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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 March 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Ms Dillon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A Cheann Comhairle, under the code of conduct for MLAs, we are supposed to uphold the law in accordance with the trust that is placed in us by the people. In yesterday's debate on flags, identity, culture and tradition, Mr Alan Chambers declared the he is engaging with loyalist paramilitaries. Those are armed criminal gangs, engaging in drug dealing, racketeering and intimidation in their own communities. Is it right that a Member of the House should be doing so?

Mr Speaker: I will examine yesterday's Hansard report to establish what commentary was made and what role, if any, I have.

Mr Chambers: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I did not speak in the House yesterday. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: As I have said, Members, I will examine the Hansard report *[Interruption]* and determine whether there is anything —.

A Member: Keep to the script.

Mr Speaker: Order, please. Order, Members. I will examine the Hansard report, as I already said, and determine whether any action needs to be taken.

Speaker's Ruling: Points of Order, Standards of Debate

Mr Speaker: Members, I want to return to some issues in the House yesterday. At the Business Committee recently, a number of members expressed concern about the abuse of points of order. Points of order are an opportunity to clarify points of procedure rather than make political points.

Yesterday, Mr Jim Allister asked to make a point of order, but he immediately made it clear

that he was raising a query in relation to the Assembly Commission.

Today's Question Time session to the Assembly Commission would have been the opportunity to raise matters with the Commission. When I called Mr Allister to order, he continued to shout over the Chair from a sedentary position. I have been concerned about Mr Allister's behaviour on a number of recent occasions. He has made ill-tempered remarks, including to the Infrastructure Minister yesterday, and has been aggressive in commenting from a seated position while other Members are speaking.

Members will be aware also that, last week, I drew attention to the debate on Standing Order 34 on 8 March. During that debate, Mr Allister also interrupted Ms Bradshaw to the point where she had to draw attention to it, and Mr Allister then apologised.

The authority of the Chair is something that we will always take seriously in the Chamber, and there is clear precedence for imposing a sanction when a Member challenges the Chair in such a significant way. Indeed, in 2014, the Chair at the time was required to similarly rule on a challenge that Mr Allister had made to a Deputy Speaker. On that occasion, Mr Allister was informed that he would not be called to speak for five sitting days. It has been some time since there has been a need to sanction a Member in such a way. However, yesterday was a clear example of unacceptable behaviour that cannot be ignored, and I intend to uphold the authority of the Speaker's Office, regardless of who is in the Chair at a given time. Therefore, Mr Allister will not be called to speak for three sitting days, starting from this morning. That includes all items of business, including questions and interventions.

I also want to comment on the overall standards of debate yesterday. Gordon Lyons raised a point of order on the matter yesterday. I realise that there are political tensions at the moment, and that has been reflected in the Chamber. Yesterday was an example of a discussion on

which there were vastly different views across the Assembly, and tensions were not helped by the way in which Members on different sides of the House expressed those differences.

There needs to be respect for different opinions. That also means that it is not necessary for Members to express their own views in a way that is clearly inflammatory to other Members. I ask all Members to be mindful of that today, and I hope that the sanction that I have reluctantly imposed will act as a clear guide to all Members of the need to adhere to the standards of debate of good temper, moderation, courtesy and respect. I will continue today to review the remarks that were made yesterday and drawn attention to by Mr Gordon Lyons to establish whether any further action is required. I will come back to that when we return at our next sitting.

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

Ms Dillon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

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

Mr Speaker: Mr Allister, you have been sanctioned, which means that you cannot make an intervention.

Mr Allister: On a false basis.

Mr Speaker: I can count. I have determined a three-day suspension. I can add to it. Do not tempt me. I call Ms Linda Dillon.

Ms Dillon: To clarify, it was Mr Trevor Clarke. My apologies to Mr Chambers.

Mr Chambers: Apology accepted.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Chambers, for that magnanimity, as was called for yesterday by our colleague Christopher Stalford.

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform the Assembly that the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill has received Royal Assent. *[Interruption.]* The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 became law on 22 March 2021. It is chapter 3.

National Day of Reflection

Mr Speaker: Today has been designated as a National Day of Reflection, and, along with other legislatures, I will suspend the sitting at 11.50 am to make preparations to mark the day. At 12.00 noon, I will invite you to join me in observing a minute's silence to remember all those who have lost their lives during the pandemic and to show our support for the many thousands of people who mourn the loss of their loved ones.

Ministerial Statement

Civil Justice Modernisation

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members present in the Chamber must also do that by rising in their places, as well as by notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions.

I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I am here today to outline my plans for modernising civil and family justice over the remainder of this Assembly mandate.

I want to set out the work that has already commenced and the further steps that I plan to take over the next year. I am investing time and energy in the area because it is an important one that touches on the lives of so many citizens, often at a point when they are facing some of life's most significant challenges, such as divorce, financial difficulties, injury or the death of a loved one. An effective civil justice system is an important part of a well-functioning economy, helping businesses and their customers to settle disputes quickly and effectively.

While criminal justice often draws most attention, many more people come into contact with the civil justice system each year. For example, in the last business year, 2019-2020, nearly 102,000 parties were involved in civil and family proceedings. Many will have had a positive experience, with cases dealt with efficiently and effectively, resulting in a swift resolution. Others will have found the process long, difficult and expensive. I want to do all that I can to support more citizens to resolve their disputes as quickly, fairly and inexpensively as possible in a system that is seen as just, proportionate and accessible.

Despite all the difficulties caused by COVID-19, we are starting from a good place, with an independent judiciary, a capable legal profession, hardworking staff in the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and other professionals, such as courts children's officers, all dedicated to ensuring that effective justice is available to all. I support all the effort and commitment on the part of so many people by delivering change that will make the overall system more effective in meeting the needs of citizens.

A wide range of partners support the delivery of civil and family justice, and arrangements for determining how the system should operate are complex and somewhat piecemeal. Policy responsibility is spread across three Departments, with Finance and Health responsible for most of the substantive law and my Department responsible for the operation of courts and tribunals. There is a case for rationalising that complex set of responsibilities. However, recognising that this is a short mandate and that we are also in the midst of a global pandemic, I plan to focus instead on the changes that I can make more immediately to improve the current system for the citizens who use it. The changes will also help to set the foundation for further reform in the next mandate in a post-COVID environment.

Focusing efforts on the more immediate benefits for citizens will make the best use of the time and resources that I have available. The changes that I am outlining are intended to do two things: firstly, to make the civil and family justice system more accessible for citizens; and, secondly, to make the system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive. In identifying ways of delivering those outcomes, I have had the benefit of the access to justice reviews and Sir John Gillen's civil and family justice review. I am grateful to the Lord Chief Justice for having commissioned Sir John's work and to Sir John for his considered and very detailed report, which contains well over 400 recommendations for a range of sectors and organisations. Around one-third of those recommendations touch directly on the work of my Department. They have helped to shape my priorities for improving accessibility and for making the system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive.

I will use the remainder of the statement to outline the actions that I have initiated and others that I plan to undertake to deliver on each of the priorities.

I will start with improving accessibility for citizens. For many, the civil and family justice

system feels unduly complicated. We need to do more to simplify the system and make it easier for everyone to access and to use. Clearly, that is not going to happen overnight, and my focus in the short term will be on taking tangible steps forward and continuous improvement while setting a longer-term ambition for transformation of the system through digital technology.

I want to highlight three areas in particular for continuous improvement. The first relates to litigants in person. Litigants in person are citizens who, for a variety of reasons, represent themselves in court proceedings. In partnership with Ulster University and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), my Department set up a litigants in person reference group in order to help identify and break down barriers that are faced by litigants in person and to improve relationships between them and the other court actors. The group is chaired by a retired solicitor with considerable experience in the advice sector, and it includes representation from the legal profession, the judiciary, Ulster University, the Human Rights Commission, my Department and, most importantly, litigants in person. The group has made good progress on building understanding and identifying areas for improvement.

I am grateful to all those involved in the reference group for their valuable work, and I look forward to continuing to build on that initial success.

10.45 am

One of the messages that has come out of the reference group is the need to improve understanding of how best to engage with the courts system and to reduce the fear of doing so. That feedback has helped to shape the 'Private Family Law Action Plan' that I am launching jointly with the Minister of Health.

A key early component of that rolling action plan is to demystify the family courts by providing additional information and tools to assist separating parents to navigate the system, to resolve more issues for themselves and to know where to seek further help. A number of animations and easy-to-use documents, such as an outline parenting agreement, have been produced as part of the action plan. The action plan will evolve over time, with further products to be developed to help separating parents to resolve disputes in the interests of their children. Ultimately, it is the welfare of children that lies at the heart of the

family justice system and the 'Private Family Law Early Resolution Action Plan'.

The third area where I intend to deliver continuous improvement is in ensuring that appropriate supports are in place for the more vulnerable members of our community who come before the courts. Effective access to justice is dependent on that. I am pleased that, through the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, by including provision for special measures and provision to prohibit perpetrators from cross-examining their victims in person, I have been able to enhance the protections available to support victims of domestic abuse to give their best evidence in the family courts.

I will now look at other types of special measures to support other vulnerable members of our community in accessing justice. One particular area of focus will be a registered intermediary support for those with communication difficulties. A successful scheme already operates in the criminal courts, and I plan to consult later this year on creating a similar scheme to support vulnerable users in the civil and family courts.

All those acts of continuous improvement will help to make the civil and family justice system easier for citizens to access and to use, but, on their own, they are not enough.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the transformative role that digital technologies can play in delivering services in new and more accessible ways. IT now plays an important role in every part of our lives, including how we order goods and services, connect with others, engage with government or access learning. Many citizens now expect to be able to interact with services at a time and in a way that is convenient for them. Justice also needs to be able to respond to those new expectations, and there is a growing case for improving access to justice through technology. For that reason, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service embarked on an ambitious modernisation programme that, over the coming years, will deliver changes, in partnership with key stakeholders, to simplify and modernise the current system and improve access to justice for citizens.

These are early days, and, while our efforts have been hampered by the need to divert resources to respond to the pandemic, I am pleased with the progress that has been made so far. NICTS's modernisation programme applies to civil, family and criminal courts as well as tribunals. It will redesign services and

adopt digital delivery channels that will improve access to justice and provide simpler and more effective services, making it easier for citizens to interact with court and tribunal services. The programme will also deliver a modernised court and tribunal estate to support new ways of working.

As part of the modernisation programme, NICTS is developing a digital strategy for consultation over the coming months with the judiciary, stakeholders and interest groups. The strategy will inform a future road map for the delivery of services. Significant work has already commenced on this ambitious modernisation programme, including the installation of enhanced audio and video technology in 41 courtrooms and the implementation of Wi-Fi across the courts and tribunals estate, to facilitate the display of digital evidence and electronic case bundles. The courtroom technology upgrade project will continue throughout 2021, and the use of electronic case bundles in the courtroom will also be piloted later this year. It is encouraging that the probate online portal, which is the first customer-facing change under the modernisation programme, will be introduced in May. That new portal will enable users to complete key stages of the probate process digitally. It is a pilot service redesign project, so vital learning from the design and delivery of the probate online project will be applied to other NICTS service innovations, and we will build similar online processes for other areas of business.

Aspects of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service modernisation programme have been accelerated over the last year. Remote working capacity has increased rapidly. Working with partners and stakeholders, we want to build on that momentum to implement a modernisation programme that will provide tangible benefits through a more proportionate system that makes better use of technology and allows faster end-to-end completion of cases. I am keen to explore ways in which online dispute resolution can complement the justice system. My officials are undertaking feasibility work in that area, and I hope to be in a position to launch a pilot online dispute resolution system focused on small claims later this year.

I will turn to the second of my priorities: making the civil and family justice system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive. The system should minimise acrimony and stress and allow disputes to be resolved as dispassionately as possible, using tools that are appropriate to the complexity and nature of the issues under dispute. The system needs to allow disputes to

be settled more swiftly, to offer greater choice and to operate at a lower cost.

The court process itself can be stressful, and the adversarial nature of proceedings can increase acrimony and make it difficult to find long-term sustainable solutions. That is particularly the case for separating parents. Each of us in the Chamber is aware of constituents who have fought intractable battles through the family courts. That is of benefit to no one, and particularly not to the children who often find themselves caught in the middle.

The central aim of the action plan on private family law early resolution is to improve the lives of children by encouraging earlier resolution of disputes between separating parents. I am under no illusion that that will be easy to achieve. There are cultural barriers to overcome, and there is a need to change hearts and minds. Many separating parents are not aware that they do not need to engage with the justice system in order to resolve parenting disputes, and others want, for whatever reason, to have their day in court. The action plan will be there to help separating parents who want to resolve disputes themselves and encourage others to try a different approach in the interests of their children. Changing practice will not be a quick or easy process. It will be a marathon rather than a sprint, but it is an exercise worth undertaking.

As part of the action plan, I will examine the feasibility of introducing mediation in private family law cases on a pilot basis. There is much more to do before we can introduce a pilot, but the idea needs to be fully explored to see whether it offers a viable, affordable way to help separating parents to resolve disputes early in the justice journey. Any approach that achieves early resolution would be a good thing, particularly for the children involved, and would avoid the stress and expense of legal proceedings that can worsen relationships and make successful co-parenting difficult to achieve.

The other issue that I will tackle in relation to family law is delay. That is a matter of great interest for the judiciary, and I am keen to do what I can as well. Earlier resolution of disputes would certainly help, as it would reduce the number of cases and leave more space in court lists for those who really need to be there. There will also be areas of court-linked processes where changes could reduce delay. Many of those processes are outside my Department's control, but one that is within my remit is the speed with which we deal with legal aid applications in family cases. One factor that

can cause delay is the process for appointing and paying expert witnesses. I am pleased that we are addressing that through a pilot that launched on 25 January. The pilot is testing a streamlined approach to appointing expert witnesses in the family proceedings court as well as standardising the legal aid rates for them.

Opportunities to make the system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive are not limited to family justice. There are a number of areas in which I want to make improvements to civil justice. Mediation is one of those areas and, to enhance its use, I plan on formalising legal aid remuneration for mediation in civil proceedings. I aim to consult on the issue before the summer. The evaluation will inform wider consideration of the effectiveness of mediation in resolving matters without recourse to the courts.

Proportionality is also about making sure that civil cases are heard at the right court tier in line with their value and complexity. That aim is at the heart of the consultation on changes to the County Court jurisdiction, which I launched on 4 February. Increasing the financial jurisdictions should ensure that more court users have certainty about costs at the outset of proceedings. That should enable them to make better-informed decisions about whether to take or defend legal action. Importantly, my proposals mean that more cases could be heard in the small claims courts where processes are more straightforward, user-friendly and designed so that cases can be progressed without legal representation.

Fairness is also at the heart of the changes that I propose to the legal framework for setting the statutory discount rate. The rate is used when determining settlements in personal injury cases. I introduced the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill on 1 March. The aim of that Bill is to ensure that the assumptions on which the discount rate is set better reflect the reality of how claimants invest and, in turn, that the discount rate provides 100% compensation to people who have suffered injuries. A further related area that I want to look at is protecting compensation for children arising out of civil claims, such as for personal injuries. Currently, it appears that some compensation settlements for children are not approved by a court or paid into court for protection. I intend to consult on how it might be possible to ensure that all such settlements can be protected in an appropriate way.

Fairness is also a key principle underpinning the housing possession court duty scheme.

That important support service, established by David Ford when he was Justice Minister, provides information and advice at the door of the court to homeowners facing repossession and renters facing eviction. I am pleased that I have been able to continue funding the service, which is delivered by Housing Rights. Helpfully, it is also linked to a broader programme of housing advice funded by the Department for Communities. Projects such as the housing possession court duty scheme play an important role in access to justice. I am heartened to see the interest being paid to the project in England and Wales, where the Government are working with the judiciary and other stakeholders to develop a similar service. That type of service is critical to helping to support our citizens when they are at their most vulnerable.

In many ways, the housing possession court duty scheme encapsulates what I am trying to achieve through the broader programme of modernising civil and family justice: having a clear focus on improving the experience and outcomes for citizens; making it easier for citizens to access justice; making the existing system fairer and more responsive; and dealing with disputes in a swifter and more proportionate way. Achieving those aims across civil and family justice will not be straightforward. I have deliberately set out an ambitious programme of work for the short time that is available in this mandate. I am committed to change, as, I know, are many of you. Together, we can improve the lives of citizens who need the civil and family justice system and lay a path for future reform. As I have outlined, we have made a good start, but much remains to be done by my Department and our justice partners. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Sometimes the Back Benches are a little more comfortable, Members.

I welcome this high-level document's ambitions for the longer-term transformation of the justice system. I think that all of us will be able to find common ground on that. Looking at it in more detail, I have no doubt that the Committee will want to see clear objectives, timelines for implementation and so on. However, as far as the high-level document goes, I welcome it.

Throughout COVID, the need for technological transformation has come to the fore because of the poor existing technology, which has highlighted the need for significant investment in the technology used in our court system. In

2017, a previous Committee recommended the use of online resolution for small claims, for example, so this is an area that Members have raised before. Does the Minister feel that the resources will be made available in her Department to have the technological transformation needed to facilitate online resolution?

Finally, in a conversation that the Deputy Chair of the Committee and I had with the Lord Chief Justice, he indicated his view that, to keep the focus on the transformation that is needed in the courts, there is an argument for operational decisions to be moved to an independent body for which the presidents of the courts could be responsible, rather than resting in the Department of Justice. I do not have a view on that. Does the Minister feel that the Lord Chief Justice has merit in advocating that?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for both of his questions. The modernisation programme, particularly the digital strategy, remains part of our core project for the next year, so it will have been bid for within our normal boundaries. Of course, the budget settlement will provide challenges, but this is a priority for the Department. We actually managed, because of COVID, to make huge progress in that regard by renewing and introducing better technology to the courts. As a result of that investment, we are now able to move forward much more rapidly than originally anticipated.

Some of that will have been funded by COVID investment but will be available in the longer term for us to make use of. There are also considerable savings to be made from using digital technology in the criminal courts and in the family and civil courts. Although the upfront investment is considerable, the savings that the individual, as well as the court system, will make down the line are significant. It is therefore important that we keep that as a priority, particularly in the context of an increasingly challenging budget situation.

11.00 am

There are disparate views on where the operational decisions should be made and on whom the lead should be. The roles played by the Civil Justice Council and the Family Justice Board are hugely important. The leadership that they are able to show around the issues, and some of their focus on them, has been important as we look at some of the operational measures that can be introduced. I have discussed this with the Lord Chief Justice, because it will ultimately be a decision for him,

but I would like to see them move from shadow format to a more formal operating standard, as they have contributed hugely to changes, and I believe that they have a continued contribution to make.

It would also be helpful if their membership were to be expanded to include court users as well as professionals. More laypeople could also be involved. I have suggested to the Lord Chief Justice that the Department should be engaging regularly at ministerial level with the council and the board, because we have to have a streamlined and focused approach to how we take that forward, and that approach has to be coordinated. There are many moving parts in the civil and family courts, and the Department has much less leverage in what it can and cannot achieve. Thankfully, the relationships among those moving parts are particularly strong at this time. There are good relationships among the judiciary, the Lord Chief Justice and his office, the court system and those who are involved in many of the panels and boards. It is therefore about trying to build on those good relationships and ensuring that we coordinate our activities and investment. To be blunt, I am less concerned about where overall responsibility lies.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her statement. Like the Chair of the Committee, I welcome the high-level document. The devil will be in the detail, no doubt, but I welcome its intent.

As the Minister will know, one of the issues that was raised regularly during the passage of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill was the abuse, rather than the use, of family courts, and the abuse of them by abusers through bringing their victims back to court repeatedly. Some work was done on the Bill to improve that — we did as much as we could — but we know that the system is still very open to abuse. I want to know whether more can be done. I am interested in what you said about having laypeople and court users on the council and the board. That is what we are missing. We need to ensure that those who are being put through the system and those who advocate for them have a say in how the system works, because it is not working. It is not that it is broken. Rather, it was never right in the first place. It is a system that was created by men for men over hundreds of years. I say that with the greatest respect to many of the men in the Chamber and outside it, but it is the truth. We have to look at it and look at having serious reform.

Mrs Long: There is significant female leadership now, in the family courts in particular. Many of those who work in family law are women who are there representing the needs of male and female participants in the court system. There has been a huge change in the culture in the courts, and a lot of that is down to the leadership shown by the chair of the family court board. That is important. She has shown real vision and leadership around how the issues should be dealt with. She has also shown a willingness to innovate and be creative in dispute resolution.

It is true to say, however, that the family justice system and the civil justice system can sometimes be affected by the general adversarial nature of any court system. The criminal courts are obviously adversarial, and they are intended to be so, but the family courts and civil courts can often be perceived as being similar when, in fact, they should be a dispute resolution tool. Of course they are the end of the line when it comes to dispute resolution, in that somebody will have to make an adjudication, but they should not be viewed as a forum for combat between warring parties over childcare and other issues. They should be seen as a way to civilly resolve disputes about the care of children in a way that is in the best interests of the child, and I think that we need to reset, if you like, our attitudes and expectations around the court. That is one of the reasons why I am very focused on the idea of support for mediation as part of the process, both in the civil and family court jurisdictions. I believe that, by encouraging, supporting and funding mediation, we may get to a point where we have less breakdown in relationships post-separation, which would allow families to co-parent in a way that is constructive and is good for the well-being of the child. That should be at the heart of the system and is at the heart of what the family courts are trying to achieve.

As I said, I think that that adversarial nature of the courts is something that the family courts and the civil courts try very hard to avoid. For example, the litigants in person issue is one that we are very conscious of in civil justice. People ought to be able to represent themselves with respect to something without having to go and find a solicitor, a barrister and all the other things that will potentially lead to a more combative approach, but it is also important that, when we set, for example, the financial limits around these things, we do it in a way that encourages both sides to operate on that basis, as opposed to an inequality of arms building up in either court. That can be incredibly intimidating for someone who cannot and does not want to have legal representation

but finds themselves facing off against a barrister over something as personal as a personal loss or the care of their children.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for bringing her statement to the House. She will be aware that retired judge Sir John Gillen criticised the slow response from the Department of Justice on the implementation of his report into how our justice system handles sexual offences cases, and today the Minister has presented myriad reference groups and action plans. However, I have sincere concerns, Minister, that there appears to be no reference to resource being attached to this. While I do welcome the acknowledgement that the problems exist and that there is a need for coming together to resolve them, it does all appear pointless if there is no targeted ambition to pull down resource to implement any recommendations that come out of those reference groups. Can the Minister speak directly to that point, please?

Mrs Long: I am more than happy to do so. Before I came to the Chamber, I met Sir John Gillen because, as you know, his reviews have been around for some time, particularly in respect of this. I will say two things. The Member has taken one extract from a very long interview by Sir John Gillen with respect to serious sexual offences. He said that he had no doubt that I was absolutely committed to making change. He said that he welcomed the progress that had been made but that, like everyone else, he felt that that progress was too slow. He also acknowledged that the justice system, more generally, is slow to change and that not all the levers are within the Department. So, we need to be full and clear when we quote people, otherwise we might misrepresent their actual assessment of the situation.

With respect to this, again, his view was very clear. He feels that it has taken too long for us to get to this point. He would like to see more progress more quickly. Who does not? However, the reality is that I have one year left of a two-year mandate, and therefore I have prioritised particular issues on which I believe we can make significant progress in the next year. I believe that they will also pave the way for any incoming Justice Minister to be able to take forward the more substantive reform of the system to which I referred at the beginning of my statement.

When I spoke with Sir John Gillen, he said that he had a checklist, as you would expect, beside him before the call started and that the things that I said I was going to prioritise were all the issues that he had on his checklist. So, with respect, we have managed to capture, if you

like, the priorities that he would capture if he were faced with the same time challenges that I have, albeit both of us share a much greater ambition for change.

Of course there will be challenges with resources, and I cannot deny that any more than anyone else. The one area that I have no control over is the budget that is given to me. I can only control where it is spent, but not how much I get. If others want to lobby for me to get more money in the Department of Justice, I can assure you that there are substantive projects on which that can be spent, and there is no shortage of issues that I could address, even in the next short period of a year to improve justice. However, even within the constrained budget that I have, we are not talking only about action plans on paper. My statement referred to specific pilot projects that will be rolled forward, and we have the resource to do that. I have talked about investment in technology; we have set aside resource to do that. I have also spoken about our forward plans to look at the structures so that we are in good shape come the next mandate when we will, hopefully, have a full five years to address those issues and will be able to make much more significant and substantive reform to the system.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her statement and update. She covered a range of issues. It gives us a really good direction, but I am always concerned that that direction could be undermined if outputs do not match what the Minister is trying to achieve. I have represented a military veteran who had to live in the Mourne mountains for three years because of the slowness of the family courts, and also a father who received a contact order two years ago but is yet to have contact with his children. Such outputs could undermine the very sensible approach that the Minister has taken. What are we doing to ensure that resident parents comply with court contact orders?

Mrs Long: As the Member will appreciate, those are matters for the judiciary. Ultimately, when somebody breaches a court contact order, it has to go back to the court to be enforced, and there will be a series of considerations that the judiciary will make at that point. It is fair to say that, by trying to engage in, for example, mediation rather than going directly to court, we might be able to foster better relationships between separating parents and might not get into the situations that we have all experienced in our constituency offices with respect to one parent frustrating another's access to their children and not being willing to cooperate with the court

ruling. We also need to be very sensitive to the reasons why people may do that. It could be perceived threat, perceived intimidation, or a fear of what may happen to their children in those circumstances. That can be very real, even if the courts do not necessarily agree. A lot of work may need to be done to change people's minds and build confidence so that they comply with a court order.

Linda Dillon referred to those who bring forward vexatious claims against their former partner to use the court system against them. We have a duty under the new law to bring forward a report to the Committee and the Assembly on how we will handle the vexatious use of the family courts. We are very conscious of that issue. Early mediation will make a huge difference in terms of resolution. It will not solve all problems, but it will go a long way to addressing some of the issues to which the Member referred.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I welcome it, including the reference to the private family law action plan. You mentioned that that is a collaborative approach with the Department of Health. Will you outline how the Department of Health will play a role?

Mrs Long: At least part of the feed-in to the action plan will come from social services and other health-based bodies. We are trying to move away from the current situation, in which court is the place of last resort, but often the first place to which people turn, to a situation in which, through mediation, case conferencing and early resolution, we can start to put the child's needs at the heart of the discussions between parents before they seek recourse in the courts and in a way that will empower parents to make collaborative and joint decisions about how they wish to take things forward.

The role of Health in that area is important, as Health covers most of the law when it comes to family courts. The law, in itself, is not something over which I have control; it lies mainly with the Department of Finance and the Department of Health. Although we are focusing in this mandate on early resolution, there is a very strong case to say that the elements of the law that relate to family courts should be centralised along with all the others. It creates complexity. People often write to me asking what I am going to do about family law. The truth is that I will refer their letter to another Minister, which is not a satisfactory response. People assume that it is part of the justice system; they do not recognise that it is spread over three Departments. It causes huge confusion in how people relate to it.

The Health Department has a huge responsibility not only for reporting to the courts in supporting the decisions that are made but for supporting early resolution through mediation and other means.

11.15 am

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her positive statement, and I hope that it will give hope to many who are going through the family courts.

Minister, your latter point is important. A man was going through court to gain access to his daughter, and the mother made what were proved to be false claims of child abuse that led to the man being removed from having access to and living with the two other younger children that he has with his current partner for nearly two years, leaving one parent to cope with two very young children. The child abuse claims were widened to the other parent, and that put in jeopardy the lives of the two young people living with that parent. They faced the real dilemma of being put into foster care or a care home. For nearly two years, those people were trapped in that nightmare. Social services were a barrier and a hindrance to that family, not a help. I know that that is not the Minister's position, but, if justice had been sped up, that would have helped to get through those barriers. Minister, can you provide hope to people through your statement that, along with the other Ministers you talked about, you will be able to fix this to a point where justice is sped up so that, if vexatious claims are made, they will be resolved more quickly, allowing people to get on with their lives. That man just made a claim for access for one child and was put into a nightmare scenario for many years.

Mrs Long: There are a number of issues in the Member's question that I want to raise. First, as he acknowledges, policy on alienation is a matter for the Department of Health. Where abusive and damaging behaviours are suspected in family proceedings, it is for social workers to advise the court, which will then consider evidence of alienating behaviour alongside all other evidence when deciding what is in the best interests of the child. Therefore, that provision already exists. Although we did not specify parental alienation as an issue in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, we talked about abuse that involved and engaged children. That is because we recognise that it is a real concern. I believe that that can now be prosecuted under that legislation.

I also understand that the Department of Health has committed to exploring guidance for professionals supporting families and experiencing acrimonious disputes as part of that private law family action plan to which my colleague just referred. I want to continue to work collaboratively with Minister Swann to scope out and support future actions. The Department of Health has policy responsibility, but I am clear that one parent should not be able to use a child to abuse the other parent. It is appropriate, therefore, that we have captured that kind of behaviour in the domestic abuse Act.

Ultimately, while those matters are important, the Member is also correct that the speed with which justice is delivered is important, particularly where there is acrimony. Through more focus on mediation, we can take out some of the cases that perhaps do not need to go to court if a resolution can be found between parents and they feel confident that that resolution can be upheld. By doing that, we will take those out of the court and allow it to focus on the more complex cases where there is a need for intervention. That will allow the process to move more swiftly than is the case at the moment.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. I, too, welcome the measure, as it is very positive. Anything that improves the speed and efficiency of family proceedings should be welcomed. It is important to recognise that, no matter what the situation is, the biggest impact is generally on the child or children in such scenarios.

Minister, there is a huge role for digital technologies in transforming civil and family justice, but many citizens, particularly those in rural areas, have difficulties in accessing and sometimes have no access to broadband. What safeguards will be in place to ensure that access to justice is not affected for those people as we go through the changes?

Mrs Long: That is a hugely important issue. Whilst we recognise that more and more people rely on digital technology to interact with government services, do online shopping and all those other things, there will always be a cohort who prefer to do things face to face. That is for a host of reasons, including the digital divide in society or, perhaps, because people have communication challenges or difficulties. It is important that we look at the individual and ensure that whatever method is used in resolving disputes — in the court, in mediation or digitally — we use the correct mechanism for that individual and that their access to justice is

not in any way hampered by the technology that is used. Support for people with communication difficulties in the courts is hugely important for someone who struggles to understand the court proceedings or to make their points clearly. All of that needs to be considered. Digital technology is only one aspect of what we are trying to achieve.

For me, it is crucial that everyone has access to justice fairly and can participate as equally and fairly as possible in proceedings that have a huge implication for their personal life. We should not view the risk of exclusion from the courts as an issue: I see this as another mechanism by which people who perhaps struggle at the moment can access justice, as opposed to replacing the current system in which people can, if their situation makes it preferable, meet in person.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the statement and its intent. I have been listening carefully to her answers.

Given that children, as everyone agrees, are at the centre of and are most affected by court proceedings and decisions, to what extent have the Children's Commissioner and other organisations, such as the Children's Law Centre, been involved in developing the private family law action plan?

The Minister mentioned mediation a number of times. I agree with that process because it could speed all of this up and it is a better process to deal with. If, for instance, partners reach agreement through mediation, does that become law, or does it remain mediational until it goes to court?

Mrs Long: I will answer the final question first. We will have to look at whether that would be enforced by the court. It would be much better if that were not needed. Often, where people come to agreements, the agreements are not only more flexible but better enforced, simply because of the willingness of both parties and the fact that there tends to be less dispute. Tensions tend to arise at points of change: for example, if a person's individual circumstances change dramatically because they remarry, move home or whatever. By mediating early in such situations, we can probably resolve a lot of those issues.

Will the Member remind me of his first question? It has gone clean out of my head.

Mr G Kelly: It was about the family law action plan.

Mrs Long: Yes, I recall. It was about third sector engagement, which is important.

I mentioned the Family Justice Board and the Civil Justice Council. It is important, for example, that we have businesses, litigants in person and so on represented on the Civil Justice Council. That would be a step forward. Equally, when it comes to the needs of children, having representatives of the children's sector and the third sector involved on those boards may help with the representation of children's needs and concerns.

It is important that we try to make the justice system more inclusive and more representative, particularly in civil and family justice. That is the part of the justice system that the vast majority of people who have interaction with justice will interact with. It tends to be the bit that people know best and, yet, are most fearful of. As we shape the justice system and plan for the future, it is important that ordinary citizens and the groups that represent their best interests are represented. If we are to keep children at the centre, engaging those organisations, particularly when looking at how we go about introducing some of the plans that we have, will be critical.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her statement and the issues and actions that it contains. Will the Minister give an update on the British Government's application to rejoin the Lugano convention, which we lost access to as a result of Brexit? Would she have any concerns, should that application not be successful?

Mrs Long: I do not have an update for the Member at the moment. Rejoining should be straightforward, as, indeed, should be the ability to get a data adequacy agreement. Doing so is important for the cross-jurisdictional resolution of family and civil disputes so that people cannot simply walk across the border, resulting in no opportunity to be able to deal with the issues. As we know, that has been a long-standing issue. The Member's colleague in the Department for Communities will know about the pain that people go through when the Child Support Agency (CSA), for example, makes a ruling about how much maintenance they should be getting, only for the person who is meant to be paying the maintenance simply to walk across the border, which makes the CSA struggle to enforce its judgement. That is something that needs to be looked at very

carefully, and we are keeping a watching brief on it.

Mr Blair: I am pleased to hear the emphasis on fairness in the Minister's statement, particularly the references to vulnerable service users. Can she tell us more about how her actions and proposals will advance fairness in the system, through either the work of the Department of Justice or departmental work with other agencies?

Mrs Long: One of the areas in which we are looking at fairness in the system is through the work that we are doing at the moment to review the financial jurisdiction of the various court tiers. That is hugely important, because there are many people who will suffer financial loss. The last time that our financial jurisdiction was increased was around 10 years ago, if not more. The value of what would be considered a small claim now — if you lose a holiday or something like that — could be considerably more than the current financial jurisdiction of the courts. The purpose of the system is to ensure that, in those circumstances, people are able to get a quick, effective and fair resolution of a dispute with another party. Its purpose is also to do that without there being the need for people to turn up with a large legal defence — barristers and all the rest — and for it to be a much more informal resolution process, and therefore much quicker. We are looking very carefully at how we will raise the level of the financial threshold. It is about balancing the need for our system to remain quick, because it is much faster than the system in England and Wales, against ensuring that there is not an inequality of arms, where people feel that the need to defend a claim justifies huge expenditure on barristers and a legal team, while people who takes the claim arrive on their own to represent their own interests and feel that they are not able to do so adequately in front of the court. That is a fundamental issue of fairness that we are working to address.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give us an update on the commencement of the civil legal aid provisions of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021 and an update on the work that has been done, as was promised during the deliberations on the Bill, to look at having better access to legal aid for domestic abuse victims and limiting perpetrators' access to legal aid?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware, at the time of the Bill, that I gave a commitment that we would move forward on the issue of legal aid, and we continue to make progress in that

regard. As you know, we took legal advice on repercussiveness. We are now working through the consequences of that. We are looking at how we can best implement the wish of the Assembly, which was that those people who go to court because they are called to court will have access to legal aid but that it will not be available to those who initiate court proceedings, unless they have a material entitlement based on income. That is the balance that we are working on at the moment. We hope to be able to bring forward that advice in the coming weeks.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome all attempts to demystify the courts, no matter at what level. Across society, we need to learn about them, and know about them, especially for children and young people who are involved in the civil and family courts. I hope that resources and information will be made available for children and young people to access. The Minister said that delay is a key factor of interest in the family courts and has answered a few questions on budgeting and resourcing already. Has she, however, had agreement from her Executive colleagues, or does she intend to put in a bid to fund and deliver the necessary changes? On what specific mediation proposals will the Department be consulting?

11.30 am

Mrs Long: The Department of Health has agreed to continue to fund mediation through the action plan that we have set out. We have, of course, put in bids for all aspects of the work in the Department of Justice and, where we have that funding secured, the plan has been cut to fit that cloth. We recognise that we have limited time and resource to make significant impacts.

Of course, if it should happen that more money is made available, there is a long list of issues that we could address in the Department. However, we also need to be realistic as to what we will get from the Department of Finance, given the competing pressures. I am in no doubt whatsoever that, for example, where the Department of Health is working with us on some of these issues, particularly early resolution, it is making a financial as well as a practical contribution to the objectives set out in the report.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Members may take their ease for a moment or two.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Whilst not questioning the ruling of the Speaker, earlier you mentioned that the heckling of Ms Bradshaw was part of your deliberations in the sanctions towards Mr Allister. I ask for clarity on this point, for the sake of —.

Mr Speaker: Mr Buckley, you actually are challenging the ruling of the Speaker, so I do not want to discuss that any further.

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

Mr Speaker: You have already challenged the Speaker. You may not understand that; you are relatively inexperienced. However, I made deliberations and announced them this morning. I do not intend to rehearse them, so I leave the matter at rest. Thank you.

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I call the Minister to open the debate.

Mr Swann: I bring forward for debate the latest amendment to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations, that is SR 2021/46.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, and the indulgence of Members present, I begin by reflecting on an unprecedented year of challenge for us all, on our National Day of Reflection. All the Ministers in the Executive have had the challenging responsibility of maintaining a delicate balance between protecting the health of our most vulnerable people, our vital health services and our citizens' livelihoods.

I assure Members that my central motivation was and is to act in the best interests of the entire population. Mr Speaker, you will be only too aware of how many times in the past year I have had to bring Coronavirus restrictions regulations before the House. I absolutely understand that the regulations were sometimes unpopular and difficult to comprehend, but they always had the overarching intention of overcoming the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, 23 March 2021, is very nearly one year since the first set of restriction regulations were made, at 9.15 on the night of 28 March. Those initial principal regulations have long since been revoked and replaced, and more than 40 amendments have charted our course through the worst stages of the pandemic.

Little did we realise a year ago what havoc this terrible disease would inflict not only here but

across the globe. We have endured many dark days and days of dashed hopes. It is a solemn moment for us to remember the more than 2,100 people who have succumbed to COVID-19 in Northern Ireland over that time.

More often than not, the Executive have had to bring harsh restrictions to the House to protect the most vulnerable and to ensure that our vital health services were not overwhelmed. Today, I find myself in the all too rare position of bringing small relaxations to the restrictions. It is my sincere hope that, with the continued successful delivery of our vaccination programme, I will be able to continue to do that.

I am sure that some of the Members who spoke or wrote to me over the past year may not have fully believed my replies when I said that I would not keep the restrictions in place for one moment longer than necessary. I meant what I said, as I always recognised the harm that the restrictions would cause and what a fine balance the Executive had to strike. Members should understand that the restrictions, however unpopular, were entirely necessary as the rate of infection spiralled, exponentially at times.

It was on 19 March 2020 that the first of many deaths occurred in Northern Ireland. I offer my deepest sympathies to all the families that have suffered loss, grief and pain since. I do not forget those who may yet experience pain or loss as a result of the pandemic. It is vital that we do not lose sight of why such strict measures were — and are — necessary. Life has changed immeasurably for all of us, but it is my sincerest hope that we can now move along the pathway to a new normal as soon as possible.

If this lockdown has felt more oppressive than any we have endured so far, I hope, like all Members, that it will be the last time that we are forced to deploy such a blunt instrument to this extent in Northern Ireland. Short, dreary winter days in lockdown combined to make poor companions. The previous lockdowns, during the warmer spring and autumn days, at least allowed us to enjoy being outside in the fresh air, with its benefits to health and well-being.

Essential to our being able to leave the lockdowns behind is that everyone continues to keep the rules and follow my oft repeated simple health messages: maintain social distancing; wash your hands frequently; do not touch your face; avoid touching surfaces if you are out of your home; wear a face covering in appropriate settings — and, please, self-isolate and seek a test immediately if you experience

symptoms. Remember, we cannot relax our guard yet. We have come a considerable distance, but have still a considerable way to go.

I now return to the amendments. I will set the context, summarise the statutory rule, and be happy to take questions.

When the amendments were agreed by the Executive, on 18 February, we were seeing a decrease in COVID-19-positive cases, hospitalisations and ICU occupancy. There were 460 COVID-positive inpatients, down from 662 on 7 February. However, the number of inpatients remained worryingly and stubbornly high in comparison with the first peak of 322 COVID-positive hospital inpatients, and it was higher than the number on 16 October, when we brought in stronger restrictions to curb the second wave. COVID-positive ICU occupancy had fallen only slowly from a peak of 74 on 25 January to 51 on 18 February.

While those were, clearly, welcome signs, the position in our ICUs remained very serious. The number of ICU patients sat at about the same levels that we experienced at the peaks of the two previous waves. In April and November, there was every indication that ICU occupancy would remain stubbornly high for many weeks.

In the population, the so-called Kent variant was accounting for approximately 70% of positive cases in Northern Ireland. That is a particularly unwelcome strain, being some 70% more transmissible than the original variant. The danger signs were clearly present. Increased interpersonal contact over Christmas had led inescapably towards a sharp rise in case numbers during January. We saw reducing case numbers only in February as a result of restrictions, but they were falling from a very high place. I could not, in all honesty, risk us losing control of community transmission again, with the inevitable surge in hospitalisations and deaths that would follow from that. In parallel, the health service continued to struggle to manage the severe pressures that were on it as a result of the existing high number of hospital cases. The emergence of other variants was an additional concern for my officials.

In the light of all those very real possibilities, the Executive agreed, at the time of the seventh review of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations on 18 February, that we should continue with the restrictions for another four-week period. A couple of essential technical amendments were, therefore, made to the legislation to

extend the operation of the coronavirus regulations once again.

The amendments that we are debating stipulate that a formal review of the need for the restrictions regulations should be carried out on or before 18 March. I must inform Members that that review was carried out a week ago today, on 16 March, and the Executive confirmed that the retention of the principal regulations remained a proportionate and appropriate response to the pandemic, albeit with some further modest relaxations that were announced last week.

The remaining amendments in SR 2021/46 make four changes to the restrictions to allow some small relaxations that, I hope, the House will welcome. The first amendment came into effect on 2 March to permit the carer of a Motability scheme customer to accompany them to assist when they pick up their vehicle. The Examiner of Statutory Rules, in her report on a previous Motability scheme amendment, had highlighted that practical difficulty for some scheme users. The amendment addressed that omission, and I am pleased to say that the regulations now provide for that to take place. I take the opportunity to thank the Examiner for drawing that to my Department's attention.

Three further amendments commenced from 8 March to permit some additional relaxations to the restrictions. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will outline each of them in turn. The first allows a degree of limited opening for non-essential retail by way of contactless click and collect. If I may, I would like to report that, following engagement with retailers and retail sector representative bodies, the Department for the Economy worked with my Department to develop proposals to facilitate the provision of limited non-essential retail click-and-collect services.

The second of the amendments increased the number of people permitted to gather socially outdoors from a maximum of six from no more than two households to a maximum of 10 from no more than two households. However, the restrictions on all other outdoor gatherings, including sporting events and gatherings in private dwellings would remain unchanged.

The final amendment permits Departments to use conference facilities for the purposes of holding a public inquiry. The amendment extends a similar provision in place for holding courts, tribunals and appeals services in COVID-secure facilities and conference centres, recognising that our vital legal functions must continue to be delivered even in

the midst of severe restrictions. There was extensive engagement with a number of Departments about the limits on the number of attendees likely to be involved and, equally importantly, the mitigations that would be in place. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) were content to support that amendment on the basis of risk mitigations that could be put in place.

I believe that the limited relaxations to the restrictions introduced through the amended regulations were a measured and proportionate response to the information that was available at the time of the seventh review of the No. 2 restrictions regulations on 18 February and are in line with the intentions of 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions', which was published subsequently on 2 March. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Colm Gildernew. I need to advise you that we will suspend the sitting in five minutes' time.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First of all, I note the continuing improvement in the daily reported statistics. We see more people vaccinated, fewer reported cases of COVID-19, fewer people in our hospitals and, ultimately, lower numbers of people passing away from COVID.

I would, however, like to join you, Minister, in reflecting on the impact that COVID has had to date, including on those who have lost family in the four weeks since we last debated the regulations. I note that, to date, across the island of Ireland, 6,693 people have lost their lives to COVID, and every one of those deaths is an individual tragedy for every one of those families.

11.45 am

We pay tribute to our health and social care workers, who have helped to bring us through what, we hope, has been the worst of this pandemic, and we hope that, over the coming weeks, as some restrictions are eased, those figures will continue to improve. We need to get to the point in the coming weeks where we are able to start our health recovery, reopen a range of services to patients and allow the Department to make inroads into the very lengthy and frustrating waiting lists.

The Committee was briefed on the regulations at its meeting last Thursday. It is a cause of

frustration for Committee members that we are debating rules today that have already been in place for a number of weeks. Members are aware that a review took place last week that will result in further regulations that we will debate again in a number of weeks' time. We have concerns about the limitations of post hoc scrutiny and the continuing approach of legislating without formal consultation and impact assessments. It is acknowledged, however, that this opportunity for debate allows Members to place on record their views, and we trust that it will inform subsequent regulations.

The briefing session with the director of population health last Thursday was very useful in that regard. It gave the Committee the opportunity to discuss the regulations in more detail and to seek further information on the work that the Executive are undertaking on next steps. One of the areas discussed was the regulation allowing click and collect in limited circumstances. The Committee welcomes the extension of click-and-collect services to baby equipment, clothing and footwear. However, members raised some concerns about the practicality of buying baby items such as prams and car seats without physical inspection. The same issue was raised in relation to children's footwear and the need for children's feet to be measured properly. There was a suggestion that an appointment-based approach could be used to address some of those issues.

There was also a discussion on the increase to the limit on outdoor gatherings, concerns around restrictions affecting youth diversionary workers and that the current restrictions prevented youth workers from meeting with more than one or two young people at a time. I welcome the clarity provided by the official that youth support services may continue to operate and provide support for persons if they are at risk of illness, injury or harm. Members also discussed that there may be a need for targeted guidance for young people to manage and mitigate risk when they are meeting. We were advised that work is being undertaken by the Department on assessing adherence and behaviour more widely. The Committee agreed to ask for an update from the Department on that work and, in particular, in relation to an assessment of youth behaviour. The other measures, including allowing a customer's carer to accompany them when picking up a Motability vehicle, are practical steps, and the Committee was content with the rule.

A Cheann Comhairle, I will now make some remarks as a Sinn Féin representative. Would you prefer that I wait until after the break?

Mr Speaker: I will have to interrupt you in a couple of minutes, so we can suspend now, if you wish, or you can make a few remarks. I will return to you immediately after we resume the sitting. I do not want to interrupt your flow.

Mr Gildernew: I will make a few remarks now. I may get through them OK. Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle.

As the transmission of the COVID-19 virus slows and we start to ease the restrictions, we must remain on our guard. Out and about in our communities, we need to continue to practise safe levels of distancing and hygiene even as the vaccination programme continues to be rolled out across communities. There is a huge job of work to be done by the Department. There must be strategic planning for restarting full health and social care services and addressing backlogs, and waiting lists that preceded the pandemic must also be tackled. Addressing the waiting list challenges will require the Department of Health also to address the staffing shortages and the low pay for far too many of our health and social care workers. We need provision of improved find, test, trace, isolate and support services to manage and to press down aggressively on future outbreaks. Last week, I met the COVID-19 contact-tracing team from the Public Health Agency to offer our continued support for a robust system and to seek assurances that it is ready for the lifting of restrictions. Effective contact tracing has an invaluable role to play in stopping transmission, which becomes more important as restrictions are lifted.

I have long called for a new public health-led strategy that is centred on find, test, trace, isolate and support. It is also important to bear in mind that, this time last year, the COVID-19 contact-tracing service was stood down by the Department of Health during the first surge only to be re-established in April. As further restrictions are lifted, the risk of increased contact at work or between households could lead to further outbreaks, clusters and surges. I am very disappointed to note the latest figures for the contact-tracing complement, with only 46 contact tracers employed on a full-time basis, 100 part-time staff and 170 who work on a bank basis. Minister, the Assembly supported the Committee's motion asking for a significant scaling up of the system, and these figures do not suggest that that has happened. As we move into the next period, that needs to take place urgently.

Mr Speaker: Members, in order to allow the parties necessary preparation time to observe a minute's silence at 12.00 noon to remember

those who have lost their lives during the pandemic, we will suspend the sitting until 12.05 pm, shortly after the minute's silence.

The sitting was suspended at 11.50 am and resumed at 12.05 pm.

Mr Speaker: Members, we return to the debate on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations 2021.

Mrs Cameron: After the suspension for the National Day of Reflection, I will say that it is good to remember all those who have lost loved ones and friends and endured a very difficult year. As you have said, Mr Speaker, people have had a time of impossible, unnatural grieving.

I support the motion. As we continue to face the threat of COVID, albeit the threat is less severe, we need to recognise that restrictions must continue to be in place. An extension of the restrictions to 18 March was therefore quite sensible.

Given the lessening of the COVID threat and the reduced prevalence in our community, however, it is right that we look at the restrictions and find a sensible way out of the current measures that we call lockdown. The Executive decision to permit:

"click and collect to operate for non-essential retail businesses"

— such as shops that sell baby equipment, clothing, footwear or electrical goods —

"if payments are completed at time of order, either online, phone, text or post, with no cash transactions permitted"

is a sensible approach, albeit, again, one with some illogical anomalies.

This week, many of our children have returned to school. I am sure that many will have tried on their uniform and shoes for the first time in months and realised that they do not fit. It is therefore rather illogical that a child's feet cannot be measured to allow for the correct new shoes to be purchased.

There are sensible accommodations in the regulations, such as allowing mobility cars to be collected, and we need more of those. Furthermore, it remains a matter of deep regret that the sensible proposal brought forward by my colleague the Economy Minister on click

and collect from florists was not permitted. We have all witnessed bunged supermarkets, especially coming up to Mother's Day, and wonder why Diane Dodds's proposal was not accepted as a practical and safe option at the time. We must not unduly penalise local independent retailers when a sensible way forward is possible and does not compromise public health.

The regulations also increase the limit for outdoor gatherings from six to 10 people:

"from no more than 2 households for the purpose of socialising which is not a sporting event."

That welcome easing is going to be appreciated by many as we seek to address the issues of loneliness and mental health. We ought to consider, however, how larger families can also enjoy socialising with friends in their garden.

Looking ahead, the vaccination programme continues to make great strides. I commend all those involved. We look forward to Easter, and, in that vein, we need to offer people hope. A perpetual lockdown or unreasonably keeping restrictions in place will only damage public support for the wider health message. There are now many postcodes in Northern Ireland with no cases of COVID-19. We long for that to happen in more areas. As we know, communities will ask why they cannot sit for a coffee, get a much-needed haircut or take their kids swimming.

Let the coming weeks see the vigilance message continue to resonate, but let us match the public's sacrifice for so long now with an easing of restrictions and the much-needed freedom that so many people crave. The vast majority of the public are sensible and responsible, so let us treat them as such.

Ms Hunter: On the back of Pam's comments, I thank our front-line staff for their continued efforts and for their continued commitment to tackling the virus. My sincere and deep sympathies go to the families out there who have lost a loved one.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today as my party's health spokesperson on the health protection regulations. The amendment (No. 5) regulations permit click-and-collect services for some non-essential retail businesses. As I said in the previous debate on the regulations, I am sure that that is welcome news to some business owners. I recognise, however, that many will not be in the business of selling the limited types of goods allowed under the

regulations. Hopefully, in line with the Executive's plans, all remaining non-essential retail will be permitted to offer click-and-collect services.

Enabling Departments to use Nightingale courts seems to be a sensible measure, especially given the success that they have had in recent months in dealing with the backlog of cases in the criminal justice system.

Increasing the limit on outdoor gatherings from six to 10 people from no more than two households will, hopefully, allow more family members to meet up. I am sure that that was a welcome change to the regulations for many and will, perhaps, allow family members who have not seen each other for a significant time to meet up.

I also welcome that the regulations have addressed the anomaly that meant that carers were not able to accompany Motability customers when they were picking up their vehicles. That seems to be a very sensible decision.

As I have done previously, I continue to urge the public to abide by the regulations and guidance that are before us. It goes without saying that the past few months of lockdown since Christmas have been extremely difficult. Indeed, the last 12 months have been extremely difficult. With the continued roll-out of the vaccine and restrictions beginning to loosen, it really feels as though the end is much closer. Of course, we all continue to be mindful of the impact that the COVID pandemic and the past year of lockdowns and restrictions have had on every aspect of our lives, whether on our collective mental health and well-being, our children being out of school for long periods, the loss and closure of many small and local businesses or, of course, on our health service and front-line workers.

I urge the Executive to continue with support grants for businesses. As the restrictions have continued, more and more small businesses and business owners have struggled to stay afloat or, indeed, to remain positive about their future prospects and the idea of opening their businesses and operating them as they did before. My constituents in East Derry have found much relief and support from the Executive's financial packages. I hope that that support will continue for as long as the restrictions are in place and businesses are forced to remain closed.

Gym owners are especially feeling the impact of COVID, and I hope that our gyms will be able to

open as soon as possible when it is safe to do so. I fear the job and business losses that we will have when we come out on the other side of the pandemic. It is very important that we seek to give businesses as much support as possible, such as start-up grants, to ensure that they can get back on their feet. As the picture with the pandemic improves and we slowly get back to normal, I hope that the Executive will turn their attention to that task. Indeed, all of us here have a responsibility to contribute to that effort.

To conclude, I reiterate my support of the Executive and the Minister in the decisions that they have made so far. However, I find it deeply regrettable that I and other MLAs get a lot of information about what is coming next from Twitter, and often at the same time as the public. That really needs to be addressed

While I am sure that this is not the last time that we will meet to discuss such regulations, each time we meet, it seems that the picture is a bit more improved and positive than the previous occasion. I hope that that continues to be the case. To be clear: we have to learn how to return to normal and live safely with the virus. I support the regulations that are before us.

Ms Bradshaw: I associate myself with the comments of others who expressed sympathy to those who have been bereaved this year and our enduring and deep appreciation for our front-line workers in health and social care for their work over the last 12 months. I, too, look forward to a time when we are no longer debating the lockdown restrictions.

I place on record my thanks to the Health Minister. We may disagree on a small number of issues, but I recognise how incredibly hard he has worked during the pandemic and how much he cares about the general public.

I will highlight a few concerns about the impact of the health protection regulations. The first one relates to crowding in supermarkets at weekends, which I think my colleague on the Health Committee Pam Cameron also raised. People are generally bored at home and think that the only places that they can go to are the supermarkets. We have seen huge crowds, especially over Mother's Day and Valentine's Day, and, no doubt, Easter will be the same. As the "Stay at Home" instruction is lifted, non-essential retail shops should open as soon as possible. The small retailers in my constituency, South Belfast, for example, are very small and run by families, and it would probably be much easier to control social distancing and hygiene in those environments than in the big

supermarkets. I also put on record my concerns about the small changes to the click-and-collect provisions. Those could have gone further again to allow businesses to trade more freely while adhering to the public health advice.

At the Health Committee, I raised concerns about social distancing at the vans and coffee stands in our parks and public spaces. I understand why people are trying to make an event out of getting out of the house, but, again, I have concerns about people not adhering to the two-metre rule.

12.15 pm

The issue that the Chair of the Health Committee raised about young people is one that I had also raised. When I mentioned it, it had been 80 days since Christmas, and there was an assumption that all our young people had not seen their friends, had not been to school and had not been gathering. The reality is, if you look down any social media feed, young people are starting to gather, no doubt because of the nice weather. The response from the departmental officials that they were looking at fresh guidance for young people is welcome. We have to deal with the reality that young people want to see their friends and try to support rather than penalise them.

Moving on to my last two issues, one is in relation to golf. There was an announcement that a maximum of two families would be permitted to meet for structured outdoor sporting activities. Anybody who has played golf will know that the majority of games are played as a four-ball, so that is something that should be looked at to make it better for those who engage in the sport. It is a sport that is experienced more by older people or those who took early retirement, who use it as a way not just to socialise but to keep up their physical health. That is something that could be addressed.

Lastly, I would like the Health Minister to give us an update on the work of the Department and the Health and Social Care Board on long COVID and what support is coming forward for those who are suffering from it at home.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for laying the No 5 amendment to the No 2 rules. There is a feeling of déjà vu at times; nonetheless we are here to support the Minister as best we can. I also want to put on record my appreciation to all the health and social care workers, all the community and voluntary sector workers, and all frontline staff for their work over the past

year. I extend that appreciation to families, many of whom will never forget the experience that they have endured this year.

I do not want to go back to what normal was before COVID. There are certain categories in our communities, our families, our society and our constituencies that were suffering long before COVID, but the impact of COVID exacerbated their experience of loneliness, poor mental health, poverty and ill health. Those are issues that we, as an Assembly and an Executive, all have a responsibility to address.

I am also grateful that the anomaly with the Mobility scheme was rectified on 2 March. It was rectified as quickly as it was spotted, so I put my appreciation of that on record. The other three amendments that came into effect on 8 March are also welcome.

There are issues on which we still need clarity, Minister. For example, you said that 70% of infections were a result of the Kent variant. We need to know what strengths and additional measures we are bringing in, including the traveller locator forms in particular. We all want to support our health and social care system, particularly those who work at the intensivist end. The last thing we want is our brightest and best saving lives whilst we are being more relaxed about people coming here infected with more virulent variants of COVID-19. I appreciate that there will always be a need for vigilance, but it would be remiss of me not to raise that issue. Addressing that will be of some assurance to people in the Chamber and those who are listening to the debate this morning.

There is another issue that we still need clarity on, Minister. Liz Redmond was at the Committee last week and, to be fair to her, was very clear about what the regulations meant.

As other colleagues and I have said and will continue to say, it is almost as though, by the time that the regulations come in, we are trying to catch up with ourselves. The Minister, as an MLA, will get that. It is frustrating when we hear something and then our constituents and colleagues ask those of us who are on the Health Committee what it means and we are not fit to tell them. It is not that we are being precious because we are MLAs. We appreciate that the regulations are coming and that we have a bit of catching up to do, but sometimes the gap is so wide and there is so much catching up to do that it just looks wrong, to be totally honest.

Last week, we asked Liz about the relaxations on two households mixing, and that is fine. However, the position on youth diversionary workers, who work with extremely vulnerable children and young people, is still not clear, and, as the Minister will appreciate, I have raised that issue. Paula Bradshaw mentioned the fact that the good weather is coming and that a lot of them are out and about. That does not mean that they are up to any harm or mischief, and I want to put that on the record. In my constituency, I know of a lot of youngsters who are extremely vulnerable. Youth workers go out to them, as do the police, because they know that they are vulnerable, but they are technically breaking COVID regulations. The police have raised that as well. They are making a decision based on duty of care. There may be two youth diversionary workers, three PSNI officers and a parent or a guardian trying to calm down three or four youngsters, particularly at interfaces, which, from time to time, unfortunately, erupt. While the youth workers and the police will do that all day long on our behalf, and we appreciate it, if the local community police do not know the youth diversionary workers, those workers may get hit with a COVID fine, which is the last thing that we want, particularly when they are trying to protect very vulnerable young people. You may not be able to provide clarification on that today, Minister. I am not raising that for the sake of raising it or to be mischievous, but we definitely need clarification on it.

Similarly, clarification was sought on those with mobility issues picking up cars from dealerships. That was rectified and rightly so. Those issues are coming up right across constituencies, and I know that, right across constituencies, conversations are being had about them, because I am being contacted by people from a part of my constituency that I do not normally represent or have many dealings with.

The other aspect is that the plan for the next set of regulations will all depend on what is relaxed with the Executive's agreement. Pam Cameron commented on flower shops. As you know, I was one of your colleagues, Minister. I am still your colleague, but I mean that I was your "colleague colleague" on the Executive. I am still your friend — sort of *[Laughter.]* Sometimes. For example, is it up to each Department to bring forward the relaxations that it would like to see and for the officials from TEO, your officials and the officials from the sponsoring Department to try to work out what the best fit is? That is my understanding.

Some of the businesses that I know in my constituency have been responsible for years. They are, as the Minister will know, going through a really hard time. They are respecting and honouring the health regulations, and that is absolutely no bother. When I was in a big supermarket, I saw a very young member of staff politely ask a person to wear a face covering, and the rude response that she got had that wee girl in bits. We have all gone into a large supermarket and seen people almost congregated in the area where you get flowers, for example. When that has happened, I have just walked out without my items, because I did not want to take the risk.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. This point has, indeed, been raised right throughout our debates on the COVID regulations: that the safest environments are those of independent retail traders, who have been responsible, and that, unfortunately, the regulations have permitted that unmitigated risk where people gather in supermarkets. Does she agree that it is important that we try, where possible, to give some of those small businesses a lead-in time and even a date, given that there are preparations that they would like to put in place for a proposed reopening date so that they can reopen in a safe and compliant manner?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member up to a point, but, to be frank, in order to give a date, you would need to have a crystal ball. You would need to know how many people have lost their lives to COVID, how many are in high dependency units and, more so, in intensive care units, and then you would work your way back. Regrettably, that is the way that it is, and I completely support that.

I am concerned about trying to strike a balance. There seems to be some relaxation around click and collect, which I welcome, and I share the concerns about youngsters getting their feet measured. I have had the experience in my family of having to buy two pairs of shoes in order to get the right size. However, the issue for me is that we need to start getting into a bit more of a "What if?" conversation, and I assume that that is happening. I will not repeat what I have said, but further regulations will be relaxed when infection rates and, in particular, the number of people losing their lives is greatly reduced.

In relation to the next amendments, I am not putting anybody on the spot, but I would like to see some preparatory work done to see about, for example, smaller businesses opening up again. We all know that people are still being

infected with COVID, but they are not going to pubs or restaurants. Those places are closed, so it is down to their personal responsibility. We all agree on that. Where we are maybe not at the point of disagreeing but are not quite there yet is with us putting out what we would like to see happen. None of us has the foresight that is needed to start that planning. However, with that said and without contradiction, I think that we need to start to tentatively plan for the next set of regulations.

I will finish by thanking the Minister, his officials and, more so, everybody who has stuck with all of us for the past year. They have given us their patience. They have been through the most awful of years and are still sticking with us. As I said before, there is hope on the horizon with the vaccination. I asked the Minister yesterday about when the booking system would open up for Belfast, and I can already see that people are holding their patience and holding their families on the basis that those who are most vulnerable will get vaccinated. Like all colleagues here today, with the day that is in it, I urge people to stay safe and to look after each other in the days ahead.

Mrs D Kelly: I echo Ms Ní Chuilín's thanks and her recognition of the public, who have made those essential sacrifices. Last week, I took my father for his second vaccination, and we were absolutely delighted to have got him through the whole period, thankfully, without COVID. I also place on record my thanks to the staff in ward 2 south and in ICU at Craigavon Area Hospital, who saved the life of my brother. I make no bones about it. He was critically ill with COVID for weeks and, thank God, is making a good recovery, so I thank all those staff.

I also want the Minister to look at the mental health and emotional well-being of staff. I believe that some staff will suffer from what can best be described as "PTSD" when they hopefully relax a bit and come off duty. From personal experience, having family members who have worked in those sectors, I know that it has taken a huge toll on their well-being. Minister, you might be able to encourage your Executive colleagues to work with you in meeting their specific needs as, hopefully, we look to a brighter future.

I have a couple of specific queries on behalf of constituents. You may know that equestrian centres and showjumping are popular in my constituency along the lough shore. I want some confirmation, as it is an all-Ireland sport, that, under the regulations, showjumping and elite sports can recommence on the same basis as in the Republic of Ireland, where eventing

has resumed on an elite, non-spectator basis with all the mitigation factors being put in place. That is my constituents' understanding from some in the Department of Agriculture. I want to confirm that.

12.30 pm

Another query came in today from the family of someone whose mother has severe dementia with challenging behaviour and is an inpatient in Gillis ward in St Luke's Hospital. Because of her challenging behaviour and deterioration, her family are very anxious. She has been given both vaccinations. Family members have received their first vaccination and want to know about the visiting policy for long-term patients in a hospital setting as opposed to a care home and when it might be relaxed.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister of Health for coming to the House yet again. He said that he wanted to begin his contribution by reflecting on an unprecedented year of challenge for all of us. It has been a challenging year that is worthy of thoughtful reflection by us all. It is appropriate that we had a moment's silence to remember those who have fallen victim to this dreadful virus in the past year and their families.

The Minister said that all Ministers had had the challenging responsibility of maintaining a delicate balance between protecting the health of our most vulnerable people and vital health services and citizens' livelihoods. In fairness, the Executive have faced those challenges without the assistance of a textbook or any experience of managing such a deadly pandemic to help and guide them. The public have had to make sacrifices that involve families being separated from elderly relatives who are in residential care. That hurtful sacrifice extended to the families of loved ones who were hospitalised. The pandemic has also curtailed the joy of new arrivals in our maternity units. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the impact that the pandemic has had on our schoolchildren, on their education and their mental health and well-being.

One of the biggest sacrifices has been the restrictions applied to laying our deceased to rest. Not being able to attend the funeral of a friend or workmate does not sit easily with the people of Northern Ireland, who want to be part of a tradition of supporting grieving families. Over 2,000 of our fellow citizens have fallen victim to this dreadful virus, but the regulations around funerals and wakes have applied to all who have passed with conditions unrelated to the pandemic. Many of the restrictions and

regulations have appeared contradictory at times, and maybe it has been hard to understand the logic behind them. However, at all times, the Executive have worked and acted in the best interests of the public.

The business community has had to pay a huge price for the sacrifices that it has had to make. I appreciate that some have slipped through the net of government financial support. Being part of the Union has permitted Ministers to be as generous as possible in difficult circumstances. The full opening of businesses should be an urgent action once the medical and scientific evidence supports it.

The main role of the regulations has been to try to reduce the pressure on hospitals. We stood at our doors on Thursday evenings and clapped in support of our front-line staff. The greatest acknowledgement that we can offer those heroes, who risked their own health and well-being and made huge sacrifices, is to continue to respect the regulations and reduce the pressure on our hospitals even further. The Ulster Unionist Party certainly backs the regulations.

We also have to remember that there have been other heroes: our shopworkers, our transport workers and a range of people who have tried to keep day-to-day life flowing for us all. I cannot sit down without placing on record a reference to the fantastic roll-out of our vaccination programme. It has been a brilliantly organised and very welcome programme. I thank all who are involved with it.

Mr Buckley: On this day of reflection, I join colleagues in thinking of all those who have, sadly, succumbed to COVID-19 and passed away in tragic circumstances. I think also of those who have passed on not as a result of COVID-19 but through having suffered from the misfortune of having to adhere to the regulations that we put in place because of COVID-19, which restricted access to care homes etc and meant that they had no access to loved ones at a difficult time. I and, I am sure, other colleagues have been moved by the testimony of Jim Wells throughout this. He reported that he was able to hold his wife's hand for the first time in a year just last Sunday. I put on record Jim's commitment and dedication to his wife throughout that time, when he went to her window at the side of the home to keep her company, albeit that they were separated by a pane of glass. It is truly heartbreaking if we think about it. Sadly, Jim is not the only one. There are so many in our care homes. I have been contacted by many who want just to hold the hand of their parent or

loved one at what is their most difficult time. I want to put on record that thought.

Like Mr Chambers, on a positive note, I want to reflect on the success of the vaccination programme. It has been fantastic. We really have reaped the benefits of United Kingdom membership in accessing the vaccine. However, I have listened to Members across the House. I think that it was the deputy First Minister who said yesterday that, with COVID-19, none of us is truly safe until everybody is safe. While the vaccination roll-out has been a success here in the United Kingdom, we have to look at the way in which, unfortunately, its roll-out has been somewhat slower in Europe, to where many of our constituents look forward to returning, hopefully, on holiday or otherwise one day, and for our neighbours and friends in the Republic of Ireland. Maybe the Minister could give us an update on that. I would like to know how the road map to recovery is affected by a slower vaccination rate in the Republic of Ireland. It is always the duty of any Government and any Administration to ensure that their population is safely and promptly vaccinated, and I welcome the fact that we are on course to do that. However, when it comes to the time that we are fit and able to do so, it would be appropriate that, where possible, we help our friends and neighbours in the Republic of Ireland to get to an adequate vaccination level to ensure that they, too, can enjoy life post COVID.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I will indeed, yes.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for raising that point. Does the Member agree that that is indicative of the need to develop a robust all-Ireland strategy for dealing with this?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, as he has repeated time and time again, COVID knows no borders. It is international. It is worldwide. However, the sad reality, which, I am sure, the Minister will touch on, is that the way in which the European Union, of which the Republic of Ireland has membership, has conducted itself in relation to vaccination has made it very difficult for the United Kingdom to engage with it constructively on vaccination roll-out. Say, for example, that we had been sharing the vaccine during the last couple of weeks. I presume that the AstraZeneca vaccine would have been the vaccine of choice that would, hopefully, have reached vaccination centres in the Republic of

Ireland. Those vaccines might have sat on a shelf unable to be used, whereas, in Northern Ireland, we have followed sound scientific information and data and continued the roll-out programme. We are well on the way to vaccinating our most vulnerable and older categories to ensure that we can have a safe reopening. I hope that we can be constructive and help where possible.

I welcome the regulations on click and collect. They recognise the need for interaction between small shops and many of our constituents for the like of shoes and children's clothing, as has been mentioned, but they could go a lot further. Throughout the COVID-19 debates in the House, I have said that our small businesses can be a COVID-compliant environment. The way in which our people have flocked to the multinational shops throughout COVID-19 has been a slight, to say the least, to our small businesses, which could, if given the opportunity, regulate their environment in a much more beneficial manner than the multinationals. I welcome the fact that we are moving in the right direction, but there is always going to be a need for caution when we reopen various sectors. We have a willing audience in our retail and hospitality sectors, however. They are willing to play their part in ensuring that their environments are safe to allow for their return.

On that very point, and as I mentioned in an intervention, different sectors will require different lead-in times. The needs of the population to which they tender are different. I recognise and understand that the Executive want to be data-driven and not date-driven in their approach, but, in a sense, we need both. Many in the hospitality sector, for example, need to plan the way in which they can return, and they can do so only by looking towards indicative dates and timelines. Take the hospitality industry as an example. I am sure that every Member has been approached by some poor bride or groom who has been caught up in the middle of COVID-19 and who has organised not one, not two, but perhaps three weddings. That has put couples under enormous stress. Every time that any of us tries to give them a wee bit of guidance when they ask, "Do you think I'll get 30 at my wedding or will it be 10? I just want to know", we cannot give them clarity. I would like the Minister and his Executive colleagues to look at such sectors and say, firmly, that they can give them an indicative time frame by which they will be able to give indicative numbers that will be allowed.

Mr Chambers mentioned funerals and the restrictions that were put on them, as they were put on weddings. Now that we have seen the

return of our Churches, albeit on an individual risk-assessment basis, we should begin to look at funerals and weddings in the same light.

We are moving towards Easter. With the good weather, the clocks going forward, and everybody in much brighter spirits with the hope of what can be, we need to present a realistic options paper to our people in Northern Ireland on what is going to be possible during Easter. Some Members represent the lovely coastal areas of Northern Ireland to which many, including me, love the thought of heading over Easter. I do not think that that will be possible, but I am trying to push the Minister in the right way. Hopefully, if the data continues on its current trend, we can get to a place in which we can give people realistic time frames for the reopening of businesses.

In closing, I thank the Minister for his endurance and for listening to me rant continually on the issues, but they are important. Our people are now looking towards brighter days, but it is important that we try, where possible, to give them as clear a pathway as we can. I also put on record my thanks to the Education Minister. Everybody was buoyed by expectation at seeing so many happy faces on the TV last night when we saw children returning to school and the ice cream vans outside. I thank the Minister for his work in that regard.

12.45 pm

Mr Carroll: Today being a National Day of Reflection, it is important that we remember all those people who have passed away from this virus. That includes people in my constituency, people across the North, people across Ireland and people across the world; the many millions, sadly, who have passed away from this virus. I think that we would do well to remember the words of Mother Jones, a Cork-born trade unionist, who said, over a hundred years ago:

"Remember the dead, but fight like hell for the living."

That would be an appropriate mantra to adopt going forward. Anything less would be a betrayal of all those who have lost their lives. Unfortunately, however, we continue to hear a banging on the table for much quicker lifting of restrictions, and lessons seem not to have been learned. I am also concerned that, while people obviously want children to go back to schools when they are safe, there does not seem to be a plan in place to implement restrictions if the cases in education skyrocket again.

Many of the regulations are fairly uncontroversial. People should be able to gather outside in a safe way that maintains social distancing and so on and so forth, but there has been a disproportionate targeting of people in this pandemic, with fines, police actions and powers being used in a way that they should not be. Not only was that the case with the Black Lives Matter protesters last year but, last week, we saw people — women and men — who met at Writer's Square in Belfast to display their disgust at sexism, misogyny and the brutal killing of Sarah Everard targeted as they gathered, respecting social distancing and wearing masks. Still, many of them were issued with fines, and that is completely unacceptable. When you compare that with the events of the weekend past at Benone beach in Derry, you see that very few people there were wearing masks, and the police effectively took a hands-off approach. In the pictures that I saw, there was just one Land Rover in attendance, with the idea that they would look at the pictures through the week. There has been completely disproportionate policing of this pandemic, where people who are oppressed and are standing up against oppression in a safe way are targeted and others are treated with kid gloves. So, there are fundamental questions that need to be answered here.

With regard to tackling the pandemic, the real issue going forward will not necessarily be about what happens when people gather outdoors in a safe way, adhering to social distancing and so on and so forth. The key issue will be what happens when people are required to — or, rather, are forced to — go back to work. The worst possible thing would be to force people back to non-essential work while we are still waiting for the vaccine roll-out to be completed. We cannot waste the opportunity that the vaccine presents us with.

We also have to address the fact that we have a wholly inadequate level of financial support for people to socially isolate. The grant system that is in place is unacceptable and insufficient. Reports suggest that only 2% of people were able to get the £500 payment, or the greater amount of it, and that only 12% were able avail themselves of that more than once. As more restrictions will likely be lifted in the next weeks and months and more people are put into work, people should not be forced to choose between whether they should isolate or not for fear that they will not be financially protected by the state or that they will not be able to pay their rent or their bills.

When it comes to nurses and healthcare workers, claps, platitudes and nice words from

me or anybody else do not cut it. People who have navigated us through the pandemic need more than that, and anything resembling a pay offer of 1% or 2% is not only offensive and insulting to those people but risks the future viability of the NHS. If, at the end of a pandemic, health workers are offered crumbs, who could blame any of them for deciding to up sticks and go elsewhere to be respected and paid properly? Those issues have to be addressed. We need to implement a fair and proper pay rise for all our healthcare workers.

Finally, it is concerning to see the worrying rise of COVID cases in the South. The number of daily cases is increasing. Also, cases are rising across Europe, with another wave beginning. Hopefully, the Executive will learn the lessons from that and not implement changes to lift the restrictions too quickly. I hope that the Minister can assure us that that will certainly not happen on his watch.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I would like to say that we will be suspending at 1.00 pm. Unfortunately, Minister, if you have not finished your contribution by then, you will have to return after Question Time. That might be a hint.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That was as subtle as I have heard you this long time.

I welcome today's debate on SR 46/2021: the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021. I thank Members for their contributions. The regulations were unanimously passed by the Executive. As we move into the phase of lifting restrictions and out of lockdown, the Executive have formed a COVID task force, which will look at the steps. I know the process from the Executive point of view, but it might be worthwhile for the Chair of the Committee to engage with the Executive Office in regard to how the Committee could get access to the scrutiny and look at the process of how the decisions about the next review period are made. That will be useful. It is certainly useful for me, as Minister, to take the feedback from the debates that we have on the regulations. It would also allow for greater input from Committees.

The Chair talked about recovery and rebuilding. I hope to publish our next three-monthly rebuilding plans towards the end of this month for April, May and June, as we did last year, so that we take that stepped approach to how we re-engage many of our services across the entirety of our health service in Northern Ireland

as we see the more regional approach that has been adopted.

There is a specific cell in the Executive's COVID task force in regard to adherence and compliance. That will be beneficial when we engage with young people on how we move forward. My Department is undertaking work with the Minister of Education and the Department of Education on how we re-engage youth services. Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned that.

The Chair talked about his engagement with our test, trace and protect system. I am glad that he has done that; I think that he will have found a very dedicated cohort of public health professionals who are doing an excellent job in what is a very challenging time. To put things in perspective, last week, 1,242 positive cases were transferred to our test, trace and protect system. Staff were able to contact 94% of them. Of those 1,242, 3,605 contacts were identified. Staff were able to track down 99% of them. Compared to any other test, trace and protect system across these islands, those levels of achievement are outstanding and are to be commended. Weekly updates from our test, trace and protect system show that, on 10 January, for each positive case, we identified 1.5 contacts. As of 14 March — last week — for each positive case, we identified three contacts. That spread is still there in people's contacts; although we are in the same level of restrictions, the numbers of contacts are increasing. That is a concern. It is why we still ask people to conform to social distancing and all the other regulations.

The Chair asked about the number of full-time-equivalent staff whom we have in regard to bank and part-time staff. The idea of where we are in test, trace and protect is so that it can flex up and flex down, depending on how many positive cases are coming through. Often, in that scenario, it is about quality versus quantity. In other jurisdictions, we have seen test, trace and protect being given to private contractors, which perhaps see it as a for-profit exercise rather than a public health exercise. We were very clear in Northern Ireland that test, trace and protect would remain in public health.

I welcome the comments from the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Pam Cameron, that the restrictions that need to be in place are sensible, proportionate and safe. That is so that, when we look to easing those restrictions, we do not end up having to take a step back. The entirety of the Executive, the House and Northern Ireland want to ensure that, once we start down the pathway of easing restrictions, we do not have to step back.

Cara Hunter specifically raised the Nightingale courts, which allow for other Departments hold public inquiries. I am not sure if she is aware of this, but that measure came forward from her party colleague the Minister for Infrastructure so that she could discharge some of her public duties on public inquiries. That is why that specific request came about, so it is about how other Ministers feed into those relaxations that we need to see.

Much of Ms Hunter's contribution was about the economic challenges that the restrictions face. We in Health are always conscious of that, and we look to the balanced approach that is taken across the Executive when making or easing restrictions so that we are doing it in a proportionate manner.

One of the things that Ms Hunter raised was how she finds out on Twitter what has happened. I have raised my frustration in the House about that because often a conversation is not finished before a journalist reports it. That is detrimental not just to the decision-making process but to the confidentiality and robustness that we need to have in the Executive among ourselves before something is made public. That is because that happening sets up train of thought and a chain of challenges and questions that are then in the public domain before the Executive have finished the rest of their discussion, never mind the rest of their meeting. That is something that the First Minister raised this morning again when she reminded all ministerial colleagues about the code of conduct that we have all signed up to, and she reinforced that at this morning's Executive.

With regard to Paula Bradshaw's contribution, I too look forward to when we will no longer be in the House debating these regulations and the easing of restrictions, because that will mean that we have completed a very hard and difficult journey. I also look forward to when we are able to discuss those things that we agree on as well as those things that we disagree on outside of COVID. That is where we should be in the House and what we should be discussing.

I know that the Member and Ms Ní Chuilín raised the guidance that is specific to young people. Other jurisdictions have looked to the numbers of people who are gathering and have come up with a greater number of young people who can gather together. That is because they have recognised the challenges that are brought about in setting targets, numbers or limits for young people gathering. Therefore, that is being looked at, and I think that it was

also raised at the Committee by you, and Liz Mitchell from my Department responded to it.

With regard to two-ball and four-ball golf, I will be honest and say that I have never played, so I have no idea. As far as I can see, I thought that they had come up with a graduated response, but that is for another time. However, it is a welcome step that we are looking at encouraging more outdoor sports and facilitating those people who want to get into them. It is an informed discussion and decision that is made on those restrictions. I say that because I can already feel the emails coming in from all the agitated golfers saying that they have not got out. That is something that we will continue to look at.

The Member raised the support for long COVID. She has often raised that in the House. The Health and Social Care Board has been tasked with bringing forward what the model on that will look like. That is now being discussed at a four-nations level so that we can pick up and learn from other jurisdictions that are already looking at services. Some have said that they have commissioned support, but when we delve deeper we see that it is still a process of commissioning rather than having something on-site. Therefore, that is an ongoing piece of work. Like many other conditions, we know that that one will be with us for a long time, and we want to make sure that there is a holistic approach to the supports that are necessary. That comes forward through some of the work that we are looking at in Whiteabbey on nurse-led and allied health professional-led support mechanisms.

I hope that Ms Ní Chuilín and I are still friends, at least inasmuch as she seemed to indicate that we are. I know that she has left, and I say that just in case I maybe said something about her but, hopefully, not. Carál brings value to the debate, having sat in the Executive while some of the restrictions were made and some of the relaxations were brought in. She brings value in understanding the challenges from both sides.

1.00 pm

One of Carál's contributions and topics that was echoed around the House, and it is one that I want to join, was support for those who work in our health family and the dedication and commitment that they have given over the past year. Their families have also borne the weight and cost of seeing their loved ones going out day after day to work in very challenging circumstances.

Carál talked about the strength of our communities coming together through the pandemic. She was right to raise the strength of our communities coming together, but also the light that has been shone on the gaps and weaknesses within our communities. People living on their own and who are lonely have been left and isolated to an extent. Hopefully, we do not go back to what we had before. I am hopeful that our health service will not go back to what we had before but that we can progress and develop it and make it a better service.

I have a number of specific questions from Members. With their indulgence, if I cannot complete them in this session before 1.00 pm, rather than coming back for four or five minutes, if the House is content, I will write to Members with responses. I hope that I answered many Members' queries in the opening debate as well.

In closing, I want to do two things. First, I express my thanks and the appreciation of all of us here today to all those working across our health service during the most difficult time. I also thank the public for adhering to the guidance and regulations. I know that it is not easy. I commend them for their strong support and contribution in reducing the impact of COVID-19 on our community.

Secondly, I want to remind everyone that the most important actions that we can all take to limit the spread of the virus is to stay at home, to limit our contact with others and to isolate from others immediately if we have symptoms.

Mr Speaker, it gives me no pleasure in having to move these regulations or restrictions, but I commend the regulations to the Assembly. With the Members' indulgence, I will write to anyone who asked specific questions in the debate.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. I believe that all Members have expressed that they are content with your proposal to contact them directly about their specific enquiries.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave —.

Apologies, I have to dispense with the business first. It is as well that I have someone beside me here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 1.03 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Bangor Alternatives: Funding

1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice why her Department has chosen to cut funding for Bangor Alternatives. (AQO 1805/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): No decision has been made by my Department to cut funding for Bangor Alternatives. However, we provide annual core funding — currently £54,000 — to Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland to sustain their central administrative infrastructure, assist with the delivery of community restorative justice and help with capacity building. There will be no reduction in that funding for the coming financial year.

In addition, further funding is provided to the organisations by my Department and its agencies for specific projects, including work on the delivery of restorative elements of enhanced combination orders, local projects in association with policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) and the assets recovery community scheme, and the work of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme through the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's (PBNI) Aspire programme.

I understand that the Member's question may have been prompted by a decision taken by the cross-departmental Tackling Paramilitarism programme board not to award funding for those accredited groups for the coming financial year, 2021-22. That funding, which had been provided for the past three years, is separate from any core funding provided by my Department and has been used to enable the groups to support the delivery of Fresh Start recommendations, in particular the development of a centre of restorative excellence (CORE). I understand that the board took the decision in light of considerable funding pressures and the likely impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on establishing a new centre in the coming year. The board also noted that there has been substantial investment in restorative practice through other funding streams for the accredited

organisations within the overall Tackling Paramilitarism programme.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that Bangor Alternatives does a fantastic job in cooperation with the PSNI? Will she take the opportunity, once the pandemic is over, to visit Bangor Alternatives to see the excellent work that they do with the PSNI?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for the invitation. I would be more than happy to do so. I recognise the important contribution that organisations make in supporting criminal justice partners, whether that is through mediation and support for victims, challenging perpetrators of crime, providing community engagement in areas where none may otherwise be possible or verifying threats and sharing information. My officials have met both parent organisations to understand better the impact of the board's decision, and I have asked for further advice on the matter. Nevertheless, I will be happy to take the Member up on his invitation.

Miss Woods: It is my understanding that funding for specific project work such as that on the protocol has been cut or is proposed to be cut. I appreciate that it may not be a departmental core funding matter, but does she appreciate that any reduction in funding for restorative justice organisations such as Bangor Alternatives will mean a cut in project work, such as community resolution notices and work on the protocol?

Mrs Long: With respect, the issue for which the programme board was not awarding funding was specific to the work on the delivery of Fresh Start recommendations and, in particular, the development of the centre of restorative excellence. The reason for not proceeding with the additional funding for this year is that the new centre will not be established in the incoming year. However, it is important that Department of Justice funding and other funding streams through Tackling Paramilitarism remain available for other elements of restorative justice.

Ms Ní Chuilín: If I hear the Minister correctly, once COVID regulations are relaxed, there is a possibility that the Fresh Start commitments to Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland will be looked at again with a view to bringing forward the centre of excellence. She has already said that the proposed cut is not coming from her Department.

Mrs Long: To clarify, the Executive action plan's recommendation A9 commits the Executive to:

"establishing a dedicated fund for restorative justice initiatives to provide enhanced"

long-term funding and support. The Executive are also required to resource the proposal for a centre of restorative excellence (CORE). The Department of Justice has been engaged in the preliminary work on that, including a feasibility study, to identify the best options. CORE would provide for a new, innovative approach to delivering the expansion of restorative justice and also wider restorative practice in Northern Ireland.

The Executive Office has been considering the most feasible approach to how to implement a dedicated fund for those restorative justice initiatives. A series of options for implementing the dedicated fund has been developed, and Executive Office officials are exploring those further with special advisers.

It is fair to say, however, that CORE will not come forward in the current financial year. That is why the programme board decided that the funding to support it could not be justified in a situation in which not all bodies will be able to be funded to the full extent that we would wish them to be. If additional funding becomes available in future financial years in which we are not inhibited by COVID from taking CORE forward, it is something that will be open for discussion with the programme board.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, in your response, you highlighted a number of other funding streams. It is my understanding that £1.4 million is to be shared between two community and voluntary sector organisations, Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Alternatives, for restorative practices under recommendation B4. That is a substantial amount of funding. There are also statutory agencies responsible for restorative justice. When was the most recent review of value for money in delivery and in working alongside the PSNI across all its crime sections?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. I cannot give her a firm answer on the last time that there was a full value-for-money review of community restorative justice. At every stage of budgeting, we look at value for money in all our departmental expenditure and assess it against the various demands that we have: those that are often unavoidable because of our statutory

duties and those with which we may have some flexibility.

The Member asked about investment in restorative justice. She is correct that a number of organisations, including some in the statutory sector, such as the Probation Board, are involved in the delivery of restorative justice. Restorative justice can play a role in the community by challenging perpetrator behaviour and getting further recognition for victims of the harm that crime has caused them. It is important that we continue to develop restorative justice in the context of it being properly accredited, monitored and supervised. It is a hugely important piece of work that we are trying to take forward as part of developing the centre of restorative excellence.

Paramilitary Activity and Crime: East Antrim

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on tackling paramilitary activity and crime in East Antrim. (AQO 1806/17-22)

Mrs Long: Members will be aware that, although the Executive action plan 'Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime' is coordinated by my Department, the programme is cross-cutting in nature. Good progress has been made, but we are all too aware that countering the enduring, pervasive nature of paramilitarism requires a long-term, genuinely collaborative approach across government, working closely with community partners.

From a law enforcement perspective, the south-east Antrim UDA remains a priority group for the paramilitary crime task force (PCTF). Recent convictions in the area have related to drugs, ammunition and offensive weapon offences. The paramilitary crime task force continues to work with colleagues in local districts to tackle paramilitary activity and crime. In the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area, a local drugs strategy has been implemented, not only to target those individuals causing most harm to communities but to support the victims of such activity.

Learning from the delivery of the programme to date has underlined the importance of developing collaborative models of working between statutory agencies and community partners on the ground to respond effectively to issues in areas that are vulnerable to paramilitary coercion and control. That place-based working will be developed further in phase 2 of the programme.

Multi-agency partnership working is already evident in a number of initiatives being delivered under the programme. Those are active in East Antrim and include the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council youth support hub, which is a multi-agency support network supporting vulnerable young people at risk of being influenced or controlled by paramilitary groups. In addition, the Carrickfergus and Larne area has been identified as one of eight priority areas for the focus of the Communities in Transition (CIT) project. A number of projects are being delivered in the area on issues relating to community safety, community capacity-building and restorative justice.

Members will be aware that tackling paramilitary activity and criminality is a priority for the Executive. The initiatives that I have described today are specific to the needs of individuals and communities in east Antrim, but continued investment is leading real change for the better for individuals and communities across Northern Ireland. Collaborative working across Departments, drawing on all their strengths, can really deliver positive change.

Mr Dickson: The Minister will, no doubt, be aware of a recent BBC 'Spotlight' programme in which the horrific murder of Glenn Quinn, a loved son and brother, was highlighted. It shone a much-needed light into a dark and murky corner of paramilitary activity in Carrickfergus. Will the Minister agree that condemnation on its own is wildly insufficient and that we need our communities and people to step up and speak out and to provide evidence of those vile activities to the PSNI and others? That murder is not the only one that has taken place in towns like Carrickfergus and in the wider east Antrim area. Today, while I think in particular of the Quinn family, I think of others going back as far as Simon Tang.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his comments. No one who saw the 'Spotlight' programme last week that featured those affected by the murder of Glenn Quinn could fail to be moved and appalled by what they heard. He was an innocent man who was brutally murdered. The Quinn family have my full support in standing up against those thugs.

I encourage anyone with information to contact the PSNI or to go through Crimestoppers, an independent charity that allows people to provide information anonymously. For people to do that, they must have confidence that there will be a response. I have confidence that, if people report that information to the PSNI, there will be a criminal justice response to those

who are behind that activity. It is incredibly important that that is the case.

Mr Beggs: Drug dealing, loan-sharking and brutal violence are hallmarks of organised crime groups. Let us not beat around the bush. It is clear that abusive members of gangs are taking advantage of their local community. I ask the Minister when those responsible for some of the murders will be brought to account. How will she support vulnerable members of the community who have to live there? How can they be protected so that they can be assured that they can live safely with their friends and families?

Mrs Long: The Member makes an important point. For those in communities whom we ask to come forward with information, there is a huge vulnerability and a fear. We already know that people can be murdered in their home simply because they have made an offhand comment about thuggery or drug dealing in their community. They are absolutely ruthless organisations. They are interested only in feathering their own nests at the expense of the local community. They are not paramilitaries; they are parasites. They feed off the backs of local communities, and they destroy local communities. It is important that we have a criminal justice response. We can do that only with the full cooperation of the community. It is a question of testing the justice system by bringing forward that information to the PSNI and others. If people feel afraid, they should use Crimestoppers to do that anonymously and allow us to work with the PSNI to ensure that those people can be brought to justice. I would be happy for more of those people to be brought to justice and brought to justice very quickly so that the rest of our community can move on and live in peace.

Ms Dillon: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you — Principal Deputy Speaker. I almost forgot it in English. Apologies.

I also watched the 'Spotlight' programme and reiterate the remarks of others who have offered condolences to the family. It was difficult to watch. As somebody who also received a threat for speaking up for others who had been threatened by the organisation that we are talking about, I say that we cannot have enough legislation and policing on the issue. Can the Minister give us a timetable for the additional legislation to tackle organised crime that was consulted on late in 2020?

2.15 pm

Mrs Long: There are a number of threads to the Member's question. I am happy to provide her with a detailed response about the work that the Department is doing. I can give an updated response about the work that commenced last year, with the full support of the Justice Committee, in relation to the commencement in Northern Ireland of the remaining parts of the Criminal Finances Act 2017. We hoped that that work would be brought forward at Westminster in the first quarter of this year. Given the pressures on the legislative programme there, it will now be brought forward by June at the latest. However, the four required pieces of subordinate legislation have been drafted and are going through. Four more pieces are to be done in collaboration with Westminster so that that can complete its course. At that point, we will have access to all parts of the Criminal Finances Act, which includes unexplained wealth orders, forfeiture of accounts and a whole series of other penalties.

I firmly believe that, while these individuals use a cloak of political cover to undertake their acts, they are motivated purely and simply by greed. If there were no money in this, they would not be in it either. The sooner we remove the assets that they accrue as a result of their criminal activity, the sooner we will put a stop to what is going on in those communities.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, in your previous answer, you mentioned political cover being given to these organisations. We cannot ignore the fact that this is happening in the context of increased tension around post-Brexit trade arrangements. Do you agree that there is a real risk that these criminal organisations will use that tension to give cover to their vile acts? Do you agree that it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that, in our words, we do not enable or give "cover" to those organisations to do that?

Mrs Long: I say to the Member: so it is and so it has always been. People exploit every tension in our community to give some form of political legitimacy to the work that they do in intimidating, bullying, threatening and murdering people in their own communities. It is nothing new, but it is every bit as horrendous now as it ever was during the Troubles.

From the perspective of leadership, there is a conversation that we all need to have with organisations that are still wedded to paramilitarism. It is a simple conversation, which is to ask when they are due to stop. There is nothing to be said beyond that. The time has come and gone for people to continue talking about wanting to move forward,

particularly when one month they say that they want to move forward, and the next month they rattle sabres about the potential for further violence.

You cannot ride two horses. You must choose. If you want to move away from violence, you should get on with it. Show us your bona fides and do it, and you will get nothing but support from those of us in the Assembly Chamber. If you want to continue to use violence and the threat of violence to coerce your community, you will meet with nothing from the Assembly Chamber; you will meet with a police response.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that question 13 has been withdrawn, although the Minister would have set a record if she got to question 13. Topical question 7 has also been withdrawn.

Illegal Moneylending

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the level of illegal moneylending. (AQO 1807/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is challenging to provide an accurate assessment of the level of illegal moneylending, partly due to the fact that it is under-reported to authorities. However, the indications are that it is widespread in communities.

We know that unregulated lenders — loan sharks — prey on vulnerable people. They take advantage of the lack of regulated loan availability for people who, because of their personal situation or because they need money quickly in an emergency, are in crisis. Evidence suggests that the victims often work in low-income jobs or are in receipt of benefits. They might have mental health issues or addictions. They could be single parents or carers. Crucially, they often believe, rightly or wrongly, that they have no other option.

It is most apparent that this is about vulnerability. The more vulnerable a person is, the better it is for the illegal lenders. People often focus on meeting immediate need without thinking of the long-term consequences. That is a societal issue, which, in my opinion, links to deprivation, housing, social care, education, addiction and general crime. Illegal lending makes vulnerable citizens even more vulnerable and creates real fear in communities.

All of that speaks to why this is an under-reported issue and why people stay silent about

it. Victims often fear for their safety and the safety of their family. They might feel shame, which makes them even more reluctant to speak out. That is why the organisations that see the issue most regularly are charities that work with the most vulnerable.

We also know that there is a link with drug supply and the collection of so-called drug debts by paramilitaries and organised crime gangs.

My Department coordinates the tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime programme. Raising awareness of the harm caused by illegal lenders and ensuring that victims are supported are priorities for the programme. A public awareness campaign is under development, particularly on how paramilitary gangs use illegal moneylending to coerce and control vulnerable people. However, it is an issue that crosses departmental boundaries, and I want to be clear that my Department is committed to working collaboratively to stop those who carry out this crime and to help those who fall victim to it.

Mr Beggs: I agree with the Minister that loan sharks are frequently linked to organised crime groups that lend money and get it back by coercion. They inflict great fear on individuals and those in desperate need of money.

Is Northern Ireland the only part of the UK without a dedicated team to target illegal moneylenders? Has she any plans to ensure that there is a dedicated policy and such a resource to tackle this issue, which particularly affects vulnerable people?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, part of the problem is that it is an under-reported crime. That is why education on the topic is incredibly difficult and also incredibly important.

The Financial Conduct Authority regulations are detailed and complex and require specialist knowledge to deliver the sort of sanctions to which the Member refers. Successful prosecutions and interventions by the police need to follow up with a support package for the safety of the victim and wider community.

There is no one type of victim of illegal moneylending. The lenders know who to target. They also understand their finances — the day that they get their benefits or get paid or if they get any kind of windfall — and target them accordingly. The Department is doing a huge amount of work to address this issue and the

harm caused. There are strong links between tackling organised crime and paramilitarism and tackling organised moneylending because the majority of moneylending in our communities is, unfortunately, in the hands of paramilitaries, and tackling organised crime is one way to tackle that.

Ms Flynn: The Minister said that a lot of work was being done and it may be cross-departmental. However, given the impact that illegal and legal loan sharks have on our societies and communities, preying on the most vulnerable, are much more comprehensive measures required on top of the systems that are in place?

Mrs Long: It is hugely important that we always look for opportunities to improve the systems that we have. We need to work with the community. My Department will be rolling out an education programme as part of the Ending the Harm public awareness campaign, which explains the difficulties and harm caused by moneylending.

Very often, people imagine that those people are there to help them. They are not. They want to create perpetual indebtedness so that they can manipulate and coerce people to do things in order to clear their debts, which are never cleared. The shame of this is that it creates a constant desire on the person to clear their debt and an inability to do so. It is completely exploitative and wrong. We need to raise awareness of it, but we also need to raise people's incomes. Unless we tackle deprivation and tackle people's ability to not just manage their finances but have sufficient funds to live on, people will continue to find themselves in desperation, particularly in crisis situations, and they will turn to the easiest source of income. For many who have previously suffered with difficult financial circumstances, there are no viable options for them at that time. That is why it is important to ask, "How do we make sure that those who are most vulnerable are protected not just when they report these issues but from the vulnerability that causes the problem in the first place?"

Ms S Bradley: The Minister, quite rightly, spoke about the nuances behind this and people genuinely believing that the person lending the money is in some way their friend or giving favour, which we know is not true. It is, on reflection, difficult to see who would be reporting these crimes if that were the belief of the recipient of the money.

Given the circumstances that we know that they face, does the Minister intend to target investigatory work into areas where it is known to happen — as the phrase goes: the dogs in the street know that it is happening — and postcode areas where it is most prevalent?

Mrs Long: Any criminal investigation would be a matter for the PSNI. However, work is being done by the Consumer Council to determine the exact scope and scale of moneylending. Whilst the Member is, of course, right that people will often approach someone when they are at a low point, sidle up to them as though they were a friend and offer them money that looks as though it comes with no strings attached, I can assure the Member that it does not take long for the person involved to realise that those people are not their friend. With their first missed payment or difficulty, they find out that those people are not friends. Indeed, they are quite the opposite.

At that point, there is an opportunity for people to come forward. However, often, they are afraid because they are ashamed that they have got themselves into financial difficulties. Often, they are afraid to come forward because they have been coerced into committing crimes as a result of their debt and are afraid to speak out about that for fear of what might happen to them. We need to give people the confidence to believe that, if they come forward, their stories will be believed and they will be supported, and also that those responsible for the moneylending in the first place will be held to account. That is hugely important.

We know the stories of people who get into debt and their children are then asked to run drugs in order to pay the debt off. What an obscene thing to do: manipulate a desperate parent in order to use their child to earn money for a paramilitary organisation or organised crime gang. It is obscene, wrong and needs to stop. However, we need the community to work with us and give us information so that we can target it properly with the resources that we have.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, we are 25 minutes in, and I am mindful that we are still on question No 3. A lot of Members had indicated that they wanted to ask questions of the Minister on that issue. However, I am sure that, if they let her know, she will be happy to write to them. I call Ms Emma Sheerin.

Prison Service: Demographic Composition

4. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the demographic composition of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) workforce. (AQO 1808/17-22)

Mrs Long: Prison officers provide a vital public service. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to them for their commitment and professionalism. Day and daily, they work with some of the most challenging members of society. I have witnessed at first hand, as have many other Members across the House, how they do so competently and with compassion.

As regards the composition of the organisation, approximately one third of the workforce is female; 69% of staff identify as coming from a Protestant background; 13% from a Catholic background, and 18% are non-determined. About one third of the workforce is in each of the following age brackets: from 16 to 34, 33.4%; 35 to 49, 33.4%; and 50 and over, 33.2%.

It is important that all public-sector organisations, including the Prison Service, reflect the communities that they serve. While it is encouraging to see significant increases in the number of women in the Prison Service, and that the majority of those who were successful in the most recent unit manager and senior officer competitions were female, there is further work to do to increase female representation. It is a matter of regret that we have not been able to increase representation from those who identify as coming from a Catholic background.

While the Prison Service will continue to reach out to all under-represented groups, it is important that every Member of the House supports it in doing so. I have, therefore, asked the director general to engage with all political parties in the Assembly to discuss how we might best reach all minority groups to increase representation and better reflect the community as we prepare to launch a further recruitment campaign in the autumn. It is incumbent on us all to encourage those whom we represent to consider a career in the Prison Service.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her answer. As she outlined, workers who are perceived to be from a Catholic background are massively under-represented in the Prison Service. Inspection reports into several prisons, including Magilligan and Maghaberry, have reported worse outcomes for Catholic prisoners, presumably as a result of that. Can the Minister advise the House of the steps that are being taken to address those issues?

Mrs Long: The 2018 Criminal Justice Inspection's report on Maghaberry prison recommended that there be investigation into the outcomes that are experienced by Catholic prisoners. In response to that, the director general commissioned a research report from Queen's University Belfast. The report found no significant difference between Catholic and Protestants when all factors, including individual, societal and prison-related variables, were considered in relation to adjudication charges, guilty adjudications, the progressive regime and earned privileges (PREP) level, and supporting prisoners at risk (SPAR) involvement.

2.30 pm

NIPS establishments have an equality and diversity committee, chaired by the deputy governor. The committee considers a range of longitudinal data reports on all aspects of the prison regime. Whilst NIPS strives to provide equality of opportunity, it is reliant on prisoners volunteering for certain posts and certain activities. Access to some posts may be restricted by disciplinary issues. However, it is important to us that all prisoners entering the system, regardless of the starting point, come out of the system rehabilitated and able to re-engage successfully in society.

Mr Givan: The point about the need to encourage all people, irrespective of their community background, to apply to the Prison Service is well made, and that should be encouraged by all of us. However, it is worth putting on the record, Minister, that, for decades, prison officers were targeted by terrorist organisations from across our community, not least by those in the Provisional IRA. Will she reject the slur by Ms Sheerin that, just because a prisoner is Catholic, they have somehow been targeted on the basis of their religion, which she clearly inferred and should retract?

Mrs Long: I will not take that line of approach, though I accept entirely what the Member says in good faith. I think that Ms Sheerin was highlighting a report that showed that there was an issue with the outcomes for prisoners from a Catholic background. However, thankfully, when that was looked into in detail, it was found that it was not as a result of discrimination being operated in the prison, and that is an important point. Too often, people attribute causality where there is simply some coalescence around other factors, and we need to be incredibly cautious about that.

I entirely agree with what the Member says about the level of threat. Let us be clear: this is not an historical artefact. Prison officers today are facing threats in the community. Prison officers and their families are being intimidated today. It is not an easy job to do, any more than it is an easy job to be a member of the Police Service. However, it is a crucial job and one that gives really important service to everyone in our community. We must remember that many of those in our prison system are there because we are trying to protect the entire community, not just one part of it or another, from people who would otherwise be a danger to society. Prison officers put themselves in a situation where they not only have to work with those people but try to develop them so that, when they are finally released from prison, they are able to contribute to society in a constructive way. Prison officers deserve huge support and credit for that, and I want to see prison officers from every possible background in our Prison Service continuing that good work.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes this section of Question Time. We now move on to topical questions to the Minister.

John Mitchel Place Health Centre: On-street Protests

T1. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what measures are place to ensure that women are not intimidated or deterred from accessing vital health services due to protests outside the clinic at the John Mitchel Place Health Centre in Newry. (AQT 1151/17-22)

Mrs Long: I realise that abortion is an emotive subject and one on which people have very strong views. However, whilst everyone has the right to express their views, women have the right to access medical treatment without fear, intimidation and interference. Those protests mean that women, at a very vulnerable time in their life, have to endure further trauma and distress. Where protests are directed at trust premises, they also impact those, including children, young people, the elderly and health trust staff, who may be attending the facility for many other reasons. No one in our society should be deterred from accessing healthcare or be subjected to protests and images that they find distressing or offensive. That is an issue that I will continue to monitor and keep under consideration, because I believe that, whilst the right to protest is important, the responsibility to do so respectfully is also of extreme importance.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, will you commit to implementing safe zones around healthcare facilities that provide compassionate care like that in order to ensure that women do not have to suffer further intimidation, harassment or abuse while accessing those services?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware that, as a Member of the Assembly, that is something that I support and would like to see brought forward. I believe that people have a right to protest, but I think that asking them to protest at a distance where they are not able to intimidate or cause fear to those approaching a place is a reasonable request. However, Executive agreement would be required for us to bring forward such legislation.

There have been previous debates on the matter in other places. In Belfast City Council, for example, there was almost unanimous support for a motion saying that the harassment of people seeking services should not be acceptable to anyone. That support came from right across the political spectrum, from those who consider themselves pro-life to those who consider themselves pro-choice. To take this matter forward, we need to open the conversation. Irrespective of how passionately one holds an opinion on the termination of pregnancy, showing dignity and respect to the woman, the pregnant person, in these situations is incredibly important. Everyone ought to be able to agree that any form of harassment, intimidation or distress caused to women approaching a medical facility is unacceptable.

Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

T2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice whether she will commit to introducing a violence against women and girls strategy. (AQT 1152/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Member may be aware from discussions over the weekend that I have submitted a paper to the Executive. The paper was discussed at the Executive today and will be discussed further, hopefully, before a decision on Thursday. I am committed to ensuring that direct and indirect violence against women and girls is tackled. I think that it is hugely important. However, I make the point that I have made many times: by the time that people contact the justice system, they are already victims. The emphasis must move upstream. How do we protect women and girls from violence? How do we change the societal

attitudes that make it acceptable for people to be screamed at in the street, wolf-whistled at or heckled and abused on their way to work? How do we deal with the attitudes that give people that sense of entitlement? We need to move the matter beyond simply a response from the Department of Justice, albeit a Justice response is hugely important.

I have recommended a cross-departmental strategy that will encompass Education, Health and all the other Departments. Rightfully, the response should be led by the Executive Office. Ultimately, it has the responsibility for coordinating Departments. However, I am committed and will not step back from the issue. When it comes to criminal justice, the law must be blind to gender issues. Any victim of domestic and sexual abuse must be able to seek recourse from the law, be protected in law and have access to the support services that they need. The approach to dealing with attitudes should be gendered, as we know that more women than men are affected by these crimes.

Mr Boylan: I agree with the Minister and appreciate her answer. Will the Minister agree that gender-based violence leads to gender-specific issues that require gender-specific interventions? A strategy to deal with violence against women and girls would complement existing strategies and the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act.

Mrs Long: I agree with the Member, but, as I said, we need to move upstream. I have attached a particular priority to this since taking on the Ministry. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act was agreed very swiftly by the Committee. We have now moved to look at the Protection from Stalking Bill, which is before the Committee. We are looking at speeding up justice, which is a recommendation of Sir John Gillen's review, to ensure that those who have been the subject of serious sexual offences can get justice quickly. The Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, which will, hopefully, be before the Assembly by May, will take forward many of the other recommendations of the Gillen review and some of the areas that disproportionately affect women and girls, such as upskirting, downblousing and other intrusive practices.

We are doing a lot in the legislative sphere but also with policy and practice. We are creating evidence centres to give additional support to vulnerable victims and witnesses that will ensure they give their best evidence.

The Member mentioned how we respond. We have a strategy for dealing with women in

custody, and that is out for consultation. The strategy is about targeted responses to offending from women and girls, which often has a very different driver from that of their male counterparts, and their rehabilitation needs to be dealt with differently. Further to that, it is important that we do not have only a criminal justice response to these issues. The point that I was making is that we need a much wider response. It is about society saying that it is unacceptable for women and girls to be treated in this way. If we value the women in our society, we need to treat them with dignity and respect. If we value the young men in our society, we need to raise them with stronger values so that they do not think that it is acceptable to be disrespectful to women.

Justice: NDNA Commitments

T3. Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Justice what her Department is doing to progress the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments that fall within its remit, given that, in the past few days, much focus has been on NDNA, with some Members particularly focused on their own pet projects, and, for him, much focus on not achieving the aim of 7,500 new PSNI officers, which is a commitment in 'NDNA' and in a previous agreement as far back as 1998, which promised 2,500 Reserve officers. (AQT 1153/17-22)

Mrs Long: We have started work on fulfilling our NDNA commitments. For example, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act was part of the NDNA commitments.

On the specific issue of policing numbers, there is a real challenge because of the budget. A flat-cash budget will not allow for a huge amount of wiggle room for the PSNI. Indeed, having spoken to the Chief Constable, my fear is that we could end up with a reduction in numbers rather than an increase. I have bid for the additional funding that was committed to in 'NDNA' and asked that it be made available. How the Chief Constable would spend that money is obviously a matter for him, and I would not direct him on how to spend it. We know, however, that around £40 million would be required per annum in the budget to allow the Chief Constable to recruit the number of additional officers that he requires. That would also take time, so it would not be an immediate panacea for police numbers, but there should be a commitment to fund what we agreed in 'NDNA'.

I also recognise, as will anyone who reads 'NDNA', that the ambition of the wish list that

was attached far exceeded the financial commitment. It is a point of constant disappointment to me that many of the things that were promised in 'NDNA' were never properly assessed on whether they represented value for money or were deliverable. I will, however, continue to bid for that funding for the PSNI, because I believe that it does need additional officers and additional support.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer and for some of the work that she has done to bring forward the projects to which she referred. You have made the bid, and you said that you cannot direct the Chief Constable, but if we cannot hold the Chief Constable to account on the 7,500 new officers, that calls into question the purpose of having a target.

Will you also address the old commitment to 2,500 Reserve officers, which I referenced in my question? Those officers would pick up the slack for some of our officers on full-time duty. I have listened to the tenor of the questions today, and most of the issues raised will eventually fall back on the police and be an additional burden and workload for them. I welcome the work that the Minister has done, but can she answer specifically about the 2,500 Reserve officers?

Mrs Long: As you know, it is not my job to oversee the PSNI budget. That is a matter for the Policing Board. With Mervyn Storey sitting just down the Chamber, I know better than to try to trample on that territory. I would be very quickly shooed away, so I will stay away from that.

It is for the Chief Constable to decide how best to deploy resources, and that is as it should be. If he decides that the money should be spent on other things because he feels that that is a better way in which to deal with things, that is a matter for him. The fundamental point from my perspective, however, is that we made a commitment to fund the Chief Constable so that he could have an increase in numbers. It was never agreed that that would happen by a certain date or time, but if we are moving in the reverse direction, that does not set a good example.

We are working with the Chief Constable on an outline business case and all those other processes and will continue to do that, but, unless we get additional funding, the Chief Constable will not have any realistic scope to expand numbers by any level in the next year. That is a matter of regret for me, because, as the Member said, we ask a lot of the police. We ask them to intervene, particularly at the

moment, in situations that are not strictly criminal justice issues but health issues and on a range of complex issues, yet we have not yet prioritised sufficiently the funding. To put that in context, it is not simply a matter of jiggling things about in the Department's budget to make it work. The PSNI already takes up 70% of the budget of the Department of Justice, and we have other statutory duties that we cannot evade that need to be met from the rest of that budget.

2.45 pm

Court Recovery

T4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice, given that, over the past year, owing to COVID restrictions, some court dates have slipped, to outline a timeline for family court proceedings and to clarify for the many people who require those courts whether their schedule is almost back to normal. (AQT 1154/17-22)

Mrs Long: With respect to court recovery, I am bringing forward a cross-Justice agency bid for recovery funds in order to let us, first, recover the criminal justice system and bring forward a number of other issues. Work has continued throughout the pandemic on the civil and family justice side, though it may have proceeded more slowly than is normally the case. We are now back at a situation where the family courts are operating. They have been operating in new ways, such as through digital justice, and trying to find alternative ways to move forward. Of course, not all of the levers in the family and civil justice arena are in my control, but, as I set out in my statement to the Assembly this morning, I want to see progress on the issue over the next year. We are very focused on recovery. It is an important issue and one that we have to take forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that that concludes Question Time to the Minister of Justice. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while there is a change at the top Table. We will then move on to questions to the Assembly Commission. If you are leaving the Chamber, please do not forget to wipe down the surface where you were seated. Thank you.

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

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I call Mr McNulty for the first question, I want to make the Assembly aware that the Speaker has today made provision for remote participation to allow Commission members to respond to questions for oral answer on the same basis as Ministers. As Mr Buchanan is self-isolating and has been unable to arrange for an alternative Member to attend the Chamber and answer on his behalf, the Speaker is satisfied that he may participate remotely.

MLA Maternity Provision

1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Assembly Commission to outline its plans to bring forward maternity provision for elected representatives, to assist in improving the gender balance in the Assembly. (AQO 1819/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Member for his question. I am very mindful of the recent debate that the Assembly had on International Women's Day on promoting a gender-sensitive Assembly and improving the gender balance in the Assembly. I can inform the Member that the Commission has asked for a paper on those issues to be brought to its next full meeting.

The Commission will have to take account of the fact that maternity provisions, because they relate to a Member's salary, are set independently and not by the Assembly Commission. The salary that a Member is entitled to receive under the determination made by the Independent Financial Review Panel (IFRP) in March 2016 is not affected by the fact that the Member is having a baby. However, the Commission is aware that Members have asked about what may be done to assist a Member with her representational duties when she is having a baby, and that is one of the issues that will be discussed by the Assembly Commission at its next meeting in the context of the matters within its responsibilities. Clearly, the Commission cannot alter any matters that fall outside its remit — for example, the co-option of a replacement Member during a period of maternity — but the Commission will consider the matters that fall within its responsibilities.

The Commission is also aware that there are likely to be issues related to a Member's work in Parliament Buildings and the provisions of

Standing Orders; for example, participating in debates or voting. Those would be for the Committee on Procedures to address. However, the Member can be assured that the Commission will give full consideration to any aspects under the Commission's remit. I encourage all Members to pass their views on the matter to their Commission member.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for his answer. I think that the Member will agree that we must do more to encourage and empower women to stand for election. In that regard, what plans does the Assembly Commission have to bring forward maternity provision for elected Members? Please outline the decision-making process. Can you provide details of how long that process will take?

Mr K Buchanan: As I outlined in my response, our next meeting will probably be within the next four to five weeks, and we will have a paper at that meeting indicating what the Commission can do as its responsibility. We have just over 30 female Members out of 90 Members in total, and that paper will include all options, including maternity, paternity and adoption issues. It is not just a female having a baby; there can be other adoption issues. That paper will be broad. I assure the Member that all issues will be looked at.

Ms Kimmins: Will the Commission also consider measures to make the Assembly more family-friendly through childcare provision for Members and staff?

Mr K Buchanan: Yes. In the past, the Commission looked at that, and there was a paper approximately two meetings back. I will ask the director to bring that to the Commission again. From memory, that was looked at. We are still waiting for additional information, but I will get a full and detailed response to the Member on that point.

Lighting Requests: Decision-making Process

2. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the process used in deciding to refuse a request to light up Parliament Buildings for the European Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Terrorism 2021. (AQO 1820/17-22)

13. **Mrs Barton** asked the Assembly Commission why Parliament Buildings was not illuminated in red to mark the European Day of

Remembrance of the Victims of Terrorism 2021. (AQO 1831/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 2 and 13 together, so I may need an extra minute. I thank the Members for their questions.

The external lighting of Parliament Buildings is covered by the Parliament Buildings special lighting policy, which was first agreed by the Assembly Commission in 2014 and updated last year. Under the policy, which is available on the Assembly's website, the Commission agreed that the Building would be lit annually on four days to mark International Women's Day, Saint Patrick's Day, the Twelfth of July and Armistice Day. In addition, requests for special lighting to mark other occasions or events can be made by Members, subject to cross-designation support, and by registered charities, public-sector bodies, community or other non-profit-making organisations. Such requests must meet certain criteria to be approved. Those criteria include that the special lighting must be in connection with an event that is of exceptional local, national or international significance and/or achievement; of constitutional or democratic significance; or a significant anniversary of a significant local, national or international event. Other than the four days agreed by the Commission, special lighting will not be approved to mark an event that occurs repeatedly, unless it is a significant anniversary of that event. Furthermore, no such event can be marked by special lighting more than once in any three-year period. All requests for special lighting are put to the Commission, and approval requires Commission consensus.

An application to light the Building red to mark the 17th European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism on 11 March was made by the South East Fermanagh Foundation. The request did not meet the requirements of the policy because the Building had been illuminated in 2019 to mark the European Day, and, when it was put to the Commission, consensus was not achieved. Therefore, the request was not approved.

The Commission has been considering whether the lighting of the Building might be appropriate to mark additional events over and above the existing four days chosen by it and named in the current policy. That consideration continues.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Commission members that, if they need extra time, they can request it.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for his response. The decision has understandably caused great hurt and disrespect to thousands of victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Will the member outline exactly how consensus is determined and reached by the Assembly Commission?

Mr O'Dowd: Consensus means that all Commission members are in agreement and/or that members have not given a contrary view in respect of a matter. Commission members have 48 hours to confirm or object to the recommendations of officials on whether a request for special lighting should be approved or declined. A non-response is taken as confirmation of the recommendation of officials.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Mr O'Dowd, for your answers so far. You spoke about the events that Parliament Buildings can be lit up for: can you give some idea of what you would consider as additional events beyond the four days?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question. Each application would have to be taken on its merits and matched against the policy and the recommendations of officials, and Commission members would then have to respond in due course.

Ms Sheerin: Do you agree that the lighting policy and the overall ethos and symbolism of the House needs to be inclusive and representative of all the communities that it represents and that there is a massive imbalance in symbolism that needs to be addressed?

Mr O'Dowd: As I mentioned in my original answer, the Assembly Commission is attempting to bring forward a policy on lighting that is broader and more representative of the community that the Assembly represents. The Commission is also looking at an artefacts policy in relation to the symbolism around the Building in order to better represent the widely diverse communities that the Building now represents.

Catering Contract: Subsidies

3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Assembly Commission what additional subsidies have been paid to the catering contract since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1821/17-22)

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission requires that catering services are provided to Members

and all other Building users during all the hours when the Assembly is operating. During sitting times that are uncertain or out of the ordinary — for example, the later-than-normal times that have occurred recently with plenary sittings — catering services continue to be provided until 30 minutes after the House rises. Where the cost of providing those services exceeds the money taken in through catering sales, the extra cost is incurred by the Assembly Commission. That operating cost is sometimes referred to as a "subsidy", and it varies on a monthly basis depending on the level of sales in the catering outlets.

Due to the extremely low footfall in Parliament Buildings during the pandemic, sales in the catering outlets have been severely reduced. The reduction in the level of sales has led to an increase in costs, given the reliance on sales income to assist with offsetting the catering operating cost. By way of comparison, from April 2019 to February 2020, the cost of catering was £157,000, while, during the pandemic, from April 2020 to February 2021, the cost was £327,000.

The Member may wish to note, however, that the majority of the costs to the Commission arise from the costs of staffing in the catering facilities. In line with other publicly funded entities, the Commission did not request that the catering contractor make any member of staff redundant during the period. Additionally, the Commission did not seek funding for that increase in costs over the past year, as it was able to deliver savings across its other categories to meet the increase.

The Member will know that the catering and cleaning contracts are held by the same contractor. One of the measures taken in response to the coronavirus pandemic was to allocate a number of catering staff to sanitising duties for hand-contact areas etc throughout Parliament Buildings.

Therefore, the staff costs of this additional and necessary sanitising are included in the catering cost between April 2020 and August 2020. That was the case until a formal variation to the contract, agreed and introduced from September 2020, recorded the hours dedicated each week to this task.

3.00 pm

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for the answer. I put on record that my question in no way reflects on the staff. The staff have been professional in what has been a difficult 12

months for them. However, there is uncertainty for staff about their hours and contracts. On some days, it is difficult for Members to go down to the canteen to eat because of the seating arrangements. There were other facilities in the Building for use by Members at unsociable hours. Rolling all those things together, when will the Commission make a decision to try to bring the contract back to as near normal as possible? That would give certainty to staff, who would know, when they come in in the morning, what time they will be working to. They will also have some job security and know that their jobs are safe. We can also get back to normal practice in the Building, with Members being able to dine without any difficulties.

Mrs D Kelly: As the Member will know, we are guided by the health regulations that pertain not only to this place but to all facilities and all providers of services across Northern Ireland. We hope that, in the forthcoming debates and Executive meetings in April and thereafter, and as the statistics continue to improve and the vaccination programme continues to roll out, we will be in a better position to start to look at whether visitors can return. The Commission will debate that at our next meeting. We had anticipated that the health regulations would prevent the public from entering the Building until at least the end of April. However, we hope that we will start to have some further relaxations from mid-April onwards, which, one hopes, will assist with catering income.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Commission agree that it is important to ensure that workers employed by catering and other contractors do not suffer as a result of the Assembly's response to the COVID crisis?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his question. You will have noted from my initial response that no member of staff was made redundant and that people were redeployed to other necessary duties, such as sanitising, in line with the COVID restrictions. I assure the Member that that remains the position of the Commission. No staff were furloughed either, in line with many other public bodies. We have a very tight-knit and dedicated workforce here, who look after the needs of Members and the public. Their interests form part of the broader considerations, as well as value for money and the public purse.

Irish Language Signage

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Assembly Commission what actions it is taking to comply

with obligations under the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages to promote Irish language signage. (AQO 1822/17-22)

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for her question. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is an international agreement. The UK Government signed the charter in 2000 and ratified it in 2001. It is designed to protect and promote regional or minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe's cultural heritage. The United Kingdom Government recognised Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Scots, Irish, Ulster Scots, Cornish and Manx Gaelic as regional or minority languages under that charter. The charter contains a non-discrimination clause concerning the use of those languages and provides for measures offering active support for their use across a range of areas, including in administrative settings.

The charter obliges the United Kingdom Government to ensure, amongst other things, that administrative authorities use regional or minority languages. It should be noted that, for the purposes of the charter, neither the Assembly as a regional legislature, nor the Assembly Commission, are administrative authorities or a body acting on behalf of such an authority. No domestic national legislation incorporates the charter, and, consequently, the Assembly and the Assembly Commission do not have obligations, as a matter of domestic law, to comply with the provisions of the charter.

The Assembly Commission is, of course, mindful of the contents of the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

The Commission anticipates that it will have to consider and review a number of areas within its remit in the context of any legislation that is passed by the Assembly under New Decade, New Approach, or in the context of any other legislation. In addition, the Commission has indicated that it awaits the decisions of the Committee on Procedures and the Assembly on the detail on making provisions for simultaneous translation. The Commission will ensure that the required resources and changes to services are put in place.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a fhreagra. I thank the Member for his answer. Does he agree that Irish language signage in the Building would be reflective of the community that it serves?

Mr Butler: On behalf of the Commission, it is important that I address that, and perhaps

more, so that Members are aware of what the Commission has done. The Commission's Education Service currently provides online sessions for schools, including Irish-medium schools, and an education officer is available to deliver sessions in Irish. Work is also under way to update and translate sections of the Education Service's website into Irish. That work is nearing completion, and that resource will be available to Irish-medium education in the coming months.

Hansard reports Assembly proceedings in whatever language is used. If Irish is used, that is the language that is reported. In normal circumstances, simultaneous translation is provided for the Speaker and the two Clerks at Table during plenary sittings. Hansard also provides translation into and from Irish on demand, depending on capacity and when resources allow.

The Commission avails itself of a framework for the provision of interpretation, translation and transcription services for the Northern Ireland public sector. Irish is one of the languages included in that framework. It includes a range of services, such as face-to-face interpreting services, telephone interpreting services, sign language interpreting services, and translation and transcription services.

The Member may be aware that the Speaker held an event on 10 March 2021 to mark Irish Language Week. This year's event took the form of a short virtual class that focused on the Irish language in a parliamentary context and highlighted phrases that are often required in the Assembly.

On the Member's specific point, Braille signage is provided in the Great Hall, while pictorial signage for toilets is provided at the entrances to the toilets on the ground floor. I am sure that the Commission will, in time, consider anything that is put to it.

Ms Armstrong: I was glad to hear the Commission member mention sign language, but I would like clarification that sign language would be welcomed in this place. The Commission, in waiting for simultaneous translation to come forward, is not currently providing any alternatives for someone who has a hearing difficulty, as I do. There are no subtitles for me. I do not want to wait, but is the Commission going to wait until the Disability Discrimination Act has to be invoked before someone like me who has a hearing impairment finally has subtitles in this place?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Pam Cameron. Sorry, my mistake. I call Robbie Butler to answer the question on behalf of the Commission.

Mr Butler: It is great to know that I am not the only imperfect person in the Chamber, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that the Member is an outstanding advocate for those with disabilities, particularly those with her disability. I have been with her when she has raised issues at the Business Committee and on the Commission. I give an undertaking to write to her on the subject. The Commission will take that very seriously.

Mrs Cameron: My question also relates to the provision of sign language. The first language of the deaf community is not English or Irish but signing, and communication is very difficult. There is an equality issue around communication and access to information for the deaf community. Will the Commission be looking at the provision of sign language for plenary sittings, for example?

Mr Butler: The Executive provided sign language in their response to COVID, and the value of the language was shown. If we are going to value our community and all who are part of it, I imagine that that will be a matter for the Commission to attend to. If the Member is happy, I will write to her on the issue.

Wi-Fi Connectivity: Parliament Buildings

5. **Mr Stewart** asked the Assembly Commission for its assessment of Wi-Fi connectivity in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 1823/17-22)

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for his question. The current Wi-Fi network was installed in Parliament Buildings in 2013 and originally consisted of 84 wireless access points located throughout the Building. As the current system supported a maximum of 100 access points, an additional 16 were purchased and installed in 2015 in order to improve the overall Wi-Fi signal coverage for Building users.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significantly increased demand for Wi-Fi services by Members and staff, and there were some Wi-Fi connectivity and signal quality issues for some Members, particularly in regard to videoconferencing. Much of that is due to the nature of the construction of Parliament Buildings, which presents a number of

challenges to providing universal Wi-Fi coverage in all areas.

In response to that, webcams were provided for use by MLAs and party support staff. The webcams have been deployed on desktop PCs in Parliament Buildings, and, as those use the Assembly wired network, they provide a much more reliable service. The current Wi-Fi network shares the Assembly's main internet connection, which is monitored on an ongoing basis, and that is currently operating well within the capacity of the connection. The IS Office also recently reissued the written advice to Members on how best to manage Wi-Fi connections on mobile devices.

Should Members experience any difficulty with Wi-Fi access or performance in Parliament Buildings, they should, of course, contact the IS Office service desk, ideally at the time when the difficulty is experienced, so that the matter can be investigated. The IS Office will continue to monitor the current Wi-Fi service in Parliament Buildings and will respond appropriately to any specific issues as they arise. As the current system is not fully meeting the Assembly's needs and is approaching end of life, the IS Office intends to undertake a review of the system and to set up a project to replace the Wi-Fi network infrastructure before the end of the current Assembly mandate.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Commission member for that very thorough response. I do not think that I am the only person in the House who, from time to time, feels like banging their head against a brick wall when it comes to accessing either the Wi-Fi network or the hard-wired network. I have just come from two Zoom meetings, both through the PC in the office, where I had to turn off the camera. That was probably a good thing for those at the other end of the line, but it was not so practical for the actual running of the meetings. It seems that, given the ongoing number of meetings that are taking place, we will need more and more access. Is there any way that we can look at speeding up that connection so that we can get more for the ongoing number of meetings that we are having?

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for his further question. I think that all of us have experienced problems with slow connections, be it with meetings from the Building or when trying to connect virtually. Wi-Fi speeds can be affected by many different factors, including physical obstructions, proximity to the nearest Wi-Fi access point and the number of devices that are currently connected. On Assembly sitting days, some access points, particularly those

around the Chamber, for example, are being required to service a large number of devices, and that can cause the delays in connections that have been referred to. As I advised, due to the nature of its construction, Parliament Buildings presents some challenges to providing universal Wi-Fi coverage in all areas, however the IS Office will continue to monitor the service daily and will respond to requests for support as they arise.

Youth Assembly: Update

6. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Youth Assembly. (AQO 1824/17-22)

15. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Youth Assembly. (AQO 1833/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 6 and 15, so I may need a few extra seconds to give my response. I thank both Members for their questions.

As Members may recall, the House was last updated on the Youth Assembly on 8 December. Since then, a number of important developments have occurred, and I will outline some of those for Members. Assembly officials have continued their work to develop the practicalities and arrangements needed to enable the Youth Assembly to start its work. In particular, a co-design panel of young people was established to help to shape the principles and best approach to recruitment for the Youth Assembly. The panel met during December and January and produced and agreed its report at the end of January. Based on the panel's findings, officials have subsequently designed and developed proposals for the recruitment of the members of the Youth Assembly.

In addition, the Speaker established a Youth Assembly advisory group to provide the Commission with advice and guidance from the youth sector and other relevant stakeholders in relation to establishing, implementing and reviewing the operation of the Youth Assembly during its two-year pioneer phase. The group comprises the Speaker; senior Assembly officials; Professor Laura Lundy from the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University; the Children's Commissioner, Koulla Yiasouma; and adults and young people from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, YouthAction and the Education Authority.

3.15 pm

The recruitment proposals developed by officials were presented to and considered by the advisory group at the start of this month. The group very much welcomed the engagement with young people and the co-design panel report. The group also provided useful and practical advice and endorsed the concept of the recruitment proposals. Officials subsequently considered the group's advice, refined the proposals and presented them to the Commission at a meeting last Thursday. The Commission is now considering them, and a decision will be taken soon.

As we look ahead, subject to agreement, it is anticipated that the recruitment of members of the Youth Assembly will take place during April and May, in the hope that it will be able to meet for the first time before the summer. That is a challenging timescale, not least because of the current public health situation, but we are committed to doing all that we can to meet that aim.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that the work and proceedings of the Youth Assembly will not be party political and that its members will represent their lived experiences and the views of young people in general.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Commission member for the answer and welcome the detail, particularly on the timeline for recruitment. Will he elaborate on how the Commission will make sure that any Youth Assembly reflects our increasingly diverse society? Does he anticipate that the use of technology, as he is so ably demonstrating today, will be used as a tool to allow more young people to engage with this place?

Mr K Buchanan: If I may, I will take your second question on technology first. The aim is for the Youth Assembly to be operating prior to the summer. Restrictions will obviously need to have eased to allow 90 young people to be in the Chamber, so I suspect that technology will be used at that stage, purely for social-distancing reasons.

I assure the Member that all section 75 groupings will be included. The method of selection will be, first, three members from the 18 constituencies. That gives 54 members, which will provide a broad spectrum of members from across Northern Ireland. We will ensure that the remaining 36 members reflect all section 75 groupings. It is important that that happens. A random selection approach will be used. For example, if Mid Ulster had three female members in the initial 54 members, the selection process to incorporate the remaining

36 members would counterbalance that, if you understand the point that I am getting at. I assure the Member that the membership will cover all section 75 aspects.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Commission member clarify whether the issues that the Youth Assembly considers and may consider in the future will link into any possible citizens' assembly, as mentioned in 'New Decade, New Approach'?

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Member for her question. My understanding is that the 90 members will have it very much in their own destinies. Ultimately, the 90 young people will be a young persons' assembly. Out of that, there will be up to four Committees, and the young people will agree which Assembly Committees they will, for want of a better word, shadow.

Effectively, there will be a two-year test phase, with the young people heading in whatever direction they see fit and "shadowing" — we will use that word — whatever Assembly Committees they want to follow. It will be a two-year programme. Depending on how well that goes, it will be developed, and it will be up to future Commission members to see how far it goes. The Youth Assembly will very much be driven by those within it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the period for questions to the Assembly Commission. I invite Members to take their ease for a few moments before we return to the debate on the coronavirus restriction regulations. Apologies: I understand that we have finished debating the coronavirus restriction regulations. After our brief interlude, we will begin the Committee motion.

Assembly Business

Mr Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. A point of order was raised about me in my absence this morning. Is it in order for a Member to mislead the House about what another Member said and to make disparaging comments about that individual when he was not present? If Ms Dillon had looked at the Hansard report, or if she had been at the debate yesterday, she could have reflected exactly what I said. Is it in order for a Member to suggest that I was breaking the law? That same Member attended the IRA funeral in July last year of a man who was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment and was involved in the Maze breakout. Is it in order for her to suggest that I am currently working with paramilitaries? If she had read the Hansard report, she would have seen that I said that, in my area, I worked with loyalist paramilitaries to move things forward.

I would like you to rule on that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has put his points on the record very fulsomely. I am sure that the Speaker's Office will reflect on what has been said.

Committee Business

Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1

Ms Ennis (The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges on its 'Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1' [NIA 82/17-22], laid in the Business Office on 25 February 2021; affirms its commitment to high ethical standards and to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members; agrees that the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should be amended in accordance with the annex to the report; and further agrees that the amended Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should come into effect on Monday 12 April 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to wind up the debate. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the opportunity to bring the motion on behalf of the Committee on Standards and Privileges to the Assembly today. The purpose of the motion is fourfold. First, it is to seek Assembly approval of the Committee's 'Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1'. Secondly, it is to affirm the Assembly's commitment to high ethical standards and to the code and guide. Thirdly, it is to seek Assembly approval to amendments to the code and guide in accordance with the annex to the report, which sets out the necessary changes in a tracked format for ease of reference. Fourthly, it is to seek Assembly approval for the amended code and guide to come into effect on Monday 12 April 2021.

I shall address the second limb of the motion first, given that a commitment to high ethical standards provides the foundation on which the codes of conduct are built. It has been said:

"Integrity has no need of rules".

Although that might be true in theory, regrettably, the international experience of government is that rules and codes of conduct are a necessity in practice.

When the Assembly last considered a motion along these lines in 2016, my predecessor, the Committee Chairperson Cathal Boylan, drew on the words of President John F Kennedy from 1961 when he was delivering a special message to the US Congress on conflict of interest legislation and on the problems of ethics in government. President Kennedy pointed out that the basis of effective government is public confidence and that confidence is endangered when ethical standards falter or appear to falter. Public confidence in the Assembly as an institution is, of course, a key reason why we need to promote and maintain high ethical standards.

However, it might be argued that there is an even more fundamental reason. In that regard, I draw on the words of another and more current American political analyst in Noam Chomsky, who, in pointing to the principle of universality, said:

"If an action is right (or wrong) for others, it is right (or wrong) for us. Those who do not rise to the minimal moral level of applying to themselves the standards they apply to others — more stringent ones, in fact — plainly cannot be taken seriously when they speak of appropriateness of response; or of right and wrong".

That highlights the importance that we, as individual public representatives and this Assembly as an institution, need to place on high ethical standards.

In turning to the Committee's report, it is the usual practice that the Committee reviews the code and guide in each mandate to ensure that it is kept up to date and reflects good practice with regard to parliamentary ethical standards. As such, the Committee's strategic plan for 2020-22 provided for the review to be undertaken in two stages. That is with stage 1 addressing urgent and straightforward amendments and stage 2 covering more complex and detailed issues, including the arrangements for handling complaints of inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour. The issues covered under stage 1 were identified since the code and guide were last updated in June 2016, including by the previous Committee, the last Commissioner for Standards, as a result of the experience of the

registration process in the current mandate, and in developments in comparator legislatures.

The detail of the proposed amendments to the code and the guide is set out in the annex to the report, and the associated rationale is explained in the body of the report. At this point in the debate, I will highlight the two key changes proposed. First, the Committee recommends a move away from the approach of setting registration thresholds as a proportion of a Member's salary to one of expressing them as rounded cash sums. That is the approach generally taken in Dáil Éireann, Seanad Éireann, the House of Commons, and the House of Lords. The Committee considers that it will offer a clear-cut and accessible approach, with less scope for misunderstanding by Members.

Secondly, the Committee recommends that a gap in the rules be addressed to require Members to register the value, or estimated value, of gifts, benefits, hospitality and visits. The value of a gift or other material benefit can be a key consideration in determining whether it could reasonably be thought to influence a Member's actions. This new requirement would support the sixth rule of conduct, which states:

"You shall not accept any gift, benefit or hospitality that might reasonably be thought to influence your actions as a Member."

The proposed new requirement would also be in line with the arrangements in the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons. While I will not go into detail, the Committee also recommends various textual improvements to clarify the existing provisions and to achieve consistency in the code and guide.

In conclusion, the Committee envisages that the outcome of the review recommendations will be an improved code and guide that reduces the risk of non-compliance, with the resulting reputational damage; increases transparency; and leads to increased public confidence in the Assembly through a strengthened standards regime. I look forward to hearing the contributions from Members in the debate.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to make a few remarks about the report, and particularly to support the motion on the Assembly's code of conduct. As Members representing the people of Northern Ireland, we must ensure and uphold the highest ethical standards and set an example. The standards to which we are to be held have not been updated since June 2016, so the Committee's review is overdue. The

report covers stage 1 of the Committee's review of the code and seeks to deal with urgent and straightforward amendments. A lot of the amendments here are simply amendments in fact. The purpose of bringing the document into line with salary changes since 2016 is with regard to the threshold for declaring interests.

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

3.30 pm

Typically, those thresholds were set as a proportion of salaries, which, as the Member who spoke previously said, is the case in the Welsh Parliament and the Scottish Parliament. However, both Houses of the UK Parliament and the Oireachtas follow a system of absolute rounded numbers that are not specifically aligned to salaries, which has been recommended by the Committee. That is a clearer and simpler way of doing things without the need for calculations. However, we will, of course, need to keep that under review.

In the clear interests of transparency, it is also recommended that gifts, benefits, hospitality and visit registrations include their value or estimated value. Previously, gifts of over £245 had to be declared, but no estimate of their value was required. Obviously, for transparency, there is considerable benefit in understanding the value of gifts, so I welcome that change. In addition, a number of clarifying and tidying amendments are included that help to make the document clearer for easier use. I welcome that for ease of use for Members and for members of the public who wish to scrutinise our activities.

In closing, I am sure that all Members agree that clearer, meaningful and ethical rules are vital in order to ensure confidence in this place and that those reviews are a key part of ensuring that. I look forward to stage 2, when we will seek to review in detail issues that are of a more complex nature.

Ms S Bradley: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the motion. It and the reasoning behind it have been elaborated on. I agree with the Member who spoke about the appropriateness of responses. We all need to be mindful that, in our duties not just at Committee but in the House and outside it, we reflect the values of society and that the people who are listening to us expect a standard to be set. This is an attempt to do that. I will keep it short. On behalf of the SDLP, I will say that we welcome the proposed review.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr William Irwin to make a winding-up speech. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges): I thank Members for their contributions. I speak as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. As we heard, there is a clear connection between public confidence in this institution and a robust standards regime for Members. I will reflect on the particular points that were raised on the proposed amendments to the code and guide in a moment. However, it is important to reiterate that there is an onus on each of us, as elected Members, to be conscious of our ethical responsibilities and to lead by example. Observations of the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Lord Evans, are instructive on that. He recently stated:

"Maintaining standards in public life takes sustained work. I am sorry to say that there is no silver bullet. It remains the case that ethical standards are first and foremost a matter of personal responsibility."

Some Members, including Stewart Dickson, made the point that Members should set an example in their conduct. That is very important.

As outlined in the report, the Committee's stage 1 considerations have been informed by information on the approaches that are taken by comparable legislatures to the issues identified as well as by advice from the Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough. In summary and as highlighted, the two key areas where the Committee is recommending change include, first, the approach to setting thresholds and the registration of various interests and, secondly, the introduction of a new requirement on Members to provide the value or estimated value of gifts, benefits, hospitality and visits.

On the first issue, the Committee believes that its recommended changes to the thresholds for registering interests continue to strike the right balance between ensuring transparency and placing proportionate requirements on Members. On the second issue, the Committee is firmly of the view that the requirements for registering gifts, benefits and hospitality under category 3 and visits under category 4 of the guide should aim to ensure that sufficient information is included in the Assembly's Register of Members' Interests in order to inform any necessary decisions on compliance with applicable rules of conduct.

As detailed in the report, the Committee has also taken the opportunity at stage 1 of the review to identify various textual improvements to the provisions of the code and guide. While it is important that such amendments are made at this juncture, the Committee recognises that stage 2 of the review will offer another opportunity to clarify further and improve the provisions of the code and guide. The work at stage 2 will examine the arrangements for handling complaints of inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour, with a view to ensuring that a best practice approach is maintained.

Going into more detail, I wish to pick up on an issue in paragraph 5 of the introduction to the guide to the rules, which currently states:

"The Ministerial Code of Conduct is entirely separate to the Assembly's Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules. Complaints that the Ministerial Code of Conduct has been breached fall outside the scope of the Assembly's Code of Conduct and outside the remit of the Committee on Standards and Privileges and the Assembly Commissioner for Standards."

However, Members will be aware that the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 means that the arrangements have now changed. To address the timing issue, a footnote will be added to that paragraph of the amended guide. It will state:

"Clause 5 of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, which received Royal Assent on 22 March 2021, extends the powers of the Commissioner for Standards to investigate complaints against Ministers".

The footnote will also include a link to further information on the Act.

In conclusion, the motion serves to highlight the importance of the standards regime for Assembly Members. The proposed amendments to the code and guide will reduce the risk of non-compliance and resultant reputational damage to the Assembly, increase transparency and help to promote increased public confidence in the Assembly as a result of a strengthened standards regime.

Again, I thank Members for their contributions. I expect that the Committee will continue to lead the further improvement and refinement of the code and guide during the remainder of the mandate. Subject to the motion being agreed

today, the Committee will circulate copies of the revised code of conduct and guide to the rules to all MLAs for their information ahead of 12 April 2021, which is when they will come into effect. I encourage all Members to remain mindful of the need to continue to develop their knowledge and awareness of their responsibilities under the code and guide. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges on its 'Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1' [NIA 82/17-22], laid in the Business Office on 25 February 2021; affirms its commitment to high ethical standards and to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members; agrees that the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should be amended in accordance with the annex to the report; and further agrees that the amended Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should come into effect on Monday 12 April 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease before we move to the next item of business.

Private Members' Business

Strategy to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls

Ms S Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns violence against women and girls in all forms; notes with concern that Northern Ireland is the only place on these islands that does not have a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse; regrets that the Executive are failing to meet their international obligations in this regard; and calls on the Minister of Justice and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence in our society by introducing a violence against women and girls strategy, underpinned by legislation and resourcing that includes a commitment to legislate to make misogyny a hate crime and prioritises early intervention in schools to erode sexist attitudes and build lifelong positive relationships.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours 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 S Bradley: I am proposing the motion on behalf of the SDLP. It condemns violence against women and girls in all forms and seeks to get the support of the House for plans to devise a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse.

In doing so, I am particularly mindful of the horrific events that occurred in Newtownabbey over the weekend, and I place on record my sincere condolences to the families of the deceased. The images of Karen and Stacey flooding our media are simply heartbreaking, coming as they do so soon after the loss of Sarah Everard. Many families are left grieving and feeling re-traumatised each time that another woman loses her life.

Our motivations to deal with the horrific circumstances that lead to such brutal and final outcomes for so many women should be drawn from our genuine hope and aspirations to make this place — our shared home — a safer place for all women. We must collectively weed out misogyny and the behaviours that it provokes. We must find a serious and concerted way in which to recognise that our world is changing,

and changing at a very fast pace. Addiction to being online is prevalent and has been spurred by the isolation of lockdown. The anonymity afforded to online users reveals a level of misogyny that is not otherwise captured by any data. The casually or thinly disguised dislike, contempt for or ingrained prejudice against women can be found on many social media platforms in a matter of seconds. One search reveals plenty. The innocent sharing of memes that degrade women, or the normalised register of language that would never be uttered offline, depicts a fertile environment for hate to grow.

I acknowledge that these are complicated and complex matters, with no easy fix, but we must try. It is simply not good enough that we are lagging behind all other parts of these islands in forming a strategy that seeks to make a fundamental change to our culture and to how we view the topic of gender violence.

During our deliberations on the now Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, it was made abundantly clear that the levels of violence being directed towards women and girls were and are frightening. In a call for evidence during those deliberations, the Women's Aid Federation, which I must commend for being so steadfast in its determination to see a strategy developed, submitted a paper that shone a harsh light on the reality of domestic abuse that is only a partial depiction of the abuse that women face. In June 2020, it noted that there were a total of 16,182, domestic abuse crimes reported in 2018-19. That is 16,182 abuses too many. In 2019 and 2020, which included lockdown, the PSNI reportedly responded to 32,105 incidents of domestic abuse, with domestic abuse accounting for 17% of all crime reported to the police.

There were 11 murders linked to domestic abuse in 2017-18. Since lockdown began, eight women have been brutally murdered in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Domestic abuse and gender-based violence are, of course, not exclusively female problems, but there is no escaping the fact that females are disproportionately affected. I commend groups such as the Men's Advisory Project, which correctly points out that men often also experience domestic abuse. That is a valid concern, and it will have its own targeted measures to help those men, because we cannot say that men are immune to this; they are not. However, it really paints a picture when

we look at the disproportionate affect of domestic abuse on women.

The need for us to urgently intervene to keep women safe and alive cannot be overstated. A fully resourced strategy could seek to adopt a preventative and proactive approach. It could include providing age-appropriate and timely education on healthy, loving relationships and the better identification of early signs of abuse. It could prevent abusive behaviours becoming normalised or entrenched, seek to prevent perpetrators moving from one victim to the next and offer critical support before a crisis develops. Whilst I, like many others in the House, am not privy to the ministerial paper that was presented to the Executive, I am hopeful that it will include topics such as those.

Through open conversations and debates such as this, we blow away the myths associated with victim blaming and stigma. We remove any remaining taboos and begin to empower women. I welcome the First Minister and deputy First Minister being in attendance, and I note the First Minister's comments in the media in support of this type of strategy. I also give recognition to the Minister of Justice, who, originally a little hesitant to see the need to break this down in a gender-specific way, has more recently come out to suggest that she is supportive and has acted on her word by bringing that paper to the Executive.

I urge every Member to support the motion. I also wish to take a moment to speak about the amendment. The amendment reorders the wording, I suppose, but I was trying to find where it actually brought a differential to the original motion. The one significant deviation that it appears to make is that it calls for the standardisation of the relationships and sexuality education (RSE) programme in schools. I made the point in Committee and will make it again in the House that a large body of work could be developed in the form of an RSE programme before any Member would diverge from their views. The basic building blocks of respect and love are fundamental to all healthy relationships. Standardising may set a limit on how far those age-appropriate conversations will go and does not negate the critical role of parenting. The rules of respect are universal and need to be promoted and reinforced by all. Therefore, we have no objection to the amendment and will support it. However, we want to make it clear that it may be a limiting factor as we go forward, and I hope that people are respectful of that.

I cannot state enough the need for Northern Ireland to act on the issue. I look forward to

hearing Members' contributions, and I urge all Members to support the motion.

Miss Woods: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "regard;" and insert:

"and calls on the Executive to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence by introducing a violence against women and girls strategy that is fully resourced and underpinned by legislation to make misogyny a hate crime, and to introduce standardised, comprehensive relationships and sexuality education in our schools to eradicate sexist attitudes and build lifelong, positive relationships."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member will have five 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.

Miss Woods: Over the weekend, I was chatting to my partner about this public debate. I asked him whether he had ever been taught or warned about not running at night, keeping to well-lit areas and avoiding going out on his own. Had he ever had his choice of outfit commented on, been verbally abused or victim-blamed, been inappropriately touched or warned about being sexually assaulted? Never: not once. That is the polar opposite of my and many other women's experiences, not because we went to different schools or were brought up differently, but simply because he is a man and I am a woman.

Violence against women and girls has been described as:

"one of the most pervasive violations of human rights in the world [yet] one of the least prosecuted crimes".

Throughout history, women and girls have been subjected to patriarchal structures in society, which give men the social power and legitimacy not only to make the rules but to police them. That is the firm reality of the society in which we live, not just in Northern Ireland but globally. The system is not working. It is a fact that, in most societies, men have power over women. That is shown in many ways: in spheres of influence, in the so-called traditional roles in the home, in relation to children, in the division of labour and in wages and property rights. The global average for women's income is around half of what men are paid. In the midst of those

inequalities, and practically symptomatic of that gender imbalance, we have a problem. The problem is male violence: that which is perpetrated by men against women and girls.

Globally, one in three women has been subjected to physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. Research from the femicide census shows that, on average, a woman is killed by a man every three days in the UK. The report makes for grim reading. From 2009 to 2018, 1,425 women were murdered. Almost half of the men who killed women during that 10-year period were known to have a history of violence against women. Seventy per cent of the killings took place in the home that the perpetrator shared with the victim or in the victim's own home. The sad reality is that violence and abuse against women and girls is endemic across the world, and responses to it are woefully inadequate legally, institutionally and societally.

The unfortunate circumstances in Northern Ireland are compounded by the fact that we have always lagged behind when it comes to legislation, policy and change. Other jurisdictions moved to criminalise coercive control many years before a Bill was brought before the House. Criminal offences such as stalking have been introduced previously in other places. England introduced a strategy to end violence against women and girls in 2010, Scotland in 2014, and, in 2015, Wales passed the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act, which imposes a duty on the Government to prepare, publish, review and implement a national strategy.

What do we have in Northern Ireland? Very little. We have, it seems, a plethora of gender-neutral policies and strategies but nothing that really recognises gender-based violence. The question, therefore, is this: what is going on? I welcome the debate and recent statements to the media by many Executive Ministers on a strategy. However, after everything that has happened, and, in the past year, for example, woman after woman being murdered, the fact that it has taken so long for us finally to kick into action is disappointing, frustrating and absolutely disgraceful.

In June 2020, I listened carefully to Women's Aid call for a strategy on violence against women and girls, and, as a member of the Justice Committee and as an individual Member, I made representations to the Minister of Justice to bring one forward. We pressed for that continually in Committee. The response that we received from the Department was

deeply disappointing. I will quote from the Committee's report on the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, which was published in October 2020. The Department said:

"There would be concerns that the adoption of a gendered strategy could send out a message that tackling abuse against men is less important."

As Women's Aid explained to the Committee, a gendered strategy:

"is not about a hierarchy of victims with one group deserving of more, it is just about that recognition that it is a gender-based crime"

and about grasping the facts and reality in order to develop evidence-based interventions.

We discussed an amendment to the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill to introduce a strategy but were advised that it would fall outside the scope, and we did not pursue it. With the help of Assembly staff, I drafted an amendment and published it on 2 November 2020. It was there for every MLA and Minister to see, but it was not selected.

I am glad that the Executive will look at the issue as a matter of urgency, and I hope that any forthcoming strategy will be cross-departmental, fully resourced and effectively implemented with a delivery model that incorporates regular reviews of its effectiveness. I also congratulate and pay tribute to Women's Aid for their campaign to get this to the Executive table.

We need to recognise the specific nature of the context in which we live. Studies have shown that it remains the case that the legacy of the conflict, such as paramilitarism, ethno-national antagonisms, party politics and political focus on identity issues at the expense of others, continues to have a negative implication for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. The traditional public-private divide has meant that the legal system is simply not equipped to deal with the issues that affect women and girls more widely, and we have a system that, for too long, has institutionalised gender bias and stereotypes. It is time to change that. I welcome the intervention from Sir John Gillen yesterday, when he criticised the pace of change of the reforms to the justice system, and I fully agree that those recommendations around serious sexual offences need to be implemented urgently.

We must recognise abuses that target women, those who are transgender and those who are non-binary simply because of their gender identity for what they are: hate crimes. Misogyny is a blight that affects us all, and I give credit and thanks to the Raise Your Voice campaign and the councils that have led the way on this, raising awareness in the council chambers. I welcome Judge Murrinan's recommendations and urge the Justice Minister to bring forward hate crime legislation as soon as possible with buy-in across the Executive. We know what we need to do, so let us get it done.

Earlier this month, the expert advisory panel on a gender equality strategy appointed by DFC described relationships and sexuality education in our schools as "inconsistent and insufficient". There is no uniform pattern to the provision of RSE in schools. Provision is not the same across the board. For every young person who has engaged with some form of RSE, many others have not had anywhere near the same experience. Another expert panel tasked with looking at a sexual orientation strategy has advised that RSE should not be dependent on school ethos. What more do we need?

Our young people tell us that RSE is not sufficient. Research by Belfast Youth Forum showed that only 66% said that they had received RSE in school, and 60% felt that the information they had received was either "not very useful" or "not useful at all". We need age-appropriate, standardised, comprehensive RSE, including the teaching of issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour, delivered by professionals using a rights-based approach and a gender-focused programme that reflects the realities of society and the relationships that people are in.

UNESCO has also published technical guidance on RSE since 2006, and its 2016 review found that using an explicit rights-based approach in comprehensive sex ed programmes leads to positive effects on attitudes, including increased knowledge of one's rights in a sexual relationship, increased communication with parents about sex and relationships and greater self-efficacy in managing risky situations. There are also significant longer-term positive effects around the psychosocial and behavioural outcomes. The review of evidence also found that gender-focused programmes are substantially more effective than gender-blind programmes at achieving health outcomes such as reducing rates of unintended pregnancy or STIs.

We need a strategy to tackle gender-based violence. We have always needed one. A strategy will provide the framework of accountability and oversight that we need to tackle misogyny and improve RSE in our schools. The evidence stares us in the face, and it shows that educational programmes that explicitly address gender inequality by confronting beliefs that support male authority over women, for example, are more effective in reducing partner violence and changing sexual behaviour. Our amendment calls for that to be recognised and for comprehensive RSE to be standardised across all our schools. It also situates the strategy across the entire Executive, recognising that all Departments must play their part and that Ministers should allocate sufficient resources to deliver change. I urge all Members to support the amendment and the motion.

Mrs Cameron: As a party, we fully support the calls for a Northern Ireland strategy on violence against women and girls. It is regrettable that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK not to have such a strategy in place. That is worrying, as sexual and violent crime against females continues to rise, and it is astounding that, across the UK, one in five women will experience sexual assault during their lifetime. The Justice Minister's commitment to bring forward a paper to the Executive to kick-start the process of devising a violence against women and girls strategy is, therefore, not only welcome but long overdue.

4.00 pm

I put on record my thanks to Women's Aid and other advocates who have consistently and passionately highlighted the need for stronger measures on the issue. The issues surrounding violence against women and domestic abuse have not disappeared during the COVID-19 pandemic; if anything, they have increased. A strategy must recognise our situation and the consequences of COVID-19 and lockdown on vulnerable women and, often, their children. The support given by organisations such as Women's Aid during the pandemic has been nothing short of phenomenal. They have adapted to the challenges and continued to support women and children across the country. Any steps to develop and implement a Northern Ireland strategy must be co-designed and must command the support of our committed and highly valued community and voluntary partners. More long-term funding for core services in the community and voluntary sector will also be necessary to achieve many of the aims of a successful strategy.

PSNI crime and domestic violence statistics paint a frightening picture of the situation in Northern Ireland. In 1998-99, almost 900 sexual assaults on females were recorded; in 2019-20, that number had grown to over 1,400. The recent horrific murder of Sarah Everard in England and, indeed, the tragic killings in Newtownabbey on Friday have really brought home the issue of violence against women. Our justice system, police and other public services must be given every possible tool to tackle violence of that nature.

The recently passed Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act is an important step in the right direction. I hope the Act's powers of tougher sentencing will be properly utilised. Legislative progress on stalking and upskirting will also make a positive contribution to tackling some of the abuse faced by women in our society. I commend the Justice Minister and the Department for the progress made in those areas over the past year. There is, however, a risk that the current mechanisms to address harm against women and girls are not being used to full effect. Many will, rightly or wrongly, say that our justice system is not tough enough on criminals on a wide range of crimes. I have the same fear about how those who commit crimes targeting women are dealt with in the courts. My party colleague Lord Morrow's Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill received Royal Assent in 2015, yet referrals, prosecutions and convictions for human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women remain unacceptably low in our Province. We need to ensure that the existing tools are applied effectively by the judiciary to protect women and girls. The exploiters of women must feel the full force of the law and be made an example of, and a clear message must be sent that we will not tolerate their behaviour.

A strategy should include mechanisms for monitoring the success and outcomes of all paths and forthcoming legislation. By doing that, we can better identify what more can be done. All of that must be put in the context of a wider strategy to deal effectively with present issues and prepare for new challenges. Over the past few years, we have seen the emergence of new forms of abuse and violence against females, including cyberflashing, upskirting and revenge pornography, to name a few. There are increasing reports of abuse and extreme sexism in online forums and social media platforms, which is not recorded in official data. The pace of technological change means that evolving forms of crimes against women and girls are emerging. The key test of

any strategy is how it identifies new trends as well as the volume and prevalence of offences. A strategy must also consider the importance of prevention and education. Women need to have confidence that any report of violence and abuse will be taken seriously, that they will not be victim-blamed and that the perpetrator will not be able to harm them any more. Education is vital in tackling negative and toxic attitudes towards women. Our young people need to be educated about healthy relationships, how to recognise dangerous and coercive behaviour and where to turn to for help. As a society, we should address and never tolerate attempts to victim-blame, excuse or justify violence against women, and that includes those who perpetrated violence and who disappeared, murdered, maimed, abused and orphaned many women and girls under the guise of so-called political objectives during decades of terrorism in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cameron: I will.

Mr Givan: Will the Member agree that there are people with information who should come forward with that evidence? Lisa Dorrian is one example. They perpetuate the violence that they did to her in the past against the family today.

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

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for his intervention. I fully agree with his comments. We must call out harmful behaviour and attitudes from wherever they come.

I welcome all the steps being taken to initiate a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls.

I recognise that a difficult task lies ahead for all of us to make it a success, but it is most necessary. As an Assembly, we must take a firm stance against all forms of violence. Our justice system must get tougher on violence against women and girls. We cannot have a light-touch approach to perpetrators and abusers.

Ms Dillon: I thank the proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment for bringing them to the House. We raised the issue on a number of occasions with the Justice Minister during the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act. That was not just the Sinn Féin representatives but other

members of the Committee, because we felt that it was important. Whilst that piece of legislation was perhaps not the right place to address the issue, it absolutely needs to be addressed, so I welcome that we are discussing it today.

It is extremely sad that we are discussing the issue against the backdrop of the killings of two women on Friday night and the killing of Sarah Everard the week before. Unfortunately, those are not the only women or girls who have suffered or who we have lost in the community, so I offer our sympathies to all those who have lost members of their families: their mummies, their sisters and their daughters.

I listened to Frank Mullane yesterday on the radio. A number of Members were interviewed as part of that piece so they probably heard him, too, but he talked about the murder of his sister and about his and his family's campaign to effect change. One issue that he raised was the importance of the first response and protection service. On that, we are talking to policing and justice, which is why I felt that it fitted with the Department of Justice. It obviously is a cross-cutting issue that goes across all Departments; every Department will have to have an input to the strategy and face up to their responsibilities. For that reason, the Department of Justice probably needs to take the lead. Somebody needs to take the lead. We need to see an effective strategy, not something like the piecemeal and gender-blind approach that we have had to date.

We all have men in our lives whom we love, who love us and who are good to us, so we do not need to constantly defend the fact that we are talking about a strategy to address violence against women and girls. We do not need to keep balancing that by saying that men are victims. We know that they are, but the statistics bear out that the victims are mostly women and that the perpetrators are mostly men, even when men are the victims. We need to stop trying to balance things out and to accept that those are the facts.

We are all well aware of the under-reporting of domestic and sexual violence against women, so even the statistics that we have are not right and are not close to being right. I welcome what the Minister of Justice has brought forward so far through the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act and the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill. Hopefully, we will have a miscellaneous provisions Bill that deals with upskirting, downblousing and some of the Gillen recommendations, and we have the stalking legislation. All that is progressive and good.

That is what we are here to do. We are here to legislate, but we need to ensure that we talk to and engage with the victims and the sector on the strategy. We, as legislators, will absolutely do our bit, but we need to engage with those people. We need to engage with Women's Aid, which has done so much in this campaign, with the victims who have survived and with the families of those who have not survived, because they will help to inform any strategy that we bring forward.

I absolutely support the amendment. I have talked in the House before to the fact that we need standardised sex and relationship education across our education system. I, as a mummy, have a responsibility. I take that seriously, and I will do my best to educate my child on what a healthy relationship looks like. However, not every child has that in their home. Not every child has parents, and not every child has good guidance. That is the reality of the world that we live in, so our education system has to pick up the slack in that, as do we, as a community. In saying that, one of the reasons why we have failed to recognise domestic violence as a whole, but particularly violence against women, is that we decided that it was a problem inside the home and not one for us as a community. It is, and I am glad to see that we are finally recognising that.

A strategy will, hopefully, bring us forward and ensure that all our community, including those who want to resist this, finally recognise that the issue has to be dealt with.

Ms Armstrong: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the motion and confirm that we will support the Green Party amendment.

In the last week, Northern Ireland has heard more sad news: another two women have died following an act of violence. If only that could be the last time that we hear such devastating news. Sadly, as we in the Chamber know, it will not be. When the next news report comes, we will shake our heads and express sympathy, knowing that that will not be the last time either. Violence against women and girls will continue until society as a whole says, "Enough". I support the amendment, because I believe that it is time that the whole Executive acted as a single unit to eradicate misogyny, sexism and violence against women.

By the time that an attacker reaches the criminal justice system, they have already acted violently against their victim. We need to stop women and girls, or anyone, becoming a victim in the first place. That has to start right at the beginning by ensuring that there is appropriate

support through pregnancy and effective help through a child's early years and school years, and that, through the curriculum, everyone is taught to recognise what a positive relationship is and what to do if someone treats them badly, is abusive or is physically violent. We should seek to prevent people from becoming victims.

In the House, Members have, over a number of debates, confirmed the need to recognise that, while far too many women bear the brunt of violence, it is an issue not solely for women and girls but for all people. We all understand that, in creating a violence against women and girls strategy, we must take a gendered approach. As mentioned by others, men are, by far, the abusers, and they must therefore be part of the strategy. It cannot be hidden away as a women's issue. We have the chance to change, to improve and to encourage healthy relationships for everyone across society, but it will take a joined-up, targeted and funded approach to eradicate the scourge of violence.

I know that the Minister of Justice brought a paper to the Executive today. I do not what the paper's contents are, but I hope that it has been or will be discussed. Violence against women and girls is a pertinent and live issue. It is not going away. I sincerely hope that the Executive take positive action and take forward whatever is set out in the paper. That would send out a clear signal to all that acts of violence against women and girls, or anybody, are wrong and that we are committed to preventing anyone from ever being a victim again.

I mentioned the Minister of Justice, a woman who takes her fair share of abuse, I have to say, inside and outside the Chamber. I would like to thank Pam Cameron for recognising the work of the Minister. These are tough times.

Many in the House have spoken in debates about and been involved in scrutinising the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, which received Royal Assent on 1 March. The Minister is also bringing forward investment for advocacy support services, which will support victims of domestic and sexual abuse as they go through the criminal justice system. The domestic violence and abuse scheme enables police and their partners to manage risk better through the sharing of relevant information about a person's history of domestic abuse. The behavioural change programme aims to ensure the safety of women and children and prevent further abusive behaviour. The programme will develop an effective partnership with the five trusts across Northern Ireland. The Minister introduced domestic homicide reviews in December 2020 to enable learning from cases

of homicide resulting from domestic violence. The consultation on enhancing legal protections for victims of domestic abuse closed last month. The consultation, as many know, sought views on creating new domestic abuse protection notices and protection orders. The Minister continues the work on modern slavery and trafficking and will publish her annual modern slavery strategy. The review of hate crime, as presented by Judge Marrinan, was published on 1 December. The Minister and her officials are considering the 34 recommendations, and a response is expected. On top of that, the Protection from Stalking Bill was introduced. The Minister and her officials are taking forward Sir John Gillen's recommendations through the implementation plan that will present a programme of transformation across the criminal justice system. Changes that many welcome include trauma-informed training for police, the Public Prosecution Service, legal professionals and other justice partners.

As we know and others mentioned, the Gillen report recommended that relationships and sexuality education in schools be progressed under the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007.

The Department of Education has agreed to take the lead on the working group, and I look forward to it taking forward that work to ensure that issues such as consent, rape myths and use of social media are covered in the school curriculum.

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close, please.

Ms Armstrong: Alliance absolutely supports the strategy mentioned today. As the amendment confirms, it is for the whole Executive to take responsibility for taking forward a strategy and ensuring that resourcing is available.

Mrs Barton: Given the sad news last weekend, the motion is extremely timely, and, I, too, wish to be associated with the condolences to the Newtownabbey family.

Gender-based violence against women is the systematic use of violence to reinforce power over women. That generally involves domestic violence and/or sexual violence, which is used to reinforce that power. While all violence is wrong and I recognise that there is violence against men by their partners and same-sex violence, the violence directed against women

is disproportionate in comparison. As a result of gender-based violence, women are left with physical and non-physical symptoms, including feelings of worthlessness, disbelief, shame, disgust, utter humiliation and guilt, making it extremely difficult for them to report the violence and even preventing many from reporting it, to the appropriate authorities.

Sadly, as we read in our press today, since the COVID restrictions were introduced in Northern Ireland, the number of women murdered has doubled. Eight women have been violently killed as a result of gender-based violence since last March, so, if evidence were needed, there is no doubt that a violence against women and girls strategy is a must. At the very least, the strategy must reflect the thoughts of those who have been victims and of the many agencies that offer support, and it must reflect how the perpetrators are to be held accountable for their actions.

One of the key considerations in the strategy must be education. Educating our youth is necessary. From primary school onwards, young people must be encouraged to respect, listen to and accept that violence is not the way forward. They must have an understanding of what is considered acceptable towards a young girl or a woman, but, most of all, they must have positive attitudes towards one another, and those must be encouraged. Our society must be educated. Through awareness campaigns, there needs to be change in the long-established societal attitudes to domestic and sexual violence until the statistics start to reflect respect towards women and girls.

Another key consideration must be to improve the support available to victims. In 2019-2020, Women's Aid supported 560 women and 316 children in its refuges. From our community outreach support, we know that 5,536 women and 5,143 children experienced domestic abuse across Northern Ireland.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way and for citing those numbers. Does that not make the point that Women's Aid and organisations like it need to be associated with any strategy and funded to implement any resources that are required from it?

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

Mrs Barton: Thank you for your intervention. I totally agree.

The PSNI has attended domestic abuse incidents every 17 minutes. Those statistics prove how necessary it is to have emotional support, counselling and referral support, such as that from Women's Aid, but they must be properly resourced and funded.

The third consideration for the strategy must involve the perpetrator being brought or held to account for their actions. Once the victim has reported the incident, they want to see the wrongdoer being brought to justice and taking responsibility for their actions, together with their being given the support to understand the consequences of their behaviour and the impact that they have had on the victim.

The strategy needs to be effective and cross-cutting across Departments, including Justice, Education, Health and Finance. It needs to encourage a society that is inclusive of equality and mutual respect and that repels all forms of violence against women and girls. It must recognise the importance of early and effective intervention to maximise the safety and well-being of women and children. I look forward to the day when the success of the strategy —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close, please.

Mrs Barton: — will be measured by a year-on-year reduction in victims. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mr Givan: This morning, when I looked at the front page of 'The Belfast Telegraph', I was struck by the image of the eight women who have been killed over the past 12 months. When I looked at the images of Natasha, Elizabeth, Emma Jane, Patrycja, Stacey, Karen, Susan and Katie, the timeliness of today's motion struck me, as did the need for a gender-specific strategy when it comes to tackling violence against women and girls. I see no contradiction whatsoever in having gender-neutral legislation that seeks to capture all those criminal offences, whilst recognising that, in the majority of cases, the victims are women and the perpetrators are men. Not to have a strategy that recognises that, in my view, would be failing to deal with where the problem exists. I support the gender-neutral strategy.

Linda Dillon touched on the fact that the Committee dealt with the matter when it considered the domestic abuse Bill. The Committee considered tabling an amendment to compel it to happen but was not able to do so. As a result of some of the engagement during that process, the Committee raised this

as one of the issues, and I am pleased that the Justice Minister now supports this approach. The Department came back, at that time, to say that there were concerns that adopting a gendered strategy could send out a message that tackling abuse against men is less important. In her opening remarks, Sinéad said that there was some nervousness about going with that approach. However, I welcome the real commitment that we will take this forward and have a gender-based strategy, because it is right that we do so.

We have the seven-year strategy, 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse'. It is an overarching gender-neutral document. However, this would be a specific document on tackling violence against women and girls. It is right that we have that.

I put on record my thanks to Women's Aid, which supported Committee members when we considered the issues. Women's Aid led on the petition and the campaign, and some credit can go to it for getting us to this place today. We have heard repeatedly when considering these issues at Committee that it is vital that support services are supported and that organisations such as Women's Aid get the financial resources necessary to support women when they come forward seeking help.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I spoke with representatives from Women's Aid yesterday, and the day before, on this issue. One of the concerns that they raised was that, currently, an excellent Committee is working tirelessly on this issue. I assured them that, no matter who sits on the Committee, that work would continue in the next mandate. I am delighted — I think that the Member will agree — to hear the voices across the House, because it gives a reassurance to Women's Aid that, no matter who sits on any future Justice Committee, this issue will be very much focused on.

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

Mr Givan: I agree with the Member. It is because of that commitment that the Committee took forward amendments on things like access to legal aid, which was not originally in that Act, and compelling the Police Service, the courts and the Public Prosecution Service to have mandatory training so that there is a much better understanding. Some of the experience that we heard spoke to the need for that type of mandatory training. We were able to enhance the legislation and are looking at

more legislation, which Members have touched on.

My colleague Pam Cameron spoke about the Human Trafficking Act. Again, that speaks to an important issue. The Assembly passed that Act, but one aspect created some controversy: payment for sexual services. I raise that to draw out a story from the time of that Act. I remember debating this very issue during an engagement with students and young people. Some of the young men said, "If I want to pay for something, I should be able to do that". It was the girls in that class who said, "How dare you think that I am a commodity that you can buy". That response was powerful. It is right that there is a job to be done for some men and some young people — not all, and we should not stereotype all men. There is a job to be done for some who regard women as a commodity and who objectify women. That has to be challenged. I agree that it has to be challenged in schools and in society at large. It is vital that work be done on that.

It is important that work is also done around social media platforms. We see all the time how females in particular, but not exclusively, are pursued and trolled by men over their appearance, and it is just appalling. Westminster has a job to do on that front in the communications legislation. There must be a much tougher approach to social media platforms. New laws must be brought in to deal with that.

I commend the proposers of the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Givan: The motion will have my full support. I will do whatever I can, in my role on the Justice Committee, to help to create better legislation in this arena.

Ms Brogan: I take this opportunity to join other Members in sending condolences to the families and friends of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell. Nothing that I can say can ease the pain that their friends and families are feeling. However, it is important for us to remember them here today and to acknowledge the many other victims of violence against women and girls.

As Sinn Féin spokesperson on children and young people, I speak in support of the motion and the amendment. The horrific events in Newtownabbey last week and the killing of Sarah Everard in England at the beginning of

this month have brought the issue of violence against women and girls to the fore. Those events cause profound sadness, widespread fear and deep frustration. It is incumbent on us, as Members of the Assembly, to evaluate what we, as legislators and policymakers, have done and to identify what still needs to be done. It is regrettable that we do not have a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse in the North. I urge the Minister of Justice to initiate the development of a violence against women and girls strategy as a matter of urgency. I welcome this debate and believe that the development of such a strategy would offer a positive way forward.

Statistics reveal the scale of the task that we have ahead of us. An NSPCC report found that one in three teenage girls had already experienced some form of violence from a boyfriend. Other figures show that one in four women experiences domestic abuse. Proportionately, the rate of women murdered by a partner here is one of the highest in Europe. At the same time, statistics show the difficulty that women face in pursuing justice. Scrutiny of rape cases over a four-year period revealed a shockingly poor rate of reported cases leading to court cases, with even fewer resulting in convictions.

A strategy to tackle violence against women and girls would be a small step towards ensuring that all our children grow up in a society of equals. We all must ask the following questions. Without a strategy, are we sending our young people out into a challenging world well equipped to understand and reject violence against women and girls? Are we empowering women and girls to challenge intimidation and violence effectively? Can we teach our boys to understand that masculinity should never be expressed through the medium of violence against women and girls?

Such a strategy should consider cultural drivers of misogyny, representations of women and girls, and the way in which our children are educated. Schools across the North should have mandatory and standardised relationship and sexuality education. Our young people should be informed and educated on healthy relationships, abuse and consent, and our schools should be equipped with the necessary training and resources to provide effective and high-quality RSE. Fundamentally, violence against women and girls is not about being ill-informed or misguided. It is about inequality and the operation of power — power asserted through a direct, illegal use of violence and control, or through an indirect failure to effectively challenge that.

4.30 pm

As well as seeking changes in understanding behaviour and attitude, a strategy must scrutinise and challenge the operation of state institutions. We need to see greater determination by the police and the Public Prosecution Service to pursue perpetrators. We need properly resourced support services to empower our victims and, on conviction, have appropriate sentencing. Last week, the British Tory Party introduced legislation in Westminster that makes toppling a statue of a slave owner subject to harsher sentencing than that given for most rape convictions. There is something seriously wrong about that. A violence against women and girls strategy should seek to identify institutional misogyny and call it out. Misogyny should be listed as a hate crime, and appropriate action should be taken.

The message must be clear: violence against women and girls has to stop, and it has to stop now. We owe it to our children and young people — girls and boys — to act with certainty and clarity. We must address our failures to ensure that their future is a future in a society of equals; a society where boys and girls, and men and women, can live without fear of abuse or violence.

Ms Sheerin: I rise in support of the motion and the amendment. I commend the Members who have brought them to the Assembly. It is timely. Others have made reference to the sad murders of two women, last week, just a couple of miles up the road. I add my condolences to those offered to their families.

According to the UN, women, worldwide, aged 15 to 44, are more at risk from domestic violence and rape than they are from war, malaria, car accidents and cancer. It is a risk that we as women are acutely aware of. When it is normalised and deemed necessary to give teenage girls rape alarms, the course has been set for their lives. Women shoulder the burden of caring responsibilities, the brunt of domestic duties, responsibility for family planning and contraception. Perhaps, it stands to reason that ensuring that we are not the victims of crime is also our job, solely.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Last week, I had a conversation with a male friend that exposed how differently we think about the issue. We were talking about the echo chamber that is social media. My politics, by virtue of my Sinn Féin membership, are fairly obvious, so my timelines are full of other lefties

who will have reposted Black Lives Matter slogans, condemning racism following the killings of George Floyd and George Nkencho respectively; who will criticise Members for homophobic letters that they have written; who have expressed disgust at the cruel and insensitive protests that have been taking place at clinics, such as the protest in Newry, which has been going on for weeks. However, nothing that we have seen being discussed in the public discourse in recent times sparked the same level of reaction on my feeds, from friends as well as fellow politicians, as the murder of Sarah Everard. As I was remarking to my friend about the number of people whom I would not count as being political commenting on the issue, he was expressing shock at the levels that women go to, on a daily basis, to keep themselves safe.

Sarah Everard's murder resonated with so many women because we can all relate. We have all noticed a taxi driver taking an unexpected route, instantly felt our throat tighten, and rung a friend to tell them where we are; crossed the street on a walk at night and fashioned our keys as a weapon; told someone that we had a boyfriend, even when we did not; laughed along at an inappropriate joke so as not to be seen as difficult; or felt a hand where we did not want one. Sarah Everard did everything that she was supposed to do — we have heard that over and over — because we are supposed to keep ourselves safe.

How many times have you heard about someone getting assaulted and then hearing a running commentary about what she was wearing, how many drinks she had consumed, whether she was on her own — whether she deserved it? It is not many years since, during a highly publicised trial relating to an alleged rape, a woman's underwear was displayed in court to prove the innocence of the accused by way of insinuations of the alleged victim's character. Lacy underwear does not mean "up for it". This sort of victim-blaming is another symptom of the misogyny that is the root cause of our high levels of gender-based violence in the first instance.

Misogyny and the continued existence of the patriarchy hurt us all. Yes, it is women who bear the brunt of attacks, women who suffer the raw end of the deal with the pay gap and career advancement, and women who have to endure commentary about our appearance, our behaviour and our morality, but the societal norms perpetuated by outdated patriarchal structures hurt us all. The narrative that all men are physically strong, violent, irresponsible ogres incapable of controlling their animal

instincts could not be further from reality. It does our men a huge disservice. It creates unhelpful stereotypes that prevent male victims of abuse from coming forward, prevents men from accessing mental health services, and puts up barriers to men talking about their feelings and experiences in an open way. It is not all men, but if you snigger at rape jokes or belittle the reactions of female friends or colleagues, you are part of the problem. It does us no harm to check ourselves on internalised misogyny and ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to challenge the inequality that we all witness daily.

CEDAW's concluding observations in 2019 listed worries about the lack of uniform protection of women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence across the jurisdiction of the state party, noting with particular concern the inadequacy of laws and policies to protect women. With that in mind, I welcome the introduction of this strategy, and I commend the motion.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important topic. Our society has a deep-rooted problem with misogyny and violence against women, and I echo the previous comments of Members from around the House. The brutal murder of Stacey Knell and Karen McClean on Friday has brought the clear inadequacy of the systems designed to protect women into sharp focus. This is one of the many reasons why today the SDLP is tabling this motion.

It is unacceptable that we remain the only place on these islands without a specific strategy to address violence against women and girls. What message does that send them? There is no space for complacency while women face misogynistic abuse every day, even women in this Chamber. Unfortunately, none of us is a stranger to misogynistic abuse online, on Twitter, on doorsteps and in our everyday lives and to the fear of walking home due to those who do not understand or who choose not to understand the important concept of consent.

A key part of this debate is that there is an evident call for a shift in how we tackle this issue from an educational perspective that can act as early intervention. Younger years are where healthy perceptions and respect for women are formed and created. Society is fast-changing. Our education system must reflect its commitment to teaching about true equality in society because, if we do not teach our children to respect women, the internet will get there first and teach them, as the Member who spoke previously hinted at, to objectify women and to

view them through the lens of sexuality before humanity. How many times as a woman have you been in a bar or a club or at a festival or a gig and a man has groped you? It is time to put consent on the curriculum.

As a former pupil of a Catholic school where the word "sex" was practically considered a curse word, suitable relationship and sex education was not delivered to either boys or girls. You may ask why this is relevant to the debate. Relationship and sexuality education is a vital tool in empowering our young people to overcome societal and cultural pressures and learn effectively about the power of consent. I agree with Sinéad that parenting plays a huge role, as do our schools, in ensuring that our young people build a healthy understanding of what relationships are and what they look like. Instigating sexual advances without consent is a crime that is an everyday act of violence against women.

A comprehensive student survey carried out last year laid bare the extent of sexual harassment in Northern Ireland's third-level educational institutes, with one in three students revealing that they had experienced unwanted sexual behaviour during their time at university or college. That is an astonishing statistic when you consider the psychological impact that sexual misconduct can have on each and every victim and survivor.

I am grateful for charities like Nexus NI that support victims and survivors of sexual assault. We need to play our role now and intervene. We are calling today for the introduction of a robust strategy that is underpinned by legislation.

Early intervention in our schools would play a key role in eroding sexism and place a focus on building positive lifelong relationships with women. Abuse in teenage relationships can impact all genders, but it is very important to raise that. In young adulthood, females in particular who experienced teen dating violence reported increased depression symptoms, and they were 1.5 times more likely to binge-drink or smoke and twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts.

What could we do more of? We do not teach young people enough about healthy relationships and how to identify and recognise abuse. More importantly, we do not equip them with the language to understand or talk about abuse. It is time that we instilled a core belief of equality and sent a strong message to our young people, with appropriate education, in

order to prevent further violence against women across the North.

Mr G Kelly: I welcome the fact that a number of Members tabled the motion, and I am glad to be able to speak on it.

Over the last short while, I have heard a lot of the discourse about the issue. One of the things that really stood out for me was how women are taught to protect themselves, and Emma Sheerin shared some of the ways of doing that, which I had heard about on the radio. Many women walk home alone at night carrying keys between their fingers in case they have to fight someone off. They have to plan their route home to make sure that they are on busy roads with plenty of lights and cameras, just in case. They are taught to tuck their long hair into the backs of their coats, and they get male taxi drivers to drop them off a few doors away from their home as they worry about those taxi drivers knowing where they live.

Members talked about statistics, and I was struck by those in the recent investigation by UN Women UK. It found that 97% of women aged 18 to 24 had been sexually harassed and that a further 96% did not report those situations because they believed that it would make no difference at all.

What are we to do? I firmly believe that, as men, we need to listen to the voices of women and to amplify their voices. We need to change the attitudes that feed that violence. We know that men suffer violence too, and a number of Members said that, but this is about women and girls, and the research and statistics show that the overwhelming and vast majority of victims are women and that men perpetrate the majority of that violence. World Health Organization statistics show that 82% of the victims of intimate partner homicides are women.

The discussion should not be focused on how women can protect themselves but on how men challenge and change their behaviours. That does not just mean avoiding being a perpetrator but challenging other men and calling out insulting or inappropriate behaviour. Often, misogynistic comments are passed off as jokes. However, what starts as jokes about women are insults. Those insults feed into a culture of misogyny, which leads to more serious incidents of violence. We need to have the uncomfortable conversations, because the longer that we go on without tackling the fundamental problems of misogyny and sexism, the longer that levels of violence against women will remain unacceptable.

A YouGov survey that was carried out by UN Women UK found that only 4% of women reported incidents of sexual harassment. That is a shockingly low figure and a damning indictment of how the criminal justice system has failed women for too long. There is a responsibility on the police to take complaints of sexual harassment and other forms of violence seriously. As a member of the Policing Board, I know that moves have been made in that area, but they have not been enough, by any stretch of the imagination. The police need to be given sufficient training to allow them to effectively investigate claims of violence against women and girls and to spot offences and gather evidence so that those cases can be effectively prosecuted. There also needs to be training in the Public Prosecution Service and the judiciary. When the retired judge John Gillen spoke in the media yesterday, I think it was, I noticed that he mentioned specifically that the judiciary needs that training also.

I was pleased to see mandatory training for police officers in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act in order to allow them to police the newly introduced domestic abuse offence. Training needs to be rolled out on all forms of violence against women and girls, including issues such as harassment, stalking and sexual violence.

4.45 pm

I finish by emphasising what I said earlier: there is an imperative on men not just to listen to women but to amplify what they say so that we can all reduce misogyny and violence drastically until it becomes a thing of the past.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion and the amendment. Sadly, the motion is very well timed. It comes after a weekend in which it appears that we again faced the horror of two women being murdered here in Northern Ireland. It is deeply shocking, yet it continues to happen.

In my constituency, in the past year, there have, sadly, been other tragic examples. We remember Emma McParland, who was murdered in the Ormeau Road area in April, and Susan Baird, who was murdered in the Four Winds area in August. Given that the murder rate in Northern Ireland is comparatively low, the fact that we can easily recall incidents in which women were the victims within the past year and within a few miles of the Chamber reinforces that we have a specific problem that requires a specific intervention.

It was, of course, the deeply troubling murder in London, some distance from here, that really hit the headlines. Perhaps that is because Sarah Everard did everything right — she made her route known, kept to well-lit locations and notified people that she was leaving — yet she was still the victim of a chilling murder. That led to an outpouring of women sharing their experiences, and every single woman has experiences to share.

Before continuing, I put on record that, when I talk about women, I of course include trans women. I also recognise the particular vulnerability of sex workers.

Of course, men can be victims of violence. Indeed, they are proportionately more likely to be, but we have faced up to the challenge that that is largely because we tolerate too easily violence and toxicity among males from an early age. We need to move towards a society where violence is never seen as the answer. There are specific circumstances here in Northern Ireland that we cannot ignore. We still have a hangover from the Troubles, where pain and injury were used as legitimate mechanisms to try to exert authority and control and to instil fear, and we have done little to tackle the resulting gang culture that is still referred to as paramilitarism, where men who threaten or use violence are seen by some as role models in their community. There is something deeply toxic and troubling about that and the fact that it is still going on a generation after the agreement.

What about the victims? Women who suffer gender-based violence often do so in silence. Such is the way in which society has skewed this that victims often end up feeling shame and as though they have only themselves to blame. Why should women just walking home be expected to do so many things right? It is an example of why Naomi Long's work in the Justice Ministry over the past year has been vital. She has brought forward the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill and the Protection from Stalking Bill. As my party colleague outlined, work has also begun to outlaw upskirting and to develop a victims of crime commissioner's office. That is vital work. It is essential that it proceeds quickly so that not only are clear offences created in law but a message is sent that violence against and the abuse of women and vulnerable people will not be tolerated in any way.

If we are really interested in preventative work, we also need a complete shift in social attitudes. That is why the strategy to tackle and prevent gender-based violence makes this a

seminal moment. It is urgent, but the process of developing the strategy must be far-reaching and inclusive.

We are well behind our neighbours. The Irish Government have had a strategy since 2010. Only this month, the Citizens' Assembly was looking at the issue. The potential for a victims of gender-based violence commissioner was raised, although I would like there to be a focus on having fewer victims in the first place. Scotland's Equally Safe strategy focuses on preventing violence and maximising safety. Surely we must draw on that. It also has a delivery plan from 2017 that is, rightly, based on a shared approach. That will be vital here.

It is important to acknowledge that there have been some improvements in how the PSNI handles allegations of domestic abuse and attacks on women, but there is still some way to go. We need to move as swiftly as possible to continue to deliver on the recommendations in the report of the Gillen review of law and procedures in serious sexual offences.

Even getting the issue into the public domain has not been possible without the help and campaigning of the likes of Nexus, Women's Aid, Victim Support, Reclaim the Night and Raise Your Voice. As others have mentioned today, MAP has also been very prominent in keeping the agenda in the public mind. It has been responsible for raising awareness and providing emotional and practical support, without which many vulnerable victims —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bradshaw: — would sadly be lost. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Carroll: I begin by thanking the Members for bringing the motion and the amendment to the House, both of which I will be supporting today. As others have noted, the motion is extremely timely, given the devastatingly tragic deaths of Karen McClean and Stacy Nell. It is hard to imagine the grief that their families and friends feel at their loss, and I extend my sympathy to all of them today. Although the motion is timely because of the tragic circumstances that saw two women murdered, it is also long overdue. The senseless deaths of women before Karen and Stacy are evidence of that.

Violence against women that has not led to their death is also something that is far too common. From the beginning of October 2019 to the end of September 2020, over 32,000

domestic abuse incidents were reported across the North. Domestic abuse crimes made up almost a fifth of police recorded crime during that period. We have heard of the impact of COVID on victims of domestic violence, and those figures are a reflection of the increase in such crimes, but domestic violence rates were unacceptable long before the pandemic. Support for women in those situations has been unacceptable for far too long. From the underfunding of rape crisis services while the number of recorded rapes rose to the implementation of welfare reform, which has hindered the ability of women to leave abusive relationships because their husband is often the sole recipient of their household's earnings, the Assembly has made conscious decision after conscious decision to underfund, cut and limit the help that women across the North need in order to protect themselves. As has been referred to already, hard-working organisations such as Women's Aid and Nexus have had to fight very hard indeed for rape crisis services. Women who face intimidation and violence in their home are still eligible for fewer intimidation points than someone who is facing a paramilitary threat. What message does that send out to victims of abuse? Some of those women in abusive relationships —

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I absolutely agree with you on your point about intimidation points. It is an issue that one of our councillors has raised with Mid Ulster District Council over the last number of years. I am delighted that Minister Hargey initiated a review, which was carried on in her absence by Carál Ní Chuilín. It is an unacceptable situation and circumstance that we have had women who could not be rehomed, yet their abusers could be. I therefore absolutely agree with the Member, but I have to point out the fact that the issue is being addressed.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for her intervention. As I am sure is the case in her constituency, I hear too often in my constituency of cases of women having non-molestation orders (NMOs) and having to take action against abusive partners or ex-partners. I therefore really look forward to the work coming forward from the Minister on dealing with that.

Some of those women who are in abusive relationships have to carry their abuser's child, potentially tying them forever to that person because they still cannot access basic abortion

services in our society. Basic consent and respect, to which Members have referred, is still not taught to many children in schools, despite the overwhelming evidence that such early intervention is crucial to preventing sexual crimes against women. This has already been mentioned, but it is quite shocking that we have generations and generations of young people who can access sexual images and pornography at the touch of a button when they still do not have access to proper consent classes in schools, in which young people can discuss these things openly. That really does baffle the mind. We also need to desegregate schools so that boys and girls — young men and young women — are being educated together. That is very important.

There is also the utter failure to address the lack of conviction rates for rape and assault and to put in place measures to prevent questions in court and reporting in the press that normalises the behaviour of talking about women's sexual history and, as has already been referred to, disgracefully showing their underwear in court.

How disgraceful that a Member of the Assembly attends protests outside health clinics in Newry alongside people waving traumatising images and crucifixes of women and normalises that behaviour.

Verbal and emotional abuse towards women is unacceptable and has to be challenged and called out. As I said, during the debate on the Justice Minister's Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill recently:

"The biggest challenge to gender-based violence will come from the fight against inequalities and oppression in society, which are, very often, not only enshrined by institutions but made worse and perpetrated by those in the institutions." — [Official Report (Hansard), 18 January 2021, p58, col 1].

The Minister agreed with me and said:

"We have to look at how society is structured if we are to do that successfully. It is not simply about one piece of legislation or action." — [Official Report (Hansard), 18 January 2021, p63, col 1].

At the time, I and others in the Chamber pushed for a targeted strategy for women and girls, recognising that they are overwhelmingly the victims of gender-based crime, but we were told that it was not the remit, at the time, of the Justice Minister to oversee such a strategy. I have no doubt that any such strategy should be

cross-departmental, with funding committed from each Department and prioritised by various Ministers. The Department of Justice should play a leading role to tackle the ways that women are further victimised and traumatised by the criminal justice system here.

We support the motion and amendment today, which strengthens the onus on the Executive to act, and we are adamant that this issue cannot be shirked nor the buck passed. It must be prioritised and funded right across Departments.

Mr Speaker: I call the First Minister to respond. The Minister will have 20 minutes.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate today. It is always good to come to a debate where there is, more or less, unanimity on where we are going. I stand here today as a mother, a daughter, a wife, a sister and a friend. It grieves me that we are still having this conversation about the unacceptably high levels of violence towards women and girls in Northern Ireland and, of course, right across the globe. That is the reality that we still face.

I want to join colleagues from across the Chamber and extend my condolences to the family and friends of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell at this terrible time of sadness and grief. I note, from today's local media, that the families have said that they do not want us to politicise their deaths but, rather, see them for what they were — murder. It is very important that we remember that families are grieving, because their names, like that of Sarah Everard, will be said over and over again. Sometimes that is very difficult for families to hear, but families are in such grief today. Sadly, they are not alone. A new report shows that, in the United Kingdom, a woman is killed by a man every three days.

I also share the many concerns expressed today by Members across the Chamber. I thank those who have shared their experiences. We have heard some of them. There have been some terrible stories about the experiences of too many women and girls. The Member for South Belfast Ms Bradshaw said that, after the murder of Sarah Everard, people wanted to come forward and talk about their experiences of when they were out on a Saturday evening or walking home in the evening. I am not that old that I cannot remember being at university and walking home late at night and being worried about who was watching me. I had my keys in my hand, ready to put them into the door the minute that I got there. Of course, it is totally

unacceptable. We must all unite to send a clear message of zero tolerance for this behaviour, and we should all stand shoulder to shoulder with the victims. As an Executive and a community, we need to work together to address this scourge.

5.00 pm

When I was at Queen's University, one of my favourite books as a law undergraduate was 'Eve Was Framed', by Helena — now Baroness — Kennedy, who was shining a light on the legal system and what the experience was for women, whether they were defendants or complainants or, indeed, practitioners. Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go. She was pointing out all the experiences that she had had as a young barrister, but she was also reflecting on the experience of female defendants and complainants at that time. There is much more that needs to happen so that women's voices in the legal system are heard in an appropriate and effective way.

As a young lawyer, I was often given the non-molestation applications — as you can imagine, it was a case of, "The young woman in the office can deal with those" — so I have some personal experience of how women were treated in the legal system, albeit about 20 years ago now and, as a young lawyer, of presenting cases to magistrates, as they were at that time. If I am honest, it was not always a positive experience, so I was pleased to hear Members — for example, the Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Givan, who was the first male to speak in the debate — reference training for the justice system and the police family. That is so needed, but, of course, we always want to do more.

The terrible murders at the weekend show once again not only that women feel afraid or under threat from danger and violence on our streets but that, for so many, the danger is in their home. For far too many women and girls, the home is not a place of sanctuary where they can feel safe but rather one of harm and violence. Those of us who live in the safety of our home and who, sometimes, long for its safety find it very difficult to understand that as being the case. Not only should we send a clear message of zero tolerance of violent behaviour, it is critical that we tackle the root causes of the behaviours that women and girls experience in their daily lives.

Members have spoken quite a lot this afternoon about co-design. That is important for the new strategy. Obviously, there are key stakeholders, and many have mentioned the wonderful work

of Women's Aid across Northern Ireland and others. However, I feel that it is important that we also engage with young women in the design of the strategy so that we hear their voices and experiences and that we are not just hearing from the stakeholders, important as that is.

Ms S Bradley: Will the First Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will, absolutely.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's words. Would you also agree that there is a perception that it is just young women? Violence is directed towards all women equally, and older women are more hesitant to come forward and tell their story.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that point. It is important. I remember one terrible sexual assault and rape case involving a pensioner. It was horrendous to listen to the details. I absolutely agree with the Member that there is a need to speak to older people and even, perhaps, to engage with the Older People's Commissioner as well.

Social media has been mentioned, and I and many others have spoken in the House about the personal abuse that we have suffered as public representatives, much of it based on sexist and outdated attitudes; indeed, it is a sad reality that women in public life endure that type of hate on a regular if not daily basis. It is indicative of the sheer extent of the problems in society and demonstrates a deeply rooted hate and prejudice that is, sadly, something that social media seem to have exacerbated. It needs to be dealt with, and I agree with my friend, the Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Givan, when he says that Westminster must take steps on the matter. I know that colleagues in Westminster are raising that issue.

It is the underlying sexism and misogyny that give rise to domestic abuse, violence, injury and the murder of women and girls.

We need to make cultural and societal change in order to ensure that there are healthy behaviours and attitudes towards women and girls. We need preventative initiatives that build on positive experiences and work with a proven track record that actually makes a difference. While good work is being carried out, I agree absolutely that more needs to be done. It is critical that we tackle those attitudes at the earliest opportunity through education, community initiatives and in homes right across Northern Ireland.

I welcome that the Executive and the Assembly have been able to prioritise action to tackle domestic and sexual violence and abuse as well as stalking and harassment since the restoration of the institutions in January last year. That was a recognition of the serious issues that are involved, the lack of progress on them in Northern Ireland compared with elsewhere and the need to take urgent action. I also note what has been said today about hate crime and misogyny. I know that there has been some consideration of those in the hate crime review, and we will closely examine those recommendations and the consideration of the proposals that I know is happening elsewhere across the United Kingdom.

Ms Dillon: I thank the First Minister for taking the intervention. Obviously, we are late coming out of the blocks on the violence against women and girls strategy, but that gives us an opportunity to learn from the other strategies across these islands, such as those in Scotland, Wales, England, and in the Twenty-six Counties, where they are on their second strategy, covering 2016-2021. We should try to learn from good and bad practice in all those strategies.

Mrs Foster: That is a very important point. Part of the delay is, obviously, because this place was not functioning for three years. If you look at some of the strategies that are in place, you will see that they came into being around that time, albeit the Republic of Ireland's strategy has been in place for longer. Certainly, the strategies in England, Wales and Scotland were made at that time. It is good that we can learn from what is in place in those jurisdictions.

As I say, there has been consideration of the hate crime review. We will look at those recommendations and take into account what is happening across the UK. It is also important that any proposed action on this is workable and that it genuinely tackles violence against women and girls. Undoubtedly, the issue will require the careful consideration of all the potential implications. In that context, we are debating the specific issue of the dedicated strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse. The action is urgent and most needed. We recognise that our neighbouring jurisdictions, as pointed out, have strategies in place, and we will, of course, look at them and take them into account. Northern Ireland also needs to take action and give dedicated consideration to how best to change behaviours and protect women and girls. No woman or girl should live in violence.

I listened very carefully to what the Member for East Londonderry Ms Hunter had to say about students and their experience of sexual violence. It is not just sexual violence that young women at university have to deal with; it is general violence as well, and, unfortunately, for some political activists whom I have been associated with in my party, there is also politically based intimidation and threats towards young women who are identified as vulnerable because they are young unionists in a university setting in Northern Ireland. That is totally unacceptable. We always have to make space for difference and for people to be allowed to articulate their political viewpoint. I find it so offensive that young women who identify as unionists at Queen's University in Belfast are under threat and are intimidated. It has to stop. I hope that we can also address that in any strategy.

I welcome that the Assembly and Executive are considering all those matters. I am committed to being a champion for supporting meaningful actions to produce real results. I am fully supportive of the task force that will examine all the suggestions that have been made today and that will look at those and other strategies in other jurisdictions in order to identify what we need to do and what actions we need to put in place.

It is a matter of huge sorrow to me that, once again, there are families and friends grieving today due to violence against women.

It grieves me that there are many homes across Northern Ireland where there are women and young children living in fear of violence. It is an issue that we can unite on, with a firm commitment to work collaboratively to do all that we can as public representatives to help and support all those women and girls to live a life free from fear, pain and violence.

Mr Speaker: I call Rachel Woods to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has five minutes.

Miss Woods: In my closing remarks, I thank all those who have indicated their support and highlighted the reasons why the changes that we need are so significant for victims of violence, abuse, harassment and misogyny. All the Members who spoke have touched on the need for a strategy; the need for things to change; the need for the experience of victims to be reflected; the need for education on consent, respect and being believed; and the need for support and help. I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for being here

today. I also thank the First Minister for her comments. There is a shared will across the Chamber to do something. As the First Minister said, there is unanimity across the Chamber on the need to tackle the root causes of the reality that faces women and girls across Northern Ireland and to listen to their lived experience. I recognise that producing a violence against women and girls strategy is the responsibility of the whole Executive. Each Minister and Department needs to consider what is within their remit and how they will contribute to the changes that we need to see. It is clear that what we have been doing is not working. Something needs to change. Women have been failed for too long.

As noted in the 'Belfast Telegraph' today, eight women have been killed in Northern Ireland since our society and economy were first plunged into lockdown in March last year. That does not include a mother and her daughter who were murdered in the previous March in Newry. They will never be forgotten. Our thoughts are with them and their loved ones. I do not want to be back here in several weeks, months or years to hear about more women being murdered or to ask and urge the Executive to do what we already know needs to be done.

The time for action is now. We need to stop neutralising gender in government policies. We must recognise how gender norms shape identity, desires, practices and behaviours. We must teach our young people how gender norms can be harmful and negatively influence people's choices and behaviour, and we must acknowledge that gender roles and expectations can be changed. Those social constructs are not set in stone. They are learned behaviours, and they can be changed. We must recognise gender-based violence and understand that our ideas about gender and gender stereotypes can affect how we treat other people. That includes discrimination and violence, which includes bullying, sexual harassment, psychological violence, domestic violence and abuse, rape, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and homophobic and transphobic violence and abuse. We must acknowledge that all forms of gender-based violence are wrong and a violation of human rights.

We need to teach our young people how gender stereotypes can contribute to bullying, discrimination, abuse and violence and explain that sexual abuse and gender-based violence are crimes about power and dominance, not about one's inability to control one's sexual desire. We need to recognise that gender

inequality and gender role stereotypes contribute to gender-based violence. We need to demonstrate ways to argue for gender equality and to stand up to gender discrimination or gender-based violence. Those are all points taken from UNESCO's guidance on comprehensive sexuality education. It needs to happen for Northern Ireland.

A strategy is better late than never. Proper resourcing and implementation will be the ultimate test for the Executive. We do not want some words on a page that gathers dust on a shelf. We need change and action. We must rely on evidence-based policies and interventions to ignite and sustain wider societal change. The research, reports and recommendations are all done and are there in front of us. We need to get it done. Let us get it done together. I commend the motion, as amended, to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call Justin McNulty to make a winding-up speech on the motion. I advise the Member that he has 10 minutes.

Mr McNulty: I thank every Member wholeheartedly for their impassioned contributions today. I rise with a deep sense of sadness in my heart to speak on this sensitive and crucial motion on a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. It is so sad that the North of Ireland has the highest rate of domestic violence in Europe. Why? There have been eight violent deaths and over 32,000 instances of domestic violence since lockdown began. My heart bleeds for the women and girls who feel unsafe in their own homes. My heart bleeds.

5.15 pm

I spoke to Women's Aid. What a powerful force for good and what a wonderful organisation it is. Its representatives say that we need early intervention and prevention, with frameworks for teaching children and young people about trust, equality, respect, consent and healthy relationships. Women's Aid knows that males need to be included in that. It wants men and boys to have the confidence to call out and challenge threatening or abusive attitudes towards women. It says that men should be as horrified by the stats as women are. I am. From that perspective, I wholeheartedly support Judge Gillen's recommendations.

Women's Aid says that the system is totally bent towards perpetrators being able to abuse women and children. How can it feel like that in 2021? If there is an instance of violence in a

pub, the perpetrator is charged and goes to jail. If it happens in the home, the perpetrator gets away with it. Perpetrators get legal aid while victims have to finance their own justice, but they never get there. How can that be? The system aids and abets perpetrators. The experience of many women is that of fear, shame, guilt and trepidation. They worry about their safety while in their own homes and live 24/7 under the threat of constant violence and abuse.

Those women know that physical wounds can be healed, but emotional and mental wounds are much more insidious, and it takes much more to recover from them. Under that constant threat and coercive control, these women are living in an environment of sheer hell in their own homes. That is why Women's Aid and the safe refuge that it provides are so important.

We must also remember the suicides, which are not included in the stats. Trauma, fear and despair have driven many women to take their own lives.

Sadly, we are all aware of the stark data that shows that instances of domestic violence have escalated during the pandemic. Women's Aid says that lockdown has inadvertently created a perfect storm for domestic violence. The "Stay at home" message has been devastating for many women and girls for whom home is not a safe place.

There is a 15-year high of instances of domestic violence in the North. What do you think happened to funding for Women's Aid here during that escalation? The funding went down. How can we explain that? How can we justify that? How can that be acceptable? I am disgusted.

Women's Aid welcomes the U-turn by the Minister. The Minister is on record as previously wanting to stay gender-neutral. Today's debate shows that that position is at odds with Members' views.

I place on record my thanks to Women's Aid and to my colleague Sinéad Bradley, who no doubt strongly influenced the Minister's change of position. However, nobody will take away from the greatest influence of all in this sensitive issue: the sad deaths of women over recent months, all the instances of domestic violence and the fear and threats experienced by women in their own homes.

I will touch on Members' contributions. Proposing the motion, Sinéad Bradley stated strongly that she wants to make this place, our

shared home, a safe place for women and girls. It is simply not good enough that we lag behind other parts of these islands in protections and supports for women and girls. The need for us to keep women and girls safe cannot be overstated.

Rachel Woods said that the system was not working. The problem is male violence against women and girls. It is very sad that, despite the issue having been raised by Women's Aid, it has taken so long for action to be taken, and women have lost their lives. A focus on identity issues to the detriment of keeping women and girls safe is wrong. Flags do not protect women in their homes.

Pam Cameron said that one in five women in the UK will experience a sexual assault. That is shocking and disgusting. Linda Dillon expressed her condolences to all families who have lost loved ones to domestic violence. Kellie Armstrong wanted to send out a clear signal to all that acts of violence against women and children are wrong and will not be tolerated.

Rosemary Barton said that gender violence against women is systematic abuse to reinforce power over them. Women are left with physical and non-physical wounds. Since lockdown, the number of women who have experienced a domestic violence incident has doubled.

Paul Givan stated his support for a gendered strategy that focuses on tackling violence against women and girls. Nicola Brogan said that violence against women was about power and that the police and the PPS needed to pursue perpetrators.

Emma Sheerin spoke about her Sinn Féin values. She said that she was disgusted at how horrific it is for rape victims to be made to feel like the guilty party. Cara Hunter said that there is no room for complacency when women face misogynistic abuse every day. She said that we have to teach society to respect women.

Gerry Kelly said that this was about women and girls. He said that, in 82% of intimate partner homicides, women are the victims. Paula Bradshaw said that this is a seminal moment in tackling gender-based violence, and we all agree with that.

Gerry Carroll said that women facing intimidation in the home get fewer intimidation points than those who claim to have received paramilitary threats. How can that be justified? The First Minister said that she saw the deaths of the victims of domestic violence for what they

were — murder. She wants to stand shoulder to shoulder with every one of those victims, and I think that everybody in the House stands shoulder to shoulder with those victims.

Thank you all for your contributions. I support the motion and the amendment.

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

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns violence against women and girls in all forms; notes with concern that Northern Ireland is the only place on these islands that does not have a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse; regrets that the Executive are failing to meet their international obligations in this regard; and calls on the Executive to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence by introducing a violence against women and girls strategy that is fully resourced and underpinned by legislation to make misogyny a hate crime, and to introduce standardised, comprehensive relationships and sexuality education in our schools to eradicate sexist attitudes and build lifelong, positive relationships.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment before we move to the next item of business.

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

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members who are not participating in the Adjournment debate to take their leave of the Chamber.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Road Safety at Schools in Mid Ulster

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, Mr Speaker has given leave to Mr Keith Buchanan to raise the matter of road safety at schools in Mid Ulster. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Mr K Buchanan: Road safety affects everyone. Communities are very sensitive to road safety and related issues, such as speeding and heavy vehicles. Road safety, especially the safety of children outside schools, is one of the frequent concerns received by my constituency office. By maintaining children's safety outside schools and exercising a little extra care and caution, drivers and pedestrians can coexist safely in and around our schools.

There are approximately 120 preschool, nursery, primary and post-primary schools in Mid Ulster registered with the Education Authority (EA). Some of them are on shared campuses and some are in large towns, but many are in rural locations. Statistics for the 2019 calendar year, published on 27 March 2020 by the PSNI, showed that there was a total of 5,676 injuries as a result of road traffic collisions. Sadly, 56 fatalities were recorded and 774 people were seriously injured. Seventy-one children under the age of 16 were killed or seriously injured during the period. That number had risen by eight children from the previous year. Any death on our roads is a tragedy, and we must do all that we can to prevent further death or injury because of road traffic collisions. Seven districts showed an increase in overall casualties between 2018 and 2019, most notably in my own constituency of Mid Ulster, which increased from 598 to 704 casualties overall. That shows the need for this timely debate.

When we talk about road safety at schools, a number of key issues need to be considered. In

general, they include the speed of traffic; road layout; the need for additional safety and road awareness; traffic overtaking near schools; parking; school entrances and exits; unsafe crossing facilities; inadequate or poorly designed drop-off/parking areas, especially at rural schools; lack of cycleways and footpaths; unsafe pedestrian activity to and from school buses; unsafe bus-stopping locations, again especially at rural schools; and speed indicator devices (SIDs), to which I will refer later.

During schools' drop-off and pick-up times, roads in their immediate vicinity are especially busy. On a number of occasions, constituents have expressed their frustration with the congestion and parking in and around schools. The 2020 edition of 'School Site Road Safety' by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) states the following:

"Child pedestrian road risk increases as children become more independent (from aged 10 upwards), with most child casualties occurring between the school run hours, namely 8:00–9:00 and 15:00–16:00. This is due to this age group being more likely to move around unaccompanied by adults, and also having ... physical limitations that make them more vulnerable in road traffic than adults."

Parking on pavements is an important issue to consider. Let us look at that from a child's perspective. A child's-eye view is much lower than that of an adult. Children's height already restricts their view. Add a parked car or other vehicle to that, and one can appreciate how limited their awareness is. Pavement parking not only restricts children's vision but hinders those with a pram, pushchair or wheelchair and, indeed, those who are visually impaired. Everyone needs to practise and consider responsible parking.

5.30 pm

In a recent response to a question tabled by my Committee colleague and Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, Michelle McIlveen, the Minister for Infrastructure stated that her Department:

"is committed to increasing the level of sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and I am aware that cars parked inconsiderately on footways present real challenges for footway users, including for people with visual impairment and mobility issues."

She went on to say:

"I am ... keen to explore if further measures may be necessary and I can confirm that my Department is currently investigating options for dealing with pavement parking on a broader basis."

That is very welcome news, especially to many in Magherafelt, which is local to me, who have raised particular concerns about parking on the pavement in the vicinity of Greenvale Leisure Centre. Those attending to exercise want to park right beside the building, which is somewhat strange when there is a car park right beside it. They want to park right beside it, on the pavement, and then go in to exercise.

A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People said that parents, children and young people voiced their concerns about traffic congestion close to schools and how that has an impact on the safety of students who are walking and cycling. The report stated that, in some cases, pupils expressed their concern about the absence of school crossing patrols, insufficient pedestrian crossings near the school and the lack of traffic-calming measures around the school. I urge the Minister for Infrastructure to work closely alongside the Minister of Education on that.

In September, along with other MLAs, I welcomed the news of the roll-out of the 20 mph speed limit at 100 schools across Northern Ireland. I also welcome the news, yesterday, from the Minister that part-time speed limits have now been set in legislation for 103 schools at 90 sites across Northern Ireland. It is hoped that, with the implementation of those speed limits, children, parents and teachers across Northern Ireland will see an improvement on the roads around their schools. Schools in my constituency that have benefited from this are St Trea's Primary School in Ballyronan, Ampertaine Primary School in Upperlands, St Brigid's Primary School in Mayogall, St Eoghan's Primary School in Draperstown, Edendork Primary School and Orritor Primary School. Woods Primary School close to Ballyronan benefits from a part-time speed limit of 20 mph that was introduced in September 2018. I believe that more schools, especially in rural areas, could benefit from these measures, and I encourage the local PSNI to ensure that the limits are enforced.

The signage and speed limit change should bring about a reduction in speed at those locations and are welcome, but, as was previously mentioned, the speed indicator devices, or SIDs as they are commonly known, give the actual speed that a vehicle is travelling at. It promotes immediate and future

behavioural change. In recent months, I have worked with the local policing and community safety partnership (PCSP) to purchase more SIDs and have them located across Mid Ulster at strategic points, including close to schools. I work with local businesses, and a local business in Newmills purchased one, at a cost of £2,800. That device is currently in operation, and the community in this through-village, as it is known, has seen immediate benefits due to the flexibility of the device, which can be moved to other roads in the village. Other groups and communities across Mid Ulster that I work with see the benefits of these simple devices and are striving to have them installed in their area.

Improving the physical infrastructure is an effective way of reducing road safety risk, and there is a wide range of examples, including improvements to road layout, street lighting, road signage and traffic management. It is also important to remember that the planning, design and build of new roads and housing developments should ensure that road safety and access is a key priority. Road safety interventions can help to encourage physical activity by creating a safer physical road environment and reducing the level of danger posed to vulnerable road users. It is, therefore, imperative that we consider what we can do to improve road safety, especially around our schools, as that will not only enhance our children's safety but encourage parents to allow their children to walk or cycle to school, thereby improving their health and well-being.

Physical speed-reducing measures, such as road narrowing or roundabouts, can help to ensure that cars maintain a safe speed. In some areas, speed bumps or humps, as they are referred to, can also be used, but they are not always appropriate. The responsibility for road safety in and around our schools is something that we should all consider and is everyone's responsibility, but it is important that schools, the PSNI local roads division, parents and local community groups all avail themselves of road safety training and ensure that training is delivered to all our schoolchildren, both primary and post-primary. A holistic approach to road safety is needed and should be advocated where policy, engineering, awareness campaigns and education are used to improve the road safety at all our schools across Northern Ireland.

I welcome the introduction of the 20 mph speed limit at 100 schools across Northern Ireland and would welcome funding for that initiative to continue for additional schools.

In summary, I call on the Minister for Infrastructure to commit to looking at the use of SIDs more widely at schools, which would be more cost-effective, in conjunction with the actual speed limit for that location, either the current speed limit or the roll-out of future 20 mph zones at the schools incorporating SIDs. I am more than happy to work with her Department on a trial of this principle at a Mid Ulster school. The devices have an immediate impact on driver behaviour and are a visual indication of the vehicle's speed. I ask the Minister to work with the Minister of Education to promote road safety and awareness not just for pedestrians but for all vehicle users at all our schools.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In a debate such as this, the proposer is allocated 15 minutes to propose the motion, and the Minister is allocated 10 minutes to respond. There are three other Members listed to speak. I did some basic mathematics, and that gives every Member 11 minutes and 46 seconds each, should you choose to use them. Given that Mr Buchanan did not use his full allocation, you may choose to use a little more if you wish. No pressure.

Ms Dillon: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Deputy Principal Speaker. Sorry, Principal Deputy Speaker. I keep forgetting how to say it in English. I assure you that I will not be using anything near the 11 minutes.

To be fair, Mr Buchanan has covered many of the points. It might seem that I am repeating some of them, but they are extremely important. I know that the Minister has rolled out the 20 mph limit outside schools, and we campaigned for that a number of years ago. The campaign started in Conor Murphy's time, but I want the measure to be rolled out further. Some schools in my constituency are in a very precarious position and have dangerous roads outside their gates. I specifically refer to St Joseph's Primary School in Galbally, which has a real issue with speeding cars.

We are engaging with the Education Minister because both the school and its site are not fit for purpose. In the interim, we need to ensure that the children are safe. There have been a number of serious accidents on that road. I would be grateful if the Minister could give us a timeline for the roll-out of 20 mph speed limits. I also welcome Mr Buchanan's mentioning SIDs. They are an extremely useful tool in the fight against danger on our roads.

As I said, Galbally is one primary school, but there are many primary schools with similar issues. I am sure that other Members will mention the fact that we represent a very large rural constituency and have many schools that were probably not built in the best place. However, they are where they are. We have very dangerous roads outside those schools with speeding traffic — often heavy goods vehicles — breaking the speed limit. I have regularly seen vehicles moving at 70 and 80 mph outside schools. Recently, there was a situation in Aughamullan where young people were dipping outside the school and almost hitting the wall of the school. If anyone had been leaving the school at that time, it would have been very dangerous. There were pupils in the school because we were still catering for key workers. All those issues have to be dealt with.

In his opening and closing remarks, Mr Buchanan said something of vital importance: the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister of Education need to work together because there are schools that need footpaths. St Brigid's Primary School in Brockagh has been promised a footpath for quite some time. St Marys Primary School, Dunamore, in my constituency, looks up the road to Orritor Primary School, which has beautiful footpaths, has been left behind. The school feels that that is historical neglect, and it is historical neglect. Such areas need footpaths.

Other areas have worked together with the Education Authority to find the best solution, whether a transport or a DFI solution. We need to be more imaginative and work together. Again, Mr Buchanan said that we need to work together as a community with DFI, Education, and the police to find solutions. DFI may have a large part of the responsibility, but I recognise that it does not have sole responsibility, and I appreciate that the Minister has come here today. I ask the Minister to work closely with the Education Minister. Maybe we need to set up a task force or a working group to address the issue with other Departments, as I do not believe that it can be addressed by the Minister for Infrastructure alone. However, as I said, it does need to be addressed by the Department for Infrastructure. I know that funding was put into the Safe Routes to School initiative, but there needs to be a greater understanding of the position in rural constituencies.

You may need only a small stretch of footpath if you are in a town or a large village, but if you live in a small village or an outlying area, you are starting from a point of zero. For those communities, £10,000 is no good, so we need

to start being more imaginative and look at what we need to do rather than filling in patches of footpaths in big towns and villages where, in some cases, there is already plenty. We should start looking at those areas where we are starting from the point of zero and where we have growing numbers. My area of Clonoe, where I live, has grown massively, with at least five new developments over the last few years. That is great to see, and the Minister's Department has put some investment into the area. We fought hard for that and got a good response, which I welcome and acknowledge, but much more needs to happen and to be done because we have growing communities, and we need to put the infrastructure in to allow people to remain in the areas that they want to live in, where they have grown up and where they want to raise their families. Thank you for coming to the Chamber.

Mr McGlone: I thank Mr Buchanan, if he is listening, but maybe he has gone, for introducing the Adjournment debate on road safety at schools in Mid Ulster. It is an issue that I have highlighted repeatedly during my time as a councillor and as an MLA working with other elected representatives, and we have successively lobbied different Ministers on behalf of many of the rural schools in the constituency to introduce measures to improve road safety.

One issue, and I thank Ms Dillon for touching on it, is the location of the schools. Many of them, with a few additions or renovations etc, have been in the exact same location for many years. When the roads that they are on were built, the only means of transport were horses. Those roads remain, by and large but with a lick of tar on them, the exact same. Some of the schools are on corners, twists and bends and the like; they are part of the community, and that is the way that it is. Those elements have to be taken into consideration too as we adopt a creative approach. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach by any means, manner or fashion, because measures that will work at some schools will not work at others. We have to bear that in mind.

The Minister recently announced part-time 20 mph speed limits for 103 schools at 90 sites across the North, including several in Mid Ulster and at my alma mater, St Trea's in Ballymaguigan, and I thank her for that. Such speed limits should be in place at every school.

Although the greatest threat to road safety in general is excessive speed, there are practical measures that can help to make our roads safer, particularly in rural areas. Along with new

speed limits, those include warning lights and road markings. I would maybe venture as well, and I have discussed this with the Minister, that where there are school buses transporting youngsters to schools, we could look at the possibility of them having flashing lights and it being illegal for drivers to pass them. I know of some very sad instances where youngsters have got off a bus and made a dart across the road. I can think of one incident in particular that sadly wound up with a fatality. That is the practice in some other countries in other parts of the world, and, although I do not know about its effectiveness, it sounds like a very practical and good idea.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Sure.

Ms Dillon: On the point that the Member just made about young people trying to exit a bus, we have had a number of those incidents across Mid Ulster. Also could gritting rural roads that have schools on them be considered, Minister? The schools on those rural roads are mostly primary schools, and it is extremely dangerous for children who are trying to get out of cars to cross the road. As a result, we have had a number of incidents that have almost been serious and some that have been serious.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for that.

Warning lights and road signage are practical measures, and we can make it safer to cross roads by adding fixed crossing points and islands for pedestrians. We can also improve street lighting in order to ensure good visibility for pedestrians at all times of the day, particularly during the wintertime when it gets a bit bleaker in the mornings and the evenings for the kids and motorists who are arriving at schools.

The more the populations of our rural towns and villages and, indeed, scattered rural areas grow, the more important the issue will become.

One recent example was in the town of Moneymore, where a local SDLP councillor Christine McFlynn successfully lobbied for the extension of the 30 mph speed limit at a school to cover access from a newly built housing estate. Efforts continue at that site to include measures such as extending the street lighting and providing pedestrian islands to further improve the safety of children attending the school.

5.45 pm

Mr Buchanan referred to SIDs. I find those very effective, for as long as they last in a particular place, given that they are, if you like, a transient feature. As a motorist, I find that my driving speed flashing in front of me is a very effective warning, but they are a transient measure. I can think of a couple of locations where they are positioned. They are very useful and are funded through the PCSPs. If they are there for six weeks and then removed, the impact is, to my mind, by and large, gone after those six weeks. They are, however, an important feature.

We have argued repeatedly down the years for a properly funded programme of maintenance and repair of our rural road network, and I believe that the Infrastructure Minister has been unsuccessful in seeking sufficient funds from the Finance Minister at this time. Nevertheless, the Minister was able to announce a total investment of £75 million in the structural maintenance of the road network in 2021. That included the allocation of £12 million to a road recovery fund, with £10 million directed towards repairs along rural roads. There are around 80 locations in Mid Ulster where work is planned or has already been completed under that programme. Those repairs will inevitably contribute to the rural road network and, hopefully, to improved road safety.

Mr Buchanan referred to one of the 20 mph pilot projects at the Woods Primary School, which is not that far away from where I live. That has been very effective. For those who may not know the geography of the area, the traffic on the road between Ballyronan and Magherafelt can get very speedy at particular times of the morning, especially at school time. That speed limit has proven very effective and useful.

I have, indeed, a list of schools for which I would like to see a variety of measures introduced to improve road safety. I, with DFI officials, have been on-site at some of those schools, and others remain on my, if you like, to-do list or wish list. Nevertheless, I want to put them on the record here today. They include Derrychrin Primary School and Ballylifford Primary School, both of which are in the parish where I live. Another factor that I want to mention is that those smaller rural roads, and the locations around them, have been altered by the build-up of traffic and have very heavy volumes of traffic, including heavy articulated lorries. Those lorries bypass the main towns, because those do not have bypasses. They bypass the likes of Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt, although it now has a bypass. Many use those rural roads as a bypass route. Parents have expressed their concerns to me

about that on numerous occasions, and two of the schools affected are Derrychrin and Ballylifford.

Other schools include St Patrick's Primary School, Loup; St Patrick's Primary School, Moneymore, which I already mentioned; Lissan Primary School at St Michael's Church, where we have met DFI officials on a number of occasions; St Malachy's Primary School in Drummullan; Spires Integrated Primary School, Magherafelt; St Mary's Primary School, Dunamore, which I have been asked to raise as well; St Peter's Primary School, Moortown; St Mary's Primary School, Clady and St Conor's College, Clady, which are within walking distance of each other; St John's Primary School, Kingsisland; and Little Flower Nursery School at Coole Road.

I have reserved mention of these last two schools for a particular reason, and that is to put these examples on the record. A speed indicator device outside the primary school in Aughmullan recorded the speed of passing vehicles, and one driver was logged as travelling at 92 mph. However, that comes nowhere near the one at St Joseph's in Galbally, which Ms Dillon referred to, where one driver was logged as doing 112 mph past the school, which is in a 40 mph zone. Thankfully, that was not during school time. Nevertheless, someone travelled along that route at 112 mph. There are headcases out there, and I do not think that flashing lights or anything else will curb their speeding. It will have to be the rigours of the police.

I could probably add to that collaborative working between the Department of Education and the Department for Infrastructure, but the police and local policing partnerships need to deal with such issues, because those speeds are incredible. It is madness.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. Last week, along with the chief executive and the chair of the Policing Board, I had the privilege of launching the police property fund, to which I alert Members' attention. If there is work that can be done that meets community safety requirements, small grants of up to £10,000 are available through the scheme. If parent-teacher associations or boards of governors have charitable status, they might consider working alongside their PCSP or their local neighbourhood team to see whether they can run some education programmes. There is only up to £1,000 capital available, however, as the scheme is primarily about education. That might be an idea for

some Members to take back to their relevant schools.

Mr McGlone: Absolutely. I thank the Member very much for that. Education is definitely one part of it, but there is only one thing that will settle the guy — and they are mostly guys — who is travelling along in his wheels at 92 mph or 112 mph, and that is somebody pointing a hairdryer at his car and giving him a lengthy suspension.

In addition to the need to put in place physical measures, there is a role, as we referred to, for the Department of Education to play in educating our young people and our future drivers on how to use our roads safely, and some of those schemes could possibly be helpful. All drivers should instinctively look to reduce their speed if they know that they are approaching an area around a school.

The SDLP will continue to lobby the Executive to approve further investment in road safety across our rural road network through all possible measures, and, as you have heard today, I and other colleagues will continue to lobby for further investment in road safety at schools around Mid Ulster.

Ms Sheerin: Like others, I start by thanking Keith Buchanan for bringing the topic to the Assembly this evening, and I put on the record my well wishes to him. He is self-isolating, so I wish him all the best and hope that he is in good health.

Since I first got involved in political activism in my community, I can say wholeheartedly that roads issues and safety relating to roads have been the number-one concern when I meet constituents. Concerns range from maintenance of roads, such as potholes and other road surface issues, to winter gritting, such as rural roads that do not receive any winter treatment in icy and snowy conditions, to speeding on rural roads.

I was laughing at the Principal Deputy Speaker's facial expressions when the Members beside me were listing some of the schools in our constituency. I have to say that we are very parochial in Mid Ulster, and there are bits of east Tyrone that I could not take you through if you gave me until tomorrow. I have to say, however, that the schools that I work with in south Derry have concerns about safety. Those concerns play very heavily on the minds of parents and teachers alike, and when the Minister announced at the end of last year the temporary 20-mph measure, I had never heard such a response from parents. It was one of

pure relief. I wrote to the Minister on several occasions about some of the schools that are affected, such as Crossroads Primary School on Drumagarner Road in Kilrea. The parents who take their children to that school, which runs alongside a road where the national speed limit applies, were fearful for their children's lives every day. To get an announcement that the speed limit was going to be 20 mph was life-changing. It was a weight off their shoulders. It struck me when I was discussing it with parents and teachers that, if you go into a town or city anywhere in the North, you know that the speed limit will be 30 mph or lower, but if you travel for 10, 15 or 20 miles, you can pass schools where the speed limit is 20 mph, 30 mph or 60 mph. There is no uniform approach. You then have drivers acting the eejit, as Mr McGlone outlined, and the school is upon them before they realise. There is not enough awareness.

This debate gives us an opportunity to raise specific issues that have been raised with us in our constituency. I will speak about a few schools, some of which have already been mentioned.

Spires Integrated Primary School in Magherafelt has a 40 mph limit outside the school, which needs to be lower. Mr McGlone referred to St Patrick's Primary School in The Loup, on the Ruskey Road. I know that a reduction from 40 mph to 30 mph is being considered, but there is a football club nearby and there is no street lighting or pavement. There are evenings when training is happening or people are trying to get out for a walk, and it is just an accident waiting to happen. There is also St Mary's Primary on the Glen Road in Maghera. I used to take the hand out of Ian Milne, saying that he was the Member for Bellaghy when he was an MLA, but I am quickly becoming the Member for Ballinascreen. We have couple of schools in Ballinascreen, and I have raised the issue and reached out to the Minister about them. St Eoghan's Primary School in Moneyneena will benefit from the 20 mph scheme, which is welcome news. We got a road resurfaced in Moneyneena: it now has its own motorway. However, as a result of that, people are just driving harder, and the 30 mph zone is not respected at all.

I echo the remarks that my colleague made on the SID signs. They are a great addition and are very helpful. Road users will tell you that it focuses their mind on the speed that they are driving at. We can all subconsciously speed, especially when driving in a rural area. If the road below you is smooth, you do not notice your speed. The flashing indicator that tells you

that you have gone over the speed limit is helpful. However, we need increased speed camera measures in Moneyneena from the village — if you can call it that — to the school.

There are two schools in Straw, and, when I was first co-opted into this role, one of the first things that I started to work on was getting a zebra crossing in Straw. I went to school in St Columba's Primary School in Straw, and parents were talking to me who had children at that school or had themselves gone to that school when I was there. It was an issue that had been there for 20 years. The reaction to that was massive. However, the speed limit is still not being respected. It is a through route to Magherafelt, and you will find lorries flying along the road. I have written to the Minister about the road between Straw and Draperstown. There is about a mile-long stretch, where, in between the two centres, there is an increase in road speed. There is no street lighting for a portion of that. Our football club is in Straw, which means that people will be walking to and from it in the evening. It is a great walking route, particularly in these times when people cannot go out and about and do the things that they would like to do. We all know the benefits of increased exercise and getting out and about in the evening, and the lack of street lighting there is a real issue that is always raised with me. I know that it does not meet the criteria, at present, on the number of front-facing properties, but it is something that I would love to see a reconsideration of and a change to the criteria to allow street lighting. It would increase the safety at that site. There is a Gaelscoil there with pupils and parents going to and from the car park between St Columba's Primary School and Gaelscoil na Speiríní, and it is a massive safety issue.

I have also written to Minister about some of the schools that Mr McGlone referred to in Derrychrin and Ballylifford. We await a decision on speed camera measures at both of those sites.

I reiterate my thanks for the debate. It is really important for our constituents. When you are up here talking about important legislation, rural roads may not seem all that important or a priority, but, for people from rural areas, it affects their life every day.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister now has more than 10 minutes to respond if she wishes to take them. I call the Minister to respond to the debate.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. First

of all, as other Members have done, I add my thanks to Mr Buchanan for instigating the debate on road safety at schools in Mid Ulster. I have listened with interest to the comments and issues raised by Members. It is clear that this is a topic of huge importance for all Members. As Ms Sheerin rightly said, road safety, particularly in and around our schools, is a hugely important issue in our communities. It is extremely important, understandably, to parents, teachers and principals.

6.00 pm

I am determined, as the Minister for Infrastructure but also as a mother of three small children, to improve road safety, particularly on roads and streets near our schools. As Members mentioned, I made a commitment last September to take forward legislation to introduce part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools so that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from school every day. Yesterday, I was pleased to announce that part-time speed limits have now been set in legislation for 103 schools at 90 sites. Children, parents and teachers in every part of the North will see positive, practical changes to limit vehicle speeds on the roads around their schools.

Road safety, especially around our schools, is a priority of mine. It is my intention that, through future programmes, many more schools — many of the schools that have been referenced in the debate — will have a 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates. My officials are working to complete the schemes, with the legislation now in place to enforce the part-time 20 mph speed limit measures at those schools. Ms Dillon asked about time frames for this. We have a number of signs already implemented, and officials are working hard to complete the programme in the coming weeks.

This is another step forward in our efforts to make our roads safer for all users. However, I reiterate that we all have a collective responsibility to take care when using our roads. At each of the schools, new standard fixed speed limit roundel signs will be erected, with a flashing amber light set to come on at the times that the reduced speed limit applies. As Mr Buchanan highlighted, this follows trials at a number of schools in 2019 to determine the effectiveness of the arrangement of signs, when it was found that they reduce the mean speed. In Mid Ulster specifically, this will include Crossroads Primary School, Edendork Primary School, St Trea's Primary School, Orritor Primary School, Aughnacloy College, Aughnacloy Primary School, St Eoghan's

Primary School, St Brigid's Primary School and Ampertaine Primary School.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Mallon: Of course.

Ms Dillon: I appreciate the Minister's response, but what I was actually asking for is a time frame for the roll-out to other schools. Obviously, there are a number of schools that I am concerned about that have not been included in this scheme. Sorry.

Ms Mallon: No problem. I will go on to address that in respect of next year's budget.

I reiterate that this is a commitment of mine. I want us to do what we can. For me, this is about ensuring that we create safe active travel for our children on particular routes.

I turn to some of the points raised during the debate. Like Mr Buchanan, my thoughts are with those who have lost their lives on our roads. In some instances, that has involved children and young people. Mr Buchanan is right to highlight that there are a number of approaches to this. We need to tackle speed; we need to look at road layouts; we need to look at parking, and I will come back to that point. It is about engineering solutions and education.

Mr Buchanan talked about the importance of ensuring that people park responsibly, particularly around our schools. I assure Members that DFI will continue to take enforcement action against irresponsible and unsafe parking. We will also work in partnership with the PSNI, given its remit in this area. Mr Buchanan pointed to the fact that I have asked my officials to scope out what more we can do in this area. I am very conscious of the moves in Scotland towards a ban on pavement and double-parking. I am conscious that, in England, they are going to consult on a number of options, and that the issue is being addressed by councils in Wales. I have asked my officials to prepare a submission on what we can do in this area. Being mindful that we have limited time left in this mandate, there are challenges around the legislative changes that I would like to see.

As I said, eight schools in Mid Ulster will be in this first tranche of the roll-out of the 20 mph scheme. I want to say to Members that I am very committed to rolling that out to further schools. The extent to which I can do that will depend on the budget allocated to me. We

have not yet had confirmation of final allocations, but I am committed to doing what we can and will keep Members regularly updated on it. St Joseph's Primary School in Galbally, Holy Family Primary School in Aughnamullan, and St Mary's Primary School in Ballinascreen were all mentioned. Those schools will all be assessed as part of the further roll-out of the schemes.

Mr McGlone spoke about people travelling at hugely dangerous speeds. While traffic calming and the roll-out of 20 mph zones will go some way to addressing that, we have a collective responsibility to get the message to all our drivers that they need to travel safely and at safe speeds.

I pay tribute to Mr Buchanan in particular, because he has been very active in working on SIDs and has been working with local businesses to gather funding so that they can be purchased. I assure Members that I am aware of the benefits that can come from the use of SIDs, so I have asked my officials to prepare a guidance note in order to ensure that we have a consistent approach across divisions when responding to requests for them.

In an intervention, Mrs Kelly referenced the importance of education and training. She highlighted potential sources of funding, which is very useful for Members. I reassure Members that my Department has a cycling proficiency scheme; the practical child pedestrian safety training scheme; the Active School Travel programme, which we work in partnership with the Public Health Agency to fund; and the junior road safety officer scheme. I hear what Members are saying about the need to expand footway provision for children getting to and from schools, particularly in rural areas. That is the kind of project that I want to be able to support through the £20 million blue-green fund that my Department has set up.

I am very conscious that Members referenced the fact that, in rural areas, schools are located in places that we would possibly not choose if we were doing it all over again. It is, therefore, very important that rural communities are not left behind and that there is not always a focus on urban areas. By setting up the rural roads fund, I want to demonstrate my commitment to ensure that we are doing much more to provide safe infrastructure in rural areas as well.

Members highlighted the importance of gritting, which I understand, and the importance of street lighting, and a number of Members spoke about the importance of site-specific solutions. That is the kind of approach that I want to have,

but you are always constrained by the budgetary reality within which you have to operate.

All Members who spoke talked about the importance of partnership working. That is really important. If we are going to create safer environments for our children, young people and other road users, we have to work in partnership with communities. The community safety grant is one way that my Department helps to support communities to have their own safety programmes. We absolutely have to work with local representatives, who know their area best, and we have to work with our school leaders and the PSNI. As all Members rightly pointed out, we have to work in partnership with the Minister of Education. I will not be found wanting in that regard.

In conclusion, I thank all Members for their interest in the issue. All Members have written to me on it. It is a matter that is very close to their hearts, and I reassure them of my commitment to do what I can to make it safer for our children and young people to walk, cycle and wheel safely to and from school.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Ms Mallon: Yes, of course.

Ms Sheerin: Sorry to interrupt. I should have said this in my contribution, but I neglected to. I am sure that the other Members would echo my thanks to the DFI staff, particularly Tracy Bratton, who, I know, has just departed her post. They respond to our queries and requests.

Mr McGlone: *[Inaudible.]*

Ms Sheerin: *[Laughter.]* I am trying not to take it personally that she left so close to my coming into this role. We have them tortured, and they are always quick at coming back. Thank you.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for that intervention. It is important that DFI officials get to hear that. They live in and very much care for their communities, and, often, because we care about our communities so much, DFI officials bear the brunt of a lot of frustration and anger.

Mr McGlone: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Mallon: Yes, of course.

Mr McGlone: May I, too, associate myself with the Member's comments? Tracy Bratton, who has now moved to another location in the division, was very useful and very effective not only in dealing with public representatives but in working with communities.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is testimony to the fact that, when we work in partnership and work to find solutions with communities instead of imposing them from the top down, we get much better outcomes for everyone who lives in the areas.

Again, I offer my appreciation to Mr Buchanan for bringing the Adjournment debate and to all Members for their representations to me not only this evening but outside the Chamber, which they do on a very regular basis. I thank them for that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Before I adjourn the Assembly, I assure Ms Sheerin that my smile was not at Mr McGlone listing the schools in his constituency but was, in fact, at his reference to hairdryers. *[Laughter.]* Anyone who knows anything about Alex Ferguson knows what the hairdryer treatment is and knows that speeders should be given the hairdryer treatment by Patsy McGlone at every opportunity. *[Laughter.]*

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.

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