

The establishment of such an office is detailed in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The office will have a responsibility to:

"promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, build social cohesion and reconciliation and to celebrate and support all aspects of Northern Ireland's rich cultural and linguistic heritage."

It is an essential part of the framework that was meant to be delivered by the joint First Ministers, and, while I welcome the presence of our junior Ministers today, it would send a clearer message to the public if the First Minister and deputy First Minister were here today. Maybe that harks back to something more sinister that needs to be clearly called out. We have heard talk today of the Brexit protocol being linked to the delivery of an Irish language Act or, more broadly, the proposed cultural Acts. That is just political grubbery. The only politics that Sinn Féin and the DUP can deliver here are these: if you do not scratch my back, I

will not scratch yours. I have mentioned our young people and their future more than once. That is a future in which we all welcome and respect each other and each other's traditions and move forward to challenge issues such as climate change, economic stability and opportunity. Just remember: there are two parties here that want to draw you into a binary debate that revolves around them and not you. That is not what I am about.

It has been more than a year since New Decade, New Approach, and the promised cultural issues have not been delivered; they have not even inched forward. Our goal is to deliver on the work of previous generations of politicians and community workers and find consensus in all quarters of the House, regardless of flags, identity, culture or tradition, that such agreement, such compromise and such recognition of identity is not only possible but inevitable. Let us prove the commentators wrong for once. Let us deliver that. I commend our amendment to the House.

Mr Lunn: I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment.

Flags, identity, culture and tradition have been dominant themes of political life here. Needless to say, there is significant disagreement on those issues across the Assembly. It will not surprise anyone to learn that there are differences of opinion on those matters on the Committee as well: we are merely a reflection of the Assembly. We come from different cultural traditions and have different political perspectives, but the Committee has agreed that we must talk about such things. Whatever our differences or viewpoints, we need to engage with each other in informed and respectful dialogue.

We know that there is a report by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. That is all that we know about it. We do not know anything about it, and the Committee has not seen it. We hear that a working group has been established to map out a way forward on the issues highlighted in the report. The Committee was not informed of that working group being set up and has written to the Department for details: when it is to meet, whether it has met and its membership.

Renowned peacebuilding practitioner John Paul Lederach talks of three working assumptions in reconciliation work. The first is relationships. Let us face it: they can be good or bad. The second is encounter, which is the opportunity and

space to express how we feel about the issues that concern us. That can be challenging and difficult, but it is important that we find ways to talk about such things. The third and, perhaps, most important is acknowledgement. That is hearing the views of others and holding those views to be valid. It does not mean that we have to agree with everything that is said, just that the views expressed are accepted and treated with respect.

The Committee may not be united on the issues associated with flags, identity, culture and tradition, but it is agreed that it needs to be part of the conversation, and that conversation has to be informed, honest, positive and respectful. The Committee looks forward to receiving the details that it requested from the Executive Office, either by return letter — that is taking some time — or in today's debate, perhaps from the junior Ministers.

I want to make one or two comments off my own bat as an individual MLA. The first is to welcome the motion from my former colleague and the amendment from the SDLP. I am happy to support both. They complement each other well.

This is not the first time that a report has been delayed. It is almost traditional in this place. It is still not acceptable. Why has it been delayed in this case? The commission was formed in 2016 — five years ago. I know that there was a break in its deliberations due to the collapse of the Assembly, but that does not really explain why, since July last year, when the report was presented to the Executive Office, there has been nothing about it except the establishment of another working group.

There are various potential reasons for such a delay. If I expressed some of them, I might sound a bit cynical. The first is that the working group is working diligently to refine the recommendations in the report and will shortly complete its work satisfactorily. I hope that that is the case. Secondly, it could be that there was so little consensus in the commission that a useful report could not be produced. I do not think that that is the case. What we hear unofficially, perhaps from within the commission — let us put it that way — is that there is some useful stuff in the report. The other day, my colleague Doug Beattie pointed out that the report had cost £809,000 so far. If it does not see the light of day, it will be a complete waste of public money. I hope that, if it does see the light of day, it will not still be a waste of public money. We have to go somewhere with it.

On 30 November, the deputy First Minister said in answer to a question from Kellie Armstrong that discussions were ongoing. That was five months ago, and we have still heard nothing. It is nine months since the report was produced. I encourage the junior Ministers to tell us what they can today about what is happening and, perhaps, give us some insight into their thinking about the report.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lunn: I know that my time is up, Mr Speaker, but thank you very much. I will support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Stalford: The first principle in a discussion on culture, identity and tradition should be that the huge majority of people who live in Northern Ireland are tolerant. We are tolerant people. That is because, over many years, there have been three major cultural and identity influences here: the English influence, the Irish influence and the Scottish influence.

Stalford is not a Scottish name, but I am married to a Getty. Her mother is a Campbell, and my relatives have various Scots names. We are a blended people, with very different and diverse backgrounds. We have a vibrant community identity in Northern Ireland.

I want to be clear on the flags issue: I will always defend the dignified display of the flag of my country, and I will never make excuses for the display of anything that could be associated with a paramilitary organisation. I want to talk about a local compromise, which I worked on and which stretched people, that was reached in my constituency. We now have an agreement in place that governs the display of flags in the Ballynafeigh area. There is a set time for when they go up and for when they come down, and there are set places where they can go up. I think that that is working well. I, along with Clare Bailey, was involved in putting that agreement together. When we announced its provisions, some of those who have participated in the debate thus far could not wait to kick us hard enough for what we had proposed. What we have instituted, however, is working and will continue to work in that area.

As for the community that I come from, I am member of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Orange Order, the Apprentice Boys and the Royal Black Institution. My father was a member of the Orange, as was his father, as was his father, as was his father. That tradition goes way, way back in my family, and it is one from which I am very proud to come. It is a

startling statistic that attacks on Orange halls have risen since 1994. Instances of attacks on the property of the Orange Institution have gone up since we have supposedly become a more peaceful society. That demonstrates an intolerance, but, as I said at the start, I genuinely believe that the huge majority of our people are tolerant and want to live peaceably alongside their neighbours.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Certainly.

Mr Allister: Does the Member recognise that, on this day in the House, this place is probably the last place that can talk about tolerance and understanding, given that we are coming off the back of a disgraceful decision last week from the Assembly Commission, which runs the House, indicating that the centenary, which is so precious to many, cannot and will not be marked on a permanent basis within the curtilage of the House? Does he not think that trampling in the gutter the wishes of unionists shows anything but respect from the House?

Mr Stalford: I thank the Member for raising that point with me.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, sir.

It is poor form to stand to your feet to demand that your culture, your identity and your tradition be respected whilst, at the same time, denying that respect and integrity to the traditions of the people whom you work and live alongside. I very much regret the decision that was taken by the Assembly Commission. It was the wrong decision, and it sends out an appalling message about the decade of centenaries that we are going through. You cannot, later on in the year, make demands while, at this stage in the year, denying people their space and their place. It is important that people reflect on that. I do not think that the decision taken was respectful or appropriate. Aside from anything else, the Assembly Commission was not being asked to spend taxpayer money on the memorial.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that he is well beyond the scope of the motion in hand.

1.30 pm

Mr Stalford: OK. I fear that it is reflective of intolerance, and that is where, sometimes, I

think that political parties are out of step with the community as a whole.

I hope that the content of the report will be published soon and that Members will be able to study it for themselves. In the meantime, I, once again, repeat my call for us to live peaceably alongside each other, because we all have to make this place work.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I thank my colleagues from the Alliance Party and the SDLP for tabling the motion and the amendment, both of which Sinn Féin will support.

Of course, this debate does not take place in a vacuum; the context is 100 years of partition. There are two narratives associated with that. The first is that there is a sense of pride about this place but also a sense of insecurity, having fashioned a state based on inequality. The second narrative is of a people who suffered discrimination, sectarianism and the denial of rights and cultural expression.

As I drove to work this morning through my constituency, down the Falls Road, I passed the Royal Victoria Hospital. I then went on down to the Sinn Féin office at the corner of Sevastopol Street which leads on to Odessa Street, both named after sites of battles in the Crimean War. You could walk two minutes on up the street to the Kashmir Road, Lucknow Street and Benares Street, other places of British imperialist rampaging. That is right in the heart of republican west Belfast. I came on up to work and drove up Prince of Wales Avenue, or, as some of us with a certain background describe it, POW Avenue. Then I got to the statue of Carson and the building with Britannia on it. I came in and waved to Lord Craigavon at the top of the stairs. As Conor Murphy says, we should be thinking of doing more to celebrate unionist tradition and cultural expressions here. That is the context. There is an imbalance in society, and that is why we have debates like this.

The framework for dealing with those problems is the Good Friday Agreement, and it is welcome to see Members on the opposite Benches belatedly giving support to the Good Friday Agreement. That is a good thing. The Good Friday Agreement reminds us of the need to uphold the protection and vindication of the human rights of all and partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships. Unfortunately, respect, equality and parity of esteem have been in short supply since the foundation of this state 100 years ago. That is because there has been a failure of

leadership to confront not just sectarianism but also sexism, racism, homophobia and so on.

The old labels of minority and majority are gone. There are new communities here now, and there are people who do not consider themselves as being part of a minority or a majority. Real political leadership means working together, and the challenge is to demonstrate that we give equal expression to the identity, aspirations and traditions of all our people. Our focus must be on building an open and diverse society, based on anti-sectarianism and reconciliation. That is what we need to do.

As another Member mentioned, we heard more of the anti-Irish aspect of the DUP's rhetoric this morning with the supposed decision to oppose the enactment of an Irish language Act until the protocol is done away with. I would love to hear what the protocol has to do with an Irish language Act. I say to them again: you may be able to stall progress, but you will not be able to stop it. We, as Irish republicans, take no satisfaction from your humiliation at the hands of the English Tories, because they will never consider you, or us, their equal. However, Irish republicans will. Unionists are the equal of republicans. So, join with the rest of us in building a new dispensation and a new country that all of us can be proud of because no one can be proud of what has existed here for the last 100 years.

Mr Beattie: First, I register an interest. For my sins, I was a commissioner for three-odd years and know the workings of the commission. Secondly, I pay tribute to the commissioners. There were seven political representatives representing the five political parties. They know what they did, and they know the information that came back from it. There was also civic representation, and there were academics who had an awful job to do in a political minefield. I pay tribute to Dominic Bryans, the joint chair with Neville Armstrong; Katie Radford, who was the only female on the commission, and that was an imbalanced commission because we needed more female voices; Mukesh Sharma; Tom Hennessey; David Robinson; and not forgetting the dedicated secretariat from the Executive Office.

It is worth remembering that the commission was not just about flags; there was an awful lot more. It was a massive remit. It covered education; the media; sport; language, culture and heritage; the public space, including arts in the public space; symbols and emblems; flags in public spaces; flags on public buildings; bonfires; murals; memorials; remembrance; and

commemorations. It was a huge remit to try to get through.

If anybody thinks that it was easy to reach agreement or, indeed, that we reached agreement on all those things, they are sadly mistaken. However, there were some great discussions, some great ideas, some innovative thinking and some fantastic arguments. The commissioners worked incredibly hard. However, I am not sure that the commission's report will have solved all the problems that we face. They may set up another conversation that we will have to have, and a working group may not necessarily be a bad thing. We certainly need to see the report. I have no issue with that; I think that it should be put into the public domain. However, it will not give us the answers to many of the issues that were raised.

Let me give you an example. I made a simple suggestion on the commission that we should reduce the number of memorials in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind that there are more memorials in Northern Ireland to murderers, rapists and child abusers than there are to their victims. That was a very simple recommendation. The argument was that we all have to be able to remember our dead. That is a fair one; I have no issue with that. However, we have to take into consideration the person whose family member was murdered by the UVF who has to walk past a UVF memorial every day and the hurt that it causes them, or the family that had a loved one blown to pieces by an IRA bomb, only to see it memorialised year after year.

However, my recommendation — I thought that it was a good one — to reduce memorials failed. It was not taken forward and was not agreed. Most military memorials have been withdrawn and are now in the memorial garden in Palace Barracks, and most front-facing RUC memorials have been taken away and are now at the back of police stations, yet we could not even say that we would reduce harmful memorials to save our people who have to look at them every day.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He makes a very powerful point, and I thank him for making it. Will the Member agree with me that people in our community have to walk past such murals and monuments while so-called elected Members of this House representing democratic parties glorify terrorists and terrorism by attending such events? That is equally wrong. In fact, is reprehensible in a democracy.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is why, as a society, we are not addressing the harmful nature of issues such as memorialisation, and we need to. For me, it was a key point, and it was not just a key point for one side or the other; I was talking about everybody. We should be looking after the victims not the perpetrators. Not only was the issue of memorialisation not agreed, neither was the issue of languages.

Partly, it was not agreed because, in 2018, Sinn Féin said, "We are not going to talk about the Irish language in the FICT commission any more because it is being discussed elsewhere".

Symbols and emblems: not agreed. Flags on street furniture: not agreed. Flags on public buildings: not agreed. Implementation and oversight: not agreed. There are elements in the FICT report that will give us food for thought and something to take forward in order to move some of the issues on. However, the FICT report will not be a panacea that will fix our problems; it will create another discussion. We need to be ready for that discussion and honest in it. When the FICT report is released — I will support the motion to have it released — some people in the House will look at it and say, "I don't agree with that element, but I agree with this element. I don't agree with what you are saying about bonfires, but I certainly agree with it about memorials". We will have to be ready for that when it comes out and to stand over it. Political parties sitting here today that say that they do not know what is in the report are not being truthful: they do. I do. [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Clarke: To follow on from the last speaker, I will put it on record that I do not know what is in the report. I have had a good insight from you today on what may be in it. However, what I also get from that is the filibustering from the other side about what they want in terms of their rights. However, from what you said, it seems that what will not be in the report is what many may wish to be in it. It alarms me to hear that about memorials for —.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to my friend for giving way. Does the Member agree that anyone who refers to Prince of Wales Avenue as POW Avenue is the very last person who should be talking about protecting rights?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for that point, and I will come back to it.

It concerns me that we have victim makers' memorials and that those who are involved in the commission obviously did not want to have them, but they came here today to give us lectures on other aspects of rights.

I will go back to my colleague's comments on the work that was done in Ballynafeigh and on the leadership there. That is where the real leadership happens: in our communities. In my area, I worked with a loyalist paramilitary organisation to remove its flags and to put up more respectful Union Jacks for the marching season. That is probably similar to some of the suggestions, given some of the comments that Mr Beattie made on it. That worked because it was led by the community. It was welcomed by those who lived in the community and did not want to see signs of paramilitarism but were content for the flag of our country to fly for the marching season. It is examples like that that show leadership.

It reminds me of the debate when they took the Union flag down from Belfast City Hall. The Alliance Party has tabled the motion nearly as if to stoke the argument when tensions are already high in our communities. However, it is ill for the proposer of the motion to come here today and not stay in her place until the second or third speaker after her had finished their contribution. That was more about them coming in to make some big point as if they are the champions of democracy and trying to lead things.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: No, I will not give way. I will hear enough when you are on your feet later.

It was poor that the Member could not stay to hear the contributions if they were so concerned.

Mr Lyttle: She had to let me take this seat. I am contributing.

Mr Speaker: The Member did not want you to intervene.

Mr Clarke: I could say to the Member, who is in a sedentary position, that, if he had taken the seat after the Member left, he maybe could have heard this point and I might have given

way. However, like the other Member, he was not here for the debate.

The only way for the argument to go forward on all the points is with respect. However, listening to the Member from West Belfast talk about his parade from his home to here, he omitted to mention all the memorials and murals for terrorists. He forgot about those. He belonged to a terrorist organisation; indeed, he was a POW, if he wants to call himself that, rather than the Prince of Wales. Like many Members opposite, he went out of his way to be offended. They go out of their way to be offended by our tradition — my tradition. I do not know why he had to go up Prince of Wales Avenue. What was wrong with Massey Avenue?

I have to say that the argument put forward by the Member opposite and the temper and arrogance of the Member opposite worry and concern me. He can smile all he likes. We want to bring peace and stability to Northern Ireland, but he can get offended by street names. He did not mention once the terrorists who murdered people in his constituency and the glorification of those people on walls, which people like me find offensive, if I have to drive through west Belfast. Not one mention.

1.45 pm

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am sure that the Member will agree that the Member for West Belfast failed to acknowledge that, if you go down the Falls Road, you will see mention of D company of the IRA, which terrorised the people who lived in the lower Falls, destroyed our city centre and, of course, was responsible for the murder of many people from the Catholic community including Jean McConville, whose family have been unable to mark her passing and murder by the IRA.

Mr Clarke: That is like many other examples that could be mooted. It is a sad reflection.

We are back here because of the NDNA agreement. However, there are many aspects of that that have not been resolved or settled. It seems that the Members opposite want to cherry-pick those. There are many aspects of the NDNA that are beneficial to everyone.

Hopefully the party that tabled the motion recognises the harm that it did at Belfast City Hall. Maybe the Member who moved the motion could have a word with the Minister of Justice to see what she is going to do about the 7,500 police officers. If we are going to do this without

consent and bringing people with us, we will see more problems on our streets unfortunately. In the Minister of Justice's police settlement, she is reducing the number of police officers. We are going down to 6,800, which is 800 officers fewer than we require. Let us not cherry-pick parts of NDNA; let us implement it in full. When we get it in full, we can talk about some of the pet projects of the Members opposite.

Mr Muir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his contribution, Mr Clarke alluded to Ms Bradshaw leaving the Chamber as a matter of disrespect and not wishing to contribute to the debate. Can we clarify that the reason that Ms Bradshaw left the Chamber is the social-distancing rules that are in place, which permit only two Members from the Alliance Party to be here?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. You have made your point on the record.

Ms Sheerin: I support the motion and the amendment. I acknowledge that, to some, this might seem like quite a superficial conversation to have, given the year that we have had and the pandemic that we are all still living through. That said, we have had events in recent weeks that demonstrate just how important identity and respect for differences still are in the North of Ireland.

In the outworking of an anti-democratic Brexit, we have seen gangs of loyalist thugs march through our streets uninterrupted; paint-can soldiers threatening our hard-won peace through graffiti on walls; and pandering to paramilitaries from both broadcast media and political unionism. The anniversary of the shameful partition of our country gave way to a debate about the appropriateness of a floating six counties made of stone, and, just this morning, we were told that Acht na Gaeilge will be blocked as long as an internationally agreed solution to Brexit on the island of Ireland remains in place.

We no longer live under majority rule. It is important that our public places welcome everyone. The days of marking territory and no-go areas need to be confined to history. This is a time of transition, something that was legislated for in the Good Friday Agreement. It is the Good Friday Agreement that provides us with the framework for equality going forward. It gives us a template to work within when delivering language rights, access to healthcare and public services, all contained within a bill of rights as recommitted to in 'NDNA'.

The Good Friday Agreement prioritised the protection and vindication of human rights for all and partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships. FICT deals with symbolism, but, far from dismissing that as just semantics, we should acknowledge that symbols are the visual manifestation of the regard in which citizens are held. This statelet is contested territory. Sometime after Ireland was first colonised, when the land had all been acquired and the people all belittled, the process of anglicisation began in earnest. Across the country, we still see the legacy of that in the loss of our native language, the imposition of place names and a state that is still owned by aristocrats.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. She will be aware that, since the establishment of the Irish Republic, or the partition that she so loathes, it has been official government policy to sustain the Irish language. Will the Member tell me how much of a success that has been?

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I do not know how relevant it is.

Mr Stalford: It is perfectly relevant.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Sheerin: The language was removed by "antiquators" from Britain, and, over hundreds of years, stripped from the country, North and South. It is being regenerated. We have a Gaeltacht in the area in which I live.

It was in the context of violence and threat that the country was divided and partial independence was granted to the Twenty-six Counties. Following partition, the North saw the establishment of the sectarian state with a deliberate and consistent resistance to equality and respect. Instead, discrimination was enforced in legislation. The remnants of that are everywhere: our street names; our public buildings; our statues and monuments; the language that we speak; and the names of our public services. They are representative of the dominance of one tradition and the exclusion of another. There has been a failure of leadership from many across the House in their attempt to maintain a status quo that has long gone and a refusal to challenge and confront sectarianism, racism and xenophobia. The antidote to all those isms is to affirm positively and commit to the delivery of the rights and entitlements of all our people. The debate on constitutional change will be the context for progressing work

on identity, tradition, overcoming sectarianism and addressing sectarian segregation. The days of majority rule are over. This is not about only unionists and nationalists. There are many new communities that must be seen, heard and represented in our society.

The motion calls for action on an agreement from New Decade, New Approach, which, of course, created the conditions for our restored five-party power-sharing Executive. It is vital that we deal with the issues around flags, identity, culture and tradition, as we should with all commitments from NDNA, and that requires common enterprise. Political leadership means that we look to the future together. The challenge before each party in the House is how we demonstrate equal expression to the identity, legitimate aspirations and traditions of all our people. We need to be inclusive and commit to a shared focus on anti-sectarianism and reconciliation. In that context, I look forward to a meaningful conversation on the FICT report and its recommendations. I hope that this will be the first step on a journey that ends in equality and respect for us all.

Ms Anderson: Tá mé ag tacú leis an rún agus leis an leasú. I support the motion and the amendment. The issue of flags, identity, culture and tradition are multifaceted. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate as it is timely or, some might say, well overdue. There is no doubt that there has been a lack of leadership from the state since the partition of Ireland. This statelet, once referred to as an orange state, had no intention or desire to be inclusive. It instilled in the republican and nationalist tradition a deep understanding that we were born into a little sectarian state that neither wanted nor welcomed us. The violent imposition of partition led to the creation of an exclusionary orange state that was built on institutionalised sectarianism. Therefore, the centenary stone proposal, in the shape of the partitioned Six Counties, was insensitive, to say the least, to the identity, culture and tradition of people who viewed it as symbolic of the past failures of political unionism and of a statelet that discriminated, excluded, oppressed and gerrymandered.

No effort at reconciliation has been made by the state to address the violence and suffering caused during that era, and, to this day, DUP politicians continue to treat with disdain the flag, identity, culture and language of the Irish tradition. Anti-Irish diatribe has been characteristic of some unionist politicians who proudly light bonfires that are bedecked with Irish flags, boastfully insult Irish republicans and nationalists with such remarks as "Coronavirus

is a Taig plague", "Curry my yogurt" and "Feeding the crocodiles", stop bursaries for aspiring Irish language speakers and even change the Irish name on a boat. That was not any of us going out of our way to be offended; that was offensive.

We need equal expression of all identities on this island in council chambers, in this Building and on this estate. That is the test for political leaders, and all political parties need to confront sectarianism in all its ugly facets. Sinn Féin has adopted and published detailed policies and concrete proposals for tackling sectarianism, and that is what we bring to the discussion on flags, identity, culture and tradition. That is Sinn Féin's contribution to overcoming sectarianism and engaging in conversations about the continued transformation of society towards reconciliation and Irish unity. Now is the time for other parties to bring forward their proposals to end sectarianism, promote reconciliation and to engage others in that debate, which is a debate that we are committed to having.

There is no doubt that the legacy of our past political conflict continues to cast a very long shadow over political and communal life. We view our past differently, and we have different narratives that conflict with one another, but we can respect each other's differences, and we can agree to disagree. Reconciliation in a new Ireland is rooted in timeless republican core principles. Sinn Féin is working to build an outward, positive and inclusive rights-based society. However, political parties that seek electoral support from sectarian politics cannot achieve a cohesive, united community if they continue to whip up their base into a toxic, sectarian frenzy in, perhaps, an effort to stop their votes haemorrhaging. I am an Irish republican, driven by an absolute commitment to anti-sectarianism now and in the future.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Anderson: Going forward, that is what our society needs.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Patsy McGlone.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Housing: NDNA Commitment

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the commitment for a specific housing outcome in New Decade New Approach (NDNA), why such an outcome is not included in the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1776/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Housing was identified as a key priority in the Programme for Government draft outcomes framework published for consultation. The provision of suitable housing for everyone features prominently in three of the nine well-being outcomes, and that reflects the importance that the Executive attach to the matter. The public consultation, which commenced on 25 January, is an important first step in the new programme's development process. The consultation closes later today, and the process of analysing the comments and views expressed by stakeholders and respondents will commence very shortly. The aim is to have an agreed outcomes framework that is informed by the consultation ready around the end of April, with a more complete programme, incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes, being brought forward for Assembly consideration by the summer recess.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the joint First Minister for her response and for her acknowledgement that housing is related to good well-being and good health. There is an ongoing issue with landbanking. Following the consultations, are there any plans to take action against those who continue to bank land, particularly in and around public housing, and to ensure that there is a sufficient budget allocation that will go some way to meeting need?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. I absolutely agree. She highlighted the fact, which I welcome, that housing is such an important area for us to be focused on, whether it be social housing, affordable rents or repairs to Housing Executive properties. The Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, has brought forward the biggest shake-up of public housing in 50 years. I know that the Member

will also welcome that. We look forward to that work being undertaken.

You are right about landbanking. There is a lot more to be done there, but it is beyond the remit of just the Department for Communities. A number of Departments will need to be involved. What is most important is that we provide housing for the public in the right locations so that people who live in rural areas have the same access to housing as those elsewhere. I am therefore more than happy to raise the particular issue of landbanking at the Executive to ensure that that is factored into the considerations that are already under way.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, deputy First Minister. As you said, housing appears in three of the nine well-being outcomes. There was a specific agreement in New Decade, New Approach to have a housing outcome on its own, because that would lead to many other options being opened up, such as the environment. Why was the decision taken to keep dividing housing up rather than having a specific outcome for it?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her commentary. I share some of the concerns that you have raised. The Communities Minister — the housing Minister — also raised that very point. You are right. The Programme for Government is in draft format, so everybody has the chance to have input and change it. There has already been considerable engagement on the draft programme to date, which we welcome. The purpose of the consultation is to try to get to a point at which we are able to change things, if we can. The programme in its current form does not seek to denigrate or downgrade the housing outcome, because it is writ large across three of the different areas, and in more detail than you would get in a high-level aspiration. It is hopefully a practical outworking of what we can do on housing. We have listened very carefully throughout the consultation. I have no doubt that strong lobbying will have been received by many people with regard to this, and I am very open to the conversation continuing.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the joint First Minister for her responses so far, and I thank Dolores for tabling a very important question. Will the joint First Minister detail the work that is being carried out to address decades of underinvestment in our housing programme?

Mrs O'Neill: As I touched on previously, the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, has already highlighted to all her Executive

colleagues that the outcomes framework needs to be revised. That is her view, as the housing Minister, and it is what you would expect her to talk about. However, I am also very pleased with the work that Minister Hargey has brought forward. She has been very clear about working through an ambitious proposal to transform the housing system, which I have described as the biggest shakeup of public housing in 50 years and which will include securing the future of the Housing Executive, ensuring that it can build homes where they are needed.

The Finance and Communities Ministers have also successfully worked together to end the Housing Executive's requirement to pay corporation tax, and they will explore future investment opportunities. That will result in the Housing Executive's ability to maintain and repair its current stock, as well as build more homes. On behalf of the Executive, Minister Hargey continues to make significant progress in this area, particularly around bringing forward measures to tackle homelessness, and she will provide a programme that will see new social and affordable homes being built where they are needed. Overall, we have seen through her recent statement that she will make sure that our housing system will work better for all those who need a home.

Brexit Transition Discussions

2. **Ms Kimmins** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any discussions they have had to address issues arising from the end of the Brexit transition period. (AQO 1777/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: Addressing issues that have arisen from the end of the transition period has been a priority for us. Discussions have taken place on number of levels with multiple partners and stakeholders. As an Executive, we consider issues arising from the end of the transition period at our regular meetings on EU exit matters. In the run up to, and following the end of, the transition period, we have engaged with the European Commission through our participation on the Joint Committee. That has met on seven occasions, the most recent of which was on 24 February. We met with the co-chairs of the Joint Committee, who are Michael Gove and vice president Maroš Šefčovič, on 3 February. We and the junior Ministers have also continued to engage with them and their colleagues, primarily through the EU Exit Operations Cabinet Committee. We have taken the opportunity to highlight issues as they arise, including at a dedicated discussion on the protocol, which was held on 7 January.

In addition, our officials hold weekly meetings with the Trader Support Service and their counterparts in the Irish Government to proactively ensure that any emerging issues are addressed as quickly as possible. We are also continuing to engage closely with stakeholders in our business community to ensure that their concerns are also understood. Throughout all our engagement, we have taken every opportunity to highlight the need to resolve issues and to ensure that additional burdens and costs for our people and businesses are minimised.

Ms Kimmens: I thank the joint First Minister for her answer. The recent breaches by the British Government of their legal obligations to implement the protocol will come as no surprise to the majority in the Chamber, who were and remain opposed to Brexit and who were acutely aware of the damage that it would do to our people and economy. Does the joint First Minister share my concern that the British Government's most recent solo run on the implementation of the protocol was reckless and unnecessary and that it creates even more instability and uncertainty?

Mrs O'Neill: I attended a meeting of the Joint Committee on 24 February with Michael Gove and Maroš Šefčovič at which both reaffirmed their support for the protocol and the need to work together to deal with the issues that have arisen. However, despite those commitments, the British Government, less than a week later, went on to do the solo run, and they took unilateral action that has totally undermined the work of the Joint Committee and that risks a collision course with the European Commission where we become the collateral damage.

In my personal opinion, rather than TEO's opinion, that was a calculated act of political bad faith. I do not think that it will come as any surprise to the Member that the current instability and uncertainty is a direct consequence of Brexit — a Brexit that was rejected by a majority across our community and this House. Those who championed Brexit need to own the economic consequences and uncertainty that have flowed from it. Any threats to the implementation of the protocol, which is our protection against the worst excesses of a hard Brexit, risk future stability, growth and prosperity. It is still a time for clarity, stability, certainty and to find solutions to issues as and when they arise.

Mr Stalford: Throughout the Brexit process, the deputy First Minister and other colleagues on that side of the House have been faithful

cheerleaders for the European Commission. Given its disgraceful behaviour over the past 24 hours, with the European Commission now actively threatening vaccine supplies, not only for my constituents but for the deputy First Minister's, will she and the Remain parties in the Chamber care to revise their fealty to the European Commission?

Mrs O'Neill: My personal view is, "Thank goodness that we had people looking out for the interests of the Good Friday Agreement, and thank God the EU stayed firm on that". We are where we are. Let me be clear that vaccines should not be a commodity and should not be traded; they should be given to those who need them most. We should be working together to make sure that that is the case. I make that point very clearly.

Mr O'Toole: Deputy First Minister, speaking of revising earlier positions, Members on the other side of the House might want to examine data put out today by the Food and Drink Federation showing that UK exports of salmon to the EU were down by 98%, beef was down by 91%, cheese by 85% and pork by 87%. Agri-food is such an important part of our economy, and, sadly, British food producers are now at an appalling disadvantage, thanks to the Brexit championed by those opposite. What are we doing to maximise the advantage presented by the protocol, which gives our farmers and food producers unfettered access to the EU market that is so important to them?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is right. We are where we are, albeit it was not the democratically expressed wishes of the people who live here. We have to maximise the potential that we have to access the EU market. We need to look towards economic recovery in a post-COVID world, and what that will look like with the new trading realities that exist as a direct result of Brexit. We have to work with local industry, particularly the agri-food industry that the Member referred to, and look at other market opportunities. For example, what the opportunities are, the challenges, and what we can do to assist the industry. We need to do all that we can because we are now faced with a post-Brexit era with many new trading realities as a direct result of Brexit.

Mr Allister: Bearing in mind that New Decade, New Approach brought the deputy First Minister back to rule over us, its commitment to Northern Ireland's continuing to be an integral part of the United Kingdom internal market and

its guarantee of unfettered access in EU trade, do the deputy First Minister and the office that she represents support the rigorous implementation of those pledges?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will know that, over many decades, every time that we have signed up to any political commitments, we have always honoured them. That remains our position. What we are dealing with on Brexit are the unfortunate trading realities in a post-Brexit world. Those who championed Brexit, the Member included, need to shoulder some of the responsibility for the situation that many people find themselves in today. My rule of thumb has always been to ensure that we had continued North/South and east-west trade, minimised the disruption to businesses, the costs and burdens that fall upon consumers, and support local business and industry. That remains the position today.

COVID-19 Recovery Strategy

3. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's COVID-19 recovery strategy. (AQO 1778/17-22)

14. **Mr Catney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they will ensure that 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions' supports parks and outdoor activity facilities. (AQO 1789/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 3 and 14 together.

The Executive are focused on building a careful and ambitious plan for moving forward in 2021 and beyond. We reviewed the restrictions on 16 March and agreed that, in addition to a phased approach culminating in all school year groups being back to face-to-face learning on 12 April, there will be modest relaxations in place from 1 April for non-essential retail, click and collect, and numbers permitted at outdoor gatherings and in private gardens.

2.15 pm

From 12 April, further relaxations will be implemented for the numbers that are permitted in private gardens, click and collect, outdoor sports training as well as the "Stay at home" message. All that is, obviously, subject to Executive ratification after Easter.

Many parks and outdoor spaces have remained open, enabling people to take daily local exercise. By the end of the cautious first steps phase in the sports and leisure activities pathway, we hope to open all outdoor visitor attractions as well as outdoor sports facilities for training and organised group activities. It is important that we ensure that our society can reopen in a sustainable manner that reduces the risk of reintroducing restrictions.

Looking beyond the relaxation of restrictions, the Executive have started developing a cohesive, cross-departmental strategy that focuses on societal, economic and health recovery. It will outline key interventions that will take account of current COVID-19 restrictions and the medium- to long-term outcomes that are envisaged in the draft Programme for Government.

Ms Flynn: I thank the joint First Minister for her response. As we know, the pandemic has had a huge impact on many people, particularly the vulnerable, the lonely and those in poverty and housing need. Women, in particular, have also been impacted quite badly; we have seen increased levels of unemployment and domestic violence. With all that in mind, does the joint First Minister agree that addressing social inequalities and concerns should be at the core of the Executive's recovery strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. The pandemic has certainly highlighted the high levels of poverty, inequality and disadvantage across our community. I am also particularly aware that the social and economic impact of the pandemic has fallen hard on women, many of whom are in low-paid, precarious employment, and many others have lost their jobs. The rise in domestic violence and abuse has also been particularly alarming. As we step out of the restrictions we, too, must develop more sustainable and strategic responses that, at their core, break the cycles of poverty, exclusion and inequality.

In that context, the Minister for Communities will bring forward a plan for inclusive social recovery that will include tackling unemployment and delivering inclusive economic growth; protecting the vulnerable, including through delivering a cross-government anti-poverty strategy; improving the supply of decent and affordable housing; working with councils to support town and city centre recovery; the recovery of our communities through support for organisations that encourage community development; the recovery of our culture, arts and heritage

sectors; and support for a safe return to sport and physical activity.

Addressing social inequality is about looking after the most vulnerable, the lonely, those in housing need and those in poverty. Families and workers on low incomes must be core to our recovery strategy. The Member will agree when I say that we owe it to all the people in our society to make that happen.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister provide an update on vaccine supply? Will we reach the targets that were set out in the vaccination timetable?

Mrs O'Neill: That is, of course, the remit of the Health Minister. You will have seen commentary from the Health Department over the past number of days about the concerns that it has. The roll-out plan as originally envisaged may be delayed by a couple of weeks, but I am hopeful that the vaccination programme will continue to go as well as it has been. We can only hope that we get to the point where the maximum number of people have been vaccinated. That will, obviously, allow us to marry the programme with our pathway out of restrictions.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. What consideration has been given to people who have been on furlough, whether they are in retail or restaurants etc? It is one thing to earn a salary, but work is not just about getting paid; it is also about interactions and a sense of worth. How will the recovery strategy accommodate those people when they are getting back to the workplace?

Mrs O'Neill: You are right. Those same considerations apply to all the children and young people who are returning to school today. They have gone so long without those interactions and the chance to engage with people and be their normal selves. The Executive have started a conversation and a piece of work on the things that we need to focus on as part of the recovery. The needs of many people who have been impacted by the pandemic have to be taken into account. You referred to those who have been furloughed in, for example, the retail and hospitality sectors, for the best part of a year.

We also have to look at the situation that faces nurses right now and those who work in the health service. It is quite alarming to listen to the lived experience of those who are working on the front line in dealing with the pandemic. I am fearful for their mental health and well-

being. In the last number of weeks, the First Minister, the Health Minister and I met the Royal College of Nursing. Representatives expressed their depth of feeling, in the strongest possible terms, on the anxiety, exhaustion and general feeling of a lack of well-being among the nursing staff. I am really concerned about that. We have a big job of work to do in trying to support people in the post-COVID recovery era.

Mr Clarke: The Member who asked the initial question talked about the effects that COVID-19 is having on families, including unemployment. The Member who spoke previously asked about furlough. The thing that is directly involved in both of those is businesses. If we can get businesses open again, unemployment will reduce and furlough will end. Are there any plans to speed up the strategy, to prevent both unemployment and furlough, and to let those businesses get back to operating as normal, which we will see right across the rest of the UK?

Mrs O'Neill: The pandemic has caused untold damage, from a personal point of view to lives and livelihoods and people's mental health and well-being and to the economy, small businesses and businesses that have been closed for the best part of a year. The pandemic has been cruel and unforgiving in its impact. There is a huge amount of work to be done. I assure every business that we want to have them opening their doors as quickly as possible, but we must do so safely and sustainably. In other parts of Europe, over the weekend, people went back into restrictions. We want to avoid that. We do not want to be in that position, and the best way that we can attempt to avoid it is by going forward, "Steady as you go". There will be gradual easements. We will keep making progress by adding to them, and we will find our way out of this sooner, rather than later. However, it will be only with continued public adherence and the public working with us. We understand how difficult it is, and we will not keep restrictions in place for any longer than is necessary.

Miss Woods: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. Today, we have the return of many children and young people to face-to-face education. Last week, during the ministerial statement, the First Minister informed me that a decision on the return to the Sure Start developmental programme for two- to three-year-olds has been referred to the COVID-19 task force. Has a decision been taken on that? If not, when is it expected?

Mrs O'Neill: The answer is that no decision has been taken as yet, but I hope that it will come to the Executive — probably Thursday's Executive meeting will be the next opportunity. We have set out specific dates at different intervals, but the cross-departmental task force group meets every week. It looks at current issues, and I know that that is one of the issues that is on its desk. We want to be able to support families that need that additional support. There are other areas around children and young people needing support in the community. That is another area that we should look at.

Mr Stewart: The deputy First Minister rightly said that the pandemic has been cruel. That cannot be any more the case than for our tourism and hospitality sectors, which have been massively hit. Some predict that many businesses will not be able to open on the back of it. Aside from the additional financial support that they need, they need assurances about when they will be able to reopen and the lead-in time to that. Can the deputy First Minister tell me what conversations she has had with the hospitality and tourism sectors about plans to reopen and the measures that they need to put in place ahead of that?

Mrs O'Neill: The principal engagement with the tourism and hospitality sectors falls to the Department for the Economy, and there is ongoing engagement there. However, at the level of our task force, there is continual engagement across the sectors, and we know that tourism and hospitality are two sectors that have been absolutely decimated as a result of the pandemic. We need to continue to engage with them. We want to have conversations about preparedness and getting ready to open, so that people know that they have something to work towards. We continue to do that. I cannot remember the last time that I met representatives of the sector, but I engage, for example, with Hospitality Ulster, on an ongoing basis, as do junior Ministers and officials from the Executive Office.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. Can the deputy First Minister tell us in which phase outdoor airsoft is included? Is it in phase 2, as a sport and leisure activity? Given that sport can take place outside at a social distance and that preparation and set-up can also happen outdoors, will that be treated as phase 2 and will it go ahead? Are there any indicative dates, or how much advance notice will be given to those types of groupings and organisations so that they can resume business?

Mrs O'Neill: The plan is designed in such a way that we are able to say, "This is what we think is coming next", and we can start to work with the sectors. I do not know specifically. I would guess that it is the phase 2 cautious first steps because it is outdoors, but I would like to clarify that with officials. I am happy to write to the Member. It makes sense: outdoors is safer than indoors, so those are the first areas that we will be able to focus on and make some relaxations. I will write to the Member and make sure that she is informed.

Ebrington Square

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on how their Department is progressing projects on the Ebrington site. (AQO 1779/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: We are absolutely committed to the regeneration of the north-west. We want to be able to move the region forward and improve the lives of all the people in the area.

Through a sustained programme of investment and development, good progress is being made. The £250 million investment through the Derry/Strabane city deal will be really transformative. The graduate entry medical school at Magee, which is on track to receive its first cohort of 70 students in September, will deliver far-reaching benefits for the regional economy and for wider society.

The Executive Office is taking forward a number of important projects, including the major redevelopment of Meenan Square through our Urban Villages programme; a new arts and culture centre at New Gate in the Fountain; and the redevelopment of the Ebrington site, which is a crucial part of our vision for the north-west. We have made significant progress since the Executive Office took direct responsibility for the regeneration of the site in April 2016. All buildings on site now have a lease agreement for lease or preferred developer identified.

Construction of the grade A office accommodation building is well under way and is due to be completed in March 2022. Construction works on a proposed hotel are scheduled to commence in the summer, and a business case to develop a maritime museum on Ebrington is being progressed by Derry City and Strabane District Council. Subject to approvals and budget, it is hoped that the council museum will open in 2024.

A new site entrance road and service road opened last year, and the provision of essential utility services is nearing completion. Those works have helped to attract private-sector investment to the site, with three businesses opened in 2020 and more scheduled to open when the tenant fit-out works are completed.

We will continue to advance all our main development works and progress the phased transfer of the site to the council in due course. We very much look forward to seeing the benefits of the regeneration to come for many years.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for that answer. How advanced are the plans for the second grade A office accommodation in Ebrington Square?

Mrs O'Neill: As part of the planning approval for the current grade A office accommodation, permission has been granted for a second office building on the same enabling platform above the underground car park. There is, therefore, scope for a further development of that nature, should the market support it.

Given the high level of interest for investment on site following previous marketing exercises, we are making plans to dispose of the car park and remaining land as a development opportunity. That is expected to be via a marketing exercise in line with the well-established process used for the disposals of other land and buildings on site. We are keen to bring that to the market as soon as possible, and work is already well under way in preparation. We anticipate that the development opportunity will be publicised and, hopefully, formal expressions of interest sought by early April.

Uighur and Kazakh Muslims

5. Mr McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any representations that have been made to the Chinese Government through the Northern Ireland bureau office in Beijing about the treatment of Uighur and Kazakh Muslims. (AQO 1780/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, junior Minister Kearney will answer that question.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Foreign policy is not a devolved matter. The function of the bureau in China is to

strengthen our relationship with central and provincial governments and the people of China to increase trade, tourism and educational opportunities. It is not a political office, so no direct representations have been made by the bureau to the Chinese Government.

However, as an Executive, we have a responsibility when it comes to how we engage on the world stage and with our international partners in promoting the values and rights that are important to our democratic systems.

In common with other Governments, we are deeply concerned about reports of the treatment of the Uighur and Kazakh populations. We believe that we are in a position to share our unique experience of how building an accountable political and democratic system is good for business and society.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. Tá mé buartha. I am sorry. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Gender-based Violence

T2. **Mr McGuigan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the Executive must take immediate and resolute action to tackle gender-based violence against women and girls in light of the fact that, in early February, Urantsetseg Tserendorj, who was 48 and from Mongolia, was stabbed and killed in Dublin; earlier this month, Sarah Everard was kidnapped and murdered; and, at the weekend, the very tragic deaths of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell occurred in Rathcoole; with us all, no doubt, extending our deepest sympathies to their families, friends and loved ones. (AQT 1132/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. First, I extend my sympathies and, I am sure, those of everyone in the Chamber to all those who have been bereaved in the most harrowing circumstances. We must always remember that, at the very heart of all those stories that we see breaking on the news, there are people, families and loved ones. Those women have tragically and avoidably lost their lives, and all those families have been robbed of that person. Although we appreciate that each circumstance is individual, such incidents are by no means isolated. Gender-based violence is the appalling truth for countless women and girls right across society. Domestic abuse of every form is the daily lived

experience of many women. This comes at a time when the levels of domestic violence across the North are at a record high. We cannot stand still while women and girls continue to come to harm. To do so would be a dereliction of duty by all of us in public office. Yes, I absolutely agree that the Executive must take unified and determined action to tackle the critical issue of gender-based violence, which needs to be progressed in the right way as a matter of urgency. I assure the Member that it will have my full commitment.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her response. Given her response and commitment, does she agree that, as a society, we must deal with the underlying misogyny that gives rise to violence against women and girls, and that that would best be achieved through the development of an Executive strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree. It is vital that the Executive develop a gender-specific strategy to address the many complex issues that give rise to violence against women and girls. The Member is absolutely right to say that dealing with misogyny must be at the heart of all that, because the ingrained misogyny that prevails across society is not only damaging to women but very dangerous. We must all say very clearly that none of us should ever stand for it. An Irish saying — Ní neart go cur le chéile — means that there is no strength without unity. We must stand together on this issue.

Dismissing the discrimination and denigration of women simply as outdated thinking, which is, often, how it is described, is really not good enough. It has to be flushed out. It needs to be eradicated through a coordinated and sustained approach across all parts of society, from educating children and young people to adopting a zero-tolerance approach to those who seek to abuse women and girls in that way.

Safety for Women and Girls

T3. **Mr Catney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after expressing his sincere sympathy to the families of Stacey Knell and Karen McClean, who were so brutally murdered and taken from their loved ones at the weekend, to state what action they are taking to make our communities a safer place for women and girls. (AQT 1133/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my previous answer, it is incumbent upon us all to work together to make society a safer place and challenge outdated claims. Misogyny is treated almost as though it were an acceptable everyday

occurrence. That is not the case. It needs to be stamped out and called out collectively. The Member asked about action. There is no one solution for how we deal with that. It needs to be across all Departments. There needs to be a societal approach that starts with individual, personal responsibility: for example, even for me, as a parent, educating my children. We all have a job to do to try to make this a better, safe place for women. I am committed to playing my part in working with others to ensure that we come at this issue. The starting point has to be the gender-based strategy on tackling violence against women and girls.

Mr Catney: Thank you. I hear what you say, deputy First Minister, but this is the only place on these islands without a specific strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. What is the timeline for the completion and implementation of a strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will hopefully know that, under the remit of the Department of Justice, Minister Long will have responsibility for bringing forward such a strategy. I will work with the Minister to make sure that we get a fit-for-purpose strategy. It is not good enough that this part of the world is the only place that does not have a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, so let us ensure that all political parties work together to bring forward a strategy in the most timely manner possible.

Climate and Energy Governance

T4. **Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that they will be aware of the recent report from academics at the University of Exeter, which was funded and commissioned by the Executive to look at the energy governance that will be required for Northern Ireland's energy transition, for their assessment of a key recommendation in the report that a duty be placed on all Northern Ireland Departments to consider climate and energy transition as part of policy development. (AQT 1134/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. The outworking of such a report has to have more Executive discussion, but we all have a responsibility to play our part in tackling climate change. Every Department will have a responsibility. I welcome the fact that the Climate Change Bill will receive large support in the Assembly Chamber when it is debated. We are living through a climate emergency, from which there will be disastrous effects across the board, so we all need to tackle it. I am open-minded when looking at these things, but I do

not have the details of the report with me. I am happy to write to the Member about where the report goes next and at what stage it sits.

Miss Woods: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. I would certainly welcome a commitment from the Executive Office to introduce a duty to conduct a climate impact assessment when it comes to policymaking, for example. Regarding another recommendation from the research, will the deputy First Minister support proposals to establish a new Department of climate and energy transition? What discussions is she having with her Executive colleagues to make that happen?

Mrs O'Neill: There are no conversations of that nature at the moment, but, again, let me get the details of the report and write to the Member about its status: where it sits and where it will go next. There have been no discussions for some time about new Departments or even about establishing an independent climate change Department. Let me look at the report, and I will then write to the Member.

COVID-19: Vaccine Access

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assurances they can give that the local vaccination programme will not be adversely affected by the EU's threat to ban AstraZeneca supplies to the UK. (AQT 1135/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I made my position clear to your party colleague earlier when I said that access to the vaccine should be based on need. Anybody who needs the vaccine should have it. It should not be a commodity. It should not be there to be traded. It should not be used as a bargaining chip. I therefore encourage everybody to work together to make sure that we vaccinate all people globally, because what happens in this part of the world during a pandemic has an implication for what happens elsewhere, and vice versa.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the deputy First Minister. Will the Executive Office support a 24/7 roll-out of the vaccination programme if the supplies allow that in Northern Ireland in the near future?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. We have always said that we will support that position. I do not think that that position has been advanced by the Department of Health yet, but getting the vaccine out as quickly as possible is top of all our agendas, as is making sure that we are protecting people. I

am therefore open to supporting such a proposal.

British Government Office in Belfast

T6. **Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister agrees with Minister Mallon who, last week, said that the opening of a UK Government office in Northern Ireland was a "power grab" and a clear attempt at "undermining devolution". (AQT 1136/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: This is not an agreed Executive position of course, but, yes, my personal view is that we need to make the power-sharing institutions work, as we do all strands of the Good Friday Agreement. I wholeheartedly believe in the Good Friday Agreement, and I believe that the British Government should not undermine power-sharing by establishing offices in Belfast that interfere with the devolved responsibilities of Ministers here.

Mr Buckley: The deputy First Minister will know full well that that is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach', as is the marking of the centenary in a "spirit of mutual respect".

What respect was at the heart of the Sinn Féin decision to veto the marking of the centenary with a commemorative stone? How can the Deputy First Minister expect unionism to honour the commitments made in 'New Decade, New Approach' when, evidently, you and your party are cherry-picking what you like and dislike in the agreement?

Mrs O'Neill: The debate over the stone — the monument proposed by unionists to mark the centenary of the establishment of the northern state — has once again highlighted the need for continued transformation of this society. We need to create a shared and inclusive society. For me, it underlines the importance of inclusive discussion and dialogue and the need for political discourse and ongoing engagement. I am sure that the Member or anybody with an objective view of this place to which I am elected will know that it is not an inclusive or welcoming place for people from a nationalist or republican background. It is more important that we work together towards the future. Yes, we reflect on the past, but someone from your generation and age category should be more concerned about working to build a better future. I encourage you to work with me. Let us make this place a more inclusive society, do all we can to make sure this place is welcoming and make sure that today's young people do not fight the battles of the past. I encourage

people to continue to look forward and see how to share this place and demonstrate through mutual respect, generosity of spirit, good grace — [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Order, please.

Mrs O'Neill: People should realise that there is nothing to fear from the future. There is something for us all to work for — something better — where previous generations have been failed. My final words to the Member are, "Work with me". Let us make this a more inclusive place where we all live comfortably together side by side.

Caravan Parks and Holiday Homes: Reopening Date

T7. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with St Patrick's Day having passed and Easter coming fast, to enlighten the House on when they plan to reopen static caravan parks and holiday homes. (AQT 1137/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is a poet, and he did not know it.

The issue of caravans has been raised quite a lot recently because the weather is turning and people want to get back to their caravan sites. I know that the issue has been raised with Minister Dodds, who has the responsibility for caravan parks. It is too early to say when caravan parks will open, but, as we have always said, we will not keep restrictions in place for any longer than is necessary.

There are already some categories where people can go to their static caravan. I cannot give you the date today for the removal of restrictions. However, I can say that we will continue to work through the issues, and, as soon as we think it is safe, we will make an announcement.

Mr Harvey: Thank you for your answer, Deputy First Minister. Have you considered touring caravans and a risk assessment of the shared facilities on sites?

Mrs O'Neill: It is all in the mix; it will all be part of the caravan conversation. As part of our ongoing deliberations, I will ensure that your points are factored into the conversation.

Victims' Payment Scheme: Funding

T8. **Ms Ennis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions have been had with the British Secretary of State on funding for the victims' payment scheme. (AQT 1138/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. It is really important that we continue to work through the funding issue. It is really important that the victims and survivors hear that the Executive are committed to the scheme and are determined to get the money paid. However, the advances that have been made from the Secretary of State in the last week are not sufficient to allow us to move forward on the financial commitment that is needed to develop the scheme. We have asked for another cross-departmental meeting, as TEO, Finance and Justice are working together. We are still asking for that meeting, and we need to have it as soon as possible to progress the issue.

Mr Speaker: Time is up, and I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table for the next item.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not during Question Time, unfortunately. We will have to take it later. Thank you.

2.45 pm

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

Infrastructure

Union Connectivity Review

1. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the assessment she had made of the Union connectivity review proposals before engaging in public comment. (AQO 1790/17-22)

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the proposed bridge or tunnel linking Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQO 1791/17-22)

10. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her meetings with the British Government on the Union connectivity review. (AQO 1799/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):
With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 2 and 10 together.

As the Assembly will be aware, the Union connectivity review was launched by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, last year. The review chair published his interim report on Wednesday 10 March, which touched on a number of issues that will be examined in depth in the final report due to be completed in the summer.

I made my views on the publication of the review's interim report known earlier this month. At that point, I had read an advance copy of the interim report and met the review chair, Sir Peter Hendy, and the Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, to discuss why the promised engagement had not materialised. I have also met the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on several occasions to discuss the Union connectivity review.

I will always welcome any proposals to provide much-needed investment in transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland. To that end, I have provided a list of my Department's agreed priorities to the review. They reflect the priority transport infrastructure schemes outlined in the New Decade New Approach agreement for which funding has not yet been delivered. However, the approach to the review from the British Government is unacceptable. Decisions on devolved matters should be made by local representatives accountable to the people of Northern Ireland and not decided unilaterally in Whitehall.

I believe that a fixed link between Scotland and Northern Ireland, whether a bridge or a tunnel, is a vanity project. The enormous costs of construction could be much better spent improving infrastructure across the North. We already suffer a substantial infrastructure deficit, especially in the north-west. The Executive and the British Government have given many promises to deliver schemes to address that deficit, not least in the New Decade New Approach agreement. I do not think that a single Member would agree that it would be in the interests of any citizens here to prioritise what appears to be a multibillion-pound bridge or tunnel when we can see that our transport and water infrastructure networks are crumbling before our eyes and that previous funding commitments made by the Prime Minister have still not been honoured.

Mr Allister: I suggest to the Minister that she let herself and the people of Northern Ireland

down by her pejorative, contemptuous, ill-considered response before the ink was dry on the interim report. Why would any Infrastructure Minister with the commercial interests of Northern Ireland at heart not want to see radical improvements to the A75, by way of example? I suggest to the Minister that it is time that she took off her nationalist blinkers and was something more than a Little Irelander.

Ms Mallon: Let us look at the facts instead of engaging in emotive language. The facts are that I got an advance copy of the report, and I read it. I entered into the process of the UK connectivity review in good faith. My job as the Infrastructure Minister in Northern Ireland is to deliver schemes that will improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. It is not a nationalist or unionist issue, and it is lazy to characterise it as that. I am a devolutionist, and I believe in power-sharing. I will work across these islands to ensure that we improve our citizens' lives.

'New Decade, New Approach' has a list of infrastructure projects. The Prime Minister has committed to turbocharging infrastructure in Northern Ireland, and that is a case that I will continue to make. As for the A75, that is a Scotland transport issue, and I will continue to engage with the Scottish Minister, who has responsibility and authority on that matter.

Mr Easton: Minister, why would any Infrastructure Minister oppose the creation of thousands of jobs and billions of pounds of investment that would improve connectivity between us and our biggest trading partners? Is it not simply the case that you are opposed to anything that physically connects and strengthens the Union?

Ms Mallon: As I have demonstrated since taking up my post, I am committed to working in partnership across these islands. That is why I have met, on numerous occasions, Grant Shapps, my Scottish counterpart and my Welsh counterpart and will continue to do so. The difficulty that we have here is that our infrastructure is crumbling before our eyes. Let us look at the Prime Minister's form: he squandered £40 million of taxpayers' money exploring the feasibility of the garden bridge in London. I could do so much with that £40 million for your constituents and the constituents of every Member across the House, and I make no apologies for continuing to do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I call the next Member, I would appreciate it if

Members, when seated, kept their remarks to themselves. There is a process for dealing with questions to the Minister, and I call on Members to respect that, please.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, you are right to point out the blinkered vision of some in the House who believe Boris Johnson's promises on the delivery of infrastructure, particularly bridges. I am sure, Minister, you agree that, if people were rational and objective and looked at what is really going on, they would see how Northern Ireland is being used and abused by the British Government in their appeal to Scottish Conservatives and Labour people in the context of the Scottish Parliament elections in May.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. It is typical Tory distraction and deflection from their failings in government. They have failed in government to honour the financial commitments that they made to the people of Northern Ireland through 'New Decade, New Approach'. I agree with the Member in her analysis: this is as much about using Northern Ireland in an electoral game with the SNP, which Boris Johnson is obsessed with, as it is about anything else. One thing that we know across the House, regardless of our political position, is that we cannot trust Boris Johnson. Boris Johnson does not care about the people of Northern Ireland. He will not put our interests first.

Mr Boylan: Minister, one of the essential projects is the A5, and there is a lot of disappointment with the announcement last week about the delay. Why were the issues such as flood risk and the alternatives not raised during the first inquiry? The project has been on the go for 15 years, so we cannot understand why those issues were not raised earlier.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Given that his party colleagues held for five years the ministerial post responsible for the A5, he will know that it has been beset by legal challenges and difficulties. The public inquiry inspector produced an interim report that made it highly likely that we would have to return to a public hearing.

I reiterate my commitment to the project. I gave careful consideration to the interim report, and I sought expert and legal advice. I want to see the project delivered as quickly as possible.

Mr Beggs: I understand the Minister's concern that funding for a Boris bridge of some sort could be better spent on lots of other

infrastructure projects, but I fail to understand her approach to the A75 between Gretna, Dumfries and Stranraer.

That is one of the four projects highlighted as having real potential, given the failure of the Scottish Government to invest significantly in that route. The Minister was content for the European Union to fund Trans-European Network links, which included that same road. I am trying to understand why she is now critical of the Scottish Government potentially gaining additional money so that improved transport links can be put in place for the west of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Indeed, that would be to the benefit of hauliers from the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Although we have been told that additional money will be provided, I reiterate that this Government have not honoured the financial commitments that they have already made to the people of Northern Ireland. I am committed to working in partnership, and I will continue to do so, but I respect the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity and the devolved settlement in Scotland in the same way as I respect and uphold the devolved settlement here. I will work with anyone. However, given what is happening with this Government, be it the Internal Market Act, the Levelling Up Fund or the connectivity review, I have been expressing concerns for some time about their encroachment into the devolved space. I do not apologise for standing up for devolution and power-sharing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Muir: The Boris bridge or tunnel is a dead cat strategy and needs to be seen as such. Will the Minister provide an update on the exact amount of funding that the UK Government have supplied under their New Decade, New Approach commitments for the next financial year?

Ms Mallon: Much money has been promised, but very little has materialised, unfortunately. However, I will continue to make the case to the Secretary of State and to all Ministers with whom I can get in contact to ensure that all of the commitments made under New Decade, New Approach are honoured. If we are serious about building back better from COVID together and about growing our economy and tackling the climate crisis, we must invest in our infrastructure. So, I will continue to make the case for that and look to colleagues from across the House to support me in doing so.

Mr Buckley: The Minister said that she wants to act in keeping with commitments in New Decade, New Approach by, for example, turbocharging infrastructure. Last week, Minister Mallon said that the opening of a UK Government office in Northern Ireland was a UK "power grab" and:

"a clear attempt to undermine devolution".

That just happens to be another segment of New Decade, New Approach. Will the Minister outline which parts of the agreement she agrees with and which parts she does not?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He refers to paragraph 7 in 'New Decade, New Approach', which mentions an office being set up here in Belfast to widen accessibility to London Departments. What has transpired is that the Government wish to set the infrastructure priorities for the people of Northern Ireland. It is not about giving us greater accessibility to London Departments, it is about those Departments being parachuted in with absolutely no accountability to tell the people of Newry, the people of upper Bann and the people of Lisburn what they need.

Vehicle and Driver Testing

3. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the restart of vehicle and driver testing at Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) centres. (AQO 1792/17-22)

15. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on measures she is taking to address the backlog in driving tests. (AQO 1804/17-22)

Ms Mallon: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 15 together.

From 20 July 2020, MOT testing resumed for priority vehicle groups, including vehicles whose owners are not able to avail themselves of temporary exemption certificates (TECs). The DVA has steadily increased its vehicle testing capacity by adopting a range of measures, including the recruitment of additional vehicle examiners, the use of overtime to provide cover for leave and sick absence and a reduction in the vehicle test appointment time. Testing is being carried out at all 15 DVA test centres.

In light of the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, I recently announced that existing TECs for qualifying vehicles will be extended by a further four months. That applies to private cars, light

goods vehicles and motorcycles aged from four to nine years that have TECs that will expire between 21 March 2021 and 25 March 2022. Four-year-old cars and motorcycles and three-year-old light goods vehicles whose first test is due between those dates will also have a four-month TEC applied. New TECs or extensions to existing TECs will be applied automatically to allow vehicles to be taxed. Customers do not need to do anything until they receive a reminder notification from the DVA to present their vehicle for testing.

The delivery of practical driving tests was suspended following the Executive's decision to increase COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in December 2020.

Resumption of testing will be dependent on the timescales set out by the Executive on the easing of the restrictions, which are due for review on 15 April. Motorcycle training and testing is unaffected.

3.00 pm

The DVA has released additional testing slots for May and June. Those will provide sufficient booking capacity to allow customers with previously cancelled tests the opportunity to rebook an appointment prior to the booking system opening for other customers. Additional booking slots will also be made available where possible as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her response. That will be of great interest to those learning to drive, driving instructors and everyone who owns a car that needs an MOT. You will be aware that drivers currently are not receiving their MOT test notice until five weeks before. They are experiencing massive difficulty with booking a test. It is hugely frustrating for many of my constituents and, I am sure, for constituents across the country that they are not able to get a test slot, even though they need the car for work, for family commitments and for everything else. There are simply not enough slots available. When will you be able to increase capacity so that MOTs can take place within an acceptable time frame?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We have provided additional capacity for the north-west in Derry by opening up a second building. The DVA recently extended the notification period from which MOT reminder letters are issued to customers to six weeks prior to the test due date. Plans are in place to increase that to seven weeks' notice

from 14 June, when the first reminders for vehicles in receipt of the further four-month TEC will be issued to bring those vehicles in for a test. We continue to review the entire process in line with public health advice and will do what we can to resume services to their full capacity as quickly as we can, when it is safe to do so.

Dr Archibald: Has any consideration been given to ways of enabling essential workers who need a vehicle to carry out their duties to be able to access a driving test safely? I have been contacted by a number of constituents who find themselves in that situation.

Ms Mallon: The DVA is actively liaising with the Department of Health to consider the facilitation of priority requests identified by employers from key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who are required to drive for the purposes of their work. It will be for the relevant employers to contact the agency directly to identify staff who fall within that priority group. The DVA will then endeavour to facilitate priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests, where possible.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister will be aware of the challenges that COVID has created for the haulage industry, which has had little to no support. The cessation of testing for drivers has had a further impact. As HGV drivers retire, there is no new pool of drivers to replace them. Will the Minister look at prioritising that important sector?

Ms Mallon: My Department is in regular contact with representatives of the haulage industry. I will ask my officials in DVA to make contact with those representatives to identify what difficulties there are and what we, working together, might be able to do to try to resolve them.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate all the difficulties with MOTs caused by COVID, but you have another difficulty in MOT centres, and that is with ramps. What progress has been made there? Are they all now operational?

Ms Mallon: When I took up post and that situation soon developed, I thought that that was extremely stressful, but then COVID hit. I am pleased to say, however, that we have carried out a significant amount of work, and all the lifts that required replacing have been replaced and are operational right across the 15 test centres.

Mr Catney: What information have you received from the Executive Office on the recommencement of driving instruction?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that the Executive stopped driving instruction in line with medical and health advice, and my Department responded accordingly. Recently, in the road map to recovery, the Executive Office deemed driving tests to be placed in phase 2. To ensure that my Department is prepared, my officials are engaging across Departments, including with the Department of Health, to ensure that the correct assessment is completed ahead of further reconsideration of any easements. I assure the Member that, as soon as it is safe to resume driving tests, my Department will be ready to do so.

Roads Network: Funding Bids

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any bids for additional funding for the roads network made in the various monitoring rounds in the past year. (AQO 1793/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been historical underinvestment in our road network for a significant number of years. Recognising this, during the current year, I submitted bids for additional funding for investment in the road network of £11 million and £6.5 million in the June and October monitoring rounds. I was very disappointed to receive no funding against my £11 million bid in June and that only £2 million was allocated against my bid for £6.5 million in October. From the £2 million that I was able to secure, I allocated £1.1 million as a priority to structural maintenance with the balance allocated to street lighting repairs and minor works.

In addition, I internally reallocated departmental capital funding of £4.5 million to structural maintenance in January monitoring to utilise remaining available capacity to deliver additional work on the road network over the remainder of the current financial year.

Mr Givan: I am deeply disappointed that you did not get your full allocation, given the underspend from the Minister of Finance and the way that it was then put out the door at the last minute, before the end of the financial year. It was not good enough on the part of Sinn Féin and I support the Minister in her bids.

Having said that, when it comes to the allocation of public funding, my constituency in Lagan Valley has often funded key

infrastructure projects such as the north Lisburn feeder road and developments around the Prince William Road and Ballymacash Road through private-sector funding. When will my constituency get equality of treatment so that key infrastructure is funded by the public sector, rather than pushing up the housing market costs and pricing young people out of the market in what is a difficult area to get housing? Funding the Knockmore to Sprucefield link road would be a good test of the Minister to announce 100% funding for it today.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware of the years of underinvestment in our infrastructure, which has led to huge difficulties with the surfaces of roads, and it limits our ability to do much more on new projects. The Member may wish to know that I have included a requirement of £120 million for capital structural maintenance for the next Budget period. I hope that the Finance Minister shares our concerns and that he recommends that this bid for our roads is met. I will continue to make the case, around the Executive table, for greater funding in our infrastructure so that we can improve the quality of life of your, and all of our, constituents.

Ms Anderson: I note that the monitoring rounds have been agreed by all Executive Ministers. That is something that should be taken back there.

I note, Minister, that you received £280 million, the largest ever capital funding for your Department. Has the Minister ever bid, during any of the monitoring rounds, to kick-start the upgrade of the A2 Buncrana Road?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware, from previous Question Times, of my commitment to the Buncrana Road project. However, we have to ensure that due process takes place. Increasingly, I hear calls of, "Just get it done" implying that I should be cutting corners in some way by not following through proper design process and consultation with local communities, right through every stage of the process, to ensure that we can get these projects delivered in the right way. I will continue to take that approach.

On the funding allocations, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be aware that there is a requirement of around £140 million per annum, independently verified by the Barton report, to maintain our road network as is. I will continue to make the case, around the Executive table, for funding. As I said in response to a previous question, I

look to all colleagues across the House to support me in that effort.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answers to the question so far. I will make a very blunt point: the Department's budget for roads in 2011 was £57 million; it is now £27 million. People can read into that as they wish.

Minister, thank you for putting the hypocrites in Sinn Féin in their box. The reality of the delays to the A5 project is that we had five years with two Sinn Féin Ministers and a three-year delay when the institution was down. Thank you for putting them in their box and for making it very clear that the delays are firmly in their corner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Does the Member have a question?

Mr McCrossan: I ask the Minister to reaffirm her commitment to this project.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I completely understand the frustration that is felt locally at the delay to that project. It has been around since 2007, and the people of west Tyrone and the wider region want to see the project delivered. I reiterate my commitment to deliver it. I carefully considered the interim report from the inspector. I took expert advice. I took Crown counsel advice. Having taken those steps, I believe we can progress the project at the earliest possible opportunity. I remain committed, and I fully understand the frustrations of local members of the public and elected representatives.

Sewerage and Water Infrastructure: Dundonald

5. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what investment is planned by her Department to develop the sewerage and water infrastructure in the rural areas around Dundonald village. (AQO 1794/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The sewerage requirements for the vast majority of rural properties around Dundonald village are served by private septic tanks, and such properties are offered an annual septic tank emptying service, funded by my Department. With regard to further plans for the Dundonald area, I recently consulted on 'Living with Water in Belfast', the strategic drainage infrastructure plan for the greater Belfast area, including Dundonald. The public consultation closed on 29 January 2021, and officials are reviewing the responses.

'Living with Water in Belfast' identifies the existing strategic drainage and waste water issues and pressures across the greater Belfast area in respect of flooding, pollution and development constraints. An integrated and collaborative £1.4 billion plan is proposed to address those over the next 12 years. The plan includes opportunities to deliver projects in the Dundonald area, including upper catchment management to store and catch surface water run-off in the Craigantlet and Castlereagh hills; river floodplain restoration works along the Enner River and various tributaries; and sewerage improvements to provide increased capacity, combined sewer overflow screening and sewerage storage tanks to reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding and spills from the network.

On provision of drinking water supplies, Northern Ireland Water prioritises treated drinking water infrastructure to ensure that every household, business, hospital and school has a reliable supply of safe and clean water. Northern Ireland Water reports no specific issues with the supply of drinking water to the Dundonald area.

Progression of any water and sewerage improvement opportunities is subject to necessary approvals being secured and the funding being made available. However, as the Living with Water programme has been identified as an Executive priority in 'New Decade, New Approach', I will continue to make a strong case for that investment to be made available. I recently wrote again to Executive colleagues to advise of the serious pressures facing our water and sewerage network and the need for critical investment.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her very detailed answer. Is the Minister taking into account the fact that Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council is about to invest somewhere in the region of £36 million in the Dundonald International Ice Bowl? That investment is likely to leverage another £100 million of investment in the area surrounding the Ice Bowl. To be successful, that requires new roads infrastructure heading towards it. There are proposals for additional housing in the immediate area of Dundonald, and there is demand for additional public-sector housing in that area.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The reality is that, because we have had historical underinvestment in our water and waste water infrastructure, we are now sitting with some 116 locations across Northern Ireland that are at or beyond their

developmental capacity. That has consequences for the building of the many homes that we need, as the Member rightly identified. It has consequences for the building of recreational facilities, hotels, hospitals and schools. The Utility Regulator has identified some £2 billion of capital investment that is required in the next price control period alone. I make it very clear to my Executive colleagues that that is a huge issue. It is a very challenging issue. If that critical investment is not realised, we will not be able to deliver our Programme for Government outcomes and we will not be able to see that development and economic growth in the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area or any of the council areas for that matter.

Ms Anderson: The Minister knows that there is a lack of capacity in Derry. Some 3,000 homes in Skeoge need sewerage capacity and are being delayed as a consequence of that. What plans are in place to accelerate that work? "No drains, no cranes; no cranes, no drains", as some say, whatever that is all about. In the Infrastructure Committee, we know what it is all about. We are very aware of the need for waste water sewerage capacity in Derry.

3.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Northern Ireland Water has advised that it completed an analysis of its waste water investment plans for the Foyle constituency at the end of last year. That investment will require the Executive to provide capital funding of approximately £29 million. The planned improvements will target capacity issues in the Culmore waste water treatment works network, including a £12 million investment in the upgrade at Strathfoyle and nearly £5 million investment in the Culmore waste water treatment works itself.

To service new growth, approximately £9 million is associated with new sewerage infrastructure investment for the Skeoge lands along the A2 Buncrana Road, which Northern Ireland Water is seeking to align with the DFI Roads A2 upgrade scheme.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a very quick question from Mike Nesbitt.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister reports that the Utility Regulator has identified the need for £2 billion of investment. What is the Minister asking for from the Executive?

Ms Mallon: My ask of the Executive is simple, but I know that it is a tall order. We absolutely have to provide the funding that is required to ensure that we have access to clean drinking water, are able to meet our environmental requirements, can build the many homes that we need and can grow the economy. I will continue to make the case to ensure that we can get the required investment across the line.

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

Active Travel: Update

T1. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on active travel plans and how grants to improve cycling and walking routes are being rolled out and utilised. (AQT 1141/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I know that he has a keen interest in this area.

The Member will be aware of the investment that my Department has provided for the development of greenways and park-and-ride facilities across Northern Ireland as part of the £20 million blue-green fund. We have also been writing out to councils to ask them, along with their local communities, to identify ways to enhance active travel infrastructure and opportunities in their areas.

I remain committed to that agenda, and, while it is not possible to determine at this stage what the final funding may be for next year because we have not yet had the final Budget allocation, I gave a commitment to the Member that I will continue to do what I can to maximise active travel opportunities for constituents right across Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that answer. How will the routes be identified, and will there be a proportionate concentration of routes outside metropolitan and urban areas compared with inside those areas so that we can reduce commuter traffic and, therefore, pollution?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am very keen to ensure that we do not leave our rural communities behind when it comes to the active travel agenda. I have also been very clear that I do not believe in delivering government from the top down, imposing what I believe to be the right approach for local active travel routes on

communities. That is why we have been working very closely with councils through my walking and cycling champion and why we had the community safety grant for local communities.

I very much want to continue to work in partnership with councils and local communities to identify the right opportunities for active travel so that, when we bring about change, we do so in a lasting and sustainable way.

Pedestrianisation and Active Travel: Derry

T2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the plans for pedestrianisation and active travel in Derry city centre. (AQT 1142/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. A pop-up cycleway was delivered in June 2020 between the Harbour Square roundabout and the council offices through the riverfront car parks. My Department continues to work with the council and other stakeholders to identify measures for social distancing in Derry city centre. Officials are developing draft proposals for the Ferryquay Street, Diamond and Bishop Street areas. Those measures may include the repurposing of road space to improve social distancing where footways are narrow, the introduction of one-way streets and the removal of on-street parking to enhance provision for walking and cycling or the introduction of parklets.

My Department is also progressing several walking and cycling measures in collaboration with the council. The more significant of those include the north-west greenway proposals for Derry and Strabane. Other walking and cycling measures are proposed at Strathfoyle in the Maydown area and along the Limavady Road from Ebrington. I am also providing funding for the construction of the Strathfoyle greenway and the Strabane north greenway.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, in line with the COVID recovery plan and, in particular, the high street recovery plan, it is important that businesses can use outside spaces but also that they share those spaces with our citizens. Will you commit to doing everything that you can to have the tourism sector COVID-ready for the summer tourism season? We are hoping that the tourism sector can use outside spaces, but we need your support.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. That agenda was important even

before COVID. We need to be better at reimagining our space. A people-centred approach to place shaping is the right one. We all must work together to ensure that we reimagine our space so that people can, when it is safe to do so, come together to shop in our local businesses. We will be very much reliant on indigenous tourism. I give a commitment that I will continue to work with stakeholders across the North to ensure that we reimagine our spaces together and do what we can to support our businesses, in particular, at this difficult time.

Casement Park: Update

T3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Casement Park development. (AQT 1143/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I announced my decision to recommend planning approval for the new stadium at Casement Park on 13 October. The final decision will issue when a section 76 planning agreement with the applicant and with relevant parties has been satisfactorily concluded. Work on that is ongoing at pace. The application remains a priority for my Department. The drafting of a planning agreement is a complex legal matter. I am sure that the Member, as a supporter of the project, will agree with me on the need for it to be done right. The Departmental Solicitor's Office and the GAA's legal team remain in regular contact on the details of the planning agreement. Both parties are keen to reach agreement as soon as possible. I look forward to the final planning decision issuing, as the project will give a real boost to sport across our island and to the economy of west Belfast and, finally, give the GAA its home in Ulster.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. It is five months since the Minister made her announcement to approve plans for Casement Park. However, there appears to have been no progress whatsoever in the meantime. Antrim and Ulster Gaels are getting very frustrated at not having a state-of-the-art, modern stadium. Casement Park, like the A5, is one of the Executive's flagship projects. Can the Minister give an assurance that there will not be a similar failure to deliver it as there has been in the case of the A5?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. To state that there has been no progress is factually incorrect. A number of draft agreements have been shared between my Department and the GAA's solicitor. The

drafting of a planning agreement is a complex matter. I am not suggesting for one moment that anyone wants me to cut corners and put the project in jeopardy. I will continue to do what I can, and my officials will continue to work at pace, on this very important project. However, I share the view that, if we had had an Assembly and Executive for the three years that they were down, we would have made much more progress on this important project.

Road Safety: Derry

T4. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having written to her about road safety at the junction of Northland Road and Rock Road at the Magee campus of Ulster University, where there have been several serious collisions and, unfortunately, last year, a young man lost his life, whether she will undertake a review of the location with a view to introducing additional protections for road users and pedestrians. (AQT 1144/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for raising this very important issue. I will commit to discussing the matter with my officials, asking them to provide you with an update on what actions we can take and making sure that that gets to you at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Following on from my what my Foyle colleague said, a good outcome of COVID has been more people being active, getting out and about and enjoying our outdoors. Will you give an update on any investment that your Department will make to light our walkways and green spaces and make them more user-friendly? I am thinking of the Foyle Road and Bay Road areas in my city.

Ms Mallon: The Member raises a very important point. That is particularly important when we reflect on the tragic deaths of the two women at the weekend and on women feeling safe. As Minister for Infrastructure, I want to ensure that we make women feel safe, and an important part of that is street lighting. The Member will be aware that I allocated a budget to ensure that we could have a full 12-month repair of our street lighting, but I am keen to work with councils and others to see what more we can do to ensure that, yes, we are lighting our spaces to make them attractive but also, importantly, so that women and young girls and everyone who wants to go out walking can do so and feel safe.

Strathfoyle and Maydown, Derry

T5. Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the work taking place in the long-neglected Strathfoyle and Maydown area of Derry, where, for the past few weeks, contractors have been busy. (AQT 1145/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Strathfoyle to Maydown shared-use path will be a continuation and extension of the council's Strathfoyle greenway and Waterside greenway projects, which provide a shared footway/cycleway from the Peace Bridge to Stradownen Drive in Strathfoyle. Phase 1 of the Strathfoyle shared-use path will provide new 3-metre-wide off-road facilities for walking and cycling on the Temple Road at Clonmeen Drive and Haw Road. Phase 1 started in the autumn of 2020 and is substantially complete.

Phase 2 of the project involves upgrading and widening the existing substandard footway on the Maydown Road from the Haw Road junction to the police station to the desirable standards of a shared-use path. The proposed alignment and location of the shared-use path ensures that no carriageway-crossing movements are required for walking and cycling, creating a safer road environment for all road users. Phase 2 is under way, and I am pleased to say that it is expected that it will be complete by the summer. It is expected that a resurfacing scheme will be undertaken alongside that project.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her investment in the Strathfoyle and Maydown area. With the progress on the Strathfoyle greenway along with that of the shared-use path between Strathfoyle and Maydown, do the Minister and her officials see merit in the ultimate continuation of the greenway as far as the village of Eglinton?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that I am committed to greenways. They deliver huge benefits to people. They contribute to better mental well-being and physical health, promote active travel and are good for the environment and reconnecting people with nature, which has been one of the chinks of light throughout the COVID crisis. I will continue to do what I can to maximise our opportunities for citizens across Northern Ireland to avail themselves of greenways and to do as much as we can to ensure that we have continuous routes for greenways not just here in Northern Ireland but across our island, because I believe that there is huge potential, which remains untapped, to do so much more in that very important area.

Resource Budget Priorities

T6. Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will be aware of her rather disappointing draft resource budget settlement for the next financial year, albeit it is for her to decide how to cut that cake, whether she will give a commitment to rebalance her investment towards active travel, given that, in a recent answer, she stated that although 1,400 staff are employed by DFI Roads, only 33·5 are employed in transport policy division. (AQT 1146/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will know that I created the new blue-green infrastructure fund of £20 million. I remain committed to that agenda. We have also been recruiting in order to ensure that we have more people in the Department working in Roads who are aware of the opportunities for active travel so that we can have that design phase at the beginning of the processes. I will continue to do what I can.

You are right: the draft budget allocation as it stands is deeply concerning, and it will have ramifications. I know that Members are very concerned about the surface of roads, street lighting and active travel, but, unless I am given the budget to be able to do those things, difficult decisions lie ahead with consequences for all our constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr Muir for a very brief supplementary question.

Mr Muir: The Minister referred to a lot of capital spending, and I welcome that, but very little resource is being put towards active travel. There are schemes in my constituency that we would like to see delivered, such as an active travel hub with the One Path initiative. Will the Minister commit to putting funding into resource initiatives for active travel?

3.30 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware of the huge pressures on the resource side of my budget. Those pressures go back to the smash-and-grab when Danny Kennedy was the Minister. I give a commitment that I will do what I can, but I cannot give a commitment on numbers because the final budget allocation has yet to be determined.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Members. Time is up.

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to address a Minister or another Member for that matter as a "Little Irisher"? The remark made by Mr Allister about Minister Mallon is not just inappropriate but insulting and inflammatory. The Member should apologise, withdraw it and wise up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That is a matter for the Speaker to rule on. I would determine it to be rather juvenile and inappropriate behaviour. I will relay that to the Speaker so that he can make a determination on it.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you clarify whether it is appropriate for Members to speak in Irish and not provide translation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The appropriate practice in the Assembly is that anyone who speaks in Irish provides the appropriate words in English for those who do not understand Irish.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

Abortion Services

Mr Speaker: Ms Paula Bradshaw has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health. If Members wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what actions he intends to take to commission abortion services in Northern Ireland in line with CEDAW recommendations, as must be provided in law under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation Etc.) Act 2019.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In April 2020, my Department invited the Executive to give their agreement to exploring options to see whether it was possible to put in place some limited measure to access a commissioned early medical abortion service in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 emergency. This proposal aimed to mitigate the travel restrictions preventing women from Northern Ireland accessing the abortion service that is available in England. The Executive did not agree to my Department's proposal. My Department resubmitted this proposal to the Executive in May 2020, and I wrote to the Executive Office on 26 November 2020 to request an update. As the Executive have not agreed to this proposal, no further work has been taken forward by my Department.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, the Health and Social Care Bill papers provided by your Department clearly state that commissioning is not a cross-cutting matter. You have used this excuse on numerous occasions for why you brought it to the Executive. Will you please outline how it is a cross-cutting matter? Also, there is an accusation that you were bringing these proposals to the Executive because you knew that they would be blocked by the DUP.

We saw from the response to the FOI request that came out at the weekend that, during the travel ban that you spoke about, people preferred to put women at risk by having them travel during a pandemic rather than provide

them with healthcare services here. Will you respond to those accusations, which members of the general public are levelling at you?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Those accusations are unfounded. It is not just the general public who are making those accusations. At times, the Member is trying to make the issue very personal and about how I view it.

My Department does not dispute that women in Northern Ireland are legally entitled to abortion services. The legal advice that was received by my Department states that the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 do not require my Department to commission the relevant services. Registered medical professionals can now terminate pregnancies lawfully. Such terminations, subject to the regulations, are to be carried out on Health and Social Care premises. To get to the position in which my Department could issue a commissioning direction, as the Member is aware, and in furtherance of legal advice, I brought a paper to the Executive on 3 April 2020 that provided options for the establishment of an early medical abortion service in Northern Ireland. My Department resubmitted that proposal to the Executive in May, and I wrote to the Executive in November. As yet, no decision has been taken by the Executive, so there is no commissioned service for abortion in Northern Ireland. I am satisfied that I have executed my duty as Health Minister by bringing the matter, under the terms of the ministerial code, to the Executive to discuss and agree. I stand by my view that the commissioning of abortion services could be considered as significant or controversial and outside the scope of the Programme for Government. The commissioning of that service also seems to cut across the human rights responsibilities of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. In view of that, I am obliged, under the ministerial code, to bring the matter to the Executive to discuss and agree before it can proceed.

Mrs Cameron: The DUP is a pro-life party that is focused on saving lives, not on taking them. The commissioning of abortion services is a cross-cutting matter. Indeed, there is nothing more controversial than this particular topic. It is quite ironic that Sinn Féin, whose MPs cannot even be bothered to take their seats at Westminster, seems happy to rely on UK Ministers to implement its oppressive abortion agenda.

Does the Minister agree that those who advocate the commissioning of radical abortion

services without any robust scrutiny or due process are showing deep contempt for devolution and the need for consensus?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments and those of her party. As I said, I am of the view that the matter is cross-cutting and controversial and therefore must be taken forward by the Executive in the first instance before any proposal to commission a service can be taken any further.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, you have repeatedly said that you are not going to commission those services. What do you say to the women who are being forced to travel to England in the middle of a global health pandemic to access health services that they are entitled to under the law at home?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I want to correct her. She said that I have said that I will not commission those services. She is wrong in saying that.

Ms Sheerin: Yes, you did.

Mr Swann: What I am —. I am not a liar, no matter what the Member says.

Ms Sheerin: I did not say that you are a liar.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Swann: I have never said that I will not commission those services. What I have said is that I have a duty, as Minister of Health, to bring any proposal to the Executive that concerns the commissioning of services, because I consider that matter to be cross-cutting and controversial. Under the ministerial code, I must do that to meet my legal obligations.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, it would be helpful to understand precisely what your position is. If I understand you correctly, you said that the last time that you brought the paper to the Executive was in November. Will you address that first? Secondly, since you have clarified that abortion services are now legal in Northern Ireland, will you advise what a woman who needs to access those healthcare services should do? As of today, from your perspective, what should she do to access those services?

Mr Swann: Those services are not illegal. They are being performed across all the trusts in Northern Ireland.

Should a woman want to access abortion services, she can contact her GP in the first instance or she can contact Informing Choices NI.

Abortion services in Northern Ireland are not illegal. They are being carried out by health professionals. It is just the commissioning of a full and comprehensive abortion service in Northern Ireland that still has to be referred to and agreed by the Executive.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for making himself available today. We know that women trying to access services are being forced to travel during the pandemic and that those who can access the very limited services here run a gauntlet of protests — in some cases by people who are travelling for their right to protest during the pandemic. In some of those cases, we have seen protesters entering health clinics and premises, blocking access, standing on the steps of hospitals. Minister, this is a deliberate attempt to prevent women accessing those services, so do you have anything to say to those who are protesting? Can you do anything to ensure safe access to the very limited services that exist for women?

Mr Swann: I agree with the Member that there should be no obstruction for anyone who wants to access a health service, whether it is commissioned or not. Those who have used their legal right to protest, as the Member has indicated, should not obstruct entry or interfere with any individual who wants to enter a healthcare facility to seek any healthcare provision that they may want.

Mr Buckley: Does the Minister agree that the intervention by the UK Government is an unacceptable breach of the devolution settlement and that this matter is for the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to deal with? Has he made that point robustly known to the Secretary of State?

Mr Swann: I have spoken to the Secretary of State and to the Minister of State, Robin Walker, on this specific issue and on what, I believe, is a devolved matter. I have said that publicly and in the House. It is also a matter that must be brought before the Executive and agreed, because it is cross-cutting and controversial, as some of the commentary that has already been delivered today in the House shows. If I were to proceed, should I want to proceed, with the matter, I would find myself in breach of the ministerial code and would be open to legal challenge, as would any adoption of the service.

Ms Kimmins: Minister, as you will know, I raised the issue last week of the protests outside John Mitchel Place in Newry. I have engaged with a number of agencies over the last week or so on this. Minister, can you advise of what engagement you have had with clinicians and the chief executives of the trusts across the North, all of whom are trying to deliver services under the law without any framework for what they should provide or any support from the Department? The Southern Trust's clinic in Newry is dealing with quite a difficult issue with the protesters. The clinic provides a range of services, for all sorts of reasons, and many vulnerable women and children face a really challenging situation, as do the staff, many of whom have been in touch with me about the impact that it is having on their daily lives.

Mr Swann: With regard to an earlier answer, nobody should judge anyone who is entering a health facility or why they are entering it. That is wrong. The protesters who are outside do a disservice to the staff working in the clinic and to individuals who are seeking medical support and advice. I ask them to desist from doing that until the issue is resolved through proper democratic scrutiny and accountability.

Mr Allister: The Minister will be aware that the present absurd system of devolution was sold to many in the pro-life lobby on the basis that it guaranteed control over issues such as abortion. Now that that is lamentably not so, what value is there in devolution for such people?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point and has raised a question that is in many heads and hearts across Northern Ireland at this minute in time. However, what I say to them is that, if this place were not here, Westminster would have a free hand to do whatever it wanted to do. We will wait to see what the Secretary of State brings forward in his proposals. As yet, I have seen nothing.

3.45 pm

Mr Carroll: Minister, the reality is that you are failing women and their healthcare by refusing to act. The legislation implemented at Westminster does not require you to bring it to the Executive. That is a political choice that you have made, and many are opposed to it. Given that you have the power to act but refuse to do so while women's mental health is at risk, with many reporting to be suicidal because they cannot get access to terminations, do you

regret not implementing the legislation and making the services available to women here?

Mr Swann: The Member again is trying to make a political point by making it personal: I regret that. As I said in my initial answer, the issue is cross-cutting and controversial. Therefore, as part of the ministerial code, I must bring it to the Executive to discuss and agree. Any commissioning of services that seem to be outside that remit and outside the Programme for Government will be open to challenge, as would I for breaking the ministerial code. I ask the Member to take the issue on its political and medical merits rather than trying to personalised it with regard to my position on it.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business.

Ms Sheerin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister accused me of calling him a liar: I want to put it on record that I did not call him a liar. I said that he had repeatedly said that he would not commission the services. He then went back to say that it was not his responsibility, that it was a cross-cutting matter and that it was for the Executive to do so.

Mr Speaker: OK. Your remarks are on the record.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister indicated that I was making this personal: I was merely stating the facts. I would like it noted that I was not making it personal. I was merely noting his lack of action on the matter.

Mr Speaker: OK. Your point has been made.

Mr Swann: I will respond to both points of order.

Mr Speaker: Briefly, please, Minister.

Mr Swann: Mr Carroll can read his contributions in Hansard where he made it very personal.

I saw Ms Sheerin speak from a sedentary position, and I assumed what she said. If I misheard or misread what the Member said, I apologise to her.

Mr Speaker: Thanks, Minister.

Mr Swann: I think I saw what the Member said, but I will apologise if I was wrong.

Mr Speaker: OK, thank you all. That concludes the item of business. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two before we move to the next item of business.

Private Members' Business

Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises there has been a failure of leadership to deal with issues that arise around flags, identity, culture and tradition in Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report, and to bring the report recommendations to the Executive for review, to provide funding and to take forward in order to ensure leadership on these issues and to move Northern Ireland forward together as a united community. — [Ms Bradshaw.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "review," and insert:

"to honour their commitments within New Decade, New Approach and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, and to provide the necessary funding for these outcomes to recommit ourselves to reconciliation, peace and stability." — [Mr McGrath.]

Mr McGlone: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Mar dhuine a chaith cuid mhór ama leis an ábhar seo, go háirithe le céasáid Gaeilge, is onóir liom labhairt agus tacú leis an leasú ar an rún. As someone who has spent quite a bit of time on the issue, especially its Irish language aspects, I am happy to speak in favour of the motion and, obviously, the amendment.

The SDLP welcomes the debate. We believe that the original motion has merit, but, at this late stage, it is time that the public saw action from Ministers and the Executive on the matter. The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition has experienced many delays since it was first announced in December 2014. Significantly, its work was put on hold between 2018 and 2020 because there was no one to give a report to. The fact that the Executive collapsed in no small part because of the lack of respect shown to the Irish language and to those of us with an Irish identity is highly relevant to the debate.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have apparently been considering what to do about the commission's final report since July last year, including whether to publish it. Unless

and until the report is published and people get to see it and start to take action on its recommendations, it will have been a waste of money. The public deserve to see the commission's recommendations and to see what it is that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister find so difficult about them. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister and their advisers have had ample time to consider the report. Certainly, everyone understands that the issue is politically sensitive, but it is also essential for reconciliation on this island that the issue is addressed comprehensively and collectively and in a spirit of magnanimity and respect. That is why the commission was set up in the first place. It has done its bit of the work, and it is time for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to take action.

One area where they can take action immediately is to honour their commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach'. They have committed to establishing an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression to promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, to build social cohesion and reconciliation and to celebrate and support all aspects of Northern Ireland's rich cultural heritage. That would seem to be the ideal body to take forward and oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.

It would also, naturally in my view, include the appointment of a commissioner to recognise, support, protect and enhance the development of the Irish language in Northern Ireland, and to provide official recognition of the status of the Irish language within the North. Sin stádas oifigiúil a bhaint amach don Ghaeilge. It, too, is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The commissioner would:

"protect and enhance the development of the use of the Irish language by public authorities".

Again, that is a direct quote from 'New Decade, New Approach'. Such a language commissioner would not be unique. In fact, their role with regard to the Irish language is pivotal. Such commissioners are present in countries across the world, from Canada to Catalonia and from Wales to Kosovo. One already exists on the island of Ireland. The International Association of Language Commissioners, which has 11 members at present, is there to support regions that wish to create the position of a language commissioner. Let us be the twelfth.

There is no better time to promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity than right

now. There is no better place to start doing this than right here. An cóimheas, common respect, an t-iolrachas cultúir, and cultural diversity, rud an-saibhir é sin agus rud atá le baint amach, are very rich, and they are within our grasp.

Let us publish the commission's report and see the recommendations. Let us honour the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, gan mhoill. Let us see the First Minister and deputy First Minister taking actions towards reconciliation across the island of Ireland, rather than paying lip service to it.

I heard the reports on the radio this morning. I hope that they are just reports and that this is just loose talk from individuals seeking to undermine the years of hard work that has been done by many. The Irish language is not going away. We are here. Cainteoírí Gaeilge, Irish-language speakers, deserve official recognition, just as others do. I respect entirely people's right to differ. I also respect entirely people's right to have their culture and identity enshrined in law and recognised properly. That is what this society should be about: an cóimheas, joint respect for one another, respect being a two-way street. So, let us start in the Assembly, and let us see some more progress. Feicimis tuilleadh dul chun cinn. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you. I call Matthew O'Toole to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I thank all those who have spoken in the debate so far, including my colleague Patsy McGlone, a proud and distinguished Gaeilgeoir, probably the most talented in the Assembly. He spoke passionately and very well on the subject.

We could talk about flags, identity, culture and tradition all day. Of course, in this part of the world, we do. That does not mean, though, that this debate is not important or that the motion, and the amendment that the SDLP tabled — I am glad that it is being supported — are not important. They are critical.

This institution exists. It is the way it is because we are a divided society, and the way to move on from being a divided society is to move to being a shared one. No matter what your constitutional preference, and I am clear on mine, by taking our seats in this place, we have all agreed that the only way to pursue constitutional preference is by enshrining the

principle of living in a shared society. That means, as the Good Friday Agreement says, not just tolerating but treasuring all the traditions that exist on this island, particularly in Northern Ireland.

As an Irish nationalist, someone who believes in removing the border on this island, it costs me nothing to say that this part of Ireland has a particular, important and unique relationship with Britain. That will be true for as long as we are in the United Kingdom, and it will be true when we leave it, if and when that day comes.

When we have these debates, it is important, as Patsy McGlone said and others reflected, that we are serious and substantive. Unfortunately, however, listening to debates in the House can be depressing when we hear people slagging each other off across the Chamber and using identity and language as tribal sticks with which to beat one another over the head with.

Over the weekend, I was doing some research for winding on the motion. I read A T Q Stewart's famous book, 'The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster', which is about Irish history, particularly Ulster history.

At the beginning of the book, he famously quotes Sir Walter Scott:

"I never saw a richer country, or, to speak my mind, a finer people; the worst of them is the bitter and envenomed dislike which they have to each other. Their factions have been so long envenomed, and they have such narrow ground to do their battle in, that they are like people fighting with daggers in a hogshead."

We do not have to be like that. We do not have to use culture and language to beat one another over the head. As someone who treasures his Irish identity and aspires to not having a border on the island of Ireland, I have no problem standing up and saying that Britishness, particularly Britishness on this part of the island, needs to be not just accommodated but treasured. That is why I want to see the report from the Commission on Flags —.

4.00 pm

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member and I work together in Committee, and I know that he is deeply respectful of the tradition from which I come, and I respect his. I also respect his party's vote

last week on the memorial stone for the centenary of Northern Ireland.

Does the Member understand the hurt and the strong feeling on this side of the House when a party cannot vote for a stone to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland — it regards it as partition, while we regard it as the centenary of Northern Ireland — because of the shape of the stone? Where is the respect and tolerance in that?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I do. I have no problem accommodating other people when they seek to mark something that is important to them. I will clearly have a different narrative about the history of partition and this jurisdiction, and I will not be shy about engaging with events that allow for that view to be held. We need a systematic approach to all of this stuff, however. That is why we need the commission to report and why we need to set up, as our amendment makes clear, the office of cultural identity. We should not be scared about any of this stuff. Whether you have a constitutional preference or not, we live in a contested space, and we need to find a way of managing those issues.

I come from Downpatrick. The patron saint of this island is buried under a Protestant cathedral: that is great. The constituency I represent now is South Belfast. It is the most diverse on the island of Ireland. What is it all about? It is all about diversity. It is all about mutual respect, and that is what we should be about in this place because constantly beating one another over the head with language and flags does not do any of us any good.

Let us move on. Let us publish the reports, and let us finally find a better way not just of accommodating one another but of looking one another in the eye and treasuring one another. I commend the amendment and the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the seconder of the motion to make a winding-up speech, I invite junior Minister Kearney to speak.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. Cuirimse fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo ar thuarascáil an Chomisiúin ar Bhraithacha, Féiniúlacht, Cultúr agus Traidisiún. Tuigim go maith gur ábhair dhúshlánaча iad seo go léir. I am grateful, however, to be afforded the opportunity to respond to the motion and amendment tabled by Members of the Alliance

Party and the SDLP on the current position of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.

I begin by acknowledging that any discussion on the issues brings with it a number of perspectives and views, and that has been reflected throughout the debate. We should not underestimate the challenges involved, nor should we shy away from those challenges. We must all work to create common ground. We have done that with other recent challenges, such as the pandemic, or on successful initiatives such as Together: Building a United Community. We need to do it again with FICT.

The commitment to establish the FICT commission formed part of the Stormont House Agreement and the subsequent Fresh Start Agreement. The commission consisted of 15 members, seven of whom were nominees appointed by the leaders of the five main political parties that sit on our Executive. The remaining eight members were drawn from outside government through an open competition.

To remind Members, the main objectives of the commission were:

"scoping the range, extent and nature of issues relating to flags, identity, culture and tradition; mapping the benefits and opportunities in terms of flags related issues whilst highlighting where challenges remain; and producing a report and recommendations on the way forward."

The role of the commission in that regard was to consult established and new elements of the community — reference was made earlier in the debate to newcomers to this place — identify key areas of commonality as well as difference and encourage shared learning, active listening and understanding in a meaningful way across our traditional boundaries.

The work of the commission aimed to contribute to a number of shared outcomes. They included the development of an open, tolerant and mutually respectful society; the development of a shared identity that relies on its mutual interdependencies and seeks to identify areas of common value; and an improved approach to dealing with contested displays and expressions of identity. Further, the commission sought to maximise opportunities to achieve significant reductions in manifestations and levels of hate crime; to develop a society that can seek to identify areas of commonality and have constructive debate around where the challenges remain; and to maximise the

opportunities to promote the benefits of diversity and cultural expression in our society.

The commission was cognisant of 'New Decade, New Approach' in concluding its work, and it provided its final report on 17 July 2020. I take the opportunity to thank the joint chairs, Professor Dominic Bryan and Neville Armstrong, and all the other commission members, both lay members and party-political representatives. They all — each one of them — deserve credit for the work that they have done. It is important to emphasise the commission's inclusive make-up, albeit, as Mr Beattie highlighted, that only one female sat on it. All parties were involved in the commission's work, and all parties have a stake in the resulting report and the recommendations that have been made. It is also important to recognise the key role played by the commission's independent members. They provided critical input from the wider community beyond politics. Their contribution undoubtedly added value to the commission's work and report.

Junior Minister Lyons and I met the commission's joint chairs in October 2020. We also met officials in our Department in September 2020 and again in January 2021 to consider the next steps. After that series of meetings, it was agreed that the next steps should be to convene a working group to consider the issues discussed in more detail and to agree on a way forward in relation to the report itself. I will talk about the working group in more detail later.

Before I do so, it is important that we acknowledge the context that surrounds the issues that we are discussing today. The commission did important work. However, it is plain that the wider societal issues relating to flags, identity, culture and tradition are bigger than the FICT report or any other report. That was reflected in earlier contributions today. Those issues can be understood and advanced only if we look at them across the board and at every level in society. Mar tá siad uile go léir fite fuaite ina chéile. To do that, we must focus on the principles that seek to address the causes of those issues rather than the potential ways to manage them. I agree with many Members: I suggest that commitment to the principles of equality, parity of esteem and respect and an absolute commitment against any forms of intolerance are essential to creating the environment for change. It is collective leadership on those issues and principles that will foster an environment in which the FICT report can flourish.

The multifaceted challenges that have arisen from the ongoing pandemic have been unprecedented in many ways. That has, in fact, impacted on our consideration of the progression of the report. Our priority — all Members will agree with me on this — must be constantly to keep people safe and save lives. However, Minister Lyons and I, supporting the joint First Ministers, are committed to working with Executive colleagues to take this important work forward.

As part of its work, the commission considered some of our most complex societal issues with impacts across many aspects of our daily lives. As Members know, many of those issues have been with us for generations. Tá siad linn leis na glúnta, ó chuaigh an saol ar suíochán. They were with us then and remain with us today. The report has the potential to provide us with pathways to make progress, potentially, on a number of those core issues. However, I repeat that we should remember that no single report, publication, policy or strategy could hope to provide conclusive solutions to all the long-standing issues. The extensive list of outcomes sought by the commission that I mentioned should leave us in no doubt of the scope and ambition of the FICT process, but we should all be realistic. It is inevitable that, at the conclusion of any such process, the challenges will remain. While the report could never have been expected to provide the solution to all the issues and challenges that it considered, it will, nevertheless, provide us with avenues of progress for many of them.

Real change in any of these complex and challenging issues will be achieved only when all parties represented in the House show the necessary leadership and commitment to that change, and it is in that context that I absolutely agree with the wording of the motion when it states that decisions on the implementation of the report should be made by the Executive. There needs to be collective leadership from us all in that regard. The scope of the work of the commission and the cross-cutting nature of the report are such that support and leadership will be required in a number of areas for us to make progress. Organisations, public bodies and the wider community will all need to take responsibility and show leadership in how we go forward.

I mentioned that a working group had been set up to consider how to progress issues arising from the FICT report. The Members' motion raises the issue of publication and the need to bring recommendations from the report forward for the Executive to review. I can confirm that the first meeting of the working group took

place last Thursday, 18 March. The meeting was very productive, and discussion focused on a proposed road map. That extends to include initial engagement with our full Executive later this week and the subsequent development of a detailed work plan, including resource and funding implications. Steps will also include engagement with the joint chairs and all relevant Departments. The working group also discussed issues around publication of the report, and, subject to any emerging pressures, we plan to deliver on the totality of that work over the coming months. The proposed way forward will also link closely to the ongoing work on a revised Programme for Government.

Members have also spoken more widely of their wish to see the Executive honour the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' on the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression in terms of funding and their wish for us to recommit to reconciliation, peace and stability. I welcome that emphasis from the Members who addressed those points. Be assured that we are committed to the development and implementation of the rights, language and identity proposals contained in 'New Decade, New Approach' go huile is go hiomlán. That includes arrangements to progress, during the current mandate, the NI Act 1998 (Amendment No. 1) Bill, which provides for the creation of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. We intend that the work on mapping a way forward in relation to the FICT report will also link into that wider agenda. On a recommitment to reconciliation, peace and stability, I reassure all Members of our continuing commitment to those aims, agus tá mé fein tiomanta agus lántiomanta do na cuspóirí sin. As I mentioned, the work of the commission and the FICT report are inextricably linked to the work on strategies at the heart of the Programme for Government, the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and NDNA.

In closing, I refer to another important strategy that I touched on at the outset. As Members know, the Together: Building a United Community or T:BUC strategy reflects the Executive's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. The T:BUC work enshrines a framework for government action in tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance while seeking to address division and sectarian segregation. The Executive fund seven headline actions in the strategy along with a number of good relations programmes and initiatives and — I refer to comments made by

some Members — actions to support our ethnic minorities.

We can be very proud of the progress made to date. Since coming into office, I have closely engaged with participants in local groups involved in the delivery of the T:BUC programmes. Last Tuesday night, alongside junior Minister Lyons, I was genuinely privileged to attend an online shared learning event hosted by young people from the good relations ambassadors programme. The programme is funded by the T:BUC strategy and is delivered collaboratively by officials in the Executive Office alongside other partners. In today's debate, some Members referenced our young people. Those young people, from all sorts of backgrounds — built-up areas, rural areas and all parts of the Six Counties — provided an inspirational account of their shared experiences of working together. The event was another reminder to me that each new generation can bring different perspectives to the challenges that we face.

4.15 pm

We who hold political office should take inspiration from our young people. Our priority must be to build bridges towards a better future where our young people can truly flourish. Standing still is not an option; that would be an abdication of our shared political and civic responsibility to our children and young people. We should ensure that our young people are liberated by the decisions that we make and can enjoy the benefits of living in a united community devoid of sectarianism, intolerance and segregation.

In conclusion, T:BUC is a shining example of how we can create positive engagement around identities, cultures and traditions for the common good. We hope to develop that collective spirit, as the full Executive consider the work on the FICT report. We have an opportunity, colleagues, to make real and lasting change. With support from our Executive Ministers, Members, Departments and the wider community, I believe that we will be able to do that together. Mar sin de, go mboga muid chun tosaigh le chéile.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrew Muir to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the debate. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It falls to me to make a winding-up speech on the debate. The tone and nature of the debate demonstrate how much Northern Ireland is a

divided place and the scale of the problem now facing us. A FICT report will not solve that problem in one instant, but it is progress. We understand the background to the FICT report: it came from the Fresh Start Agreement, and then we had New Decade, New Approach. If FICT is to succeed, it requires a fresh start and a new approach. Some contributions today did not demonstrate a new approach: they demonstrated an old approach. We all need to come into this place aspiring to a fresh start and a new approach in our society.

People came with very different perspectives on the past and visions for the future. As someone fortunate enough to come from a mixed marriage, I have some — not an entire — understanding of the perspectives and backgrounds. I come from a mixed marriage between someone from a very proud republican background and someone from a loyalist background. I am very grateful to have had that experience. Over many years, I have greatly enjoyed attending not only the Twelfth with my family but the Felons Club, and those perspectives enrich you.

Mr Speaker: Did you buy any drink in the Felons? [Laughter.]

Mr Muir: I will not comment on that.

Those perspectives enrich you and help you to understand the perspectives of others. We should learn that our past and our shared history is something to celebrate rather than to cast up against each other. Our shared past and our history will enhance us going forward. Regrettably, some view that in other ways.

I make this winding-up speech from the perspective of someone fortunate enough to have been an elected representative for the last 10 years. Throughout that time, many people have contacted me about different issues. However, one issue remains with me, and that is the issue being debated here today: flags, identity, emblems and culture. I have an email that I received in 2015. I will anonymise the area because Members will be able to understand the perspective. It states:

This area is a lovely place. A lovely street with no hint of trouble. A flag has been erected on a lamppost outside my house and is something a lot of home owners don't want to see. I am a catholic man living here and I don't want to be seen complaining or putting my face out there.

That is why I am making the winding-up speech to the debate. My response to that individual was one of powerlessness.

Another piece of correspondence read:

"I wish to pass on the strong sense of annoyance and outrage shared by my family and our neighbours at the unwanted placement of flags on lamp posts in"—.

The correspondent then names the area. The area:

"has always been a road where people of all/no faiths and differing backgrounds have lived together in peace and harmony. It is outrageous that our lamp posts are now festooned with flags and offensive para-military banners. These have no place in our neighbourhood".

As an Assembly, we must do better to respond to those individuals and create a better society in which we do not receive correspondence like that.

The Alliance Party's view on the issue is that a clearly communicated, respectful and time-bound flying of flags and emblems in public places can be a genuine expression of cultural celebration in Northern Ireland. The current situation serves no one. I have read out that correspondence, and I am sure that there would be correspondence from my unionist friends and neighbours from another perspective.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. I echo what he said. Like one of his colleagues, I represent areas like Finaghy, Rosetta and Carryduff, which are proud of their diversity. For a lot of those people, it is not so much that they object to the flying of flags in any circumstances per se, it is that they object to the sense that it is done unaccountably and with very little structure, and if those flags stay up or turn into rags, they have no means of removing them or understanding why they were put up in the first place.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with him. On many occasions. I have seen how flags and emblems are used to divide and mark out territory. For someone who has respect for different identities, I do not think that national flags flying in tatters in November shows respect to a culture or identity. To use flags and emblems to divide and mark out territory is wrong. It is particularly insidious when terrorist organisations use their flags and emblems to

mark out areas, yet no action is taken by statutory bodies to deal with that. That creates a sense of powerlessness in the communities that it has been inflicted on and creates a desire for the Assembly and the Executive to come forward.

Some are aware of what is in the FICT report; I am not. However, it is there, and it should be published. There should be no reason for any more delay. Since joining this place in December 2019, I have asked questions about a number of things and have been told, "In a number of months" or "In due course". Publish the report, let people know its recommendations, and step up to deliver them.

As one Member said, a significant amount of money has been spent on the report. It would be a criminal waste of money if the report was not published and acted upon. We charged individuals to take it forward — I acknowledge the lack of gender balance; that was wrong — but, after investing so much money in the report, it should be published and its recommendations acted on. Indeed, the many other commitments in New Decade, New Approach should be acted upon.

This place has gone through a horrendous period with the pandemic. We have lost so many people, and lives and livelihoods have been destroyed, but that cannot continue to be used as an excuse not to act upon the obligations and commitments in New Decade, New Approach. This place came back on the basis of New Decade, New Approach and a collective commitment to a new approach, not to tear each other apart day by day as we have seen today, but to try to work together for the common good of the people in Northern Ireland. It is incumbent on us to deliver that.

I will now summarise some of the comments that were made during the debate. First, I thank my colleague Paula Bradshaw from South Belfast for her work over many years on the issue. I also thank Chris Lyttle, my colleague from East Belfast. Through very difficult times, they have remained steadfast in bringing forward constructive proposals on the matter. The publication of the FICT report and the enactment of the obligations in New Decade, New Approach are required to allow that to be progressed.

Paula referred to the fears of what lies ahead of us in the summer. I share those fears. I share the fears about phone calls from pensioners who are crying down the phone saying that flags have been erected outside their house, that there is nothing that they can do and that

they are worried about what would happen if they spoke out about it. It is incumbent upon this place and the Executive to progress what has been asked for in the motion. If the motion is passed, let it be not just noted but a motivator for change.

Colin McGrath referred to the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' and the need for action. Trevor Lunn said that it was traditional for reports to be delayed. Reports are delayed by Departments more often than buses and trains in Northern Ireland and very little progress is made on them. A lot of work, including research and engagement with members of the community, as Paula outlined, is put into a report, and any delay is an insult to that work. It is therefore incumbent on Departments to publish those reports.

Christopher Stalford, who is not here at the moment, referred to the fact that the huge majority of people in Northern Ireland are tolerant. I agree with that. I think that Northern Ireland is a great place to live. I would not be here if I did not believe that. He said that the dignified display of national flags was right and that he opposes paramilitary flags. I agree with that, but we need to be able to go further. We need to put a framework in place in order to ensure that people do not feel intimidated, that flags are not used to mark out territory and that actions are taken on paramilitary flags.

Jim Allister, who is not here — Chris has taken his place — made an intervention about the centenary stone and the position on that. That was given quite an airing here today, and other comments were made. I am, however, conscious of the 10-minute time limit. Mr McGlone, who was the last Member to speak, said that there is a need for magnanimity. There is indeed. That is required in relation to the centenary stone and the expression of identities and cultures other than unionism or nationalism. The ultimate measure of this place when the mandate finishes will be whether we were be able to show magnanimity to one another.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises there has been a failure of leadership to deal with issues that arise around flags, identity, culture and tradition in Northern Ireland; and calls on the First

Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report, and to bring the report recommendations to the Executive for review, to honour their commitments within New Decade, New Approach and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, and to provide the necessary funding for these outcomes to re-commit ourselves to reconciliation, peace and stability.

Mr Lyons: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I speak as a DUP Member for East Antrim. Earlier this month, Mr Speaker, you issued two Members with the behaviour code, which we are to adhere to. It states that we need to:

"Display the highest ... standards of integrity, courtesy and ... respect."

The Sinn Féin speeches in the debate that we have just had were little more than diatribes against British and unionist identity in Northern Ireland and against Northern Ireland itself. Indeed, Ms Anderson said that it is, apparently, "insensitive" for us to even ask for a centenary stone to commemorate 100 years of Northern Ireland. Mr Speaker, if we are to move on as a society, we need to treat each other with a little bit more respect. I do not think that that was evident here today. I ask you, Mr Speaker, whether you believe that the Sinn Féin Members displayed the highest standards of "integrity, courtesy and mutual respect"?

Mr Speaker: What I will say, Mr Lyons, is that today I have been quite disappointed at the manner in which a range of matters were raised. I do not have to identify one party in that respect; I can do that. I intend to review a number of the contributions today. I do not think that "respect" was at the core of a number of those contributions. You do not need me, from this podium, to spell out all those to you at the moment. I will review the Hansard report of today's debate and some of the debates that have been had.

I am disappointed that not enough respect has been shown by a whole number of Members. Not just one party was involved; a number of Members' contributions, in my opinion, fell well short of the standards that the House expects and, more importantly, what the people whom we collectively represent have a right to hear from the Chamber. I will review that, but I will not review it on one side.

I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

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

4.30 pm

Job Start and the Impact of the Pandemic on 16- to 24-year-olds

Mr Frew: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, their personal and professional development, mental health and career prospects; recognises that 16- to 24-year-olds have been among the most disproportionately affected by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions; expresses deep concern that the Minister of Finance has not provided certainty that funding commitments for the Job Start scheme in Northern Ireland can be honoured in the next financial year; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to the implementation and roll-out of the Job Start scheme without further delay to address serious youth unemployment challenges.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): 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 a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I invite Mr Frew to open the debate.

Mr Frew: On Monday 23 November 2020, I asked the then Minister for Communities — not the Minister who is sitting in front of us today — why she was failing the most vulnerable. I talked about people not being able to go through personal independence payment (PIP) and employment and support allowance (ESA) appeals. I also mentioned the Kickstart programme and asked why it had not been commenced. The then Minister answered:

"The Kickstart scheme will not be introduced this month, because we are not calling it "Kickstart"; we are calling it "Jobstart". It will be far better than what the British Government in England introduced. It will be a bespoke programme, and, if I introduced it, it would be done during a two-week lockdown. I do not want that to happen, because, as soon as it is introduced, the clock starts ticking." — [Official Report (Hansard), 23 November 2020, p29, col 2].

The clock is ticking grievously for those young people who have degrees and all sorts of qualifications, having passed exams at the

highest level, because they are finding it very difficult to find employment. It is not about lockdown. A lot of the potential employers are from the digital world, from the high-tech end of manufacturing and data processing and from computer firms, all of which can operate almost as normal in a lockdown scenario. Lockdown should not be the excuse for any Minister in this place's failure to act. In fact, lockdown should be the inspiration and stimulus to do more, to react better and to achieve something for our young people, knowing the damage that the economic and societal lockdown is having, particularly on those who would benefit from the Job Start scheme. We have seen nothing roll out, however. It has not been better for young people in Northern Ireland compared with those in GB. There has been no bespoke programme put in place to help them. By debating this motion and having the Minister address it, I hope that we can give those young people hope today.

I believe that there has been commentary about the tone of the language in the House today, but let us leave the House today inspired, having given our young people and our employers hope that something good could come out of the motion. I stand here today to tell the Minister very plainly that if she were to bring forward a programme, she would find support from me and my party to roll it out, but I do not understand why, after so many weeks and months, we have seen nothing.

There seems to be an issue with the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance, but when you look through all the financial documents that the Executive have published, you will see clearly that the licence is there for the Minister to move forward, even in the draft Budget that is out for consultation at present. A bullet point from the Department for Communities in it states that its functions include:

"Supporting people to find work and the provision of a tailored recruitment service for employers across the region".

Even in the Budget Bill, which was debated and passed in the House, it is stated across all four schedules to the Bill that there is:

"provision of youth and adult employment services programmes and skills training programmes"

and

"employment schemes and services, including those for people with disabilities, and career information, advice and guidance services".

In every single schedule to our Budget Bill, which has now been passed, you can see very clearly that there is provision left for such a scheme, and it is very important that the Ministers involved roll out the scheme, because it is important that those young people are picked up and given hope for the future.

In summer 2020, the Chancellor announced a new employer initiative aimed at creating six months' paid work placements for young people who are at risk of long-term unemployment. He called it the Kickstart scheme. I do not care what this Minister calls it, but a scheme needs to be rolled out here, because we have seen its benefits. By 25 January, more than 120,000 jobs for 16- to 24-year-olds had been created in GB. The Government also made it simpler for employers of all sizes to benefit from joining the scheme by removing the limit requiring that they create a minimum of 30 vacancies in order to apply directly. That meant that employers of all sizes could avail themselves of the scheme, but, here in Northern Ireland, there has been nothing.

I met with employers and potential employees a number of weeks ago, and they are so downhearted. Employers are downhearted because they want to employ these young people, and they have them earmarked for employment. They see the talent before them, but they cannot employ them. They need help and support. I spoke to potential employees. The potential and the skills base is brilliant. It is beyond scale. Yet, the Executive is failing those young people, our future and the future of this country. Our young people think that they are not worthy. They look across at GB and see the scheme, albeit small fry, but it still helps to create 120,000 jobs for six months in GB. We are saying to them that, because of indecision, our Ministers do not see fit to roll out a similar scheme.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: If I have time at the end, I will. This was an easy scheme to adopt. It was not a highbrow scheme that had to be developed, engineered and manufactured. All that we had to do was lift it from GB and implement it.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not know if the Member was listening to 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, but there

was an eminent lecturer who was outlining the impact of the COVID restrictions on the different sectors of the community. What the report indicated was that those most disproportionately affected are young people. As the Member alluded to, one of the reasons is a lack of employment opportunities. Does the Member agree that our attention should be focused on that?

Mr Frew: Absolutely. I thank the Member for his intervention because he makes a valid point. It is good to have that on record. Let us remember, not only did the Minister only have to lift a scheme that was already designed and apply it to Northern Ireland, we also received funding for that scheme. Where is that funding now? We have lost a massive opportunity because we should have put something in place this year. However, it is not too late. I want to end with hope that the Minister will be able to put something in place that will do the very thing that is being done in England to support employers and potential employees. Let us get our young people into work and get them motivated to display the skills that they have. They are the future of this country. Why is it that the party opposite seems to think that the scheme is not worthy and that they do not need to support it?

I plead with the Minister, and I thank her for her attendance today. Please, Minister, roll out the scheme. Lift the scheme from GB if you have to. Let us get it on the ground as soon as possible. No more excuses of lockdown or other excuses. Get it rolled out. Get young people employed, assist the employers and the firms and let us get Northern Ireland back to work.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is stiflingly warm in here. I know that there is a lot of hot air at times, but before we move on to the next contribution, could we do something about the heat?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I understand that the engineers are attempting to deal with it. Your point is on the record, thank you.

Ms Mullan: Young people's education, training, skills and opportunities are areas that I am very passionate about. I welcome the opportunity to debate this very important issue as there is no doubt that we can all agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on our young people. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that we put measures in place to support young people, none more important than developing their skills and providing opportunities for

employment and training. Sinn Féin is fully committed to making sure that everyone in our society has the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to avail themselves of the opportunities to gain meaningful employment so that people can provide for themselves and their families.

Rising unemployment has been an issue for decades for people aged 16 to 24. Young people were disproportionately impacted on in the last downturn, and youth unemployment is projected to rise as a result of COVID and Brexit. The Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities have a shared role to play in addressing that.

4.45 pm

No one needs to tell me or Sinn Féin about the need to tackle long-term unemployment and neglect. I come from Derry, which, alongside north and west Belfast, consistently ranks amongst the worst areas when it comes to unemployment and joblessness. If we are to truly deliver for our young people and to offer them real hope and opportunity, we need to transform Invest NI. My colleague Martina Anderson recently published a 'Tackling Regional Inequalities, Breaking the Barriers to Employment and Opportunity' policy document, which argues for long-term, strategic solutions to those issues.

Minister Hargey has confirmed her commitment to the Job Start scheme. After discussing the scheme with both Minister Hargey and Minister Murphy, I am confident that the scheme will go ahead. I commend Minister Hargey and Carál Ní Chuilín for their work in addressing youth unemployment. It is important that any scheme that delivers for young people and is providing training and skills addresses all barriers to employment. Those charged with delivering the programmes must be held accountable. If done right, it could make a meaningful difference to the lives of our young people, particularly as we emerge from COVID.

Apprenticeships are a key entry point to the workforce for young people who follow a vocational path at school. The Department for the Economy and the Department of Education have been reviewing the 14-19 strategy for a number of years. I have engaged with both Departments and others on that. Along with schools, further and higher educational institutions and others, I would like to know when that piece of work will be completed. Changes regarding apprenticeships are underway, but those do not go far enough.

As someone who has seen the benefits and difficulties in the apprenticeship scheme, I want to highlight an area of grave concern to me. Each year, I have young fellas from Creggan, Galliagh, Top of the Hill and right across my city coming to me searching for help to find a work placement, often weeks into their course and under real threat of having to leave their course. It becomes a lottery and, many times, is left to pot luck. That is unfair and needs to change now. Young fellas coming into apprenticeships must be fully supported. They must also receive a fair and just wage. I urge the Minister for the Economy to work with employers, trade unions and regional colleges to address that in time for September. The Executive spend millions of pounds a year on public contracts. Again, if we are serious about changing and improving outcomes for our young people, we need to ensure that all government contracts include properly enforceable social clauses.

Finally, in order to bring about the required systemic change, the Executive must work collaboratively across Departments and make linkages that change people's lives for the better. Sinn Féin will support the motion, but I will put on record that those who tabled it know full well that Minister Hargey and Minister Murphy are fully committed to delivering this programme.

Mr Durkan: The importance of giving young people opportunities here cannot be overstated. It is incumbent upon the Executive to show our youth not only that they have a future in Northern Ireland but that they are our future. On our airwaves again today, we have heard sectarian bile being raked up over Brexit and the protocol in a pathetic attempt to stoke the fires of hatred and to re-entrench division for the purpose of electoral success or electoral survival. We also have the constant undermining of our political institutions. That serves only to send more young people away from here in their droves. The brain drain and its detrimental effect on our local economy has been evident for as long as I remember. Now, with the added challenges surrounding the pandemic and more and more young people finding themselves out of work, we run the risk of forcing even more of them to leave these shores in the pursuit of opportunities elsewhere.

In the summer of 2020, the Chancellor announced a significant £2 billion Kickstart scheme, as part of a COVID recovery package, to prevent:

"an entire generation of young people being left behind".

It now seems that the only ones who are being left behind are the young people here in the North. Once more, they are at a disadvantage to their peers elsewhere on these islands. The youth labour market intervention, which was marketed as Kickstart in England, Scotland and Wales but proposed as Job Start here, was due to commence in December. We were assured that the delivery would be of a new and improved scheme as lessons had been learned from issues that were encountered by the roll-out of Kickstart across the water. Instead, we got false start — the latest twist in a game of smoke and mirrors from the Communities Minister: lots of announcements and not a lot of action. It begs the question: where has the very significant Barnett consequential for the scheme been spent? When it became evident that there may be insufficient funding to run the scheme into next year, did the Minister make the call that no scheme would be better than a reduced scheme?

At a time when youth unemployment stands at 11.7% and rising, the Job Start scheme provided a glimmer of hope for many 16- to 24-year-olds who were facing a bleak job market. However, despite repeated assertions from the Communities Ministers — Carál Ní Chuilín and Deirdre Hargey respectively — that the scheme was imminent, the hopes of the young people were cruelly dashed. In a response to the Committee, departmental officials confirmed that the Minister first became aware that the Executive's draft Budget did not include an allocation for labour market interventions in mid-December and that that resulted in her approval of the decision to shelve the Job Start scheme. That fact did not come to light until a month later with the publication of the draft Budget, and after months of preparation by businesses and many promises to young people.

It is important to note that, last year, a staggering 72% of job losses here were among 16- to 24-year-olds. When we weigh that up with the Department's proposed cut to the independent advice sector, which we have been assured will not happen, when universal credit claims are up 126% and when the bid for 900 new staff is put on ice, which, mind you, will probably get sorted as well, it is unsurprising that our young people feel that they have been treated with contempt. The Communities and Finance Ministers' approach has been haphazard, with little evidence of any strategy, be that long-term or otherwise. Their failure to commit to the Job Start scheme, while disappointing for the businesses involved, is utterly devastating for young people who have been left in limbo. They do not know where their

future lies and feel that the North has nothing to offer them. Furthermore, when our young people voice the fact that the job prospects here, or lack thereof, are impacting on their mental well-being, the Executive have a duty to act.

Our young people desperately need support to enter the labour market at what is the most challenging economic period that many of us will ever face, I hope. It will be ridiculous if the Finance and Communities Ministers fail to get the scheme over the line, and it will cost us much more in the long term, and not just economically. I, of course, support the motion, because, as I previously outlined, the myriad of failures within the draft Budget must be addressed to give our younger generation a fair and fighting chance.

Mr Butler: We will support the motion, and I thank the proposers for tabling it. I acknowledge the ongoing work of my colleague John Stewart in particular in highlighting the issues in his role as the UUP economy spokesperson and as the chair of the APG on micro and small businesses.

It is sad and deeply concerning that we have to debate this motion. There are many things that parties across the Chamber will disagree on, as we heard today, but I never thought that implementing a scheme to support our young people into employment and assist our businesses to grow would be one of them. I truly hope that, on the back of what will surely be a unanimous vote in favour of the motion, we will see the Communities Minister and the Finance Minister move at the speed of light to restart the Job Start scheme and, as was said, perhaps call it something different.

Young people have been among the worst affected by the COVID pandemic and lockdown restrictions due to the effects that they have had on their employment opportunities, personal and professional development, and mental health. Members from Foyle spoke about the lack of hope. I have sat on APGs in and around mental health, so I know how important it is for young people in their areas to receive messages of hope. I hope, for all of our sakes, that we get to hear some of that this evening.

That impact was recognised by the United Kingdom Government when the Kickstart programme was launched. The scheme provides employer subsidies for the creation of new jobs and employment opportunities for 16-to 24-year-olds. The Department for Communities announced a similar programme

in Northern Ireland, Job Start, which would commence on 30 November. Unfortunately, the scheme was delayed until 14 December, and, subsequently, postponed, I think due to budget constraints.

Sinn Féin, to be fair, rightly talks about the need to grow the skills sector in Northern Ireland. It regularly talks about the need to support our young people and to get them into desirable employment. How can it possibly be then that a scheme designed with that sole purpose in mind has been binned, leaving thousands of young people and businesses on a cliff edge because of the actions of, perhaps, the Communities Minister and, perhaps, the Finance Minister?

We have heard from Members about the process that leads us to this point. The delays in getting the Job Start scheme off the ground in the first place were regrettable and led to pressure being put on businesses and young people looking to avail themselves of the scheme. Those delays could at least be explained by a desire to make the scheme a bespoke, Northern Ireland version. In fact, businesses said exactly that: they would happily wait if it meant that the scheme was fit for purpose. How then, after months of delay, promises made and hopes raised, is the scheme now not going ahead? It is simply not acceptable. The Minister may blame lack of funding, but how could that possibly be the case? Perhaps, in her response, the Minister can outline the amount that Northern Ireland has received in Barnett consequentials flowing from the Kickstart scheme and the cost to deliver Job Start in comparison.

Job Start would not deliver a silver bullet to resolve the lack of desirable employment opportunities for young people. I think particularly of the Member for Foyle referring to suitable apprenticeships, which I am a full champion of, having been an apprentice butcher for many years and really enjoying that role. I know that it does a lot for people and that there are other discussions that we need to have. It would offer hundreds of opportunities if we were to get an announcement today when previously there was none. It would also show that our Executive take young people's employment seriously. This nonsensical decision to postpone or cancel Job Start has had an immediate short-term impact on those many local businesses seeking to avail of the scheme. Worse still, it is a terrible blow to the thousands of young people I have spoken of who were banking on those paid internships.

There are several negative outcomes for our young people and the Northern Ireland economy. Even more worrying are the medium and long-term impacts of abandoning Job Start. As has already been said, it will be exacerbated by the brain drain, which has been a significant hindrance to our economy in Northern Ireland for decades.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Butler: Yes.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for raising the brain drain; my colleague across the way also raised it. There is a perverse state of affairs here where employers, perhaps tech firms, can establish a base in Liverpool or Bristol and can encourage young people from here to move to England to avail themselves of a Job Start scheme and be based there instead of Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his point. By the time I read to the bottom of my speech, I probably will have given an example of that very outcome.

The postponement of Job Start will encourage 16- to 24-year-olds to move to other parts of the UK, where they will be able to access support to enter employment. That does not help our economy, as we know. We are globally competitive now, and our approach needs to be collegiate. It was envisaged in the PFG draft outcomes framework, in fact. Just this week, a local business contacted me to say that, following the withdrawal of the scheme, it was transferring all its paid internships to GB because Kickstart is available there. That is the point that the Member was making.

COVID restrictions have disproportionately affected hospitality and retail. Those are sectors that young people and students overwhelmingly work in, and many have lost their jobs through the indefinite nature of furlough. The Job Start scheme can help to bring young people back into employment and give them the skills and experience that they need in a new sector whilst simultaneously improving their mental health.

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

Mr Butler: Minister, this is a no-brainer. The hard work has been done. Our businesses and our people have been prepared. Work with the Finance Minister and get the scheme back up and running, please.

Ms Armstrong: As others have confirmed today, COVID has had a severe impact on our employment market. More than ever, we need progressive and innovative schemes that will ensure that our young adults aged 16 to 24 do not become the so-called scarred generation. Generation Z is entering a jobs market that has been compromised by COVID. Those young people will be permanently scarred by the effects of unemployment and its well-documented negative impact on mental health and well-being. I declare an interest as a mummy of a teenager who is just about to become an adult. She is a member of Generation Z. I do not know what my generation was called; it was probably the Dark Ages by today's standards.

5.00 pm

I get it. The intention of the Job Start scheme was honourable. It was due to start on 14 December. It was promoted as being better than the GB scheme because it was to include options for people with disabilities. It included longer times, and there was more investment for it. It sounded great. As we know, and as others said, the Kickstart scheme started in GB in September and has been rolling forward. I am not so politically naive that I do not understand what happened here. The funding that came across to Northern Ireland was unanticipated. The Executive chose to spend that money in the way that they chose to spend it, and it was not on Job Start. The Minister at that time said to the Committee that the money would be found in the Department. Unfortunately, time has rolled on. We have had COVID. The opportunities for young people to have work experience and to take up what would have been the Job Start scheme were not there. There are young people who left school last year, but we do not know where they are.

The Minister has been very kind and has responded to lots of questions about the Job Start scheme. Over and over again, we see the Assembly questions coming through, and, each time, she has confirmed that she is fully committed to delivering the Job Start scheme and to engaging with the Department of Finance and other Executive colleagues to implement it as soon as possible. The Minister also talks about the draft Budget, which

presented significant challenges. We know that the consultation ended on 25 February, but we still do not know what is happening with Job Start, what happened to the young people last year or what will happen to our young people who are leaving school this year. On 18 March, the Minister told us about the different schemes that are available, like the adviser discretionary fund, the travel to interview scheme and the work experience programme, but there was still no mention of Job Start. I am a wee bit annoyed that we are hearing that it will go forward when we do not know what the budget will be. I am annoyed as well that the Executive as a whole did not use that money for our young people when it came across as part of the Barnett consequentials.

However, let us move on today. Minister, is there a way to produce a report to confirm what the outcome has been for the young people who left school last year? Where are they, and what help do they need? What support will be provided to our young people this year? If Job Start is there, that is well and good, but I am sick, sore and tired of hearing about bright young people who are going on to do A levels being looked after and cared for in a school system while others who are leaving the school system are left behind. I do not want that to happen again. If Northern Ireland does not proceed with a Job Start scheme, how many young people will be left on universal credit? What will be the resulting pressure on the Minister's Department, especially on benefits, and on the economic recovery of Northern Ireland?

I am not very impressed by businesses that say that they can move young people across to Liverpool. They see our young people as a commodity and cheap labour instead of seeing what we hoped that Job Start could do, which was to develop a system whereby those young people work here, stay here and live here. I encourage you, Minister, to do what you can. You certainly have my backing.

I support the motion today — absolutely. We all need to do more for our young people. I do not blame you completely, Minister; I blame the Executive for using the money elsewhere at a time when we were in crisis. I support you completely in getting the money this time for the budget for the coming year so that our young people will not be left behind.

Mr Easton: Last week, I spoke on a motion on the future funding of welfare support. In that speech, I touched on the Job Start scheme and the serious consequences of the pandemic on the future prospects of our young people in

Northern Ireland. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak further on the issue today.

Young people have missed their classroom education and their opportunity to sit exams. They have missed opportunities to undertake placements and work experience and to engage with careers services and fairs. They have missed in-person learning at universities and apprenticeship opportunities. The past year has deprived young people of so many chances that were open to those who came before them for enhancing their personal and professional development.

We do not know how fast or slow our recovery will be, or how successful it will be. We know that a fifth of young people in Northern Ireland are concerned about their future employment; that, given the high demand for such services at present, 55% of young people are finding it difficult to receive employment help; and that almost two thirds of young people think that getting a new job will be impossible. We have a duty to our young people to do all that we can to lessen the problems that they are facing because of the current pandemic.

The sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic are hospitality, tourism and small retail, all of which employ large numbers of young people. Those in this age group are also twice as likely as those in older age groups to have lost their job. Ongoing restrictions mean that further business closures and job losses are inevitable. The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training now stands at 28,000, which is above the UK average as a proportion of the population.

Just last week, we debated the rise in the number of claimants for universal credit, which is predicted to grow even further before the pandemic ends. We know the pressures that this will put on our public services and the potential for an substantially increased waiting time, from five weeks to eight weeks, for first-time payments. A good uptake of the Job Start scheme could reduce the number of claimants and relieve some pressure on our welfare support services, if the number of claimants continues to rise.

Despite the bad news, some developments are to be welcomed. I am supportive of the apprenticeship week recently launched by the Economy Minister. Importantly, it will include a range of programmes and opportunities. We all know that apprenticeships are often wrongly characterised as somehow less ideal than university or other academic options. However,

I think that everyone here would agree that apprenticeships are a fantastic opportunity for our young people and that they are needed to encourage the young people for whom academia and university are not suitable.

I am also pleased to hear of more places becoming available on the Assured Skills academic training programme. However, these developments make me question how valid the excuse from the Minister for Communities is. She says that the current restrictions make it difficult to engage young people with businesses. If the Economy Minister can do it, why cannot she?

These programmes are to be welcomed. However, the lack of certainty about the Job Start scheme is extremely concerning. It is unfortunate that this uncertainty seems to have been caused by the Sinn Féin Finance Minister's failure to provide funding.

A point that I made in my last speech, which warrants repeating, is that the brain drain — people moving from here to other parts of the UK — is a serious problem. We should be doing everything that we can to prevent what has been a long-standing issue. I want our young people to live, work and raise their family in Northern Ireland. In the rest of the UK, over 120,000 young people have benefited from the Kickstart scheme. Therefore, our young people are at a competitive disadvantage at a time when it is already exceptionally difficult for them to find a job. If we do —.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member accept that Brexit will also put our young people at a disadvantage? It will have a detrimental impact on skills and apprenticeships, and the British Government's proposed replacement scheme will go nowhere near to matching the EU social fund programme.

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

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for her intervention.

If we do not get our recovery right and more opportunities are available on the mainland, we will exacerbate the brain drain problem. The scheme would be good for not only our young people but businesses. Hundreds of employers have expressed interest in the scheme. They now face uncertainty: whether they should wait for the roll-out of scheme and expect to hire a person at the end of it. I find this deeply unfair,

given that their taking part in Job Start assists our economy as a whole. Many have already invested time and money in this process and laid the groundwork for participants to train as part of their business. They have no clarity on whether the scheme will go ahead as planned. These businesses are trying to help us, so the least that we should be able to give them is certainty.

In conclusion, our young people have already been deprived of a great many opportunities. They are struggling with mental health issues that are being exacerbated by economic- and employment-related anxieties. The cost of this scheme is very little compared with the other economic support packages that are being rolled out to assist people through the pandemic and its aftermath. Therefore, I call on the Minister to implement the Job Start scheme as quickly as possible to go some way to countering the difficulties that our young people have faced educationally and economically during the pandemic.

Mr McCann: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on everyone over the past year. It has been particularly felt by our young people in so many ways, as many Members have already detailed. One aspect and the main focus of today's motion is the impact on opportunities for employment and training. We are all aware that youth unemployment has been rising for a number of years. Although that predates COVID-19, no doubt it will be exacerbated by it. The Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy have a joint role to play in addressing that in their respective ways. Immediate interventions from both Departments will be crucial in the time ahead, as will looking towards longer-term measures and addressing what is and what is not working.

The Job Start scheme, as well as the additional labour market interventions that the Minister has previously outlined, has the potential to make a real difference for people in the age group. I commend Carál Ní Chuilín and Minister Hargey for their commitment to ensuring that the scheme will not simply be a copy and paste of the Kickstart scheme but will be tailored to meet the needs of employers here and be more inclusive around participation, particularly for young people with disabilities. From the early stages, it was confirmed that the requirement of a minimum of 30 placements per employer that was proposed in Britain would be removed here, allowing the scheme to support single job creation. That is really important, as many local businesses and SMEs would not have met the criteria, which would have had the knock-on

effect of limiting the variety of employment and training opportunities available. The requirement has since been removed in Britain, which shows the foresight here on the matter. Other changes that the Minister has outlined include increasing the six-month placement to nine months for people with disabilities to allow them time to settle in and for any adjustments to be made, as well as the proposed widening of the criteria to extend the scheme's reach. Given the work and planning that has gone into that to date, I have no doubt of the Minister's commitment to delivering the scheme and to doing it well. For that reason, I am content to support the motion.

It is important to ensure that any scheme delivers for the young people participating in it. It must provide opportunity and the necessary support to obtain the skills and experience that will help them gain employment or to go further in training. If done right, the Job Start scheme could make a real difference to the lives of our young people, particularly as we emerge from restrictions and begin to look ahead to the rebuild. Across all Departments, we must continue to look for ways in to support our young people through these challenging times and ensure that no one is left behind. I know of Carál Ní Chuilín and Minister Hargey's deep commitment over many years. To deal with previous failed schemes, their commitment has been to put in place not only a short-term scheme but a longer-term scheme that provides proper training and the apprenticeships that are required, by which I mean meaningful apprenticeships so that people can get decent jobs and have a good standard of living.

Let us not look to the past: let us look at what we can do now. I have no doubt that, in Minister Hargey, we have a person who is deeply committed to ensuring that the scheme works. As I have said, I support the scheme, but, as with everything else, we hope that the future will bring better schemes than we have had in the past.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I am hearing some interference, so I ask Members to check their phones to see what is causing it.

5.15 pm

Ms P Bradley: Tomorrow, as we are all aware, we will reach the one-year milestone of the ongoing lockdown. We have spoken many times, inside and outside the Chamber, in the past year about the impact that the pandemic has had, whether economically, mentally or socially. We also know and have heard that

women and young people have been disproportionately affected, especially in terms of employment.

The latest Northern Ireland labour force survey shows that, between July and September 2020, an estimated 26,000 young people aged between 16 and 24 were not in education, employment or training. That is equivalent to 13.2% of all those aged between 16 and 24. In the period between October and December 2020, that figure had risen to 28,000, which is equivalent to 13.9% of all those aged 16 to 24. To put that into perspective, the proportion of young people who were NEET in the UK was 11.3%. In the most recent reporting period, 20,000 of the 28,000 young people who were NEET were not looking for work or were not available to start work.

As has been said already, the Chancellor announced the new Kickstart initiative in the summer of 2020. We were excited, in the Assembly and in the Committee for Communities, to hear Carál Ní Chuilín's proposals for a better scheme that would be bespoke for Northern Ireland, and all of us in the Chamber backed that 100%. We knew, of course, that the money for it had to come via Barnett consequentials. We know that that money was consumed in the Executive and that the Minister then gave a commitment that she would find the money in her own Department. That is what made things so frustrating.

As someone who sits on that Committee, I know that getting any information from the Department, since the Job Start scheme was first cancelled in November and then in December, as to why we were in the position that we were in was like pulling teeth. I stand to be corrected if I am wrong, but when we came back in January, after the Christmas recess, we discovered that the reason behind it was that the money was not going to be available in the Budget. I welcome what Karen Mullan said earlier, and I am heartened that she said that the scheme will take place. I will support the Minister 100% when she takes it forward.

Some Members have spoken about the cohort of young people in Northern Ireland who left school, university or college last year. People have talked about the brain drain. I have spoken to a couple of graduates, who said that they wished that they had stayed at the universities in mainland UK, where they had trained, because they knew that they would have been able to avail themselves of the scheme over there. They are really disappointed that that did not happen here for them. However, there is another cohort of

young people who are due to leave school, university or college this year, and we know that the youth unemployment figures are going to increase. When officials from the Department for the Economy briefed the UNSCR 1235 all-party group (APG) last week on their COVID recovery plan, it was good to hear that they were lifting the age cap on apprenticeships. That will be of benefit to many young people who are in that cohort now and many women who are finding it difficult to gain employment.

I am heartened by what I have heard here today, Minister, but it is absolutely shameful that we could not get the scheme started, albeit I understand the reasons behind it. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what the way forward is going to be for the Job Start scheme in Northern Ireland, and I will give it my wholehearted support.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion on the Job Start scheme. It is really important to recognise the huge impact that the pandemic has had on our economy, on businesses and on the workforce in general. Many Members have said that young people will feel that impact very acutely as they try to establish a foothold on the employment ladder and look for opportunities to learn new skills. We have spoken many times in the Chamber about the need to build our way out of the pandemic and about having the courage to create the economic stimulus that we will need to sustain and grow our economy in the time ahead. Sinn Féin firmly believes that the Job Start scheme is a vital element in that overall recovery piece and is critical for those young people to gain the necessary skills and experiences that will allow them to obtain long-term employment.

While the motion makes reference only to the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance, the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities have a shared role to play in addressing youth unemployment. For example, the Department for the Economy is responsible for skills, training, apprenticeships and the Careers Service, and the Department for Communities provides the necessary support for preparation and financial assistance for people seeking employment. While a number of employability initiatives are currently run by the Department for Communities, the Job Start scheme and the additional labour market interventions that the Minister has outlined have the potential to be an important element in the pathway to recovery as we move out of COVID restrictions, especially for people in that particular age group.

I recognise the important intervention by the then Minister Carál Ní Chuilín in not just turning out a copy-and-paste job of the Kickstart scheme in Britain but tailoring the scheme to our unique circumstances. I heard Mr Paul Frew lament the fact that it was not a copy-and-paste job, but I am sure that he will know that that decision has since been vindicated by the scrapping of the 30-employee rule in Britain. That will allow the scheme here to support single-job creation. Surely, Mr Frew understands and other Members know that that is really important, as many local businesses here are small to medium-sized enterprises that would not have met the criteria. That would have had a knock-on effect, limiting the variety of employment and training opportunities that were available.

The implementation of the scheme has been delayed, and that has been frustrating for everyone. Parallel to that, the difficulties highlighted by the recent draft Budget have been discussed at length over the last number of weeks in the Chamber: flat budgets, yearly budgets, British Government constraints around the spending review outcomes, late announcements, no ability to carry over the money etc. Those have implications for all Departments, particularly as they try to "build back better".

I commend the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, for launching the equality impact assessment (EQIA), which allowed people the opportunity to have their say on the consultation on the Budget process. She has made it clear that she is committed to taking forward the Job Start scheme, and we await the outcome of the Budget deliberations, which are, of course, an Executive decision.

I make it known to the House and the Members who tabled the motion that I met the Finance and Communities Ministers and that both are in resolution mode with respect to Job Start. Both Ministers remain committed to delivering on the Job Start scheme, and I am entirely confident that we will see it come to fruition fairly soon. That said, Sinn Féin is happy to support the motion. It is vital that we continue to look for ways to support young people through these challenging times, and Sinn Féin's focus remains on making employment, skills and opportunities accessible for our young people.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the motion. We need to stop messing around and to get on with supporting our young adults by providing the best work and training opportunities that we can.

There is a reason why Kickstart has been ongoing in England for the past eight months, and that is, of course, the difficulties facing our young adults. However, if there is a need for a scheme that supports employment and training for young adults in England, there is a much greater and stronger need for one here in Northern Ireland.

Let us look at the stats. At the end of last year, we had 14% of young adults not in employment, education or training. That compares with 11% in England and 10% in Scotland. There were 28,000 young adults here, aged 16 to 24, who were not in education, training or work at the end of last year. That is a really shocking statistic. We need to ask ourselves what is going to become of them in the future. What sort of start in life is that for them? What does that mean for our society? What social problems will we face as a result? What are the mental impacts for them?

It gets worse than that. Tomorrow, we will consider violence against women and girls. As part of that discussion, we need to consider the plight of young men and the social and economic pressures that are on them, which, perhaps, for a few of them, feed into their anger and frustrations, leading to terrible results.

Just as violence is not gender-neutral, neither is the job situation for young adults. While more than 12% of young women are in job-related training, fewer than 9% of young men are.

There are more young men outside work, education and training than young women. For young men and young women, the number and percentage outside the system of work, training and education has increased in the past 18 months, and we really need to take stock of that figure. It increased to 28,000 at the end of last year, and we all need to sit up and take that seriously. That has serious economic and social implications, and it needs to be addressed.

Young people need jobs and a positive start in life. They need support to get into training and employment. The Minister for Communities has a duty of care and responsibility to put in place an ambitious and comprehensive Job Start programme. I urge the Economy Minister to engage with that programme so that the synergy between the apprenticeship programme and the Job Start programme is rolled out for the benefit of individuals, communities and the economy.

It is intolerable in these difficult times that employers are seeking to engage in a programme and offer young people meaningful

work providing skills and experience and a fulfilling future only to be told that the Minister has not established the programme. I spoke to one such employer earlier this month — [*Inaudible*] who runs a company called [*Inaudible*] — and he told me that there was a supply-and-demand need for a Job Start programme. He said that government and businesses should be instrumental in building talent solutions.

I spoke to two young interns in his company who ably articulated what their engagement had done for them in relation not only to skills but to their personal confidence and mental health. We really need to ask why the response in putting forward a Job Start programme here has been so slow.

Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre observed:

"In Northern Ireland, proportionally the young and those at the lower end of the earnings spectrum have been the most impacted by the pandemic."

Without additional support, it is not only young adults who face a challenging future but all of us. I ask the Minister to get on with it and let us all stop messing with our young people.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):
Thanks to everybody for their contributions to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion.

I recognise that young people have been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic — I have said that on many occasions — and, indeed, by the current economic crisis and what will unfold over the next couple of months. The current youth unemployment rate in the North is 12.1%, which equates to 12,000 young people.

My Department's initial labour market response to COVID-19 was to introduce schemes to support the biggest volumes of people affected. Two groups were identified as needing an urgent response: young people and the work-ready — that is, those who are ready to be re-employed but who need help to negotiate the process of finding work.

The first wave of the new provision included the Job Start scheme, which was to provide funding for employers to create job opportunities for young people aged 16 to 24 years of age who are at risk from long-term unemployment. The Job Start scheme has been developed and was due to launch on Monday 30 November 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 circuit

breaker that was introduced by the Executive on 27 November. Some Members commented on that, but, if people could reflect on where we were last November, the arguments were about closing up or staying open, and the run-up to Christmas. It was a fractious time that created uncertainty for many, and there was real concern about the spiralling number of people being infected and, in particular, the increase in hospital admissions.

The outline business case for the Job Start scheme was approved by the Department of Finance and allows for 3,313 young people to avail themselves of the scheme at a cost of £24.854 million until 31 March 2023.

5.30 pm

Also included in the first wave of the new provision was expanded flexible support funding through the adviser discretion fund (ADF) to provide up to £1,500 per person with the eligibility criteria to apply, in a 12-month period, to address barriers that face young people when trying to gain employment. That included an expansion of the proposal to pay upfront childcare costs to allow parents to get over the initial cost of registered childcare when moving into employment. It is anticipated that the upfront childcare grants will be operational from the end of October 2021. It is estimated that the expanded ADF will result in over 10,000 awards being made to help people to move closer into employment during the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

A refreshed work experience programme will provide a financial incentive as an additional motivator for participants and employers to take part in the programme. In addition, a new opportunity guarantee strand for young people will offer placements with the guarantee of an interview for a job or apprenticeship. Costs are in the region of £0.71 million and will provide support for up to 770 people. There is a new provision to help up to 77,000 work-ready people by providing training on core employability skills, such as motivation and confidence, interview skills, CV development, job search techniques and basic digital skills. Work-ready employability services will cost about £4.1 million next year. Further provision is planned to be developed collaboratively with local councils through the labour market partnerships, including schemes similar to the Restart scheme, and to help those who lost their jobs 12 months ago at the onset of COVID and who are at risk of falling into the category of the long-term unemployed.

My Department also bid for £38.9 million for labour market interventions for the 2021-22 financial year. That bid included £20 million for Job Start and £12 million for Restart. Unfortunately, the draft Budget provided no funding allocation for the new menu of provision, including Job Start. As a consequence, the launch of those schemes was paused in December 2020, depending on the outcome of the Executive's final Budget allocation for the incoming financial year. I recognise that, as we move to this stage of the pandemic, labour market interventions that my Department has developed will be essential to help young people to return to the labour market, and those interventions, including the Job Start scheme, are aimed at helping people who have lost a job to find new employment.

As has already been stated, I have had a series of engagements with the Finance Minister. I know that he is fully supportive of the Job Start scheme; indeed, to that effect, it is in the incoming Budget. I hope that all other parties around the Executive table will support it when it is presented to them.

As regards other concerns, people have questioned why we did not run with the scheme that was taking place in England. Indeed, as has already been said, there was a number of differences. I believe that the scheme here is better. First, our scheme is open to all young people, not just those on universal credit. Secondly, it is open to all employers, including small and medium-sized employers. It also includes the voluntary and community sector, which is an important sector here. Thirdly, employers can apply directly to our scheme and not just via the gateway programme. Therefore, they do not need batches of 30 people to apply. As was said previously, England has now moved with regard to the changes that we made. That says a lot. Fourthly, the extended scheme is for people with disabilities, again, for up to nine months, to recognise their challenges and to support them to access the scheme as well.

I welcome the conversation and the motion to place a focus on young people, as I agree that the pandemic has hit that group more adversely than others. It was the same during the financial crash over 10 years ago. Any shock to society here impacts on poor people, women and young people the most. These schemes are, of course, important, but the Chamber needs to introduce other initiatives in order to challenge the precarious working practices that are out there. Those people are the first to end up losing their jobs or becoming unemployed. We need to look at banning zero-hours contracts,

make sure that we are encouraging collective bargaining and have a proactive trade union movement that looks at the terms and conditions of all those in our economy.

I agree that we need to have a good conversation. You can get up and make statements in the Chamber, but if Members are serious about targeting inequality and challenging the issues that are related to areas of deprivation, young people and women, we need to allocate our public spend to objective need. Are Members across the Chamber supportive of that? I would welcome further conversations on that.

As I said before, I would also welcome anybody who wants to come to meet me, because Members have raised the matter. It is easy to talk in the Chamber, but very few come and ask me for a meeting to sit down to talk about these issues. It is easy to get up in the Chamber, spout things and play politics — that is fair enough; it is a political Chamber — but if Members are serious, my door is always open for them to come, engage and sit down to work through these issues. You will not find me wanting in that regard.

I agreed with the Minister for the Economy, who I met recently, that a collaborative approach from our respective Departments is essential to achieve a shared economic objective and, in particular, to respond to the challenges that are faced by young people in the labour market. Our officials have been working collaboratively to produce a coherent, joined-up approach that works for individuals and companies and that provides the support and assistance that young people need. I have moved quickly to provide help and assistance in order to ensure that people do not suffer financial hardship as a result of the pandemic, and my officials developed the Job Start scheme in order to help young people move into employment.

I am keenly aware that the last year has been difficult for many, particularly for our young people, who have lost their jobs or have not yet had the opportunity to gain employment. It is clear that the Budget position presents very significant challenges not just for my Department or for the Finance Minister but for the Executive as a whole. We are a collective five-party Executive. It is clear that we need to commit to the Job Start scheme, and, as I say, the Finance Minister has said in engagements that I have had with him that he is supportive of it. I hope that other colleagues in that five-party Executive support me on that in the time ahead.

I assure Members that the Job Start scheme is a priority for me. I will continue to fight to protect the interests of young people and those who are most affected by the COVID pandemic and, indeed, by the current economic crisis. I am committed to working hard in order to ensure that resources are targeted at those who are most in need. I hope that, given the sentiments that Members expressed today, there will be support around the Executive table and across the Chamber for targeting resources at objective need as we move ahead.

Mr Newton: In winding up on the motion, I want to make remarks on my own behalf first before turning to the remarks that others made. In particular, I will refer to the part of the motion that talks about:

"the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, their personal and professional development, mental health, and career prospects; recognises that 16-to-24-year-olds have been among the most disproportionately affected".

I will concentrate my remarks on that area.

This DUP motion was tabled out of a genuine concern for our young people and their future — young people who, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, have been disadvantaged and, indeed, now left behind. Unlike their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales, our young people have not been offered an opportunity for employment and training, and, in many ways, they have been cast adrift.

Currently, unless the Minister can confirm tonight that there is the prospect that 16- to 24-year-olds will engage in the scheme known in Northern Ireland as Job Start, young people will be disadvantaged in comparison with their counterparts in GB. The matter has been discussed since Westminster announced the scheme in July last year. Months of opportunity have been lost, squandered and thrown away.

I will refer to the Minister's response to a question for oral answer from Mr Muir about young people and job schemes. The Minister said:

"I had a meeting on it this morning. We are looking at a bespoke response to needs that we already know. I will also meet service providers, employers and the Children's Commissioner." — [Official Report (Hansard), 08 September 2020, p44, col 2].

That response was in September. The Minister has promised but not delivered. Other Members referred to the fact that 120,000 people in GB are engaged in Kickstart, which gives them a big advantage in the labour market. The Minister knows that there is huge expertise in the Department of Communities in developing programmes and addressing skills gaps. It has a long history of developing on-the-job training schemes. Over the years, the Department has successfully delivered for our young people training programmes that businesses bought into. There is no experience gap. The Department has a successful track record and the skills to deliver. What has been missing? Only one word: leadership. Leadership has been missing in the delivery of the programme.

Let me look at another job training scheme. Under exactly the same pandemic conditions, the Department for the Economy stepped up to the plate. Through ministerial leadership and positive action, it successfully delivered an apprenticeship training programme, along with many other initiatives, in a more complex situation than that facing Job Start. Northern Ireland's future success will be built on and by our young people, and it is vital that we provide them with opportunities. It is essential that young people know that we are investing in them. Young people need to know that they are valued and that they can have hope for a brighter future. The DUP believes that all our young people deserve support. Where is the Minister's practical concern for our young people's future job prospects? Where is the financial certainty for the scheme? We have not heard about that. We have heard about discussions, but we have not heard that there is financial certainty.

On the other hand — this is in the motion — has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss with the Minister of Health the mental health of young people who are facing long-term unemployment? One of the major drivers of the UK initiative was to tackle economic inactivity and improve the lives of young people in receipt of universal credit. The failure to implement the scheme in Northern Ireland will sustain the rise in claimants caused by COVID-19. The delay in the programme is not only having a direct impact on young people but holding back the attempts to rebuild our economy. The Communities Minister needs to explain in detail why the scheme introduced in Great Britain was not replicated in Northern Ireland, at least as a first start. It could have been modified as it went along.

5.45 pm

I will now refer to what other Members said. Mr Frew kicked off by proposing the motion. He mentioned the Kickstart scheme and outlined the quality of our young people. We have very good young people. He also indicated that they need support and hoped that that support will be forthcoming.

Karen Mullan recognised the need to develop a programme and placed an emphasis on work placements. I agree with her, in the sense that it is no good entering a training programme if you cannot get a work placement. That applies to any work-experience scheme that has started, particularly the apprenticeship programme.

Mark Durkan rightly referred to the brain drain and the potential for the lack of a scheme to force more young people into leaving Northern Ireland. I liked his expression, where he said that Job Start has now turned into "false start". He also said that the lack of a scheme is devastating for our young people.

Robbie Butler hoped that the Minister will move on the scheme and that it will transpire.

Kellie Armstrong agreed on the need for an initiative and that schemes were needed. She said "schemes". We do not have to limit Job Start to one particular branch. It could, in fact, have a number of themes running through it. She also said that there should be schemes to address the needs of our young people and urged the Minister not to leave them behind.

Alex Easton highlighted missed opportunities when he spoke about young people who have not been in education and about the job fairs, work experience and careers advice that have been missed. He said that young people are now at a disadvantage having missed those.

Fra McCann mentioned the impact that the pandemic has had on our unemployment figures. He also, not unexpectedly, paid great tribute to the Minister.

Paula Bradley referred to the one-year lockdown, highlighted the unemployment statistics and expressed difficulty about getting information on the scheme. She said that it was "like pulling teeth."

Sinéad Ennis remarked that we need to build our way out of the pandemic. She said that the 30-trainee rule was a factor and that GB had changed that rule. That is no surprise at all. Any scheme makes changes as it goes along.

Sinead McLaughlin said that we need to get on with creating a job scheme and that,

considering the challenges and the unemployment situation here, there is more need for a scheme in Northern Ireland than there is in GB. She also stressed the need for an ambitious and comprehensive scheme.

I sat opposite the Minister on Belfast City Council. I believe that she has concern and wants to do something for the unemployed and those from very disadvantaged backgrounds, but, Minister, it has to be delivered. It is no good talking about it. Nice words will not deliver the scheme. We need work-ready young people —

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

Mr Newton: — during these fractious times, in which the Minister stated that it was difficult to start the scheme, yet the Minister for the Economy was able to go ahead and deliver the apprenticeship scheme.

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

Mr Newton: Thank you. I pay tribute to all those who took part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, their personal and professional development, mental health and career prospects; recognises that 16-to 24-year-olds have been among the most disproportionately affected by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions; expresses deep concern that the Minister of Finance has not provided certainty that funding commitments for the Job Start scheme in Northern Ireland can be honoured in the next financial year; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to the implementation and roll-out of the Job Start scheme without further delay to address serious youth unemployment challenges.

Adjourned at 5.49 pm.

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