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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 24 February 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we proceed with today's business, I want to make a few general points.

First, I acknowledge the huge amount of work that has been done by Committees in recent weeks to scrutinise the significant amount of secondary legislation laid by Departments over the last three years. While more attention is often given to plenary sittings, this emphasises the crucial role of Committees in the Assembly.

Secondly, I wrote to Ministers last week with a reminder for all Departments of the key procedures and conventions to be observed towards the Assembly and that the Assembly should be the place where key issues are debated in the first instance. As we return to the normal pattern of two plenary sittings each week, I want to underline my focus on ensuring that our business is conducted properly and fairly. I ask Members to note how vital this is towards building confidence in the Assembly.

On points of order, I genuinely welcome procedural concerns that Members may want to raise with me, and I will endeavour to deal with them seriously and fairly. As in other places, if Members can give me advance notice of a point of order, it will make it more likely that I can give them a considered response at the time.

Finally, I recognise the work that has been done by Assembly and party staff in the past six weeks. In my role as Speaker, and on behalf of the whole Chamber, I formally record my thanks to Assembly staff. The last three years created particular disruption and uncertainty for them, but, since early January, they have worked tirelessly in challenging circumstances to ensure that we have been able to resume our business almost seamlessly. Although I have been a Member since 1998, in this role, I get a much greater insight into the work that goes on behind the scenes. I know how personally committed the staff are to the importance of the work that we have to do, so it is fitting that I

formally record my and our appreciation to them this afternoon.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to what you just said, you did get some short notice of this point of order. The first item of business today is a motion to establish an Ad Hoc Committee:

"to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights".

If I understand correctly, the House is not to be permitted to debate or amend that motion. All that the House is permitted to do is to vote on it. Why, since Standing Order 53 places no prohibition on debate when the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee is the subject matter, are we to be denied the right to debate a motion such as this? More than that, my understanding is that, if the motion is passed, the names of those who will serve on this Ad Hoc Committee are never to be put to the House. Normally, when we establish Committees, we name them in a subsequent motion and approve the individuals. However, in this case, I am informed by the Business Office that there will be no follow-up motion. All we have is the carve-up between the parties, and they then choose the individuals. The House, in whose name this Committee is being established, can neither debate its establishment nor the names of those appointed to it. How does that fit with good order and with the credibility of the House?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for raising that point of order. I also thank him for giving me some notice, even though it was short. As I said, it helps in my preparation of a response.

I am content that the motion is in order, insofar as it reflects the decisions taken, and the manner in which they are taken, by the Business Committee in the establishment of Ad Hoc Committees. The motion was agreed by the Business Committee and scheduled for today's sitting following consultation with party Whips and representatives.

I have a certain empathy for Mr Allister's concern that we do not have an opportunity to debate the motion. Whatever about the particular motion in today's Order Paper, I empathise with him insofar as I will not be wedded to convention being the underpinning principle that allows every future motion to go forward. As far as I am concerned, the motion in the Order Paper is appropriate and in order, but I will bring it back to the Business Committee to discuss for future reference. I commit to doing that.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, it is of little comfort that, for the future, this issue might be addressed. The reality remains that, today, the Assembly is being asked to set up a Committee that it cannot debate. It seems that there was debate in the Business Committee, but not in the House. Surely, the House should make this decision. If it is then compounded by the fact that we will not even be able to know, by notice, who is serving on this Committee, we could well arrive at the farcical situation where an Ad Hoc Committee to deal with human rights issues could be peopled, in part, by human rights abusers. There may be put on this Committee, unknown to the House, those who are human rights abusers by virtue of the fact that they are convicted terrorists who abused, in that role, the human rights of others. The farce could get even more extreme than it already is. I implore you, sir, to refer this back to the Business Committee and let it draft a motion that can be debated in the House.

Mr Speaker: I made the point, Mr Allister, that the motion in today's Order Paper is in order. I made a commitment to take it back to the Business Committee for further discussion and future reference. I have no doubt that the Member will have ample opportunity to discuss and consider the business of the proposed Ad Hoc Committee in due course, as all Members have the right and ability to do.

Bill of Rights: Ad Hoc Committee

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion regarding the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee to consider the creation of a bill of rights. The motion will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the creation of a bill of rights as set out in paragraph 28 of part 2 of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document; and to submit a report to the Assembly by 28 February 2022.

Composition: Democratic Unionist Party, 2; Sinn Féin, 2; Social Democratic and Labour Party, 1; Ulster Unionist Party, 1; Alliance Party, 1.

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members except when no decision is taken or question put to the Committee, when the quorum shall be four.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — [Mr O'Dowd.]

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

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

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 24 February 2020.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 24 February 2020.

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Spring Supplementary Estimates 2019-2020 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates and Vote on Account 2020-21

Mr Speaker: The next two motions relate to the Supply resolutions, and, as usual, there will be a single debate on both motions. I shall ask the Clerk to read the first motion on the 2019-2020 spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) then call on the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so or when the time limit is reached, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion, the 2020-21 Vote on Account, will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

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

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £17,519,166,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2020 and that resources, not exceeding £21,022,321,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2020 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(c) and 3(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2019-2020 that was laid before the Assembly on 19 February 2020.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,962,895,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying

the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £9,054,440,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates and Vote on Account 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 19 February 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four and a half hours for this debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and making his winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes. I call on the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Murphy: As you have set out, Cheann Comhairle, this debate covers the Supply resolutions. The first resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2019-2020 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates. The SSEs were laid in the Assembly on Wednesday 19 February 2020. Alongside the SSEs, the 2020-21 Vote on Account was also laid, and it will be the subject of the second Supply resolution. I will now speak to both of those.

The first resolution before the House relates to the supply of cash and the use of resources for the current year, 2019-2020, as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates. In the absence of an Executive during 2019, the Secretary of State took the 2019-2020 Main Estimates through Westminster last October. Normally, the Main Estimates would be approved in June. However, because of delays in getting this timetabled at Westminster until October, that meant that, while the Main Estimates were based on the Budget, which the Secretary of State announced back in February 2019, they were updated to reflect the latest in-year position agreed by the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) at that time. Since the Main

Estimates in October 2019 and prior to the restoration of the Executive, the Department of Finance continued to manage the public expenditure position, including the reallocation of resources when Departments declared reduced requirements and surrendered any funding no longer required.

Since the Executive were restored last month, I have announced an outcome of the January monitoring round, including allocations of £35.8 million resource and £5.8 million capital from the funding that the block has received as a result of an updated forecast of regional rate income, the impact of Barnett changes being finalised as part of the Westminster Supplementary Estimate process and funding previously set aside for particular purposes not being required and, therefore, being made available for allocation to Departments. These are the allocations being authorised through the spring Supplementary Estimates, which we are debating today. The focus of the January monitoring round was to ensure that all funds available from easements are allocated to Departments. It was not meant to address significant pressures, and I ensured that all available resource and capital was allocated to Departments.

Since then, Treasury has made some late adjustments through the Barnett formula, making some £18 million of resource available, and you will be aware from my written statement last week that I have allocated that. I have kept my commitment to the Infrastructure Minister to provide more funding for winter services, street lighting and other road maintenance, with the majority of the remaining available funding going to fund pressures in our schools.

12.15 pm

Alongside the SSEs for 2019-2020, there is also a Vote on Account. The Vote on Account provides an initial allocation for 2020-21 in order to ensure that Departments can continue to deliver services until the Main Estimates are presented to the Assembly for approval in June. I emphasise that the Vote on Account does not represent the setting of a Budget for 2020-21. The amount for each Department in the Vote on Account is, in most cases, set at approximately 45% of the 2019-2020 provision, in order to authorise sufficient cash and resources to ensure that services can continue to be delivered through the summer. The Executive will set a 2020-21 Budget in the coming weeks, and I will bring that Budget to the Assembly, but

neither today's debate nor tomorrow's debate on the Budget Bill are about that.

There are a number of procedural issues that I must also address. First, on behalf of the Executive, I request and recommend the levels of Supply set out in the two resolutions, under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Also, as is normally the case for a Budget Bill, accelerated passage is required for the legislation. Indeed, there is specific provision for that in Assembly Standing Orders, under Standing Order 42. I understand that the Finance Committee has already agreed to grant the Bill accelerated passage, and I place on record my appreciation of the Committee's vital role in agreeing that important step in the financial process.

I am sure that Members are aware that today's debate is time-limited, and I encourage Members to use their limited time to focus on the issues that relate specifically to the 2019-2020 Supply resolution before us. The Estimates are seen by many as complex and difficult to understand, and I agree with that assessment. However, it is imperative that we as an Assembly recognise that the Budget Bill, underpinned by the spring Supplementary Estimates, is the key legislation for delivering funding to vital public services, such as schools and hospitals. The public services that are underpinned by that legislation in turn support the wider economy, and it is vital that we debate the legislation and pass it expediently.

As we know, the public-expenditure environment will continue to be challenging, especially set against the background of Brexit and the effects of austerity policies, which continue to damage our public services. When I bring the Executive's 2020-21 Budget, Members will have every opportunity to debate the issues, not just when the Budget is announced but when I bring the 2020-21 Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill to the Assembly later in the year.

I look forward to putting the Executive's final spending plans for 2019-2020 on a legal footing through the spring Supplementary Estimates before you today, together with the corresponding Budget Bill that we will debate tomorrow. I request Members' support for the resolution for 2019-2020 and also for the resolution for the Vote on Account to allow services to continue to be funded into the first few months of 2020-21.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and for his explanation of the

spring Supplementary Estimates and, indeed, the Vote on Account. At its meeting on 19 February, the Committee for Finance took evidence from Department of Finance officials on the SSEs for 2019-2020 and the Vote on Account for 2020-21. Although those are typically considered routine requirements, they can, by necessity, be quite technical. I thank the departmental officials for their assistance to the Committee in that regard.

During the evidence session, the Committee examined the reconciliation between the departmental expenditure limit (DEL) figures in the Main Estimate Budget position and the SSE Budget position before us today. It was an exercise during which the Committee received clarification from departmental officials on the extent of the in-year changes to the resource and capital allocations for 2019-2020 for a number of Departments, particularly as those changes occurred while the Assembly was not sitting. In some instances, the figures involved were substantial. I shall not get into the specific figures for individual Departments on the in-year movement of money, suffice it to note that just over £150 million was made in resource allocations and almost £64 million in capital allocations.

It is important to place on the record that, under the prevailing extenuating circumstances, neither I nor the Committee considers the business being debated today to be routine in the traditional sense. The political instability that occurred over recent years meant, that in the absence of the Assembly and Committees, the process, as has already been mentioned by the Minister, was overseen by the Secretary of State. It was important for the Finance Committee to establish clarity on these significant adjustments as it exercises a cross-cutting scrutiny function in respect of Budget Bills. Moreover, the scale of these technical changes, combined with the cumulative changes resulting from the normal reallocation through monitoring rounds will, in some cases, have resulted in significant differences between the opening and closing resource and capital allocations of Departments.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Committee's discussions with departmental officials also covered a range of issues in respect of how future scrutiny will be facilitated by Departments for the forthcoming in-year monitoring rounds, as well as the departmental engagement that the Assembly and its Committees can expect in the formation of future draft Budgets.

During the Second Stage debate tomorrow I will go into more detail on the assurances that we

received, but I wish to inform the House that there would appear to be a genuine desire to engage productively and meaningfully with the Assembly in order to facilitate robust financial scrutiny. I have no doubt that, over the remainder of this mandate, we will be faced with many challenges, necessitating focused financial scrutiny that will require Committees to work collaboratively with Departments. However, this must be underpinned by the fostering of relationships and a recognition by all Departments that there needs to be a robust challenge function by the Assembly to ensure that, in discharging our duties, we maximise the limited resources available to us to focus on the best possible outcomes in delivering our public services.

To achieve that, statutory Committees must continue to ensure that they fulfil their Budget-related statutory roles and responsibilities. It is essential that all scrutiny Committees continue to satisfy themselves as to the reasons for, as well as the timing of, any significant levels of easement or returns of moneys during the in-year monitoring process, and that the necessary assurances have been received from Departments on any and all Committee concerns.

As I said earlier, in terms of the scrutiny of departmental input to the in-year monitoring rounds, the Assembly was not sitting during that time, and therefore has been unable to receive the associated departmental evidence sessions in advance of the June, October and January monitoring rounds. As we move into the new financial year, the Committee will take a keen interest not only in the Department's financial management of its own resources but in its coordination role in the in-year monitoring process.

The motion on the Vote on Account for 2020-21 is a practical measure that usually provides interim resources at approximately 45% of the 2019-2020 provisions until the Main Estimates and associated Budget Bill are agreed before the summer. As I will outline in tomorrow's debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, the Committee for Finance has approved accelerated passage for the Bill, which will be introduced by the Minister later. In the meantime, on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motions.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): As Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure, I will take this opportunity to outline the Committee's consideration and views in respect of today's motions.

The expenditure of the Department for Infrastructure is one of the Executive's largest, and scrutiny of its budget is a key role for the Committee. In the short time that the Assembly has been back, the Committee has received a number of briefings on the Department's financial situation. Minister Mallon was invited to the Committee on 5 February to discuss her priorities for the Department. She outlined the financial challenges, and departmental officials briefed the Committee on the details of the Department's finances on 28 January and 19 February.

The stark financial situation faced by the Department was made clear. It is evidently a Department that has reached breaking point after years of underfunding and it is hard, as Chair of the Committee, to point to priorities for additional spend when so much of the Department has been depleted. The Committee notes that in the January monitoring round the Department made bids for £28.5 million of resource funding and £14.5 million of capital, and received £1 million of resource and £3.8 million of capital. The Department's bid requested funding for the Belfast transport hub, street lighting and roads maintenance, winter services, water mains replacement and the digital transformation of the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). The largest bid by far, however, was for £19 million to address Translink's operating deficit. The £4.8 million received from the Department of Finance went to the Belfast transport hub, street lighting and winter services. It is to be welcomed that the Executive found an additional £3 million, which was announced by the Minister of Finance last week, that will go towards street lighting, road maintenance and winter services.

During her briefing to the Committee, the Minister was pressed about the severity of underfunding of these recurrent services. She highlighted that the required annual budget for street lighting repairs was £3.2 million, but that the current allocation had been £1 million. To clear the backlog alone would require an estimated £710,000.

The additional funding has ignored water mains replacement, digital transformation of DVA and, of course, funding for Translink. There has been a trend over recent years to ignore Translink's deficit. In briefings by the Minister and her officials, the Committee was advised that there were no further identifiable savings. While additional money through the monitoring round is obviously welcome, it is only a sticking plaster.

The Department has become increasingly dependent on monitoring rounds to deliver basic core services. As other Departments utilise their budgets better and surrender less, there is less funding at the monitoring rounds for the Department to make up its increasing shortfall. According to the Minister, Treasury approved the moving of £130 million from the capital grant into the resource block to supplement the shortfall. This position looks set to continue, but it is unsustainable.

Understandably, the Minister has allocated additional moneys to those aspects of her remit that protect lives, such as street lighting and road maintenance. However, because these are the areas most critical to fund, large swathes of the Department continue to be depleted.

I want to outline what a Department in financial crisis looks like. The Department for Infrastructure budget has a recurring structural deficit of £61 million going into the next financial year and due to rise to £80 million in 2021-22 and £90 million in 2022-23.

Within the area of water alone, there is shortfall in resource of £7 million. According to the Department, it has not been possible to fund Northern Ireland Water to the levels recommended by the Utility Regulator. New housing developments and businesses are not able to connect to the sewerage network in over 100 towns and villages across Northern Ireland. This has the potential to stagnate development, with various knock-on effects. The Minister advised the Committee that she intended to discuss Northern Ireland Water's organisation, borrowing powers and funding model with her Executive colleagues.

I have talked about the severely needed money that has been spent on roads. Funding has been pared back to such an extent that only a limited maintenance service exists, with much-reduced pothole repairs and half the number of grass cutting and gully emptying operations. Prior to the 2014-15 departmental budget reductions, the Department would have regularly allocated some £35 million to cover routine maintenance and meet winter requirements. In recent years, this budget has been cut by more than half.

As an asset, the Northern Ireland roads system is worth an estimated £40 billion, and experts suggest that £400 million should be spent each year just to maintain it. At best, the Department has managed only £75 million over the past few years. Underspending on that level only stores

up bigger problems, and officials noted that it takes four times more to repair than to maintain.

The Department has a statutory duty to promote road safety, and the budget for that has been significantly cut over the past number of years. The budget spend for 2010-11 was £1,703,256 and in 2011-12 was £2.5 million. The opening baseline budget for road safety advertising for 2018-19 was £700,000, and again for 2019-2020, representing a 30% reduction on the previous low allocation of £1 million in 2017-18.

The Department told the Committee of its ongoing support for community transport organisations. The Committee noted the Department's provision of £4.5 million to a number of them in 2019-2020 through the provisions of the rural transport fund and the transport programme for people with disabilities to deliver specialised and affordable transport. The Department made the point that, whilst this funding has remained the same as that in 2018-19, it is a reduction of almost 20% in the overall baseline since 2015-16.

12.30 pm

The Department's capital budget for 2019-2020 was £471 million. However, the Department pointed out that the requirement for 2020-21 is £795 million, increasing to £1.4 billion by 2022-23. In response to the Committee's question on how the Department prioritises its spending, the officials outlined that funding flagship projects, such as the major road upgrades, are at the top and, if approved by the Executive, the city deals are next. The Department noted that the Utility Regulator's determination on what Northern Ireland Water should get is inescapable. Next, there is critical rail safety work required. There is a contractual commitment in place to buy new carriages for the rail network and for new buses. There is also a need to find money for Waterways Ireland and the continued funding of the design phase of York Street.

It is a Department with severe pressures, a Department struggling to keep the infrastructure that we all rely on from breaking down irrevocably. For Northern Ireland Water, there is a requirement for £1.45 billion identified under the Living With Water programme. That will bring hugely increased demands on the capital budget over the next decade. Northern Ireland Water also urgently requires assistance on a sustainable funding agreement. Officials warned that, if the constrained budget settlement for the current price control rolls forward, choices will have to be made that will lead to failed outcomes for our environment and

more frequent prosecutions, including increasing fines for pollution events. Additionally, economic growth in many areas across Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast, would need to be put on hold. On the road network, the recent Barton and Northern Ireland Audit Office reports on structural maintenance of the road network recommend that the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure work towards ensuring funding of some £143 million per annum on a recurring basis to prevent further deterioration. Furthermore, additional funding is needed to address the £1.2 billion backlog of road maintenance. The Committee will, as always, do its best to scrutinise the work and budget of the Department, but, with such a depleted budget, it is difficult to critique a Department in such crisis.

I have left the matter of Translink and the now very real possibility that it will become insolvent to the end. That would be catastrophic for the transport infrastructure of Northern Ireland and would leave the Department in breach of its responsibilities. A number of reduced budgets for the Department have meant reduced budgets for Translink of around £13 million per year. Translink, therefore, ran its service at a deficit and used its reserves to supplement that. As the £19 million requested for Translink in the monitoring round was unsuccessful, its reserves next year will be below the level of working capital that it needs, and it may cease to be deemed a going concern, which is a critical issue facing the Department. Given our ageing population, officials noted that the concessionary fares scheme is becoming more expensive and has risen to almost £50 million. The Department gives Translink only £40 million for the scheme. The Committee has sought comparable tables on concessionary fares in Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions. The Committee has also asked the Department whether the Department's underfunding of Translink is a breach of its contract under the public service agreement.

The Committee for Infrastructure will continue its scrutiny of the Department for Infrastructure's budget and especially the Minister's efforts to mitigate the impact of cuts.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I advise Members that, as everybody is being given up to 10 minutes to speak, if any Member takes an intervention, they will not get an additional minute.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Fáiltím roimh an deis páirt a ghlacadh i ndíospóireacht an lae inniu

mar Chathaoirleach an Choiste Sláinte. I welcome the opportunity to address and participate in today's debate as Chair of the Health Committee. I acknowledge, in the first instance, the positive start to consideration of the Health and Social Care budget since the institutions were restored, in terms of early progress on addressing pay issues and a renewed commitment to the transformation agenda seen in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. I particularly welcome the resolution of pay issues for a workforce that continues to bear an unreasonable burden as pressures increase, along with the commitment to address safe staffing issues in partnership with staff representative bodies. I thank the Minister of Health for inviting me, on the Floor of the Chamber, to join the strategic health partnership forum. I confirm that I have accepted his invitation and look forward to working with all concerned on that important issue. I also acknowledge that the HSC budget this year will have exceeded 50% of the block grant. On the one hand, that demonstrates a welcome response to need, but it also underscores the urgent need for radical reform, as we have all agreed.

In recent weeks, the Committee heard evidence from the Department and from stakeholders of significant inflationary pressures of around 6% and inescapable pressures estimated at around £345 million, and that is before the transformation budget and New Decade commitments are added. While in-year monitoring moneys helped to bridge the gap last year between the original allocation and cost pressures, those funds are mostly non-recurrent and do not, therefore, allow for long-term planning. Of course, some of the increasing costs derive in part from success such as longer life expectancy and better medicines, which are to be welcomed, but the substantial impact on existing services inevitably makes transformation more difficult. While there is cross-party acknowledgement of the need for double running to allow transformation, we have not yet seen evidence that that necessary step will be possible at the scale required, which is, of course, a serious concern.

In 2016, the previous Committee heard evidence that, without adequate investment in transformation, hospital waiting lists would rise and GP practices would close. Members will know that that is, indeed, what has been happening, despite a wide range of initiatives being undertaken and £100 million having been invested in transformation in each of the last two years. Last week, at the Health Committee, we heard that, without faster and further reform,

patients could end up being bussed from Fermanagh and Tyrone to see GPs east of the Bann. Tá a fhios agam go rí-mhaith go bhfuil Comhaltáí ar gach taobh ag déanamh a ndíochill le cinnte a dhéanamh nach dtarlaíonn sin. I know that Members on all sides will want to do everything possible to prevent that from becoming a reality.

We know that it can be done, and we know how it can be done. We have cross-party agreement on the road map, including the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams with investment in primary and community care, as advised by countless reports over the years. Moreover, we know that, if done effectively, that investment will be repaid with early intervention, health promotion and prevention, which will ease pressure on acute care. Ní mór dúinn glacadh leis an riosca gur, gan maoiniú ceart, is deacair an t-athrú a mheas. We need to acknowledge the risk that, without sufficient funding, transformation becomes much more difficult. An example of that is the current substantial reliance on locum and agency staff. The Department is on record that, in the 12 months up to April 2019, the cost of temporary workers across Health and Social Care came to just over £200 million. That cost has more than trebled since 2014-15 and could clearly go some way towards achieving transformation, if workforce planning, recruitment and retention issues can be effectively addressed.

The Committee has asked questions about savings targets and the reliance on savings targets, which are acknowledged as unlikely to be achieved in some cases. Efficiency is clearly vital, but we will want to know that savings are achieved by strategic decision-making and not by opportunistic cuts where vacancies occur at random.

The new Committee is still at an early stage in its development, but we are already identifying issues that make it difficult to comment effectively on budget priorities. We cannot look at the papers supplied to the Committee thus far and identify, for example, how much, it is proposed, we spend on mental health and on cancer or the split between primary and acute care. Fantastic work may well be going on to address those balances and priorities, but previous Committees were not able to get clarity on that. We are, therefore, seeking further detail and enquiring about progress towards transparency and accessibility in our budgetary processes.

The move towards a three-year Budget has been widely supported and will be crucial for Health to move towards a process that will

allow the long-term planning that is essential to reform. Go ceann píosa, is dúshlán ceart dár gcóras pleanáil fhad-téarmach a dhéanamh le buiséad aon bhliana. For now, though, proper long-term planning with a one-year Budget is a real challenge for our system.

I look forward to the coming year and to the chance to engage constructively on the spending plans for the reforms that we have. Ag deireadh an lae — at the end of the day — we have no choice but to deliver.

I now want to take a couple of moments to speak in my role as health spokesperson for Sinn Féin. Since the institutions were restored in January, progress has been made on addressing pay issues in the health sector. I welcome the resolution of pay issues for a workforce that continues to unselfishly bear the burdens in a health service that is starved through Tory austerity measures. I particularly welcome the commitment to victims of the blood contamination scandal, with an extra payment of £1 million being made available by the Minister to those affected. The money is ring-fenced and is intended to alleviate hardship for those infected with hepatitis and HIV in the contaminated blood scandal. However, we are concerned that £400,000 of that has been withheld. I urge the Minister of Health to release the entire £1 million, as allocated. Victims and those affected by the blood contamination scandal have waited and suffered long enough.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I know that he is speaking in his capacity as the Sinn Féin spokesperson, but, as the Chair of the Committee, he has insight into what is going on with the contaminated blood situation. He referred to the £400,000 that the Minister or the Department is holding back: will he tell us whether any light has been shone on why that is the case or why that has been proposed?

Mr Gildernew: I will leave it to the Minister to explain to the House why that is the case. I urge him to prioritise that spending immediately.

While we have renewed our commitment to the transformation agenda proposed by Bengoa and the then Health Minister, Michelle O'Neill, it is difficult to see how we can achieve that when we cannot afford the double running required to transform our health service. Just last week, we heard that the rate of GP closures in Fermanagh and parts of Tyrone — a largely rural area — means that patients could end up being bussed to see GPs. Transformation of the health service is vital if it is to serve the needs of our entire population across rural and urban communities, particularly the more deprived

communities that already suffer unequal health outcomes in important measures of physical and mental health and well-being.

The transformation of particular components of the healthcare system — for example, reduced waiting lists and the provision of IVF treatment according to NICE recommendations — are just some of the many promises made in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Not surprisingly, a Tory Government who have savaged public service funding for years may now also renege on many of the commitments they made in that agreement. We cannot be complacent when it comes to the health and well-being of our communities. Our responsibility as public servants is to come up with ideas that allow us to fulfil our duties to constituents. Tory austerity must be challenged through sound proposals that will allow us to address the pressures on the healthcare system and other public services. Increasing our suite of fiscal powers is one avenue that must be explored so that we, the public servants sitting in this institution, have the latitude to decide how we generate revenue and how best to spend that revenue so that the daily lives of our constituents are improved.

Our healthcare system has benefited from significant North/South cooperation in numerous and important ways, with our constituents feeling the benefits that come from the effective and efficient sharing of resources and the provision of health services across the entire island. We need to explore how we can generate further improvements for all our people in the time ahead. The work of the Health Minister in developing an all-Ireland paediatric pathology service is a fine example of how we can reach out to address key issues of concern in a way that meets the needs of our population most effectively. I wish the Minister well in dealing with the many and complex challenges that he faces at this time.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate and thank the Minister of Finance for bringing it to the House.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the specific challenges in this year's budget process. The absence of a fully functioning Government for three years has resulted in a compressed budget planning timetable, and, although unavoidable, it has had an impact on the time for engagement between Departments and Committees on budget planning. Nonetheless, it is important that Committees conduct their scrutiny in as thorough a manner

as possible and despite the challenging circumstances.

Against that backdrop, the Committee received briefings on budget matters from departmental officials on 12 February and 19 February. Normally, the Committee is briefed in advance of the Department making monitoring returns, but that did not happen in 2019-2020.

12.45 pm

In the January 2020 monitoring round, the Executive Office was awarded just short of £1 million resource funding for preparation costs involved in taking forward the recommendations of the historical institutional abuse (HIA) inquiry and victims' payment service scoping study. It also received £0.3 million for the capital costs incurred in taking forward the HIA recommendations. It is widely accepted that the HIA redress scheme will have a sizeable long-term financial impact, and it is not surprising that the exact costs are hard to predict at this stage. However, the Department has estimated that the cost could be between £25 million and £60 million for the 2020-21 period. Given the scale of those costs, it is not possible for them to be absorbed within the Department's existing budget, and the source of funding for the scheme must be clarified as a matter of urgency. The Committee resolutely believes that funding for the scheme should be met centrally from the block grant. Notwithstanding that, it also believes that robust efforts should be made to secure funds from those institutions that were involved in the abuse. It is only right that they should share the costs with the public sector. Officials advised the Committee during the briefings that there has been contact with the institutions on a number of occasions but that it is expected that Ministers will now become involved. This is an area that the Committee will follow closely.

Members heard that the Department's key objectives will be to address its statutory obligations; meet any contractual obligations; take forward the Programme for Government commitments; protect the victims and survivors' service budget; mitigate the impact of services delivered through arm's-length bodies (ALBs); and protect programme spend. The Department is managing a resource funding deficit of nearly £3 million. That is a result of budget cuts over the past five years and some new and additional work that the Department has taken forward for which baseline funding has not yet been received. The funding situation has been made even more difficult because of the work on implementing the HIA inquiry legislation, which I alluded to, and the victims' payments,

which I will talk a bit more about. To cover the payments to victims of Troubles-related incidents, the Department has estimated costs of £25 million to £60 million for the coming year and, over a three-year budget period, costs of £109 million. Reflecting on the experience of the PSNI hearing-loss claims, the Committee questioned officials about the estimates. While acknowledging the difficulties around estimating costs, there was a sense that those estimates should be treated with caution and, indeed, viewed as conservative. There is absolutely no question in the mind of the Committee that additional resource to fund victims' payments should come into the block grant. Westminster designed the scheme, Westminster put it in to law, so Westminster should foot the bill.

The Committee puts down a marker at this stage about the need to properly fund work to strengthen international relations. Given the UK's exit from the European Union, it is more important now than ever that the North's voice is heard loud and clear on the world stage. The importance of strong international relations in marketing and promoting our region as an attractive investment and tourist opportunity and in creating economic, technological and cultural partnerships cannot be overstated.

I will now move to capital funding. Officials confirmed that there is a £7.5 million pressure for Urban Villages. To spread the positive outcome of the Urban Villages programme to a wider geographical base, the Department is requesting additional resources to support the establishment of more Urban Villages areas. If agreed, that will also require additional resource funding in 2020-21 to develop appropriate projects and start the delivery of revenue projects, with the aim of commencing the delivery of capital investments in 2021-22. For Ebrington, there is a degree of uncertainty about when the site will be transferred to Derry City and Strabane District Council. However, the Department is working on the basis that it will complete the required capital works on the site by 2021-22, so the capital requirement includes £2.3 million to develop infrastructure and for external repairs. Some £760,000 has been identified as being needed for essential or legislative health and safety works at the Maze/Long Kesh site, although it should be noted that the capital requirement will increase significantly if agreement is reached on the way forward with the site.

A number of funds will be held centrally for allocation in-year to ensure key Executive commitments are funded and delivered, and we will be keeping an eye on those programmes. They include £7.8 of capital and £2.5 million of

resource for Delivering Social Change, which is a key programme that we want to see delivered, and the social investment fund.

Officials have advised that resource amounts close to £6.35 million are required for the commitments that arise from NDNA. That money will cover costs associated with the Office for Identity and Cultural Expression, an Irish-language commissioner, an Ulster-Scots/Ulster-British commissioner, a commissioner for ministerial standards, a compact civic advisory panel and bill of rights experts. The overall figure is set to rise to just under £12 million in 2021-22, before reducing the year after.

The Department has a significant number of budget lines that it needs to keep an eye on. We have received only the initial briefings, and it is our intention to receive more briefings. We wish to see the appropriate funding set aside for any of the commitments that have been made so that all the initiatives can be delivered.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): The absence of an Executive and Assembly Committees has made monitoring in-year allocations and savings delivery plans and determining how effectively the Department of Education is using its £2 billion budget almost impossible for 2019-2020. That is an unacceptable democratic deficit and an inadequate budgetary process under any circumstances, but particularly so during a time of a financial crisis in public services. Despite that, the restored Education Committee has worked diligently in recent weeks to examine the financial information provided by the Department of Education for 2019-2020 and beyond.

The Department of Education received nearly £90 million of monitoring round allocations in 2019-2020. Despite that, the Department expects to overspend on its budget for 2019-2020 by around £28 million. There are two key contributors, it seems, to that financial crisis: an Education Authority (EA) overspend; and particularly acute demands on our special educational needs (SEN) provision. Special schools, for example, have seen their numbers increase by a staggering 20% in about five years. The Education Committee recently learned how that and the increasing complexity of pupil need is presenting significant challenges to special educational needs provision. The demand for SEN support in mainstream schools for non-statemented and statemented pupils has also increased significantly, and the system is failing to respond adequately. The Education Committee

is agreed that responding to that crisis will require not only the significant investment requested but radical reform.

Some of the other key challenges include our school budgets. A significant number of our schools are in deficit. One contributing factor to the situation is the HM Treasury requirement in recent years on teachers' employers to increase their pension and National Insurance contributions. Between 80% and 90% of school spending goes on salaries, and that has had a significant impact, forcing many stable and growing schools into financial deficit. The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) has indicated that we have more schools in deficit and that we have a system that is at tipping point financially.

Teachers' pay and conditions require urgent investment to deliver the fair outcomes that our teachers need. We may also see a potentially significant increase in rates bills for many schools across Northern Ireland. The figure is imagined to be approximately £11 million. Add to that investment needed for childcare, nurture, tackling underachievement and emotional health and well-being, and those costs are projected to be £50 million to £60 million.

During our deliberations on the Supply vote, the Committee also took evidence from BookTrust Northern Ireland on its early intervention programmes. The Committee felt strongly that this kind of low-cost intervention merited support. Members had no hesitation in supporting the BookTrust's bid for the very reasonable sum of £50,000. I am glad to make this known to the Assembly, and I hope that other Members may also refer their support to the BookTrust early intervention reading programme in Northern Ireland.

To address the multi-million-pound pressures on education, radical reform is absolutely vital. In addition to the ongoing education transformation programme, the Committee looks forward to urgent implementation of the review of education proposed in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. If we are to avoid a cycle of deficit followed by bailout followed by deficit, a new, radical approach is absolutely required.

The Department of Education has a capital budget of around £167 million for 2019. The Committee's current expectation is that the Department will continue a good record of having capital money spent before the year-end. However, there are significant challenges, particularly in relation to the Strule shared education project, which is now tens of millions

of pounds over budget and several years late. The Fresh Start capital programme has also seen only around £29 million spent to date, with around £470 million to be spent in a relatively short period of five years. Fresh Start will fund a substantial new-build programme, from which six shared education projects and 17 integrated schools will benefit, but this does appear to be dependent on HM Treasury agreement to re-profile Fresh Start expenditure over the coming years.

I would also like to point out that the Department's completion rates for school enhancement programmes are good and running at around 90%. Members will also no doubt wish to refer to the minor works expenditure being extremely welcome across a number of schools and the budget for that needing significant increase. Notwithstanding the above, there is still concern with regard to business case development and approval for new school bids and the speed at which that is delivered. To be clear, over half of the new school builds announced in the period 2012-16 have yet to have construction started, and the problems appear to relate to both planning and area planning and continue to be a concern to the Education Committee.

I would like to say a few words as an Alliance MLA. The previous Education Authority CEO stated clearly over two years ago that without radical investment and radical reform our education system would be unaffordable, socially immobile and unfit for the 21st century — a stark warning. Two years later, the Education Department faces pressures of up to £427 million, rising closer to £1 billion in three years, a £400 million backlog in maintenance and a £150 million gap to deliver the basic standards of fair teacher pay and conditions to end the industrial action that is damaging the well-being of our workforce across our schools in Northern Ireland and limiting the ability of our schools to deliver.

We also know that the cost of division in Northern Ireland with regard to education is estimated to be up to £100 million a year, yet area planning and the rationalisation of our education system are moving at snail's pace. As with health, investment alone will not resolve this financial crisis in education, and an independent review of education must be an urgent priority for the Education Minister to set out the radical reform that we need to deliver a more integrated, affordable, socially mobile and fit-for-purpose 21st century system. Most importantly, we must deliver quality education opportunities and outcomes for all children and young people in Northern Ireland.

1.00 pm

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I welcome the opportunity to make some remarks as Committee Chairperson. The spring Supplementary Estimates show significant increases in departmental net resource requirement of almost £288 million and an increase in the net cash requirement of almost £202 million. That estimate reflects changes to the budget position for 2019-2020 in monitoring rounds and annually managed expenditure forecasts (AME).

The Department has advised the Committee that the main reasons for the differences between the Main Estimates and the spring Supplementary Estimates are due to increases in demand-led benefits and provisions for annually managed expenditure. The Committee noted that there is a significant increase in AME of £116 million relating to the necessity to increase funding to the financial assistance scheme in order to protect the pensions of people whose employer has become insolvent; or where the pension scheme could not afford the benefits promised to members upon winding up; or where the pension scheme started to wind up between 1 January 1997 and 5 April 2005.

The Committee recognises that that is a precautionary step, given that the actual amount required rests on a judgement of the Court of Justice of the European Union that has yet to be delivered. This is an estimate of potential future requirements and the reason why the net cash requirement is lower than the net resource requirement. However, it may, in fact, ultimately result in an underspend if pension members are not required to receive 100% protection.

That increase in AME was partially offset by reduced requirements that the Department gave up in the September 2019 and January 2020 monitoring rounds. The Department surrendered £38.8 million of DEL resource and £36.4 million of DEL capital. While the Committee never likes to see resources surrendered, the vast majority of the reduced requirements in DEL capital is due to the need to surrender financial transactions capital (FTC) of £36.2 million. That is due to the current Office of National Statistics (ONS) classification of housing associations. While there is an ongoing derogation from Treasury, the rules still will not allow us to use FTC to build social housing until the reclassification of registered housing associations is dealt with on a legislative basis in the Assembly. The

Committee acknowledges that that issue is a key priority for the Minister, and we hope that it can be resolved in the very near future.

The majority of reduced resource requirements relate to Fresh Start mitigation measures not being required due to successful PIP appeals and a lower uptake in discretionary support grants. The Committee was also informed that some welfare reform protections were not taken forward and PIP contract volumes were less than expected.

The Committee notes that less funding was also required for the rates rebate programme, a reduced requirement of around £8.7 million. That issue was raised at last week's Committee meeting and members made the point that often those people who could benefit from this programme are not aware of it. The Committee has praised the Make the Call programme and we would like to see the Department put a similar effort into raising awareness about the rates rebate programme.

The issue of departmental budgets has rarely been out of the news of late, and everything seems to be a priority. We all have a duty to ensure ongoing public service delivery, but, in doing so, we collectively will have to make some unpopular decisions. The Committee looks forward to engaging with the Minister and our stakeholders to ensure that she receives the advice and support required to make those decisions.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity to outline the views of the Committee. The Committee received an oral briefing from the Department on the spring Supplementary Estimates and the budget 2019-2020 and proposals for 2020-21 on 13 February.

Officials advised the Committee that the budget for 2019-2020 had an allocation of £312.4 million, alongside £13.9 million for Brexit, for staff salaries, which was additional money. That additional money for staff to work on Brexit was initially to help with preparations for a possible EU exit with no deal. There is a separate bid for Brexit staff in the 2020-21 budget proposal. Therefore, in the budget, we are already seeing clear signs that Brexit preparations are and will be a priority for the Department.

Members queried the number of staff allocated to deal with Brexit and the proposal to increase staff costs to £23.6 million in the 2020-21 budget. Officials advised that, due to the number of specialist posts required and the

unavailability of staff in the Department to fill those posts, they have secured, externally, a process that is ongoing. The Department advised the Committee that it considers a staff complement of 454 to be a more accurate figure for the number of staff that it will require to deliver Brexit successfully.

Salaries and wages still accounts for the biggest cost in the Department at £125 million. After that, only some £46.6 million is allocated to programmes, of which £34.5 million is funding for the three NDPBs: the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), the Loughs Agency and the Livestock and Meat Commission. In terms of programme funding for 2019-2020, the Committee heard that, of the £46.6 million of expenditure, the single largest programme was the £18.9 million spent on compensation for TB. A further £8.8 million was spent on the fees for private vets testing for TB, and a considerable sum is spent on TB testing by in-house vets.

The Department advised that the January monitoring round had concluded with reduced requirements, including £12 million of resource, £1.6 million of resource depreciation impairment and £4 million in capital. The Committee sought clarification on the surrender of the £12 million resource, which it considered to be a large amount. Officials advised that it was a mix of money from no-deal preparations of £2.9 million, reduced requirements for TB compensation of £2.6 million, and a number of one-off easements. The Department had also generated additional income over and above what had been forecast. That came from Forest Service — £0.9 million — and the regulatory aspect of the NI Environment Agency.

On the resource and capital budgets, the Department advised the Committee that the spring Supplementary Estimates provides for a total net resource of £330.2 million and a net cash requirement of £300.2 million. Members noted that the biggest NDPB is AFBI. It has the largest budget totalling £32.4 million. One of the Committee's members expressed concern about the issue of royalty income to AFBI and focused on how collection of that had been problematic. The Committee recognised that that is now subject to legal proceedings, and we await with interest to see how that unfolds.

The Committee recognises the impact that Brexit will have on the Department's budget in terms of replacement funding and was keen to find out how the Department will manage that, particularly in relation to CAP funding, which is currently worth £293 million. The Committee was pleased to hear that that has been

secured, for this year, from British Treasury funding, but we are concerned about what may happen after this time. Such EU replacement funding will come directly from the Treasury, and there are big questions over how much we will get as a percentage share and whether it will be ring-fenced. There are further questions on the UK prosperity fund and its role in the replacement of rural development funding. Indeed, that point was raised at the Committee meeting on Thursday, when we heard evidence from representatives from the LAGs: Rural Action, Rural Women's Network and Rural Community Network (RCN). Looking forward to the Budget 2020-21, the Committee heard that the Department will bid for EU replacement funding within its resource bids, which total £310.6 million.

Other areas that Committee members are concerned with include elements in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. The Committee was encouraged to hear that climate change features and noted the bid of £2 million for additional staff to take forward new legislation, policies and strategies. That also includes the scoping study for the creation of an independent environmental protection agency. There is considerable interest in those policy matters. The Committee looks forward to engaging further with the Department on the policy progress and final allocations in the 2020-2021 Budget. The funding bid for climate change also covers a bid for a LIDAR survey of our coastline.

One major area of concern for the Committee is the replacement of the animal and public health information service (APHIS). Many Members will know that that system allows farmers to register cattle movements and other matters. It is a vital component in ensuring compliance with animal health and traceability matters, and it is of great importance in our international trade of agri-food, particularly at this time. In 2016, the Department commenced a project to introduce a new system known as NIFAIS — the NI food animal information system — with an expected completion date of 2018.

Due to issues with the contractor, including a high level of defects with the software, it has missed the deadline and has to date cost £10.9 million. The Committee noted that a further £2.3 million has been requested in the Department's capital bids for the 2020-21 budget, and we will watch with interest how that unfolds. We have asked for further information and expect to be kept up to date by the Department as time allows.

The Committee is also interested in the Department's funding allocation to Project Stratum and rural broadband. Many rural areas and districts have appalling connectivity issues. In this day and age, that is not acceptable, especially as we encourage farmers to move online to fill in their forms and for the use of APHIS. This is important right across the rural spectrum, for SMEs, wider connectivity, education and even for reducing social isolation, which is a key factor in mental ill health.

The Committee raised the issue of the budget allocated to remedial action at Mobuoy, of which most Members are aware. The Committee will keep an eye on that matter.

The Committee values the opportunity to scrutinise the Department's planned expenditure and delivery of associated projects. I am optimistic that the Department will continue to update the Committee on all aspects of budgetary information to assist us in undertaking that function. I conclude my remarks as Cathaoirleach of the AERA Committee.

I want to raise a couple of points as spokesperson for agriculture and rural affairs for my party. Last Thursday, we had a marathon session of the AERA Committee and took evidence on the Agriculture Bill. Brexit is a toxic issue that permeates absolutely everything. That is compounded by the announcement last week by the British Home Office of the points-based immigration system.

We have information from the 2017 DAERA migrant labour survey and from DAERA's migrant labour and trade inquiry the same year. We found that 10,000 new nationals are employed in the agri-food industry in the North and another 1,400 are so-called seasonal migrant workers. Horticulture will be particularly impacted should this points-based system come in.

We heard compelling evidence from the Meat Exporters' Association, which made the point that 60% of employees in the meat industry are new nationals from outside Ireland, and it would be devastating to place barriers in their way. It was said very pointedly that the Tory Government talk about different types of labour — skilled and low-skilled — but it was made clear that we need labour here. The meat industry brings in workers and trains them; those workers learn the local language and make a big contribution to the economy and society. However, that is completely ignored by the British Home Office in its plan to introduce a

points-based system to the North. We have the Irish protocol, which guarantees unfettered trade across the island, which is so important for the likes of dairy processing. However, the points-based immigration system has the potential to place a hard border on labour, which is totally unacceptable. Obviously, it may happen that capital will follow labour, and that will have a huge impact not only on those people but on the wider economy and industry.

Brexit is a huge issue. I will pick up on it again tomorrow when the Budget is debated. Brexit permeates the whole debate around the agri-food industry as we try to map out a future policy for agri-food in the North.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, for your indulgence.

Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): At the Audit Committee's first meeting on 13 February, it took evidence from Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) officials, including the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), and officials from the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), including the acting ombudsman. The Committee has not yet had an opportunity to take evidence from the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. My comments, therefore, will cover only issues about the Audit Office and the Public Services Ombudsman.

During the briefing on 13 February, members had an opportunity to question officials from both organisations about changes to their budget position for 2019-2020. First, the NIPSO had a £756,000 reduction in its net provision from Main Estimates to Supplementary Estimates. That was due to a combination of two main factors, plus a number of miscellaneous cash flow adjustments. The main factors were, first, a reduced requirement of £248,000 declared in the January monitoring round in respect of maladministration complaints handling and, secondly, a transfer of unspent moneys, amounting to £250,000, to the Department for Communities in respect of NIPSO's local government ethical standards function. A cash flow adjustment of £250,000 related to the technical treatment of the landlord contribution to refurbishment work in NIPSO's office. During last week's evidence session with NIPSO officials, I questioned them further on the detail of the reduced requirements from 2019-2020. Officials explained that the reduced requirement from the January monitoring round related to moneys allocated, not all of which could be spent effectively in-year due to the non-recurrent nature and mid-year timing of receipt.

1.15 pm

The other reduced requirement related to, as I mentioned, NIPSO's local government ethical standards function. That has arisen primarily from the suspension of adjudication activity owing to the post of commissioner being vacant since July 2019. As Members may be aware, the Ombudsman also holds the role of Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards, which includes the function of investigating complaints of alleged breaches of the local government code of conduct. Although investigations into alleged breaches of that code have gone ahead in the absence of a commissioner, there has been an enforced pause of the adjudication aspect of the role as it could not be delegated to the deputy ombudsman. Additional funding for that function could not be spent as adjudications could not be taken forward.

Given that and other implications of the commissioner vacancy, the Audit Committee wrote to the Assembly Commission asking for a recruitment timetable. The Committee, in its evidence session with the Audit Office officials and C&AG, noted that, as a result of the changes to the NIAO budget position in 2019-2020, there was a resource saving of £981,000. Officials explained that this was due to the continuing significant reduction in staff costs following staff leaving through the voluntary exit scheme and natural wastage over recent years.

The Committee has sought further information on the Audit Office's contribution to in-year monitoring. The Committee noted that further recruitment will be required over the next two years to ensure that the Audit Office is adequately staffed to meet its strategic objectives going forward, including staff resources to address the needs of the Assembly.

The Audit Office also had a reduced capital requirement of £290,000 due to adjustments to the timetable associated with the refurbishment project and costs associated with the procurement of a design team. At the meeting last week, Committee members probed the NIAO officials on the financial implications of the Audit Office's refurbishment project, given the anticipated increased costs to the capital budget. In the case of the Audit Office, members were assured that appropriate use is being made of NICS shared services. Similarly, we have asked the Public Services Ombudsman to what extent it makes use of those services. The Audit Office also makes use of the Strategic Investment Board and construction and procurement delivery to assist

in its accommodation project in order to ensure that the necessary expertise is utilised in such a key project for the organisation's future.

The Audit Committee has sought assurances from the NIAO and NIPSO and, in due course, will do likewise with the Assembly Commission to ensure that, once that meeting takes place, effective financial management processes are in place to avoid overspend and minimise underspend going forward. The Committee looks forward to fulfilling its important statutory function.

I will now address the debate as the SDLP's spokesperson for education and as the MLA for West Tyrone. As Members have clearly articulated, our public services are crumbling. They are falling apart. They are on their knees and, in many areas, on life support. The pressures facing health, education, housing and our welfare system reached crisis point long ago. We in the Chamber must offer more. We must deliver on the mandate that we have been given, and we must ensure that our public sector delivers effectively and efficiently for anyone who needs it.

In education, our teachers, as already mentioned, schools and children are being failed. We have had a perfect storm bubbling for the past 10 years due to inadequate funding and real-term cuts that were worsened by the absence of these institutions for three very long and challenging years — a time when teachers and principals had to struggle along without any proper funding support for their schools.

It is deeply concerning that over £400 million is needed to tackle immediate pressures in the education system. That figure was provided to the Committee by the Education Minister the week before last. While demand and costs have increased, our education budget has flatlined. Our schools cannot continue to, or be expected to, deliver increasingly better results against what are decreasing real-term budget cuts.

Teachers have also been left out in the cold in terms of receiving a fair pay increase for the work that they do. That is an unforgivable situation given that, when you look at teacher pay in Wales, England and Scotland, you see that teachers here receive way below what they should be receiving. They deserve a pay increase, and I would like the Minister to ensure that that happens as swiftly as possible. We should not be in this situation. It is important for the Chamber to understand that teachers not only do their own job but almost act as parents to many pupils in their role as a role model. They are almost like nurses and doctors in the

classroom. They are like counsellors to the young people who need the necessary support, and they ensure that children receive a proper meal in the day. It is teachers who identify those serious issues.

Teachers in schools are also struggling to deal with special educational needs, with massive investment needed to ensure that vulnerable children receive the proper support and care that they need. Although I welcome the Minister's additional £10 million investment in special educational needs services, there is a long way to go to ensure that no child with special educational needs loses out, but we are at a starting point at last. There is greater demand, but that demand has not been met with greater resources in recent years. I hope that the Minister, who is back in place, leaves no stone unturned to ensure that those services are properly and adequately financed.

There are also funding pressures surrounding mental health services in our schools and pressures in tackling a range of issues surrounding deprivation and its impact on our children's education. It is absolutely shocking that, since 2017, there have been 25 critical instances where schools have been impacted by suicide. That is the number that has been documented. That has far-reaching consequences for the school, for the community but, in particular, for the other pupils. We need to have a fundamental look at how we fund mental health services in our schools, as we continue to face a suicide pandemic across the North. In West Tyrone, we are no strangers to that. I have sat at the funeral of many young people who have taken their life, and I have seen the ripple effect and consequences of that across the entire school and the community that is there to support the family and grieve for that loss. We have not seen proper investment in mental health services, with many people forced to attend hospitals due to the lack of services in our communities. We see that in particular places, and I will talk about Strabane, where an out-of-hours GP service does not exist. People are forced in difficult situations to attend the A&E at Altnagelvin Hospital, which is already under huge pressure.

We have also seen very little done to tackle deprivation and poverty, which are crushing families locally. Many children never realise their dreams and ambitions or utilise their full potential. I know that more and more families are struggling. Benefits cuts have forced people into poverty. In my constituency, families have been forced to use food banks. Is that the society that the House wants to see, or are we going to do something about it?

West Tyrone has also long suffered from an infrastructure deficit, and I am well on record in talking about the A5 and the huge issue that it presents to the health and safety of my constituents and those travelling across my constituency. The A5 needs to be delivered. It has been an issue for a long number of years, and people's lives have been lost as a consequence of the dangerous road that is there.

The House, with proper leadership and political will, can deliver on the many issues that we face, but our children, who are the children of today, should not be the generation that loses out because of a political failure of the House. We have a responsibility to those children and to the people whom we represent to deliver more for all who support those children and for our teachers.

Mr Stalford: It is a pleasure to follow the Member from West Tyrone. I believe that public-service reform will be the defining issue of the next 10 years. It is incumbent upon all Members to have the courage to do what needs to be done. Whether it is in health, in education or in any of our other public services, we need to be brave and to accept that controversial and sometimes unpopular decisions will need to be made.

I welcome the fact that this process is now back in local hands. The scrutiny of departmental monitoring rounds and of Budgets etc should never have been out of the hands of these institutions. Devolution is about setting local priorities. It is about having power in local hands, in order to deliver for local communities. The Finance Minister's approach — to wait until after the national Budget is handed down at Westminster in order to allow us a more accurate picture, whereby we can set priorities for the coming period — is absolutely correct.

When we are talking in the context of the Budget at Westminster and its implications for us, it is important to note that the previous Secretary of State, Julian Smith, presided over a talks process that produced an agreement that contained spending commitments. Those were commitments given by the Government at Westminster, and it is essential that Julian Smith's successor, Brandon Lewis, honour the commitments that were given.

I will now go over areas in Departments that are of particular interest to me as an individual. I have some concerns about reductions in net provision for urban regeneration, sports, and employability and skills for the Department for Communities. As a representative of

communities such as Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, the bottom of Ravenhill Road and the Market, I know about the need for investment in urban regeneration in those inner-city communities.

I welcome the fact that there has been a reduction in the costs associated with the Department of Education's overheads, but we need to press on with the devolution of powers to schools and, in particular, to head teachers, so that they can have greater control over their own budgets. I welcome the allocation that has been made for special educational needs. We are in the middle of a massive explosion in diagnoses of autism and ADHD, and it is important that every child gets the best start in life, particularly children with special educational needs. I welcome the announcement in that regard.

The problems in the Department for Infrastructure have already been mentioned by Miss McIlveen, the Chairperson of the Infrastructure Committee. The reductions that we have seen in road safety provision and for roads maintenance will have a knock-on effect. For the Department of Justice, I am concerned about the reduction in funding for the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust, but I welcome the increase in additional resources for the PSNI. The police work hard to keep us all safe, and a well-funded police service is essential.

I associate myself with the remarks made by Mr McGrath, the Chairperson of the Executive Office Committee, on which I serve, on the issue of historical institutional abuse. The estimate that has been given is that the recompense scheme is going to cost anywhere between £25 million and £60 million per annum. It is essential, and it is only right, that the institutions that had a hand in the systematic abuse of children should be made to pay financially towards that compensation scheme. The state handed children over to rapists and paedophiles, and it is essential that those institutions, which those rapists and paedophiles used as a cloak to carry out their despicable actions, be made to pay towards compensating their victims. I therefore associate myself with what the Chairperson of the Committee said. I welcome the increase in funding for the Victims and Survivors Service, because I think that we have a moral obligation in that area.

I turn now to the Department of Health. The comments made by the Chairperson of the Health Committee are astonishing. The statistic that he mentioned is staggering: more than

50% of our block grant allocation is going to a single Department. If that does not demonstrate the need for serious and far-reaching reform, I do not know what does.

Courage is needed around the Chamber to see that issue through. It would be the easiest thing in the world for the Health Minister, as previous Health Ministers have done, to simply stamp his feet and say, "I need more money", and it would be the easiest thing in the world for the Finance Minister to say, "You can't have more money. You need to do the reform". One side will make their point, the other side will make theirs, and, at the end of it, nothing will have got better. Nothing will have improved. I am happy to put it on record and have it recorded in Hansard that I believe that Robin Swann should be given the political cover to see through essential health reform, because, if we continue like this, within a short time, that one Department will gobble up not 50% of the block grant but 100% of it. We need to be prepared to do the difficult things that need to be done there.

I will conclude where I began. The Secretary of State and the Government have obligations towards all of us who entered into the New Decade, New Approach agreement. The Secretary of State may have changed, but the commitments that were made have not. We all have a job now to do to hold Her Majesty's Government to those commitments.

1.30 pm

Mr Nesbitt: It is a pleasure to follow the Member for South Belfast, although, to pick up on his last point and to put it on record, not all parties that are now in the Executive bought into every commitment of the New Decade, New Approach deal.

Let us look at the pressures coming to the Executive Office's budget. The Committee was given a briefing last week, and we were told that there were pressures for this financial year and, indeed, that the baseline's pressures were explained by a combination of budget cuts in each of the past five years: 12.8% in the 2015-16 financial year; 5.7% in 2016-17; 4% in 2017-18 and 2018-19; and 3.6% in 2019-2020. If we are to be accurate, open and transparent in our government, we have to acknowledge that that does not tell the whole story. When the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) became the Executive Office, functions were transferred to other Departments, and with those functions went the budgets. Inevitably, there was a decrease in the Executive Office's budget, but it was not a

pressure, because they no longer had to deliver the services that had been transferred. I want to put it on record that I think that the officials of the Executive Office could have made that point and they could be accused of trying to spin by saying that it was all pressure because the budget was reduced.

Looking at the past year and the narrative that is attached within the spring Supplementary Estimates booklet, I see that the first thing to be mentioned is the North/South Ministerial Council. Over the past three years, it was not just this Chamber that was not sitting; there was no political meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, yet it still cost nearly £1.5 million in this financial year — £1,434,000. Is that not a bit like buying an expensive car that you cannot afford, taxing it, insuring it and leaving it in the driveway with the engine idling, topping it up every now and then with petrol or diesel at £1.25 a litre? We simply cannot say that there was value for money in that expenditure or, indeed, for the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, because nothing has happened in this financial year beyond the RUAS and the Balmoral show. Yet it has cost us over £1.5 million — £1.688 million, to be exact. Is it not the case that the failure to move on from the fact that the peace-building and conflict resolution centre is not to be built on that site — by the way, the development corporation has moved on from that; its business plan no longer has the peace-building centre — not just another sign of our shocking failure to deliver on big-ticket projects? Desertcreat never happened for the blue-light services. The A5, as the honourable Member pointed out earlier, has yet to be completed as intended.

I note that, in the last year, money was spent on the Executive's good relations strategy, called Together: Building a United Community. Now, T:BUC has seven headline objectives, and, under scrutiny last week, Executive Office officials made it clear that two were in danger and would come up as red in a red/amber/green (RAG) analysis. One of those objectives is removing peace walls. T:BUC said that we would remove every peace wall by 2023. It is already clear that that will not happen. We must be aware that that will have implications for future budgets. We have to consult, and removing a peace wall does not come at a negligible cost.

Talking of implications for future budgets, what about the social investment fund? Again, for the record, the Executive agreed the social investment fund on 22 March 2011. There would be £80 million to tackle deprivation and

dereliction. It was a four-year programme that should have ended in 2016. We now know that it will not end until 2023. We are being asked to Vote on Account roughly 45% of next year's budget, and we know that, in next year's budget, the Executive Office has capital DEL for SIF projects of £7 million — actually £7.8 million, I think. That is a stress on our budgets. That money will not be spent for our citizens in the way that we might like because we have spectacularly failed to deliver the social investment fund as intended, i.e. £80 million over four years starting in 2011.

I note also that money has been spent on the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. I believe that the total cost to date is some £0.75 million and that individual members earn £300 per day by sitting on a body that is yet to report or make a recommendation. Can we afford to go on with that, particularly as we have now determined, through the New Decade, New Approach deal, that we will have an alternative body — an office of identity — with two commissioners? It appears that we have set aside some £5 million for that new office with its commissioners — £5.833 million next year, which, perhaps, this Vote on Account will help kick-start — in fact, over the next three years, the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression with the two associated commissioners is scheduled to spend £28.25 million. When the Executive Office officials were asked what that would be spent on, they were unable to say, because Ministers have yet to decide on a work programme or aims and objectives for that office and the two commissioners. Can the Minister of Finance really tolerate budgets being allocated with no business plan, no vision, no aims and no objectives? That £28.25 million over three years is a lot of money: Robin Swann could use it in Health; Peter Weir could use it in Education; Nichola Mallon could use it in Infrastructure.

A final thought is with regard to AME, annually managed expenditure. That is the money that is not part of the block grant; it is the money that pays for welfare benefits, pensions and student loans. It is by far the lion's share of what we are talking about in these Estimates, as AME will flow through the Executive Office to the tune of around £540 million this year. AME is, of course, the money that the public learnt about during the inquiry into the renewable heat incentive scandal. We learnt that there were those in this Building, in Stormont Castle and in our Administration who said that, because it was not part of the block grant, it was free money and the attitude should be, "Fill your boots". I suspect that there is more than one

copy of Sam McBride's 'Burned' floating around Her Majesty's Treasury these days. I am sure that eyebrows have been raised at the attitude that you can fill your boots because it is not part of the block grant and, therefore, it is free dosh and you can take what you want. With the rise of English nationalism, we should be very aware of the damage that that has done to our position in the United Kingdom.

I know that the Minister will head to the Treasury this week, looking to cut a deal. I wish him well with that, because we need it for the people of Northern Ireland. As a corporate body, we really need to move away from where we are, which is a perception that we have a dependency culture and we just put our hand out for more and more, again and again. Let us switch that to a prosperity agenda, and let us ask the Treasury for the tools to strengthen our economy and to concentrate on the welfare and prosperity of our people.

Mr Newton: I will speak on the spring Supplementary Estimates 2019-2020 as a member of the Education Committee. I note that what we are required to do is to Vote on Account and provide finance to allow existing services to continue in the early months of 2020-21, pending consideration of appropriate legislation to provide the funds. That is what we are debating today.

I agree with much of what the Chair of the Committee said and, indeed, much of what Mr Daniel McCrossan said. There appears to be a fairly cohesive approach by the Committee on what is the most important feature for our future well-being in the sense that we start to think about education not as a cost to the Minister but as an investment by the Minister in the future of the children and young people of Northern Ireland. We are now looking at every aspect of life in Northern Ireland through the New Decade, New Approach agreement that was reached by the five main parties.

When the Department officials came last week to speak to the Committee, that was after the Minister had been there the week before. The Minister made his case and indicated to the Committee members what, he thought, was required to make sure that we have an education system that is recognised internationally for the quality of its teaching and learning, for the achievements of young people and for the focus on meeting their needs. The Minister addressed the Committee on his perceptions and thoughts and the approach that he would use. He indicated that he would require between £300 million and £400 million,

and, indeed, the Department has confirmed that it is a figure in that region.

I pay tribute to the Department of Education officials for how they approached the situation and for how they conducted themselves and performed during the time when we were not performing in the Assembly.

They have been diligent in presenting their papers to the Committee, and their clarity of thinking and prioritisation of issues are to be admired. They have displayed those skills in a very difficult situation for officials, when no Minister was available. Their task was to create a successful educational environment, but it was short of finance.

1.45 pm

We will maybe get the opportunity to spend a bit more time on each of the areas tomorrow, but, in making that bid for £354 million, I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would disagree — at least, I hope that they would not disagree — that we need to spend money on some areas. I will mention a few of those areas. I think that we would all agree that the teachers' industrial dispute has to be solved and that, in recompense to them, their standard of payment is made comparable to those in other parts of the UK. The Department has included a total of £148 million for the estimated 2020-21 pressures to address the teaching and non-teaching pay disputes. Of that, it is estimated, circa £68 million is required to implement the current proposed deal for teachers, which covers the 2017-18 period. I do not think that anyone would not be supportive of teachers being sufficiently rewarded.

I will also mention briefly another area that has a great deal of sympathy and empathy: teachers who provide a service to children with special educational needs. The Committee had the privilege of meeting, in an informal way, a leadership group from special educational needs teachers. We did so to try to understand the pressures that they are and will be under, as was referred to earlier, with a growing number of pupils with special educational needs needing to receive an appropriate education. We should, perhaps, think not just of the teaching aspect of that but of where those teachers are required to provide a care aspect, even to the extent of spending time on pupils' medical needs. The Department indicated that it is estimated that another £30 million will be needed annually to cover the implementation of the new SEN framework. I do not think that there would be any disagreement — I hope that

there would not be — across the Chamber or the Departments in addressing those needs.

Mr Speaker, you will be aware that we have debated another area of education, which is referred to as "educational underachievement"; I wish that we could get away from using the term "underachievement" and, perhaps, look at that aspect of education in a more positive way. There is probably much more of a need in areas where there are young Protestant boys or males who have not, perhaps, embraced education in the way that many other parts of the community have. We are looking at addressing the links between persistent educational underachievement and the socio-economic background that, perhaps, creates that. The Department is looking for an additional £10 million for that in 2020-21, increasing to £30 million annually.

Under New Decade, New Approach, we all need to think that we are investing in our children and young people. This is not a cost. However, if it is perceived to be a cost, the failure to meet it and the future ramifications of not meeting it, will be borne by every other Department. The Department has already identified an estimated cost of £426 million. I hope that, when the Minister comes to make the allocations, we will see that education is one of the mainstays of his Budget.

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

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Mineral Prospecting

1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of trends in local mineral prospecting. (AQO 163/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Northern Ireland currently has 12 active mineral-prospecting licences: 10 for base metals, mainly zinc, copper, lead, iron, cobalt and baryte; one for diamonds; and one for rock salt. In 2009, following the publication of data from a major geological survey, the Tellus project, the number of licences peaked at 42. Those 42 licences covered 73% of the land mass of Northern Ireland, compared with around 16.6% today. After that 2009 peak, subsequent years saw a steady decline in the number of licences until 2014, when numbers stabilised, and they have remained relatively consistent — between 10 and 20 — ever since.

It is difficult to consider mineral-prospecting licences in Northern Ireland without the question of gold exploration also being raised. As a reserved matter, consent to explore for gold and silver is given by the Crown Estate and does not require a mineral-prospecting licence from my Department. However, of the 12 licences currently in place from my Department, nine also have options from the Crown Estate to explore for gold and silver.

Miss Woods: Minister, you will be aware of local community-based campaigns against the exploitation and pollution of our countryside by international corporations. Northern Ireland has a major problem with unregulated mines and quarries and the unrecorded impact that they have on the environment. According to the latest annual mineral statement, published in 2018, a total of 157 quarries were contacted but only 115 responses received. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that all information is collected as required under schedule 13 to the Mineral Development Act (Northern Ireland) 1969?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her statement and question. It is an interesting area for my Department and perhaps demonstrates

to everyone here the broad range of issues that the Department for the Economy covers. Northern Ireland minerals and petroleum-licensing legislation is now over 50 years old. The legislation needs to be reviewed to ensure that it is flexible, to balance the needs of our society and our environmental responsibilities with the economic benefit. We all recognise the concerns about the environmental and community impacts of mineral and petroleum licensing. On 3 February this year, the Assembly declared a climate emergency and called on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental agreements in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

Equally, my Department recognises that access to mineral resources is important, particularly to support the new green technologies that will be required to help us tackle climate change. Towards the end of last year, my Department began a strategic review of licensing policy, and I fully intend for that work to continue. To inform the review, I recently gave approval for my Department to commission independent research in the area. The aim of the research is to develop our understanding of the potential economic, environmental and societal impacts of mineral and petroleum activities and to consider what policy and licensing regime we require for the future. I look forward to having that conversation with the Committee and in the Chamber.

Ms Sheerin: It is important that there is caution around the prospecting and mining of precious minerals, particularly in areas where it is not supported by the community, and it is crucial that, in issuing licences for resource extraction, we prevent any further fossil fuels being extracted. Does the Minister have plans to end the issuing of licences for petroleum exploration?

Mrs Dodds: Currently, we have two petroleum licensing applications. Both of those consultations opened on 7 May 2019 and closed on 31 July 2019. Members will be aware from their local communities that there were huge expectations arising out of that. We received 5,700 responses to the consultation: 2,500 for the application for an area south of Lough Neagh and 3,131 for an area in south-west Fermanagh. Work is ongoing to identify and consider the complex issues and concerns that have been raised. However, it is clear from the analysis to date that the possible environmental impacts and the potential risks to health are the main concern of communities where such licences are concerned.

My Department is undertaking a strategic review of petroleum licensing policy that will include independent research aimed at developing a better understanding of the economic, environmental and societal impacts. That, along with advice from experts in other Departments, will help inform consideration of the issues raised through the consultation. Therefore, in answer to your question, this is the strategic way forward. We will await the outcomes of the consultations and the reviews, and then we will have that discussion in the House.

Mr Durkan: The Minister will more than likely be aware of the huge strength of feeling and, indeed, opposition in the Sperrins region to proposed gold-mining activities there. While most of the objections will be environmental in nature, there are concerns about an economic impact. Does the Minister have a view on the impact that that type of activity could have on existing industries such as tourism and agriculture?

Mrs Dodds: My understanding is that the Department for Infrastructure is in receipt of a planning application for exploration for gold. The planning decision in relation to the exploration is for the Minister for Infrastructure to take.

Some Members: Oh.

Mrs Dodds: OK? I will let you all take a break.

On 11 February, as part of the consultation process, the Health and Safety Executive submitted an update on the application for gold. It is a controversial subject. It has the potential to impact on communities, on tourism and on agriculture, but those are planning decisions and generally not for the Department for the Economy. There is also a potential for job creation. However, the decisions cannot be taken in isolation. They should be taken as part of a package. Therefore, it is important that the whole package is considered when we look at applications for proposed mining.

Ms Armstrong: The removal of mineral permissions, as we know, was never really introduced in Northern Ireland, and we wait for the Minister for Infrastructure to bring that forward. Many of us have quarries in our areas that are, to be honest, extremely concerning. Can the Minister confirm that we have people going out across the world, selling the benefits of mining in Northern Ireland without considering the impact on our local communities? Is the Minister in any way

surprised that, whenever these mines open, communities are extremely angry and do not understand why this is being sold on the world stage? Perhaps the Minister can clarify what communication she will have with communities to explain why we are selling Northern Ireland in that way when they are so opposed to it?

Mrs Dodds: I will answer the question in two parts. I understand that communities can be anxious and distraught at the potential for mining in their area. It is important to say that the environmental and planning considerations are not for me to take; it is for the private sector, in pursuing its interest in possible exploration in Northern Ireland, to take on. I presume that the Member will be aware that there has been some controversy about members of my Department taking part in a convention in Canada and about their proposed attendance at a convention on the issue in Canada in March of this year. As a new Minister, just in place, I asked for the public interest test to be applied to attendance at last year's conference, and that concluded that a future review of this was required. I will ask my Department to review this further, and then we will decide if this in the public interest and if it is a value-for-money exercise for officials from my Department to take part in, and then we will make a decision based on those two issues alone.

Mr Stalford: On the theme of the public interest, can the Minister give us her assessment of the need and demand for these minerals?

Mrs Dodds: We live at a time when we are progressing with new technologies that require minerals to progress through to their economic benefit, technologies in wind power, solar cells, batteries and electric cars that are essential if we are to meet zero-carbon targets in the future. Modern living also depends on mobile phones, tablets and laptops, which all require metals for their production. Lithium, copper, nickel and cobalt are essential to growing our green economy, given the high dependence on battery technology. Northern Ireland may have the potential to provide those minerals. Therefore, the requirement from our new and emerging technologies and our environmental restraints mean that we need minerals to be part of that everyday exercise. We must have a sound basis to develop those policies, and that is why I am asking for a review of licensing and further economic research on the societal and economic impacts of mining. We should not go ahead without any of those measures being in place, and it is an area that I intend to take forward in my remaining time in office.

Mr Carroll: The Minister stated that there were some 5,000 consultation responses about the application for drilling in the Lough Neagh and Belfast areas, including parts of my constituency.

Given that there is considerable opposition to the application, including by my party, which submitted several thousand objections to it, and ongoing concern about the environment, will she give an indication of whether she will rule out granting the licence?

2.15 pm

Mrs Dodds: I cannot give that indication because the consultation responses are under review and will be informed by further work that my Department is doing. We take the issue seriously. It is not something that we should be doing without good policy and environmental protections in place.

Brexit: Departmental Business Plan

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 undermines strategic objective 6 of her Department's 2019-2020 business plan. (AQO 164/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It refers to the regulatory environment that would optimise our economic opportunities while protecting consumers and workers. I am committed to ensuring that our regulatory system optimises economic opportunities for business and commerce while protecting consumers and workers.

My business regulation officials continue to progress casework and activities as normal. The existing bodies of regulatory legislation, including employment legislation, are already incorporated into Northern Ireland law, and there will be no changes, during the transition period, that diverge from required EU standards. Any future divergence, at our initiative, would require consultation and Assembly approval for legislation.

More generally, I am concerned about the potential for regulatory barriers to trade with our largest market: Great Britain. Great Britain is a key market for Northern Ireland business, with sales of goods to Great Britain representing 48% of total goods sold in Northern Ireland in 2017. Goods purchased from GB during the same period represented 63% of all Northern Ireland purchases. I am working hard at the

Executive and with our Government to ensure that our businesses do not experience frictions to trade with GB, and I also wish to protect consumers from any adverse impacts, particularly the most vulnerable, who are most at risk from rising prices and, indeed, perhaps, restricted choice. Many of the policies that could cause frictions to trade are reserved policy areas, so I am working to hold the UK Government to account on their commitments to unfettered access to the market.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. The original question asked to what extent the withdrawal agreement Act undermined her strategic objective 6, namely:

"Deliver a regulatory environment that optimises economic opportunities for business and commerce".

Perhaps the Minister could focus her next comments on that specific.

Mrs Dodds: The withdrawal agreement Act gives us the Northern Ireland protocol, in which the issues that I outlined are real, live and fundamental to our economy. In the wider terms of the withdrawal agreement Act, what we have is the transportation of EU law into Northern Ireland's law. That means that, for the transition period, nothing will change, and, therefore, we remain the same. Under the protocol and its operation, we remain the same in terms of manufactured goods and agri-food. I am concerned, but I will work to ensure that we minimise frictions and that the operation of the protocol does not impact unduly on Northern Ireland's businesses in our trade from Northern Ireland to GB or from GB to Northern Ireland. I raised the issue with the Executive's Brexit committee, and it was agreed that that would be a priority for us.

Last week, I took the time to meet and talk to Conor Burns, the International Trade Minister in the United Kingdom Government. I raised with him issues such as our participation in UK trade deals, which is very important to Northern Ireland and is part of the protocol and withdrawal agreement. Another important issue for trade here is our full participation in the trade remedies authority, which will be established by the trade Bill, which will soon come back to our national Parliament.

Mr Humphrey: Given that mainland GB is Northern Ireland's largest market, how can the Minister ensure that the unfettered access that the Prime Minister promised is delivered to and

implemented by business and trade in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: As I have said many times, in Committee and now in the House, our most important market, and fundamental to the growth of our economy, is our market with GB. We do more there than in any other part of our marketing areas. It is vital, therefore, that we protect that trade. The Prime Minister promised us unfettered access to the United Kingdom's internal market, and the Executive and Assembly need to ensure that the Prime Minister is held to account in order to achieve that unfettered access to our most important market.

The United Kingdom Government committed to including the Executive on the delegation for the joint committee that will look at those trading issues. We need to ensure that we maximise our influence in that forum. I understand that the Prime Minister has also written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and indicated that he will hold to his promise of unfettered access.

Mr Allister: How can the Minister optimise the economic opportunities if access to and from our biggest market is fettered? Whereas the hyperbole of the Prime Minister might be very soothing, is it compatible with the cold print of the withdrawal agreement?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question, which gets to some very important points. It is the Prime Minister's promise to Northern Ireland that there will be unfettered access. It is up to us to ensure that he is held to that promise. Unlike the Member, I will not take the European Union view on this: I will work with my Government in London to ensure that that unfettered access is a reality. It is a fact and is absolutely undeniable: it is the most important thing that we can do to ensure that the fundamentals of our market access are secure to Great Britain.

As to the hyperbole of the Prime Minister, it is not for me, neither do I have the time nor energy, to engage in that kind of philosophical debate today.

Mr O'Toole: Going back to the initial premise of the question, objective 6 in the Department's strategic plan states that the Department for the Economy will work to have more people in better-paid jobs. It also talks about a more competitive, balanced economy. Does the Minister agree that the Home Secretary's announcement last week about new

immigration rules flies in the face of that and that it is an appalling set of proposals that will damage the Northern Ireland economy? Will she also reflect on the fact that it is another set of broken promises from the Government in London?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. The provision of more and better jobs is a primary objective of my Department. Since becoming Minister, I have been delighted to announce 85 jobs in connection with Microsoft, as well announcing on Friday a further 155 jobs at a business in Coleraine. Investing in jobs is investing in people, in families and in communities. That is fundamental, and I hold it very dear.

On the immigration rules and the proposals that were set out last week, we can agree with business and business representatives that the salary threshold is a problem for Northern Ireland. Although I have absolutely no desire to make Northern Ireland a low-wage economy that appeals to the lowest common denominator of the market, on average, the salary threshold is an issue for Northern Ireland. Many of our key industries, such as tourism, which is thriving in Northern Ireland, rely on people who come to live and work amongst us. Therefore, it is important that we are able to retain those people. Perhaps one of the issues that is not often talked about — you referred to the competitiveness of our economy, which is hugely important — is the fact that we share a land border with an EU member state where there will be much less immigration control. I do not want the competitiveness of our companies and our economy to be impacted by those issues. I understand that we as an Executive are writing to express our concerns to the Prime Minister, and we hope to meet him on those issues in the reasonably near future.

Dr Archibald: I refer to strategic objective 6. A Law Centre event on Brexit and employment rights was held in the Assembly today. Given that the withdrawal agreement protocol on Ireland commits to no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity and that employment is a devolved matter, does the Minister agree that we must continue to meet at least the EU standard going forward and look to strengthen employment rights?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. As someone who has spent a lot of time in the European institutions, I think that we should reflect on this idea that we as a nation and as a country are not sympathetic enough, democratic enough or aware enough to ensure

that we have our own appropriate and proper employment rights. The body of European law has now been transposed to the United Kingdom and, therefore, applies in Northern Ireland. My Department has responsibility for that area, and I will, of course, keep a close eye on it.

Since becoming Minister, I introduced the early conciliation service, which is a benefit to employees in resolving issues that have become protracted and difficult. As most people know, I wish to introduce rights for bereaved parents. Those are just a few of the areas that I will keep a watching brief on. I will work with my officials to ensure that we have appropriate, sensitive and legally watertight employment laws.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give a clear commitment to implement fully the withdrawal agreement Northern Ireland protocol?

Mrs Dodds: I will commit today to working with our Government to ensure that the protocol — I am always struck by some Members who want to tie us up in EU legislation for ever and a day — is used to make sure that our economy is not hindered by any of the issues that I have talked about — access to trade and trade agreements — and that we do not put up barriers to our most important economy in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Our access to the United Kingdom's internal market is fundamental.

As well as that, I will encourage our cross-border trade; I will encourage our trade with the rest of Europe; and, of course, I will encourage our trade with the rest of the world. Those are all fundamental opportunities. We must see the situation that we are now in as one where we guard against problems and look for opportunity.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions. Questions 4 and 7 have been withdrawn.

EU Work-life Balance Directive

T1. Mr Gildernew asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has set a time frame for the implementation of the EU work-life balance directive that was approved by the EU council in June 2019. (AQT 121/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: No.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Minister recognise and agree that working carers are some of the most disadvantaged in our society and that they struggle to juggle their caring responsibilities along with accessing, retaining and protecting their progression in work? I ask the Minister to consider implementing that directive as speedily as possible.

Mrs Dodds: I agree that we need to take care of those amongst us who work in difficult occupations with the vulnerable and that we should provide a proper work/life balance for people in those roles. I know what it is like to be a carer. It is a difficult position for people to be in, and often the demands are 24/7. I understand the issues from a personal perspective, and, while we will look at all aspects of employment law, it is important that we recognise the fundamental principles. At my previous Question Time, I said that we should aim to have not just a legally watertight system but a compassionate one.

Northern Ireland Centenary Celebrations

T2. Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department is putting in place to celebrate the centenary of Northern Ireland next year. (AQT 122/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. Next year is a significant year for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland will be 100 years old, and, while we will celebrate a past century, we will look forward to a future century of progress in this part of the United Kingdom.

As Minister for the Economy, I have been reflecting on this important milestone in our community. At the turn of the last century, Northern Ireland led the way in shipbuilding, linen manufacturing and rope-works, and Belfast was a hub of manufacturing activity. Today, Northern Ireland leads the way in fintech, cybersecurity and new digital technologies. I have also been reflecting that my constituency is due to have a new visitor attraction from a renowned and very famous production company situated in an old linen mill, where we have married the past and the present. I have been thinking along those lines, and I think that we have a great story to tell.

I want to see us produce tourism projects to use the opportunity to market Northern Ireland further on the world stage. When I go to America in March, I will do that to a number of

new companies. It is an opportunity not just to look at tourism and the economy but to provide skills for our young people so that we can grow and provide the proper skills to match the future of Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley: Coming from a strong east Belfast family that worked in the shipyard and the rope-works, I am glad to hear that. I am also glad to hear that we have moved on considerably since then. I want to home in on what the Minister said about skills for our young people. They are our future and the future for Northern Ireland for the next century. Can you please give an undertaking to ensure that we do our utmost for our young people by upskilling them in the skills that we need?

Mrs Dodds: As we think of Northern Ireland's centenary, it is important that we consider the future and allow people to celebrate in all our communities, both old and new to this part of the world, and that we build for the future.

The skills agenda is huge in my portfolio. I recently attended a wonderful showcase for our apprentices and higher-level apprentices. I want to see us develop more skills that are relevant to our economy, not just skills that help people into work but skills that will help them to develop along their journey of work. That is the way in which we can make our communities stronger and more prosperous and the way in which we can have a more inclusive and stable Northern Ireland.

Tuition Fees

T3. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy, given her recent comments, which he welcomed, that students should not be priced out of university, especially in the light of her party leader's recent pronouncements on the issue, whether those comments can be taken as an indication that she will not support raising tuition fees here. (AQT 123/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Of course, if you had read the full text of what my party leader said, you would have seen that that is not what she said. Anyway, we will not let the truth get in the way of a good story.

I want to see us widening opportunity for all our communities. That is an important and fundamental aspect of the work that I will do. I do not want to see students priced out of education. When we talk about reviewing university funding, we should not pick on students as the one aspect that we can drive for higher prices and better margins. We will review

the whole issue of higher and further education funding in the next year to 18 months. It is important that we look at it in the round. I want to see opportunity and education advanced to all communities. It is important that I stick by the comment that I do not want to see anyone priced out of education.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her response, but it is disappointing that she did not rule out tuition fees going up in this Assembly term. Is it fair that people who availed themselves of free education can tell students that they have to be landed with a mountain of debt when they come out of university?

Mrs Dodds: Since that can be directed only at people of my generation and era, I will answer it personally. I was the first in my family to go to university. University and education opened up a huge number of opportunities to me. Those opportunities should be extended to all young people. I am therefore committed to taking forward a fair review. I am not looking to price people out of education or to saddle youngsters with debt that will stay with them for a long time, but we must look at the issues in the round and arrive at a conclusion that we can all be satisfied with.

We also have to allow our universities to advance, grow and progress. There is a balance to be struck, but, if we keep the principles in mind, we can come to that very fair balance in the end.

Derry City and Strabane District Council: Project Approval

T5. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for the Economy when she will approve Derry City and Strabane District Council's strategic outline cases for two innovation and two digital projects currently on her desk. (AQT 125/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Those issues are working their way through the system. When they come to me in the fullness of time, we will look at them in the round.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her response. Given the Minister's earlier answer on the centenary, she will understand that, in looking to the future and developing skills, these are important projects for Derry, Strabane and the wider north-west. In keeping with the commitments to target resources on the basis of objective need and to tackle regional disparities laid out in both the Programme for Government and 'New Decade, New Approach',

I urge the Minister to give a time frame for a decision on the proposals.

Mrs Dodds: It is clear to anyone who has read my recent comments that I am committed to building an economy across Northern Ireland for all of its communities. That includes the north-west, the south-west and all parts of Northern Ireland. It is important that I state that again today. We will progress the issues that she raises in as timely a manner as we can.

Viewable Media UK Ltd/Grenke

T6. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what interim and long-term support her Department will give to the over 400 businesses here that are facing financial hardship due to advertising deals with Viewable Media UK Ltd and Grenke, notwithstanding the fact that an ombudsman's investigation is ongoing. (AQT 126/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Member's colleague spoke to me about the issue last week, and I have passed it to officials for a review. As soon as we have conclusions, I will commit to talking to both you and your colleague to see if we can identify a way forward and work with it. It seems scandalous that this has gone on for some time, but we are working on it. I got the information last week, and I will talk to you when it is available to me.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her response and her commitment. I ask the Minister to meet not only ourselves but the stakeholders, some of whom were up here campaigning last week. It is important that we understand the fine level of detail that impacts on what really are difficult times for struggling businesses.

Mrs Dodds: I accept that completely. As soon as we have looked at and worked through the issues, I will talk to you. We can meet whatever groups it is necessary to meet. That is not a problem.

Immigration: Impact on Local Businesses

T8. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that she answered a question in a similar vein earlier, for an assessment of the likely impact on local businesses of the new immigration regime being proposed by the UK Government. (AQT 128/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: We want to make sure that, as we go forward in this new era independent of the European Union, we maximise opportunity but also try to limit the difficulties that face us. Obviously, we are in a very fluid and new situation in relation to the immigration rules. I have listened carefully to business, the service sector, tourism and the healthcare sector, where there are many issues around the level of wage control that there will be. However, there is also an opportunity to ensure that we do not sink to the lowest common denominator in our wage economy. The situation is new and fluid. When we have conducted the impact assessments, we will make any advice available.

2.45 pm

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware of the Home Secretary's figures on economically inactive people that were announced over the weekend, which have been largely rubbished by everybody in sight because they are so utterly inaccurate and preposterous and not worth consideration. They include carers, students and retired people, and they are expected to take on the jobs of immigrants. Will she agree with me that that is quite ridiculous and that there might even be a case for differentiation in terms of Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: I understand the Member's question about the economically inactive, and it is an issue that I will have to grapple with in the Department. In Northern Ireland, we still have a relatively high economically inactive percentage in the population and therefore I want to see more people back in work and to see more flexible routes to get people back into work. However, that does not take away from his basic and valid point that many of those people who are described as economically inactive are people who perform incredibly important caring roles, are students or have a disability. There are fundamental challenges in relation to this. I have already set out concerns around the salary level for people coming to Northern Ireland. This is one area on which we can make representation to our Government, and I know that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have committed to doing that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes our business. I thank the Minister.

Education

Climate Emergency

1. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to introduce education on the climate emergency into the curriculum. (AQO 193/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for her question. This is a very important subject, as was highlighted by the fact that it was one of the first debates in the Assembly, and I know that the Member opposite was instrumental in bringing forward that motion.

Climate change should concern us all and the Executive, as a whole, are committed to tackling it, and New Decade, New Approach signalled its intention to develop a strategy to address the immediate and longer-term impact. Education plays a critical role in educating our youngest citizens on this subject, and sustainable development is already part of the curriculum at primary level via The World Around Us and through the environment and society elements of learning at Key Stage 3. During that, pupils will explore environmental and climate change and how to exercise environmental stewardship, and are helped to develop an understanding of the need for environmental change to be sustainable. Pupils can gain an understanding of the interdependence of society, the economy and the environment and can develop respect for the needs of present and future generations and the importance of securing a sustainable environment. Pupils also have the opportunity to pursue qualifications at Key Stage 4 and post-16 that explicitly cover issues relevant to climate change.

The curriculum is designed to be adaptable and dynamic. It devolves a great deal of autonomy to schools and trusts the professionalism of teachers. The aim is to lift the burden of prescription and allow space for innovative approaches to learning. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment supports this by developing curricular resources for schools and teachers, including resources that cover issues like climate change. Of course, there is always more that can be done, and my Department will be working alongside the rest of the Executive to develop that climate change strategy.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his response. Young people have been to the fore of the activism that has been highlighting the

climate emergency and should be commended for that, but does the Minister agree that we need to harness and encourage that? Does he agree that, while respecting the need for flexibility and the devolution of certain abilities to schools to set their own curriculum priorities, there needs to be, as part of that, evidence- and science-based education on the causes of the climate emergency and the impact of that on all of our lives?

Mr Weir: I would like to think that, particularly when we are talking about science issues, it is always evidence-based. From the point of view of the curriculum, I will make two points. I have a great deal of faith in our schools and our teachers to be able to use their autonomy wisely, and I do not think that it is particularly my role to impose on them. Indeed, I am under a restriction, as any Education Minister would be — it is the right restriction — under the 2006 Order, which means that Ministers are barred from indicating particular time frames to schools that they need to set aside for particular subjects. That is about ensuring that there is not micromanagement or interference. It is right that we have evidence-based teaching, rather than any attempt by any Minister, of whatever description, to impose what they believe to be important through micromanagement of the curriculum.

The important thing is to ensure that there are opportunities for our pupils but that schools are not simply left on their own. That is why the role of CCEA in developing materials is important. It is the case that, while there may be particular teachers and schools that feel very passionately about particular subjects, they do not, in and of themselves, possess the expertise to draw down their own materials. Therefore, it is important that that bank of evidence-, science- and expertise-based materials is available to them.

Mr Newton: Does the Minister have any plans to convert the school estate to more sustainable energy sources?

Mr Weir: As indicated, as part of the overall process, we have been working with the Executive to see what wider context we can prevail on. My Department already invests in a wide range of measures to reduce carbon emissions in the school estate. That includes certain efficiency measures, such as boiler replacement installation, the installation of LED lighting and solar panels and the provision of energy monitors, as well as encouraging sustainable lifestyles and travel. While those are important first steps, the cross-departmental

future generations group will seek to address climate change and mitigate its impact. Those, of course, are over and above the individual actions that a range of schools take. For instance, quite a number of schools have embraced Eco-Schools and the aim of getting that flag of indication that they are environmentally friendly. We need to encourage that and to provide that level of support where possible.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that it is important, particularly with people of an impressionable age, to debunk the hysteria that attends this subject and, indeed, to deal with the tendency towards anarchy among, for example, the Extinction Rebellion protests? Does he further agree that it is very important that, when our children deal with the subject, they do so in a balanced way, that eco-fascists do not put their view upon them and that people who would lead them, for example, into the anarchy of Extinction Rebellion are properly addressed as an example that is not to be followed?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There may have been a number of questions there. The Minister can choose which to answer.

Mr Weir: I will pick from the gamut of questions that have been put to me. As we are speaking in the Assembly, I am sure that the Deputy Speaker would agree that avoiding anarchy, where possible, is always a useful direction of travel.

As I indicated to the original questioner, it is important that teaching is based on evidence and science and that the issues are tackled rationally. People will have particular passions, but it is important that teaching is done in such a way that imparts the information in a balanced and evidential manner. People may be passionate, but it is important that they do not embrace a route that is disruptive to others. It is also important that we have respect for one another in how we express our views.

Mr Lyttle: What action is the Minister taking to encourage cycling proficiency and safe routes to school to support a modal shift in transport and to promote sustainable, active travel for children and young people?

Mr Weir: The role that home-to-school transport, in particular, can play is important. It has been encouraging to see schools working with organisations such as Sustrans to develop that. At the moment, 84,000 pupils each day are involved in home-to-school transport that is

provided by school buses. Every opportunity should be taken to encourage greater mobility, either on foot or cycling. The current review of home-to-school transport, which we will come to later, looks at how we deliver the aim of reducing emissions. I have some nostalgia — although, quite clearly, it is not applicable in every case — about my own school days, when I walked to and from school. I suspect that some of those days are gone; as Members will appreciate, it was quite a long time ago that I was at primary school. We should do everything that we can to encourage cycling and walking, and a healthier lifestyle at school level and, probably, around the Chamber would be useful if we all adopted it.

Mr McGrath: I will avoid the temptation to comment on the last response. Will the Minister outline his Department's position on allowing pupils to join future strike movements on climate change? Will he give a guarantee that no pupil will be punished for such?

Mr Weir: It is important that people express their passions and support for different organisations, but I do not want to see them being taken out of school to do that. There is a distinction between what people do outside of school hours — there is great value in expressing that passion — and disrupting the school day, which I am not in favour of. Ultimately, any discipline that is applied to a pupil is, in the first instance, for the school; it has to draw its own conclusion. I want to see it being done in a productive way that does not disrupt others. To take a leaf out of Mr Allister's book, it should be done in a non-hysterical way across the board so that we can have calm, rational discussions. These are very serious issues for the future of not only schools but our planet, so they have to be tackled in a calm, non-sensationalist way. As I said, I am not keen on situations in which pupils are taken out of school unnecessarily.

Miss Woods: Without going into the previous subject or the importance of listening to our young people, who are leading the way on this matter and are doing a lot of the work that the rest of us are not, does the Minister agree, given the urgency of the issue, that climate science and sustainability should be included in teacher training?

Mr Weir: There is an unusual situation in teacher training: the role for the Department of Education is largely to prescribe the numbers. The Department for the Economy then produces the financial support for that. The detail of the curriculum is largely provided by

the institutions themselves. A wide range of things need to be built into that. Again, I am not going to micromanage by saying what precisely should be involved in initial teacher education, but there is good work to be done between the Departments and the teacher institutions to ensure that teachers are prepared fully for the full curriculum that lies ahead.

Minor Works Programme: Funding

2. Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to ensure that funding for the minor works programme meets current and emerging needs. (AQO 194/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. My Department has made significant investment in the schools estate through minor improvement works. The expenditure in 2016-17 was £66 million. In 2017-18, it was £63.8 million, and, in 2018-19, it was £84.2 million. The budget for the current year for minor works is £83.2 million, which is roughly about half of the overall total outside of non-ring-fenced expenditure.

Despite the increasing investment in minor works, significant demand for further improvement remains. As we increase the relative expenditure on major works and the school enhancement programme over the next five years, that will be an important element of improving the overall health of the estate in the medium to long term. Although there can be certain situations where there is a quick fix because something is needed very quickly, it is also about improving the overall stock of the estate. A balance needs to be struck in the Department's capital budget to deal with immediate minor works pressures and the more strategic investments in major works and SEPs. If those are successful, the demand for minor works will reduce.

My Department will continue to bid for additional funding to enhance the school estate. If the Member can influence her friend the Finance Minister to provide that capital funding, the money will be gratefully received by the Department.

3.00 pm

Ms Anderson: I refer the Minister to what he just said about a healthier lifestyle. Minister, in your role, you will know how important that is for children. In the context of physical health and well-being, I want to ask him about St Joseph's Boys' School in Derry. Six years ago, the school was promised a 3G pitch, and it is

still waiting. Given the funding allocation that you received and the implication of the British Government's austerity cuts on the Executive, I can understand how you will struggle at times and have to prioritise. However, six years ago, that school was promised a 3G pitch and is still waiting. I say that in the context of physical health and well-being and their importance to children.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her supplementary. On the Department of Education's mainstream funding, one thing is for sure: we will make sure that the capital funding is spent. Whether it is a mix of major capital works, strategic estate partnerships and minor works, we will make sure that there is the fullest delivery possible.

I am happy to look in detail at the specifics of St Joseph's. As the Member will appreciate, I do not have to hand the detail on the exact capital position of every school in the country. I commit to finding out the situation in regard to any delays at St Joseph's, and I will write to the Member in connection with that.

Mr Humphrey: The Minister will be aware that officials from his Department and the Education Authority have been in front of the Committee in recent weeks. At those meetings, members expressed concern about the state of the schools estate, giving a number of examples, as I do now: Glenwood Primary School in my constituency of North Belfast. How much does the Department spend annually on maintenance across the schools estate in Northern Ireland?

Mr Weir: There can be a slightly artificial dividing line between what constitutes minor works and what counts as maintenance. Financial pressures in maintenance will come directly out of the resource budget.

The figures are that £19.4 million was invested in 2016-17; a further £16 million in 2017-18; and £20.5 million in 2018-19, the last full financial year. The maintenance budget for this year is approximately £18.5 million. In addition to that, there was approximately £90 million of investment in minor capital works. With that cocktail of measures, the aim must be to deal with the immediate pressures to ensure that there is a balance between those and other more major capital works. To some extent, the more that can be directly invested in major capital works, the more that eases the burden on maintenance. There is a belief that an additional amount needs to be found for

maintenance next year, which I will certainly try to do.

We sought a range of minor works a number of years ago. The very large pool of works that was produced is gradually being worked through. However, we have to ensure that the maintenance takes place at the same time. It is about getting the balance in the cocktail right.

Ms S Bradley: Does the Minister have any concerns that there are schools across Northern Ireland that may be in breach of health and safety standards and fire protection standards or might be inaccessible to pupils with disabilities, visiting parents or general staff? Will he find a more cost-effective way of delivering the remedial work required in those instances?

Mr Weir: The Member makes two points. There is a particular issue with some of the maintenance work. We need to look at where the delegation of budgets lies and give greater opportunity for lower-level procurement from within schools. That is very significant, and a later question also deals with that.

Where any maintenance or minor works give rise to particular issues of health and safety — I am not saying that all of those have been solved across the school estate — they will always jump to the front of the queue. Any risk to pupils must come top of the list. One of the frustrations, particularly where minor works are concerned, is that we have a ranked list of those works from the previous call. That is, and rightly so, subject to change. An electrical issue or something else concerning health and safety may be identified, and that will supersede the pre-existing list, so there will always be an attempt to prioritise it. As with other issues, there are not unlimited resources, so we can do only as much as we can. Dealing with anything that puts any child at risk has to be top of the list.

School Transport

3. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education, in light of the home-to-school transport review, what changes he will make to school transport provision. (AQO 195/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department's ongoing review of home-to-school transport aims to ensure that the policy is fit for purpose and sustainable over the long term. The review is focusing on the current policy, and any changes proposed as a result will be subject to full public consultation. Home-to-school transport plays an important

role not only in supporting the attendance of pupils at schools but in contributing to a number of wider government policy aims, such as the reduction of air pollution and of traffic congestion. By its nature and because, for instance, there is considerable reliance on organisations like Translink, this is very much a cross-cutting issue, and, therefore, if there was any proposal for policy change, it would be brought to the Executive. It is not a unilateral matter for the Department of Education.

Mr McHugh: Thank you, Minister, for your response. Unfortunately, my supplementary question, which I raise on behalf of people who live in the Glenmornan and Domemana area, is stimulated as a result of a negative experience at a time of amalgamation of schools. As a representative of that rural area, I ask the Minister to ensure that any changes that he intends to make to school transport provision meet the needs of rural people and ensure that they are not left disadvantaged. The experience to date has been that amalgamations have, unfortunately, left some people out in the cold.

Mr Weir: The Member makes a very valid point. The figures are such that the vast majority — I think, off the top of my head, it is about 67,000 out of that 84,000 — are pupils transported in rural areas. It may well be that, through a wider consultation, a range of options will be offered in different directions. It is important that those take particular account of the rural community. It is also the case that, particularly where there are amalgamations, we need to ensure that those are given sufficient weight and opportunity to be heard. Quite often, amalgamation will provide a good educational way forward and produce a sound economic way forward, but it will create levels of financial pressure in the first place. It is important that, whatever point is reached in home-to-school transport, the schools are clearly accessible to those pupils and the opportunity is given for them to be able to have the fullest education as a result.

Mr McCrossan: Has the Minister any plans to review the distances required to satisfy school transport? There are quite a number of pupils in my area who just miss out. They live in very rural and dangerous parts of the constituency. They could not possibly consider walking to school and do not have any access to any form of transportation.

Mr Weir: At this stage, there is a series of options, none of which any particular conclusion has been drawn on. The overall distance requirement in either direction has to be on the

table to be looked at. I think that the distances being used were produced in the 1940s, so there is an argument about whether they are necessarily fit for purpose. Balanced against that must be the pressure on the wider public purse and, obviously, the impact that it has on transport.

The Member highlights a problem, and it is difficult to find a solution that solves it.

He highlights an unfairness that can create problems in communities. For example, in the post-primary sector, the family of someone who lives 2.99 miles away from a school has to pay the full amount, yet someone who lives three miles and 10 metres away will get free transport. There is a level of inequity there. Finding a solution is probably easier than stating the problem, but two pupils who get on a school bus at exactly the same point will often be treated in a different fashion.

If we reach the stage of having any public consultation, people can give their views on probably a wide range of options. What everybody would like will be against the backdrop of high financial constraints. The issue is not directly related to any particular school, but I appreciate the service that is provided to people.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Minister confirm whether his Department has done any scoping exercise on yellow school buses to see whether they can be used by youth organisations, given the fact that youth organisations also fall under his remit? I am very aware that the yellow buses sit doing nothing most weekends, all summer and during other holiday periods. Very little use is made of them. Your Department is in charge of youth services as well, so I am interested to know what scoping exercise has been done to make those vehicles available, with or without driver, to youth organisations.

Mr Weir: As we move forward and as part of wider home-to-school transport provision, we will look at interaction with other Departments. The issue raised interacts with the Department for Infrastructure's remit.

We need to realise that there will be a programme to replace buses. Ultimately, a bus can produce only a certain mileage, so it is not simply a question of buses lying idle. Although we want to make sure that there is maximum usage made of them, that may have the knock-on effect of those buses having to be replaced sooner. That will also need to be factored in. I am open to any suggestions. We need to see a

much more joined-up approach across transport as a whole. I know that the Member has a background in community transport, and I am sure that she has detailed thoughts that she will want to share.

Mr M Bradley: What improvements are being made to school transport service delivery?

Mr Weir: School transport lies largely with the Education Authority (EA). It is not and has not been in a position to make policy changes, but it has made a range of operational improvements to home-to-school transport to try to make it more effective and accessible, particularly with the launch of the online eligibility checker tool, which gives parents a much quicker indication of whether their child will be eligible for transport. That has been quite successful. Indeed, in the current academic year, there were 27,000 applications.

The authority has also digitalised its transport network to improve the accuracy of its eligibility assessment. As part of the Department of Finance's small business research initiative, the EA is piloting a new digital tool to improve safety on board buses, allowing pupils, parents and schools to use an online app to track the bus on its journey. A business case is also being considered on replacement of buses, and that will feed into the level of modern-day provision that can be made. Therefore, there is a range of things.

Mr Beggs: In the home-to-school transport review, has there been an acknowledgement that many bus stops are inadequate? There may not be a safe location off-road, and those buses serving many villages and hamlets do not even have a shelter where young people can take cover from the winter storms. Will the Minister undertake to engage with other Ministers, particularly the Minister for Infrastructure, to see how the situation can be improved?

Mr Weir: To a large extent, any improvements to the layout of roads, places for a bus to stop to allow people to disembark or embark and issues with bus shelters lie outside the remit of my Department, but I am happy to work with others to see what improvements can be made.

3.15 pm

Head Teachers

5. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to enhance the powers and autonomy of head teachers. (AQO 197/17-22)

Mr Weir: I acknowledge the continued commitment and professional leadership that is shown by school leaders. Head teachers, subject to the agreement of their boards of governors, are afforded considerable levels of autonomy on a day-to-day basis that mainly covers responsibility for internal organisation, management discipline of their schools and the implementation of the school development plans. They also have autonomy in areas of workforce management such as managing absence and timetabling.

I am open to seeing where there can be other measures to increase autonomy. Whenever it has been mooted in the past, there has been a mixed bag of responses from school principals, but, in issues such as minor procurement, there is a good case for a more relaxed regime that enables, if you like, delivery on the ground. Again, it is part of an overall position of putting trust in the professionalism of our teaching workforce.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a very brief supplementary question.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker. On financial deregulation and management, the Minister mentioned small procurement, which is a particular issue here. How do we compare with other UK regions?

Mr Weir: England and Wales are very similar to ourselves at present. The Republic of Ireland has a much more centralised system. Scotland is not part of the same local management style, and therefore funding arrangements have a much greater level of central control. We need to develop what is appropriate to our needs.

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

Transfer Testing: Negative Impact

T1. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education whether, in the light of the report produced by Right to Education (R2E) in June 2019, which found that 92% of teachers felt that transfer testing had a significant negative impact on the health of children, he will consider his position on the use of academic selection in schools. (AQT 131/17-22)

Mr Weir: As Yogi Berra once said, "It's déjà vu all over again, Boo-Boo". There is no doubt that there is not a level of consensus about academic selection at both an academic level

and a political level. I am keen that we do not disappear down that level of rabbit hole. I am supportive both of the right of schools to use academic selection and of academic selection. The reason I say that is that, if we make a comparison with England, we see a situation where selection will happen, because there will always be schools that are oversubscribed, but the alternative they employ is that a section of the school population is effectively private education, where selection happens very much by the ability to pay. We have seen many prominent figures in neighbouring jurisdictions who have benefited from private education, but that is because they had wealthier parents. Whatever the flaws in academic selection, replacing it with a system that would inevitably have a greater emphasis on the ability to pay would be a retrograde step for academic achievement and social mobility.

Mr McHugh: I agree that, if the type of school a person goes to was based on how well-off a person is, that system should in every way be confronted. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the Children's Commissioner, the OECD and the trade union movement have all called for an end to academic selection in schools. Is the Minister content to see the continued use of academic selection in schools in the light of the evidence against it?

Mr Weir: Again, I have indicated that you need to look not only at where we are today but at what the position would be if we did not have academic selection. I am tempted to say that I refer the Member to the answer I gave John O'Dowd at Question Time a fortnight ago. I note that the Member is at one with me at least on the first point, in that he does not want to see a system that is driven by the ability to pay. Inevitably, if we simply remove academic selection, that is what will happen. We have seen it happen in other jurisdictions. In England, around 7% of the school population attends public schools, on the basis of the ability of their parents to pay for it, and there is a range of private schools in the Republic of Ireland. Whatever is said about the current system here, I think it is fairer. In short, I am not seeking to change the idea of academic selection. If there are measures that can be taken to make it a smoother or less stressful process, that is something we need to embrace. However, it has been, I think, more than a decade since the official tests were abolished, and we see more children going through transfer tests and academic selection, so there is clearly a desire for it. We have to accept that

reality, irrespective of where we are on the argument about academic selection.

School Transport

T2. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to try to reduce car journeys made by pupils who live within a mile or two of their school gates, given that he might be aware of recently released statistics on the reliance on cars to get pupils to and from schools. (AQT 132/17-22)

Mr Weir: This is about transport to schools. There is an ongoing problem in the use of car transport to schools, which disrupts the quality of life of a lot of neighbours of schools. I know that schools have tried to solve it; some have a tougher regime than others. Unfortunately, it tends to produce short-term relief that lasts only for a while, and then people will again encroach on the area.

If we can encourage more pupils to walk or cycle to school, perhaps by working with organisations, it will help ease the burden. It is understandable that many parents will take the view that they want to take their child to school in a car, and no amount of dissuading has an impact.

Mr Catney: I am sure that the Minister will agree with me, if he lets me move off the subject for a second, that, in mind of what happens this Saturday — that particular date — many a relationship has been struck up at school. I look at the glances back and forward across the Floor. Everyone who is single, be careful: it is a leap year on the 29th [*Laughter.*] On a serious note, is the Minister aware of the prohibitive rules for receiving free school transport? Will he address them, specifically to allow more students to avail themselves of that service and therefore cut down the reliance on the motor car?

Mr Weir: The Member mentioned the significance of the date at the end of this month. It is clear that, shall we say, the production of children is not dependent on marriage proposals. I am sure that the Member will be aware of that.

In all seriousness, home to school transport is about balancing the availability of that transport with the public cost. There is a finite budget for education. If, for example, we were all minded to say, "Let us increase the eligibility for home to school transport to a much greater extent and increase the money spent on it", that would come, ultimately, at the expense of school

budgets, either directly or as an opportunity cost to them. Consequently, that has to be borne in mind in any discussion that takes place. When proposals on home to school transport are ready, they will be put out to public consultation. It may well be that, when that is done, it is done in an open-ended way, so that we can look at ways in which availability is either increased or decreased. However, they are cross-cutting issues, and they have an impact, particularly on the Department for Infrastructure.

Socially Disadvantaged: Definition

T3. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to review the definition of "socially disadvantaged", which is used in the application process for the allocation of preschool places. (AQT 133/17-22)

Mr Weir: I understand that. At the moment, there is a degree of disjoint. There is a longer-term and a short-term situation. The introduction of universal credit has created a level of mismatch. We are examining whether regulations are needed to bring that into line and how that can be done. In the longer run, particularly for preschool placements, there is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' to widen the availability of childcare, particularly for three- to four-year-olds. At the moment, around 62% of those who avail themselves of a preschool place are in part-time settings. We would ease a lot of the problems if we moved to a situation in which whatever is being made is made on a more universal basis. That would inevitably lead to a considerable increase in the overall offer that can be made by increasing the number of places that are available. To some extent, that will also have a role in the longer run in alleviating the situation to ensure that everybody is on a level playing field.

Ms Kimmins: As the Minister will be aware, people in receipt of benefits such as contribution-based employment and support allowance and tax credits do not currently qualify as socially disadvantaged under the preschool application process. Will the Minister consider that when reviewing the process and take it into account?

Mr Weir: As I said, there is an indication that the current situation is not fit for purpose and has a level of mismatch. I will look at the criteria. There is also a balance to be struck: if criteria are simply considerably widened, there will be large financial implications. All those things are interdependent and will be dependent on the available budget. However,

where are at present in terms of the qualifiers and what is there in terms of the benefits system do not align with each other. At the very least, there needs to be a greater level of alignment, which, I suspect, will require some form of change in the regulations.

Lea Green Primary Referral Unit

T4. Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Education to explain why the Lea Green primary referral unit in Newtownabbey has ceased to provide its much-needed services for children. (AQT 134/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am aware of the very good work that has been done in Lea Green, particularly in dealing with challenging behaviour. A previous questioner mentioned health and safety: it is a health and safety issue that has been raised. The exterior of the mobile classroom was in a poor state of repair, and sections of the outer partition of the building had been damaged by storms. As part of remedial work undertaken by the EA, further health and safety reports were done in 2019 that identified additional issues. In order to support children who had been referred to those provisions, the EA has provided additional in-school resources as a temporary measure. To date, they are not taking any additional referrals. We need to have buildings that are absolutely fit for purpose and meet health and safety requirements. I have often been to schools where what is provided is not ideal but would meet health and safety requirements. If there are health and safety issues, they have to be taken into account in any provision that we make, particularly for children with special educational needs.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer; it certainly answers some questions that local teachers have asked. I know of the unit; it was stuck on to the side of Glengormley youth centre for many years. If they are looking for a suitable location, may I suggest that they look no further than Rathcoole Primary School?

Mr Weir: There will clearly be a replacement. The Education Authority has direct responsibility for deciding on the location and, obviously, will look at the wider interests of the area, particularly around Newtownabbey, Ballyclare, Glengormley and Carrickfergus, to see what will service that. It is not simply that the unit has disappeared; a replacement will be put in place, and, from that point of view, they are examining what would be the most suitable site. I am sure that they will take on board the suggestion of Rathcoole and, indeed, other sites and see what location is best suited and

most able to provide that vital support for children with behavioural needs.

3.30 pm

Truancy: Educational Underachievement

T5. Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education whether he accepts that the statistics on school attendance by ward that he provided in a recent answer to a written question, which showed that as many as 43% of post-primary school pupils have less than 85% attendance at school, are unacceptable and that those pupils will suffer from educational underachievement. (AQT 135/17-22)

Mr Weir: We need to tackle truancy. The Department is, for example, very much trying to indicate the value of education and the importance of school attendance, and that has been part of the campaigns. When you drill down into individual wards, it can produce relatively small numbers and create a particularly high percentage on that basis. It is undoubtedly the case that, while attendance overall is good, and, indeed, there are levels of academic success, we also have pockets of underachievement. Clearly, attendance at school is a key element in that. While we will look to see what measures can be taken in the short term, as part of the agreement, a panel will be established to look at educational underachievement, and attendance at school will be a key element of that.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that it takes the school, the parent and the community to educate a child and that high levels of poor attendance often show that there are problems, not just at school? Will he liaise with educational welfare, schools and local councils, which have their community plans, on the issue and on the importance of involving all the community?

Mr Weir: I agree with the Member that the answer to issues of attendance and underachievement lies holistically beyond the classroom. We have seen elements of good practice, particularly in parts of Belfast, where there has been that interconnection between the school community, the wider community and the parental community. Trying to build that nexus is critical. There are examples of good practice, and we need to ensure that we roll that out and get an understanding of it so that we can start to tackle those pockets of underachievement.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I thank the Minister. Time is now up. I ask Members to take their ease, please.

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

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Spring Supplementary Estimates 2019-2020 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates and Vote on Account 2020-21

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £17,519,166,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2020 and that resources, not exceeding £21,022,321,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2020 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(c) and 3(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2019-2020 that was laid before the Assembly on 19 February 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,962,895,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £9,054,440,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates and Vote on Account 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 19 February 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr McGuigan: I intend to direct my remarks on the Estimates as party spokesperson on the environment. Before I get there, I welcome the intention of the Finance Minister to secure a Budget for 2020-21 that delivers for public services and for all the citizens here in the North. I also welcome last week's reallocation by the Finance Minister of this year's Budget across a number of Departments, particularly the £10 million to help to address pressures in our health service, the additional £5 million to help with pressures in education and, indeed, the £3 million to the Department for Infrastructure for winter services, urgent street lighting and road repairs.

I know that in my constituency of North Antrim the totality of the reallocation across the three Departments will be welcome, particularly given that, in the Chamber recently, I asked the Minister for Infrastructure about extending the winter gritting service to rural roads to provide rural communities access, particularly to schools on mornings like this morning, when I know that a number of schools had to close, and a number of children were not able to get to school because of the lack of gritting. I hope that this additional money will allow the Minister to look at that again. I also raised the fact that one electrician looks after street lighting repairs across three councils, from Belfast to Derry, with over 3,000 lights in need of repair. I also highlighted the growing number of potholes appearing on our roads. I hope that the Minister for Infrastructure will spend her recent reallocation swiftly.

Moving on to today's Estimates generally, I welcome the opportunity to debate the existing and forthcoming Budget allocations. As I frame my comments on environmental issues that fall primarily under the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee's watch, it is impossible to discuss the state of our environment and not talk about the impact that a decade of Tory-imposed underinvestment and austerity has had on our environment and natural world. With at least £1 billion stripped from public services across Departments since the beginning of Tory rule in 2010, the impact and cost of missed investment in environmental protection are clear, and there is a knock-on

effect from all of that. Just 8% of land in the North, and 11% across the island of Ireland, is forested. Staggeringly, that is just a quarter of the EU average of 35%. The shocking rate of forest cover is symptomatic of the broader state of our natural environment as budgets to invest in its protection were recklessly cut by Westminster.

Just over a third of our water bodies are deemed to be in good condition, and only one of 49 priority habitats in the North is worthy of the badge of favourable status. The effect of endangered habitats on the biodiversity and wildlife synonymous with this island is clear. Ten per cent of all species on the island are in danger of extinction, and 41% of bird species are in measurable decline. All the while, over one million tons of waste in the largest illegal dump in Europe sits idly at Mobuoy, outside Derry, accumulating dangerous toxins that threaten the River Faughan and the wildlife that calls it home.

In the time ahead, as the Minister with responsibility for the environment forms his budget and makes bids for the incoming year, I urge him not to ignore those pressures and the pressing need to improve our natural environment. Now is the time to tackle it. The economics of the environment are clear. We deal with these issues now or we ignore them and suffer the consequence as a society of attempting to deal with a much bigger crisis down the road at a vastly higher cost. In the coming Budget, the Agriculture Department is bidding for £40 million less in capital funding than it received in 2019-2020. Although other pressures exist in the Agriculture Department, as I am sure they do elsewhere, that is potential capital funding that the Agriculture Minister might bid for to invest in the environmental protection or remediation at Mobuoy that we sorely need.

Commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement also seem to be getting some attention, but some attention will not cut the mustard. We are well past the time for a scoping study on the creation of an independent environmental protection agency. The Assembly recently debated and passed a motion declaring a climate emergency. In the coming Budget year, the Environment Minister must use his budget to deliver, as a matter of urgency, an environmental protection agency and a comprehensive climate change Act.

Mr Muir: I thank the Finance Minister for his statement and the Committee Chairpersons for their contributions. I speak today as the Alliance spokesperson for finance. I have been an MLA

for nine weeks, and it has been a bit of a crash course in public finances to try to understand everything that is happening here, but I will give it a go.

It should be noted that today is the first time in this mandate that the Assembly is debating a motion and forthcoming legislation concerning finances and budgets. Since early 2017, civil servants have stepped into the breach. Along with the odd bit of legislation from the Secretary of State, it has largely been civil servants who kept the show on the road. I want to put on record my thanks to the civil servants for the service that they have given to ensure that government limped along without Ministers in place. They were left in a very difficult position, and we should all be thankful for the service that they gave over the last three years.

We are where we are now. The Assembly has been restored, and we are, in effect, today being asked to give retrospective approval to in-year movements via the spring Supplementary Estimates. That is the first element that I will talk about, and my party will vote for it.

I welcome the new approach that has been taken to monitoring rounds, compared with the previous mandate, when departmental bids were not published. That inhibited the Assembly and relevant Committees in their scrutiny role. I seek assurance from the Minister that that new approach will be the norm for the rest of the mandate, because it is important that full scrutiny is given to the monitoring rounds and that, when we are giving an overview of the spring Supplementary Estimates, we have a process that is open and transparent.

As we know, many key services have often been reliant on the hope of monitoring rounds. The recent monitoring round provided funding for a number of services, but it is no way for services to be delivered whereby they are waiting on monitoring rounds to be able to continue. Essentially, some services in Northern Ireland are being delivered on a wing and a prayer, and we cannot continue like that. Monitoring rounds should not be used as the only stopgap to ensure that services continue to be delivered.

Monitoring rounds were used to help towards the resolution of pay parity in the health service and to avert further nurses' strikes. I welcome that that money was found as part of the monitoring rounds to help towards that resolution, but we should not kid ourselves that there are not other public pay issues to be resolved, especially teachers' pay. Whilst the monitoring round was useful in providing a

resolution to the nurses' pay, we should be cognisant that there are many other challenges ahead.

In the weeks running up to the restoration of these institutions, a number of strikes were taking place on behalf of nurses, and, as I said, the monitoring rounds were able to help towards the resolution of those strike actions. It was a damning indictment of the Assembly, and of politics generally, that the Health and Social Care system was experiencing those strikes and that public services were allowed to deteriorate to such a level. There is an opportunity today and in the weeks, months and years ahead, or whatever time is left in this mandate, to rectify that situation and give confidence to people because never again should we see the situation whereby nurses feel it necessary to strike. That was a disgrace and something we should all be ashamed of.

Members will note that the Vote on Account document is very short and that the legislation is, in effect, just about keeping the show on the road and providing funding to allow the continued delivery of services. As the Minister stated, the real debate will come when the Budget is presented. That is when the difficult and challenging decisions need to be made not only by the Finance Department but by Ministers, the Executive and the Assembly. We all know that there is the potential of Barnett consequentials, but they are unknown as the UK Budget is due to be delivered by whoever is the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 11 March. We must proceed now to keep public finances operating in Northern Ireland and ensure that rates bills are issued.

I also note that the Barnett consequentials that are likely to arise will largely be as a result of a splurge to overshadow the turmoil likely to ensue as a result of Brexit if the Prime Minister is intent on continuing his current negotiating strategy. Whether such funding commitments will be able to continue in the years ahead is unclear. Whilst we may get Barnett consequentials, especially in capital, the fact that this may continue over the rest of this mandate is not certain.

Regardless of whatever Barnett consequentials we are likely to receive, the challenges in the next financial year and beyond are going to be significant and should not be underplayed by anyone. The additional revenue and capital moneys will not meet all the funding pressures that have been reported in Committees, the Chamber and the media. There are many.

Whilst we need to look at revenue raising, the first place we should always look as a default should be our expenditure. The Alliance Party is on record saying that the cost of division needs to be tackled and the savings delivered. We cannot just keep saying no to the difficult decisions, such as a single teacher training college. That may have been ruled out previously, but we need to come back to it. We need to come back, look at these issues and take the difficult decisions. I will expand on this tomorrow in the Budget Bill debate, but if we are real about wanting to protect front-line services, we must face up to and tackle the cost of division.

The independent review of education provision is essential as part of that. It needs to deliver, and promptly, and we have to take the difficult decisions. The additional costs as a result of our segregated education system have to be addressed. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road.

On health services, my colleague Paula Bradshaw will outline later that all parties signed up to Bengoa. We need to oversee the delivery of the outworkings of Bengoa to ensure better outcomes for patients. Reform of the health service is essential — it should be funded — but we also need to face up to the fact that health service inflation is running at between 6% and 8%. There are difficult decisions to be made.

3.45 pm

In addition to finance, my portfolio includes infrastructure, the significant pressures on which were reported last week. I declare that I am a former employee of Translink. Translink's funding position and the worries about whether it can continue as a going concern have to be addressed. We cannot legitimately declare a climate emergency, as we did a number of weeks ago, and then stand here and talk about decimating our public services and transport provision, particularly Ulsterbus, given its rural services. The official was quite open in Committee about the fact that one of the plans is to stop those services and close down Northern Ireland Railways. We have to address that issue.

We also have to address issues such as roads maintenance. The cost paid out to claims, reported in the media in recent days, cannot continue. We also need to ensure that we are investing in infrastructure, particularly west of the Bann. The regional imbalance has to be addressed. We have to be able to move

forward as a region, and include all parts within it.

The need for investment in Northern Ireland Water's infrastructure has been well reported. We cannot continually put our head in the sand and not discuss how to resolve that. An open and honest discussion is needed about financing options for Northern Ireland Water. Mutualisation needs to be discussed. That is all before we consider the commitments made in New Decade, New Approach. I and my party are on the record as saying that the UK Government need to stand up and make their —.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, if we raise revenue to fund those antiquated systems as they are, the money will be wasted and go down the drain? Reform must take place.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much for the intervention. I agree with you. We have to show to the public that we are good custodians of public finances. We cannot legitimately go around asking for additional revenue-raising powers if we are not giving confidence to taxpayers that we are spending their money sensibly. We have not been able to do that to date.

The spirit of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document needs to be respected by not only the UK Government but the parties represented in the Chamber. There must be new attitudes to public finances and to taking difficult decisions, which, as I acknowledged, we have not done in the past. I look forward to seeing the Finance Minister's Budget and to all Ministers stepping up to the plate. The Alliance Party is content to support the motion.

Mr Frew: It is a privilege to follow Mr Muir, a lot of whose comments I agree with. I applaud him for his words. We are in a very unusual position. We are in a position in which we have stretched the integrity of the Finance Committee to the point at which it has to show contentment that it has scrutinised the process, when, in fact, none of us has. I applaud the Departments that furnished each Committee with their bids and details around finance. The Finance Committee received that information, but we have not had time to scrutinise the detail in the way in which we should. There is a great fear that, although we are all back in the Chamber, it will be business as usual. Business as usual will just not cut it any more. We need to see change and decisions being taken that will positively impact on the people of Northern

Ireland. Why are we in this unusual position and what should happen? We are in this unusual position because of three years in which we were not able to do our job. Those three years cost the people of Northern Ireland a lot of money. Worse than that, in September 2017, the then Finance Minister refused and failed to bring forward a Budget that could then go out to public consultation. That Budget never appeared. When all the Committees were screaming for budgets to compare and contrast with the draft Programme for Government at that time, that Budget never came forward. The following months were September, October, November and December, and in January this place finally crashed. Was a Budget ever going to be delivered by the previous Finance Minister? I doubt it. That has left us in dire straits and has left our Departments in dire straits, and it left the responsibility to the NIO — the unaccountable NIO — and the unaccountable Secretary of State to make budget decisions for the devolved Assembly because a Finance Minister could not, would not and did not bring forward a Budget to this place to help furnish the funding that the people desperately needed.

What should take place? We should actually see the Budget workings from the Finance Department from April/June of any given year for the next financial year. That should be worked on over the summer period and should then go out in draft form in September to be consulted upon. Then, in December/January, we would be faced with a Budget that could be prepared to go forward months in advance of when it is actually needed. However, we are now in this weird situation where we are debating financial transactions that have already taken place. Worse than that, we have 318 pages of detail on decisions that have already been taken, but we have three pages of detail on the 45% of moneys still to be spent in the Vote on Account. It is unacceptable that this Chamber has been furnished with three pages. Do not get me wrong, the detail is at the Committee, and the Committees have furnished the Finance Committee, but, unless you are privileged to be on the Finance Committee, this collective Chamber will not have full sight of that, and that is a fundamental problem for debating and scrutinising and being accountable to the people who elect us to do a job. Three pages for 45% of the annual budget for Northern Ireland — billions of pounds.

I said that we cannot get back to the way it was or to business as usual and that there has to be a sea change. We need an era of decisionism. I have said this before in this Chamber: we need a period when decisions will be taken for the

benefit of our people. Mr Muir talked about cans being kicked down the road. I see along the horizon and it feels like there has been a kerbie bin cowped from the last named storm and all the cans are flying about all over the place because we have so many of them to pick up. When are we going to start?

We must ask ourselves four fundamental questions. What must we do? What must the Executive do to make this place better for the population of Northern Ireland? Within that, there are two questions. Can we afford it? Can we afford not to do it? Then there is the hardest question of all, which we have probably never got answered. I have been an MLA for 10 years and I have never really had this answered. Where are we getting the money from? It is not good enough to complain that we are not getting enough money from the Exchequer. That will be an eternal truth that we will always have to deal with. It is not good enough either to say that we should have the courage to raise revenue ourselves, because I will tell you now: the way this place has performed, I would not like to see us getting more revenue-raising powers. What we need is reform, and only then should we consider raising revenue. If we take more hard-earned cash from our population to put into faltering systems that are antiquated and are no good to us, it will be like a household hearing that there is a hosepipe ban and deciding to fill the bath, but forgetting to put the plug into the plughole. That is how bad it would be, how ridiculous it would be, for us to even suggest revenue-raising powers or more powers being devolved. That is a nonsense and we should not be in that space. We have not functioned properly in this place, and even when we were functioning, we did not make the hard decisions that needed to be made.

Look at it right across the board. It is not only about the money that we get but the money that we could have. Look at the money that we are not spending on financial transactions capital. Look at the money that is not coming here that could be. Look at the debacle around RHI and the Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Act and the money that we cannot draw down, the money that businesses cannot draw down to heat their premises and the money that is left sitting there. Those are decisions that we will have to tackle sooner rather than later for the benefit of our people.

I do not want to see business as usual in this place; I want to see a change. I want to see an era of decisionism like we have never had before, because our people deserve it. It is not good enough. It is not good enough that we would send the Finance Minister to the

Exchequer to protest and try to get more money out of the British Exchequer. Of course, that is part of the job, but the introduction for the Department of Finance in the 'Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2019-20' document states:

"The aim of the Department of Finance is to help the Executive secure the most appropriate and effective use of resources and services for the benefit of the community and deliver quality, cost effective, efficient public services and administration in the department's areas of executive responsibility."

Can the Minister say that that has happened under his watch? I know that he is only into his post, but the previous Finance Minister could not even bring a Budget to the House. There were months of delay, and, eventually, the place fell without a Budget in place. What way is that to treat the people of Northern Ireland? What way is that to treat the House that represents the people of Northern Ireland and the Committees that are meant to scrutinise the work of all Departments? We could not even find a Budget to put on top of a Programme for Government to populate those outcomes and indicators.

We have a shameful legacy in this place, whereby Ministers did not stand up to their responsibilities and ran away from the difficulties of this place. I say, "No more of that". It is not business as usual. It is time that this regional Assembly stood up for itself and started to make the tough decisions that are required to make our people's lives better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Mr Maoliosa McHugh. This is the Member's maiden speech, and I ask that he be allowed to deliver it without interruption.

Mr McHugh: I am also a Member of the Finance Committee, and that was a wee bit like a re-run of the discussions that we had only last week. I am a wee bit disappointed in that, because the Committee took the decision to facilitate the accelerated continuation of the Bill. As I said, much of that was a re-run.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the debate that has taken place today. I was very impressed by how knowledgeable each and every Member who spoke seemed to be about the implications for their Departments or sections. They were quite capable of quoting figures and numbers of what was required in the coming year.

Something that was also impressed on me was an element of a common denominator in each contribution. Just as they would identify priorities in their own areas, Members also acknowledged that we have a finite Budget and that resources are not there to meet all the requirements that they might have in their areas. What is the common denominator in that respect? It is the fact that we are dealing with austerity. That austerity not only exists now but has been a constant feature over the last number of years and has impacted on the budgets of each and every Department in the North of Ireland. It was in existence long before I came to the House.

Austerity is not like a new disease or something; it is a man-made feature that was implemented by the Tory Government. They continue to implement that same austerity agenda when it comes to the financing of the affairs of the North of Ireland.

4.00 pm

The new agreement has highlighted that, once more, the Tory Government have displayed duplicity. We, as MLAs, have come under attack in the media. Each and every morning, all you have to do is turn on the radio to hear Nolan or the like giving out about the different parties here in the North of Ireland and asking, "How is it that you signed up to an agreement without them including the budget in it?". Rather than criticising the MLAs for the commitment that they gave to the restoration of government in the North of Ireland, their attention should be concentrated on the people who are being duplicitous; they are the ones who have not delivered the budget that we require. On top of all that, Brexit will impose more constraints on us as we go down the line.

We hope that, when our Minister makes his journey to the Treasury, he will be able to maximise returns to allow us to deliver many of the programmes that we hope to deliver here for the people. Fiscal powers have been mentioned. Some do not have the confidence that we would be able to take on board new fiscal powers to raise revenue, but we would be quite capable of that. We should look to London to devolve those powers to the Assembly in the North of Ireland so that we can take greater control of the economy of the North. In saying all that, am I confident that, even then, we can, in any way at all, become a lot more successful in reaching all our objectives? It is very difficult to see how that can happen unless the British Government take on board the responsibility that they have towards the citizens of the North

of Ireland and help them in every way to ensure that they have the resources to meet the requirements of the new agenda that has been established by all of the parties here.

Mr O'Toole: "Thank you" to the Finance Minister for taking us through the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2019-2020. I welcome the fact that he and the Department have been able to deliver the Supplementary Estimates in such a timely and quick manner following the institutions being restarted. This is my first opportunity to speak in detail in the Chamber as my party's finance spokesperson. As was the case for two colleagues who spoke, I am a member of the Finance Committee. We have had some really interesting sessions over the past few weeks.

Today is also the first time that anyone has had the opportunity to debate in the Chamber the details of Northern Ireland's devolved spending priorities for nearly three years. Today, we are debating the spring Supplementary Estimates, which are, in a sense, the final update on spending for the financial year 2019-2020, and the Vote on Account for 2020-21, which enables spending plans to continue for the first few months of the next financial year. The first thing to say is slightly self-evident: it is a good thing that we are here debating the Supplementary Estimates, scrutinising allocations and adjustments across Departments and arm's-length bodies. For the past three years, civil servants have been placed in the uncomfortable and democratically unacceptable position of having to spend money with barely any political oversight or scrutiny. That situation is even more bizarre when one considers that the primary reason that the devolved institutions fell three years ago was that public money was spent so badly. Budget controls failed spectacularly, and Ministers and civil servants failed to react quickly enough to a spiralling budget crisis. The remarkable reaction of our political class to that catastrophic failure in spending control was to stop doing any scrutiny of spending for the past three years, so it is good that we are here now, scrutinising spending. It is far from ideal, as the two previous contributors mentioned, that we have to do it in such a compressed time. Tomorrow, the Finance Committee will be asked to grant accelerated passage to the Budget Bill, having had barely any time to consider that enormous Bill in detail. While we know that that Bill is not necessarily a long-term programme of agreed Executive financial priorities, it is still very detailed and important legislation that we have not had much time — or, really, any time at all — to scrutinise in detail. I agree with the sentiments of Mr Frew,

who is vice Chair of our Committee, and those of the Committee Chair earlier on that issue.

In normal times, spring Supplementary Estimates should be uneventful updates to the Assembly on in-year spending changes, but we are clearly not in ordinary times. The financial circumstances in which the re-established Executive are working are extremely straitened. We all know about the acute funding pressures across our public services, and various Members today have outlined what those are. The previous Alliance Party Member to speak gave the example of Translink and the acute pressure it faces; indeed, the indication from senior departmental officials is that there is a funding crisis in our public transport system, but that also goes for health and any number of areas of our public services. Although it is good that we are here scrutinising those acute spending pressures, we are in an exceptional position.

In the January monitoring round, £36 million in resource spending and just under £6 million in capital spending were reallocated to meet some but far from all of the most immediate spending pressures. Last Monday, ahead of the laying of these Estimates, a last-minute update from the Treasury, just weeks away from the end of the financial year, led to a sudden £18 million uplift in resource spending to be allocated before the end of the financial year, and the Finance Minister updated us on where that money was going. However, that announcement had a sting in the tail: a £52 million reduction in our capital allocation. That reduction has been deferred until next year, in a sense understandably, by the Finance Minister, partly because the nature of capital spending means that it is hard to reallocate at short notice. Also, the deferring of that cut in capital spending — that reallocation — was because we presume and the Department hopes that the UK Budget in a few weeks' time will generate new capital resources for Northern Ireland that will absorb the £50 million that the Treasury has just taken away at the last minute. It is worth pausing and considering that. The Minister will be in London to meet the Treasury later this week. Even if we get the "expected splurge", to use Andrew Muir's words, on capital spending, we will still, presumably, start from a lower baseline because of the Treasury adjustment that we were told about at the very last minute. I am sure that the Minister will be remonstrating with the Treasury, and, as a former Treasury official, I urge him to do so in the strongest possible terms.

The Supplementary Estimates also include for 2019-2020 what looks like a significant

underspend in capital DEL, with £93 million of unallocated DEL capital not being spent. That is far above the cap in the so-called budget exchange scheme that allows Northern Ireland to carry forward up to 3% of capital underspends in any given year. When one adds on the £52 million via the negative Barnett consequential that I just mentioned — the one that the Treasury forced on us at the last minute — you get to around 10% of Northern Ireland's entire annual capital budget. As part of that, we have more than £150 million in financial transactions capital spending that we handed back to the Treasury because our Departments simply cannot find ways of getting that money out the door. I say that, acknowledging the fact that there are specific issues with housing associations that the Chair of the Communities Committee referred to. Given the urgent need for capital investment in our public services, every party in the Chamber and probably every Member in the Assembly agrees that we simply cannot accept a situation where resources are being handed back to the Treasury. People lost trust in the Assembly and the Executive three years ago because of a culture that allowed people to burn woodchips in order to make money that would otherwise be "lost to Northern Ireland". That was the wrong attitude; that was resource spending. Handing back money that is specifically designated for capital investment is a loss to Northern Ireland, and we need to do better, our officials need to do better and people across our public services need to do better at spending the money when it is allocated. Tomorrow, we will have an opportunity to talk about priorities for the next year. Hopefully, that will include a much-improved and more transparent Budget process. I am glad that the Minister has confirmed that he will shortly present, following discussions with Executive colleagues and once he has seen the outline of the UK Budget on 11 March, a full Budget.

Today, we get to vote on a Supply resolution, both for the first few months of the next financial year and confirming, in a sense, money that has already been spent in the last financial year. Voting on Supply resolutions — giving authority for the spending of public money — is one of the most fundamental acts of any legislature. As we know, politics in London and Dublin has been characterised in the past years by the presence of what are known as "supply and confidence" arrangements, so it is to be welcomed that Stormont is back fulfilling the most basic act of authorising the supply of public money. My party will support the motions today, but, after the past three years and with an eye on the Coghlin report in just a couple of weeks, we have much more work to do to

ensure that we have the confidence of the people on whose behalf we spend this money.

Mr Storey: As I contribute to this afternoon's debate, I feel much more relieved and under less pressure than I did in 2016, when I sat in the House as Finance Minister. My colleague from North Antrim has reminded us that, not many months after we brought a Budget through the House, the party that now has responsibility for the Department of Finance abdicated its responsibility and ran away from its duty. We have heard much over the last weeks and months about "Our commitment to public services" and how "We will work for the people whom we represent". That party has been found wanting in that delivery. Let me give you an example. The current Finance Minister was the person responsible, so, if this is not the case, he can deny it, although he has had reason to deny a lot of things recently. Let us look at the mitigation of welfare reform, an issue that, we were told, was "really important to the people whom we represent, an issue of real concern". When the deal was done to bring in mitigation measures, whom did Sinn Féin leave it up to to deliver? The Westminster Government: "Let us send it to London to the big bad Tories", whom we heard a Member talk about, the people who were responsible for austerity. Why? Sinn Féin was not prepared to come to the House, put its hand up and vote for something. We welcome the fact that now, maybe, for a time, they have returned to the Chamber. They will go through the Lobbies, and they will vote for a Budget and for measures that were made in Northern Ireland. Maybe we can give a degree of comfort to the people of Northern Ireland that, for a period, we may have some progress. Some of us remain more sceptical than others.

As we come to what is before us today, there are issues that I would like the Finance Minister to address. I have no doubt that he has many officials in another part of the Building who are seeking to prepare responses for him. When it comes to, for example, the Department for Communities, when will we deal with the underspend on mitigation measures of at least £136 million, going by the last correspondence that I had with the then permanent secretary, in March 2016? There was much talk about how we needed to get the money to the people who were in need. The need did not transpire, and we have an underspend of over £136 million. No wonder the Treasury looks at this place and asks, "Why would we give you any more money? You cannot manage the money that you have already been allocated".

Then we come to the Housing Executive. When will the parties opposite, including the SDLP, grasp the issue? I am no financial expert, but the reality is that the Housing Executive, according to the Savills report on housing that we brought in, needs in the region of £6 billion over the next number of years.

Where is that money coming from? Are we just going to go to the Treasury again and say, "Please give us more", when we are unprepared to change the financial structure that deals with how the Housing Executive can spend money?

4.15 pm

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McCrossan: I am listening to the Member and am fascinated by his remarks. Surely the Member will recognise the phrase "high horse" about the statements being made when you consider the spending and lack of budgeting in the past in RHI and Red Sky by his party's Ministers.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for reminding us. Wherever irregular spend happens, I am quite happy to call it out. In fact, I remind the Member that, when I was the Finance Minister, I was the Minister who contacted the Comptroller and Auditor General about the irregular spend in RHI, so none of us are running away from our responsibilities. We are facing up to our responsibilities in the House.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that if you keep adding a wish list of projects and red lines into the fiscal system without having a clear pathway to find the money, that truly makes us a basket case, and then, of course, Westminster takes the attitude that it does?

Mr Storey: We could depend only on our own opinion on these things, and we all have biases and all come with a particular political view, but I do not think that anybody would argue with the Northern Ireland auditor. Let us remember that there have been three Northern Ireland audits on issues in relation to spend, but not on what we are going to spend. Sometimes we are accused in the House of not making decisions. Decisions were made about certain spend. The last Comptroller and Auditor General's report made it abundantly clear that there is £700 million. Do we get that figure in the House

today? It is £700 million not as a result of some botched boiler scheme but because of total and absolute inadequacy in the system to deliver on the decisions made in the House. Let us remember what Mr Donnelly said about how we spend our money:

"Existing, cumbersome governance and delivery structures within the Northern Ireland public sector can be a barrier to achieving value for money. I believe there is merit in considering alternative models, sufficiently resourced with specialist staff, to help improve future delivery."

That was not in 2016. That was not in 2017. That was in 2019. There are two other reports that he gave his financial assessment on. One was on the Education Authority, and the other was on the voluntary exit scheme. There is an interesting one. Let us remember that we, in good faith, embarked on a process to rebalance the economy. It seems as though that phrase has now disappeared. It seems as though there is little interest now in us addressing that. It is still there. What was it that we did? We let almost 4,500 people leave the Civil Service, and what did it cost us? It cost £170 million. I ask the Finance Minister to undertake a piece of work to determine to ensure that no one has been returned to the system as a result of the exit scheme, as I believe there has been.

The House and the decisions that we make in the House are sometimes taken as though, "Well, sure, you can have a swipe at the politicians", and we are up for it, but, as the Comptroller and Auditor General said, we need change to how we do our business.

Mr McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McCann: Just listening to you makes me think that I am in a different place, because I remember when you were Minister and we had debates and arguments about welfare. It was your party that tried to stop welfare reform at the start. It was this party that argued the pace and, as a matter of fact, got close to walking away from this place because of the impact that it would have on people out there. When you talk about the Westminster element, you know quite well that there was a technicality that had to be met. If it had not been met, the thing would not have gone through. The other thing is —.

Mr Allister: The other thing is Connolly House.

Mr McCann: I expect that from you. I did not expect it from Mervyn.

Again, when you were Minister, and we were talking and arguing about giving powers back to councils, your party, along with another Member, put forward a proposal that we remove all mentions of need, and that stopped crucial legislating powers going to councils. He can get up —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Member that interventions should be brief.

Mr McCann: I will finish there.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention. My time spent as Minister, in either the Department for Social Development or the Department of Finance and Personnel, should prove that need is something about which I genuinely have a concern. When I visited the Member's constituency with him, he will remember that I saw housing conditions in West Belfast that were abysmal. Let us remember that, in meeting need, we have to have the right structures in place. What I am imploring the Finance Minister to do is to ensure that the way in which the money is not only allocated but spent —

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

Mr Storey: — gives us delivery, because, as the Comptroller and Auditor General clearly indicated in his most up-to-date report, that has failed to date, with £700 million being the amount of underspend.

Ms Dolan: I will make my very short contribution as a member of the Finance Committee and as Sinn Féin spokesperson on workers' rights. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document included the banning of zero-hour contracts, devolving minimum-wage powers and making the Executive a living-wage employer. Those commitments signalled additional investment after a decade of Tory austerity.

Tory austerity was imposed on us against our will. Tory austerity has had a devastating impact on departmental budgets and public services. Members will be well aware of ongoing Civil Service pay disputes. Those have been caused by Departments being unable to award civil servants the necessary pay increases to improve their living standards. The very fact that the lowest-paid civil servants had to get a 3% pay increase because they could

not legally be paid beneath the national minimum wage highlights the extent of the effect that austerity has had on our workers.

Until austerity is lifted and Departments receive a cash injection from the British Treasury, they will continue to struggle financially and will be unable to resolve ongoing pay issues. Our role in the Assembly is to challenge austerity and to mitigate, as far as possible, the pressures that result from cuts and underfunding that have been imposed on us. The challenges that those financial pressures present are not abstract or academic. They affect people in their day-to-day life in immediate ways in the areas of health, the education of our children and the impact on our environment. We need decent jobs that value workers and protect their rights. We need to improve our competitiveness through investing in our public services and infrastructure. Our job as political representatives is to make a difference in the longer term through managed political change on this island, but it is also to improve the lives and prospects of ordinary working families.

In that context, I welcome the Finance Minister's commitment to continued engagement with trade union colleagues. I am committed to continuing to work with all Ministers to be a voice for workers' rights.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members to connect their speech to the spring Supplementary Estimates or the Vote on Account. Those are what we are debating today.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the opportunity to address some of the budgetary issues in the spring Supplementary Estimates, particularly for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, for which I am party spokesperson.

It is interesting to note that the overall financial trend from the present net provision in DAERA is downwards. There are reduced budgets for flood prevention, farming, veterinary services, animal health, the environment, the marine environment, fisheries and forestry. The only significant budgetary increase is going to the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. It is unusual that areas in which we assume there should be attempts made to improve and increase input, such as forestry, animal health and the environment, are all on reduced budgets.

The Department has a very high staffing level in its resource costs, with 71% of the departmental budget going on staffing. While I

fully understand the need for staff and the work they carry out, as they are largely a front-line service, it is vital that the level of staffing undergoes a detailed review, including assessments made on the balance of staff between senior management and those in the front line.

I note that the Department of Finance approved the business case for the expenditure of £44 million of capital and £27 million resource for a DAERA digital transformation programme. While I support progress towards online services, it needs to be carried out in conjunction with more widespread improvements on delivering rural high-speed broadband. There are a significant number of areas in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone — I am sure, in many others as well — where broadband speeds are very poor and, in some cases, there is no broadband accessibility or even mobile phone signal. It is unfair to expect the rural community, and particularly farm businesses, to manage by digital methods if the core infrastructure is not available. It is like expecting to travel to London at short notice from Northern Ireland, but all the airports are closed.

It is vital that the agricultural economy has stability as Brexit continues to be implemented. There is a major onus on the Northern Ireland Executive to be proactive and robust in any negotiations or discussions with either the UK or the EU about the future of the Northern Ireland agri-food economy. People here expect and deserve nothing less.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. As someone involved in agriculture, I understand the importance attached to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the many aspects of its work and remit in managing agriculture in Northern Ireland. This is not a small Department, and DAERA has a staff base of over 3,000 people in over 70 locations. In budgetary impact, staff costs associated with the Department run to some £146 million. That amounts to 71% of the total budget available to the Department. That covers every aspect of the running of the Department, and it represents a significant slice of the pie.

With this in mind, resources are important. The way in which they are spent must take into account the complexity of agriculture and rural affairs, and the requirements of the many directives and rules that must be navigated. I am on record previously as praising the Department on the advancements in payment and processing structures for basic farm

payments. Important improvements have been made in recent times which have enabled almost all payments to be made on time. That is down to good management and important changes in processing methods. It is good stewardship of departmental resources, and it shows how efficiencies can be delivered that can deliver gains for the agricultural industry.

Digital transformation is a vital aspect of driving down the cost of government administration in the future and also making processes easier for farmers. It has been noted in recent Committee hearings that the Department is on track to move 125,000 transactions annually from paper-based to digital, and 150,000 transactions from phone to digital platforms this year. With this transformation in mind, and the fact that online and digital technologies are faster and less cumbersome, this should also result in efficiencies and savings within the Department that can be utilised for all its important work. We have been briefed at Committee on estates and assets, and there is importance attached to ensuring that properties and assets are used to their maximum potential. Areas where savings can be made by restructuring or offloading should be fully assessed, and reasonable opportunities taken to make DAERA's estates operations as efficient as possible.

One of the most pressing issues of the day, and of particular importance to DAERA, is the outworkings of Brexit. It is important that the Department has the right level of resources to deal effectively with important changes that will come and be able to respond to the new realities and challenges.

I believe that opportunities will come from being freed from the fetters of the European Union. I welcome the recent finance package as we move away from the EU-based payments; the fact that payments will be based on the September 2019 exchange rate; and the fact that payments will be made on time, which will be of significance to everyone in the industry. Important work will, of course, be undertaken in reaching an effective replacement system, and that will require adequate resources.

4.30 pm

Climate change is another important area that will require action and adequate resourcing. It will also require capital funding from within DAERA's remit to support farmers in making further moves towards low-emission methods. As farmers will know, rules and regulations are already stringent on ensuring that best care is

taken of the environment. For further steps forward, it is vital that farmers are assisted financially.

A key theme in the coming months will be the ability to respond to fast-paced change. The Department must set out its stall with that firmly in mind in order to respond to change, as I have said, and make the most of opportunities. Agriculture is vital to the Northern Ireland economy. I encourage the Minister and the Executive to protect its interests at home and abroad.

Ms Anderson: Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire Airgeadais ar an bhuiséad. I thank the Minister for his statement and the comments regarding the Budget and the spring Supplementary Estimates. Minister, you referred to austerity and Brexit and the impact of both on the Executive Budget as well as on the spring Supplementary Estimates: do you agree with the comments that Mike Nesbitt made regarding the tools you need to strengthen the economy — I agree with Mike on that — and the need for prosperity? The corollary of that is twofold. In the first instance, we need to end the British Government-imposed austerity, and I will return to the other later. Even in the context of the spring Supplementary Estimates, we have to take account of what austerity has done over the past nine years, nine years of deepening inequality; nine years of deepening poverty; nine years of poor health and schools struggling; and nine years of families and workers struggling. All of that is very much compounded for those of us who live in the north-west, because, on top of everything else that I have listed, there have been nine years of deepening regional inequality in such places as Derry. People in the north-west and across the North rightly demand that the Executive address such regional inequalities. They look to the New Decade, New Approach outline Programme for Government, which commits resources to be allocated on the basis of objective need.

We are dealing with the spring Supplementary Estimates and what Departments are trying to do. I listened to Chris Lyttle talk about the need for radical change in how we do things. He focused on education and the impact of budget deficits and bailouts. I want to widen that out, but, before doing so, let me recall what Robin Newton said about the importance of educational achievement. Of course, we do not want to see the British budgetary cuts result in children underachieving in school, regardless of whether they come from one tradition or another: boys or girls, Catholic, Protestant or

neither. It would be remiss of me not to point out that, whilst Mr Newton was right in saying that the percentage of Protestant boys underachieving in education is the highest — too high; none of us want anything other than that to be addressed — numerically, more Catholic boys are not achieving five GCSEs or more; indeed, the latest data shows that 919 Catholic boys underachieved compared with 565 Protestant boys. Both should be highlighted when we express concerns about children underachieving, regardless of which tradition they come from and regardless of whether they are Protestant or Catholic or have another denomination or none, as the case may be.

I go back to what Chris said about the need for radical change. That takes me to the second point that I want to raise. Given that you are going to London, to the British Treasury, to make a case for them to end the damaging cuts and the damage and harm that they are doing to schools, hospitals, workers, social care — the list is endless, and you have heard a lot about it here today — have you, Minister, looked at the excellent report done by the Vancouver university on mapping the economic benefits of Irish unity, especially in the context of the damage that Brexit will do to the economy in the North on top of imposed austerity? Will you reflect on what Declan McAleer said when he outlined the damage that the British-imposed point-based immigration system will have on the North? He was addressing that in the context of the spring Supplementary Estimates.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, I will not give way.

He talked about new nationals feeling unwanted and unwelcome and now unprotected. All of that points to an economy in the North going from bad to worse, making your job, with reduced finances and limited tools to address it, all the more difficult.

When I reflect on Derry and Donegal — the place where I live — and the places along the partitioned part of Ireland that will suffer most from Brexit, as they have done from the British-imposed cuts, I see that there is a better way and an alternative to the block grant through the economics of reunification, with the development of the work under way on planning and preparing for constitutional change in Ireland. Minister, reports such as the Hübner report, undertaken by the Vancouver university, would be worth exploring. Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir. Thank you all for listening.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I plead again with Members to keep to the Vote on Account and the spring Supplementary Estimates. We are straying way beyond that.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motions, and I will make my comments specifically on health spending. It is well known that funding a health and social care service that meets the needs of our ageing population is becoming increasingly and incredibly difficult. Every day, in the media, we see a new story about the huge pressures on our system in terms of the workforce, the workload or the workplace. Before I reflect on those three areas in the spring Supplementary Estimates, I put on record my appreciation of the work of the civil servants with financial management responsibility during the three years of political impasse, be it through the Department of Health, the health and social care trusts or any of the arm's-length bodies.

At our Health Committee meeting on 13 February, we were advised that some measures had been put in place in this financial year to reduce costs. For example, the medicines optimisation programme will save £32 million in this year. However, I have no doubt that, at this stage, there is little fat left that can be trimmed.

If we look at the spring Supplementary Estimates — I refer to page 131 — in the context of workforce pressures, we see a downward movement in spending for the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency. I ask why that happened in this financial year. We know that there are huge pressures in training our staff, developing them and, most crucially, retaining them in Northern Ireland.

On the workload, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs highlighted in its report last autumn the urgent need to address the huge pressure on our community pharmacists, not least because so many of them have left community pharmacy and moved into practice-based pharmacy. While the protracted contractual negotiation is still ongoing, about three years later, with the Department of Health, we see in the Estimates that there is a net change in provision, under the heading of "Family Health Service — Pharmaceutical Services", of over £8 million. Again, how did that happen? I agree with my colleague Colm Gildernew, who chairs the Health Committee, that, while the report breaks it down into headings, we need more information on exactly what that money is being spent on in public services.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. She raises a valid point about community pharmacy. The report published, I think, in 2017 was for 2011, and the people who provide a very good service to our population have been cut adrift. They are trying to work with business plans that are so outdated it is unbelievable, yet that is one of the decisions that could be made that would help those people.

Ms Bradshaw: I totally agree, and we could bridge that gap with slightly over £20 million. That is not a lot, but it would make a big difference to the services that they provide in our communities.

Lastly, I want to look at workplace issues. One of the key recommendations in the Bengoa report and the resultant 'Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together' report was the establishment of multidisciplinary teams to support GP federations. That was a wonderful proposal, because mental health practitioners, physios and occupational therapists (OTs) would all be based in a primary care setting. That is great, but we have not seen a flow of funds to support the refurbishment or extension of GP practices. Again, the report showed that financial transactions capital was available — money that was allocated and available for loans, specifically for capital projects. However, millions of pounds are being sent back. My question is — I think that Paul Frew raised it as well — "Why is that money being returned? Why was there a gap in the conversation between the Department of Finance and the Department of Health?".

While I agree that a lot of these questions are not necessarily posed to the Finance Minister, who is here today, or even to the Health Minister, who has been in post only for a couple of months, we need to ensure that the changes that were promised in the New Decade, New Approach deal in how we do business here on the hill, especially around the Executive table, are realised quickly. At the heart of that, we must ensure that the funding received by the Civil Service is used not only effectively but efficiently. That is challenging, not least because of the long list of pressures that are queuing up to be met. However, while we need to stabilise our health service, which requires substantial funding, not least as regards reducing our scandalous waiting lists, we need to ensure that we deliver on that health transformation agenda. The next two years of this Assembly term will no doubt fly in, so we cannot delay the process any longer, not least through political populism or parochialism.

Ms S Bradley: As the SDLP's spokesperson on health, I note that the Chairpersons of the Statutory Committees have rightly highlighted the pressures across their respective Departments and pointed out how this inadequate budgetary practice, compounded by the cost of political absence, has really factored into what is, essentially, little more — or less — than a holding position for most Departments. Like others, I can point out that the problems associated with non-recurrent funding pots, repeated dependency on in-year monitoring rounds to deliver on many basic front-line services, inability to utilise financial transactions capital and a lack of any real time for scrutiny are really not a good way to do business.

I want to refer to the spring Supplementary Estimates and look at what has happened. The Health Committee has been made acutely aware of the huge pressures across the health and social care system. Nobody knows that better than those outside this place who depend on those services. We have welcomed the Health Minister's early efforts to address some of the pay issues in the system, but we recognise that that is not all. The SDLP is concerned about the sustainability of the financing, going forward.

The Committee also welcomed the funding announced to aid victims of the contaminated blood scandal. We urged the Health Minister to ensure that victims and their families or beneficiaries receive directly the full money that is due to them, as promised throughout the process.

4.45 pm

We urge the Executive to recognise that what begins as one Department's pressure often emerges as a shared pressure. I note, for example, the positive feedback — it was mentioned often today and was highlighted to the Health Committee — on multidisciplinary teams, which Ms Bradshaw rightly pointed out.

That is an excellent model, and nothing but good reports have come to us following the pilot scheme. The aim is to wrap significant primary services around GP practices. The ambition to save time and funding via this method should not be lost. It is significant. Soundings suggest that we should aim to have this model in a town near you soon. However, let us consider the 100 towns and villages highlighted by the Chairperson of the Infrastructure Committee, Miss McIlveen, that cannot currently connect to the sewerage and water systems, or the areas that do not have access to high-speed

broadband. We cannot go into our silos. It is critical that each Department knows what is happening upstream in other Departments and whether that might be a severe impediment to the delivery of its ambitions. Promises were made to come out of silos, but we have never had real evidence of that. This is the time when, perhaps for the first time ever, we need to step out and do that. We urge that that is how future Budgets will be delivered. I look forward to working with colleagues across the House on what should be a longer-term and more sustainable offer for Northern Ireland.

Ms Armstrong: Today's debate should be a non-event. We are debating something that should be a matter of process. However, as this refers to a Budget set by the Secretary of State, and given the fact that no Committees have thus far been able to scrutinise it or in-year monitoring rounds, we are, understandably, taking the opportunity to discuss our financial situation.

We are discussing the resolution that confirms this year's detailed spending for each Department. We are also discussing the Vote on Account for 2020-21. We all know that this will allow existing services to continue in the early months of the new financial year, as the introduction in the paperwork that we received states:

"pending consideration of appropriate legislation to provide funds to meet the balance of estimated expenditure for that year."

It is not next year's Budget. It is just a glimpse of what we need to roll forward.

We are discussing this year's money because the Budget for this financial year was set when the Assembly was not sitting. No MLAs had an opportunity to scrutinise this year's Budget or in-year monitoring rounds. As a result, we are being asked to Vote on Account so that Departments do not run out of money.

I add my thanks to those expressed by other Members to the Civil Service, which carried Northern Ireland through the missing Assembly years. Thankfully, they kept the lights on and the wheels turning while there was an absence of responsibility. I thank the two largest parties for getting us back, but it took far too long.

If the Civil Service had not been enabled to continue to deliver services, I expect that Prime Minister Johnson's Secretary of State would now be in control. Goodness knows what delights they could have imposed on us. Thank

you to our civil servants, especially those whose names and faces are now known to the public. Our Civil Service normally remains in the background. However, due to the impasse, and whether it was intended or not, some civil servants were thrust into the spotlight.

Going back to the spring Estimates and the Vote on Account, as the Alliance spokesperson for Communities, I thank the Minister for sharing the details thus far, but I also raise significant concerns. Substantial, eye-watering amounts were surrendered by the Department for Communities: £38.8 million of DEL resource and £36.4 million of DEL capital. I am sure that, like me, the public will be shocked by the amount that it gave back, especially at a time when many people struggle to make ends meet. As we are all aware, the Department for Communities is the place that is supposed to provide a fair system of financial help to those in need.

Much of the money that is being returned — £36.2 million — is from financial transactions capital. The Department cannot spend this money because of the classification of housing associations. This matter needs to be addressed as quickly as the welfare mitigations. I ask the Finance Minister to work with the Minister for Communities to bring forward the Housing (Amendment) Bill to reclassify housing associations urgently, as this will ensure that enough new homes can be built and that co-ownership remains an option and operational. If the Department for Communities is to enable access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes and housing support services, we need the legislation to enable this to happen as soon as possible.

Some of the resource money being given back by Communities relates to programmes that have not been taken up as well as they could have been; for example, the rates rebate programme. That money is available to help people pay their rates, but, because few people knew about it, they were not able to avail themselves of the support. The contingency fund provides emergency support for people, but, again, it is not being shared, and the communications on it have been quite poor. People have been offered an advance loan but were not made aware that there was an opportunity to access non-repayable moneys. If Committees had been in place, we would have had more time to scrutinise this and put it right in-year. We need to learn from this and ensure that appropriate messaging is used to enable the public to know what is available to them. I, therefore, urge the Minister to ensure that there is consultation before the next Budget. I

appreciate that time is tight, but the Assembly is back. We each need, through our Committees, to ensure that the 2020-21 Budget is scrutinised and that, where there are allocations to support people, they are communicated quickly, spent appropriately and not surrendered.

The Department for Communities is supposed to provide a fair system of financial help to those in need, to tackle disadvantage and to promote social inclusion and economic equality. It cannot do so if part of its allocation is surrendered because it has not appropriately promoted programmes of support to the public or there are delays in the implementation of the legislation regarding the reclassification of social housing. Can the Minister confirm that appropriate consultation will be completed? I appreciate that we will hear from the Chancellor only on 11 March about how much Westminster will provide to Northern Ireland. I appreciate that the Vote on Account may give us breathing space, but it should also give us time for scrutiny.

Finally, I ask that you, as Finance Minister, address as a matter of urgency silo budgeting, which has just been mentioned by an SDLP colleague. This is the new approach. The Programme for Government is a new approach, yet we are still budgeting separately and looking after individual Department's interests. There are cross-cutting programmes that we need to fund across Departments. I ask that the Minister, if he can, bring forward as soon as possible what criteria he will expect Ministers to use to ensure that cross-departmental budgeting is taken forward.

Ms McLaughlin: The Minister will know that the Supplementary Estimates include the Department for the Economy's proposals to promote a competitive, sustainable and inclusive economy to be delivered through investment in skills, infrastructure, research and business development. We need to begin by accepting and acknowledging that we have a problem. In doing so, we might be able to find and provide some solutions.

It is easy to walk around Belfast, see the cranes above you and believe that there is no problem, but for those communities in west Belfast and east Belfast where there is chronic unemployment and deprivation, there is a problem for the economy. It does not work for everyone. That is exactly the same in my constituency of Foyle. We have problems with unemployment, economic inactivity, low productivity and low wages. That means that, for many thousands of families, we do not have

an economy that is competitive, sustainable or inclusive.

If we want to improve wages and business profits, we must raise productivity. The accountancy firm PwC says that the Republic of Ireland is around 60% more productive than Northern Ireland. Ulster University says that Great Britain is around 25% more productive than Northern Ireland. If you drill right down into that, you will find that the area that includes Derry city and Strabane has the lowest productivity in the whole of Northern Ireland. It is easy to understand why. For decades, we have had some of the worst transport infrastructure both on this island and throughout the UK. We do not have the skills that we need. There has to be more investment in skills at graduate level by not only increasing the flow through substantial expansion of the Magee campus but investing in apprenticeships and ensuring that every child leaves school with the skills that they need for their life and career.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking the intervention. I am sure that she will agree with me that, even where indigenous businesses have worked really hard to keep their businesses, such as in areas like my constituency of Mid Ulster, the infrastructure has not been put in place to support them. That needs to be addressed, because we are too focused on foreign direct investment.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you for the intervention.

To meet all those challenges, investment is needed, and more investment than we have given to date. We also need to invest more in public transport to ease the gridlock in Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland, including Derry. Investing in public transport is another part of the solution to low productivity. Time spent in a traffic jam is not very productive. I urge the Executive and the Assembly to make tough decisions and to get moving on the efficiency measures that are needed to free up funds for investing in skills, infrastructure and public transport.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she accept that, without the necessary investment, particularly in our sewerage infrastructure, key elements such as housing, affordable housing, economic and industrial development, and, equally, councils' local development plans could be rendered nothing more than academic exercises?

Ms McLaughlin: The Member is absolutely correct.

We need to get moving on subregional targets for all our Departments and economic development agencies that are based on economic, social and political need and that will drive and deliver a balanced regional economy that works for all. For once, we need to be courageous and do the right thing. If we fail to do this, we will be failing the current generation and future generations of workers, businesses and citizens.

Mr Allister: Debates such as this can sometimes be a bit dull — even boring — and so this one might have been. Then Ms Anderson came along and led us into the fantasy land of Irish unity. Did she even read the first resolution? As you go through it, you cannot be but struck by the eye-watering figures that keep this place going. You come to a resource figure of £21 billion. Where does Ms Anderson think that figure came from?

Mr Frew: Venezuela.

Mr Allister: Venezuela? Maybe. That figure came from the benighted, much-abused British Treasury. Of course, that is not the end of the story, because £21 billion is only the resource figure. To get the full spend in Northern Ireland, you have to add other things, such as the capital figure. Indeed, as an aside, I ask the Minister to remind us why we do not vote on the capital spend in the resolutions. You have to add the capital spend, the accruing resources and things that are obliquely but not emphatically referenced in the spring Supplementary Estimates document, such as state pensions and judicial salaries. I suggest that, when you do that, you come to an annual spend in Northern Ireland of somewhere in the order of £28 billion. Do not take it from me, however. I ask the Minister, in his reply, to tell us the total gross resource and gross capital spend in 2019-2020 in Northern Ireland, and then let me ask he who would have us in an all-Ireland republic how he would ever hope to raise that money.

Here we are in Northern Ireland with a working population of 800,000 people, and we are spending something like £28 billion. That is about £35,000 for every person who works in the Province. Is that the level of Venezuelan tax that we can expect in the utopia of a united Ireland?

It does not seem to worry Ms Anderson and, clearly, not the Minister, but that is the reality.

That is the realpolitik. Is he truly saying to us that his precious Irish Republic could afford any of that? When you look at the state of the Irish Republic and its homelessness and housing crisis — all of those things — you ask, "How would they ever hope to pay for any of this?". Of course, they would not.

Someone wanted to intervene.

5.00 pm

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Given the national debt of the Irish Republic and the utterances of its Prime Minister about the recalibrated amount of money that the Irish Republic will have to find to pay into Europe because of our withdrawal and Her Majesty's Government no longer giving a contribution, does the Member share my near-disappointment that the Member for Foyle would not take an intervention to explain, especially when she had four minutes and two seconds left? We do not need to hear from a university in Vancouver; we could have heard from the Member or, indeed, the Members across the way of the advantages to persuade us of a united Ireland. Sadly, there was no such giving way. Does the Member agree?

Mr Allister: I agree absolutely. Of course, we only need to look across the border. The Member mentioned national debt: the Irish Republic, per capita of population, has the third highest level of national debt in the developed world. That is the panacea for "spend, spend, spend" Sinn Féin, who never have enough and always want to grab more, and then they say that the answer lies in joining the half-bankrupt Irish Republic.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Oh, indeed.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member opens up the opportunity for a motion in the House that would allow us to have a proper debate and discussion on the benefits of an all-Ireland economy. I want to reassure him of one thing: we do not want to join 26 and six together to combine what have been all the mistakes of the two states to date. We want a new beginning, and we want the Member's involvement in that new beginning.

Perhaps the Member will answer this question: where does the British Treasury get all this money? It gets it from taxpayers. Do people here pay taxes? Of course they do. Do corporations here pay taxes? Of course they

do. Do industries out there pay taxes? Of course they do. Where do all those taxes go? They go to the British Treasury. The question is what the economy will look like in the future, not what it looks like now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I draw Members back to the motion that we are debating today: the motion on the Vote on Account and the Supplementary Estimates.

Mr Allister: Yes, in coming back to the motion, I remind you, Deputy Speaker, of the resource figure in the resolution: £21 billion. There it is in black and white.

The Member asks where all the money comes from, and I am glad that Sinn Féin is beginning to think about that; that is a novelty in its terms. Where does it come from? Yes, we all pay taxes. Yes, our corporations pay taxes, but they do not pay £28 billion a year in taxes. Let the Minister's strategic policy unit tell us what the estimated tax take is from Northern Ireland, and we will all find that it is far below the £28 billion that we spend. Where does the balance come from? It comes from the subvention, the subvention that Dublin could not make. My goodness, they are quaking about having to pay £2 billion to Brussels, and here we have a subvention of the order of £10 billion and more to Northern Ireland. It is such fantasy politics that only somebody of the calibre of Ms Anderson would even think that the debate should go there.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Much ado has been made about Brexit and its potential impact. Does the Member think that it is interesting that, a few weeks ago in the House, we unanimously and collectively voted to withhold consent for the Brexit Bill? However, it was not all of us. As a Member of the European Parliament, Ms Anderson voted for the Brexit Bill. Will the Member tell us why he thinks that that logic does not correspond with the view of the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, I have indulged everyone quite enough. Can we come back to the motion that is being debated today?

Mr Allister: Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I could not possibly fathom or rationalise what Ms Anderson thinks.

There are other issues that I want to raise about the Estimates. In truth, I cannot do them justice, but I will speak tomorrow in the Budget debate and refer, if I may, to some of the technical

issues in the document, particularly whether the issue pertaining to 'Managing Public Money' has been honoured, particularly Appendix A.2.5.15, which states that there is a limit of £1.5 million a year where you can rely:

"entirely on the authority of the Budget Act"

to list matters. In the document, there are matters as high as £400 million listed under the authority only of the Budget Act and the Estimates. There are questions that require answers, and I will pose those questions tomorrow.

Mr Carroll: I begin by saying that, obviously, public confidence in these institutions has been pretty low for some time. There is a general perception that Stormont is a gravy train where politicians simply turn up and take their wage for rubber-stamping legislation and where financial decisions are primarily drafted by unelected officials, advisers or spads; indeed, those concerns were right at the heart of the RHI debacle and the collapse of the previous Assembly. Overcoming that perception will be a test for the new Assembly. On the basis of the fact that we are being asked to approve the spring Supplementary Estimates today with nowhere near enough time for the appropriate scrutiny, it is hard to see how anything has changed. It is seriously concerning that such serious financial decisions — many of them retrospective — are being presented to the Chamber at such short notice, with little to no time for oversight or approval through the normal channels expected by the Assembly. It is not just concerning; it is incredibly frustrating. I have attempted to get clear answers from Committee Clerks, departmental officials and staff about the details of the spring Estimates, but I have been unable to get detailed answers in time. One member of staff rightly pointed out that officials should not be expected to respond with such detail at short notice. How, then, are MLAs expected to scrutinise and vote on important financial decisions with the shortest of notice? If the Estimates are voted through today, it will be with a clear and recognised lack of scrutiny and accountability. That, simply, is not good enough.

There appear to be some positives in the Estimates, with departmental increases to address pension payments, for example. Public services are, obviously, crying out for investment, and increases in public-sector spending should be welcomed. However, we are also asked to give blanket approval to a huge range of Estimates, the finer detail of which is not clear. Even a cursory glance shows some worrying financial movements, such as

the decrease in DAERA spending of up to £24 million in cash resources and £10 million in net resource, which has been referred to. I find that extremely concerning at a time when we need to see investment to tackle issues such as the climate crisis. People Before Profit does not support such a reduction in DAERA spending.

I note that, during the Finance Committee meeting last week, one MLA had the good sense to ask for an explanation of the DAERA decrease, but no one was able to explain it to him; indeed, I have been trying to ascertain that detail myself. No one has been able to explain it to me or my party staff in the short time afforded to us for scrutiny. I find it ludicrous, then, that the Finance Committee was told that it must approve the Estimates and that here we are, being asked to approve them in the Chamber. It would be reckless to do so. I appreciate that the Chair of the Finance Committee raised similar concerns about the level of scrutiny that has been possible. I also appreciate that there is a large backlog of work due to the unique situation that the Assembly finds itself in. However, the institutions have been sitting for some weeks, and more time should have been afforded to critically engage with the financial Estimates. It is a false choice to present an ultimatum that the Assembly must give blanket approval to the Estimates, which include cuts to DAERA, or trigger a disastrous situation in spending. I cannot sincerely give my approval by engaging in such a false choice, and I call for more time to be afforded for proper scrutiny.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I have finished.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Finance to make a winding-up speech. He has some 56 minutes of his allotted time remaining, should he wish to use them.

Mr Murphy: I just might. I am saving it for Jim Allister tomorrow; I will allocate him some time.

I thank all Members — I am not being facetious — for their contributions to the debate. I particularly welcome the contributions from the Chairs of the Committees, many of whom outlined the spending pressures that their departmental officials had briefed them on. I understand that from engagement with all the Ministers and their officials, and I welcome the valuable scrutiny role that the Committees will provide in relation to spending plans, not only for the retrospective approval and the Vote on Account to allow Departments to begin

spending in the new financial year but for ongoing expenditure by the Departments.

I thank again the Finance Committee for agreeing to accelerated passage for the Bill that will be introduced later and debated tomorrow. I acknowledge that the in-year process has not followed the usual procedures this year, but I assure the Committee that they will be in place for the next financial year. Obviously, this Budget, as people have remarked on, was delivered by the Secretary of State — it was not our Budget — and the monitoring rounds up until the January monitoring round were done by the civil servants. I note that quite a few Members — almost exclusively from the Alliance Party — thanked the Civil Service for its contribution. On one of my first days in the Department, I acknowledged the contribution that the Civil Service had made over the three years in which the institutions were not functioning and the valuable contribution that the civil servants made at that time to keep issues ticking over.

There are a couple of points raised by Committee Chairs that I want to answer. As expected, quite a few people throughout the debate made points in relation to future spend and other arguments that are not necessarily part of the Estimates that we are dealing with today or the vote in relation to the expenditure for early in the new financial year, but there were a couple of points on specifics that were raised, and I intend to try to address them.

The Chair of the Health Committee, Colm Gildernew, commented on the contaminated blood issue. The Executive allocated £1 million for that issue in the January monitoring, and, whilst £600,000 of that has been allocated, a further £400,000 remains unallocated. I have sought assurances from the Health Minister that all of the money allocated to his Department by the Executive for financial payments to those affected and infected by contaminated blood will be used for its intended purpose.

I noted the comments by the Education Committee Chair, Chris Lytle, regarding a potential overspend of some £28 million by the Education Authority and the pressures on special educational needs. We have been able to prioritise education through additional in-year allocations of some £29 million. The Department of Education and the Education Authority must take every step to prevent an overspend in the 2019-2020 financial year. That said, we acknowledge the pressures facing Education, which many Members referred to, and that will have to be considered as part of the Budget-setting process for 2020-21.

Some Members advised that they would return to specific issues during tomorrow's debate, which I look forward to very much. I remind Members, as the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers did on a number of occasions today, that tomorrow's debate is still focused on the 2019-2020 financial year. Members will have every opportunity to debate next year's Budget when it is brought before the Assembly in the coming weeks.

As highlighted in the debate, this morning, the Executive agreed that their Budget — Mr Stalford managed to make the announcement before the Executive; I am not sure how he got that insider information, but there you go — for 2020-21 will be announced at the end of March. That allows a Budget to be set after our funding envelope is confirmed by the British Chancellor's Budget on 11 March.

Turning back to the focus of this debate: obviously, quite a number of Members made remarks.

Mike Nesbitt raised the old chestnut for unionism: the North/South Ministerial Council. When in doubt, wheel it out to ask why we are spending money on it. He talked about the car that was parked in the garage, but he ignored the much larger car that was paid for over the same period, which was, in fact, the Assembly, and in which he was a passenger because he was still getting paid. The North/South Ministerial Council, of course, had to keep the North/South arrangements in place over the past three years. The areas of cooperation and all the work continued in the North/South Ministerial Council in the same way as the Assembly process kept the Assembly ticking over in the past three years. That point has some validity, I suppose, coming from other Members, but your party agreed the North/South arrangements as part of the Good Friday Agreement.

5.15 pm

The Member also voiced his frustration about the delay in the delivery of the A5. I agree with some of his points but, as the Minister responsible for trying to get that road off the ground, I remember distinctly that the biggest political opposition came from the Ulster Unionist Party. He now is frustrated at the delay in delivering that. I assure him that at no stage has the delay been caused by a failure to fund it. In the New Decade, New Approach agreement, the Irish Government have

reaffirmed their £75 million commitment to the A5 project.

The Member raised a point about the office of cultural identity and asked how we could allocate funding when a business case had not been completed. I reassure him that we have not allocated any funding. What officials were talking about was their idea of an indicative budget for the office of identity, and it will fall to the Executive to consider that as part of their deliberation on Budget 2020-21. No public expenditure will be incurred without appropriate approvals in place.

With regard to the other priorities in New Decade, New Approach, as Members said, I will meet the Treasury on Thursday. I intend to raise the issue of funding for these priorities and, indeed, other priorities. I agree with him in that I want us to move to a prosperity culture rather than a dependency culture. I also agree with him when he spoke about my approach to Treasury. It has not been said explicitly to me, but I am aware, because I do my research before I talk to people, that the fill-their-boots mentality has damaged us in our approach to Treasury. The Members opposite, Mr Storey and Mr Frew, raised a range and litany of sins of the last Executive but ignored the enormous elephant over on those Benches: RHI. They talked about our approach to Treasury, but that is the most damaging thing that has occurred in our approach to Treasury over the past number of years, yet we will try to get across. We are also trying to secure confidence and supply money, which was cut off by the person who tried to steer Theresa May's deal through Westminster and whose experience of the DUP caused him to cut off what was left of our money for rural broadband, our money for a mental health strategy and our money for deprivation. Without any notice, he cut off that money, and we are continuing to negotiate that.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. For clarity, I was not ignoring RHI. Maybe you missed the point where I said that, when I was in the post of Finance Minister, I contacted the Comptroller and Auditor General about the irregular spend. My eyes were not closed, so when you are reporting that, the generalisations are unfair and unwarranted.

Mr Murphy: I was alluding to that, and I agree with the Member. I was Deputy Chair of the Economy Committee, and I also brought it to the attention of the Comptroller and Auditor General on the first RHI briefing that we had that they should specifically look into that project before the flag had been raised very high. The Member and Mr Frew were arguing

vociferously that a failure to set a Budget was the greatest sin of the last Executive, and I am saying that there were much bigger sins in our dealings with Treasury. I am trying to get the confidence and supply money reinstated, and Members on the Benches opposite need to look at their own party's behaviour in Westminster as to why that has been so abruptly cut off and denied to us.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. His colleague talked about the hard job that a Finance Minister has, and I agree with her. The Minister has a difficult job, but how much more difficult is that job when a Finance Minister cannot even bring forward one page of a Budget, like your past colleague failed to do for this Chamber?

Mr Murphy: I think that your timelines are wrong. I listened to you, but you kind of lost me in the history of time on all that. I make the point to you again: if you think that that was the biggest sin in the last Executive, you are a long way skewed from reality.

Those are some of the issues that we are dealing with. Andrew Muir made a number of points that I want to deal with. I confirm that I intend to keep transparency in the monitoring round process so that Committees can effectively scrutinise the financial process. He also raised the issue of fiscal levers. It is important that the Executive have the autonomy that they need on fiscal levers so that we can make decisions in the best interests of our people. We may not change them, but it is important that we have that ability should the Executive and the Assembly decide to do so.

Andrew Muir also mentioned the timing of the Budget, which I have just referred to. It is a difficult decision. The Executive made it this morning. I announced it this afternoon. That followed Mr Stalford's earlier announcement. There was a judgement to be made on whether to go ahead of the Budget in London, which would mean having to reallocate quickly should any consequences flow from that. The alternative was trying to get more certainty, which gives us logistical difficulties in the time frame beyond 11 March. The Executive decided to go beyond 11 March to try to get more certainty in the process, recognising, of course, that that creates logistical difficulties not only for Departments but for public bodies and planning spend into the new financial year.

A common theme was that Members are not terribly satisfied about where we are in this process. I remind them that this is the Secretary of State's Budget. This institution has been in

place for five weeks. We will have a very uncertain financial year because we not only have to wait until 11 March for a Budget but we have to decide our own Budget. We move then into a Treasury spending review and, possibly, another Budget in the autumn in Britain.

A number of Members made general points on the unsatisfactory nature of the process. Unfortunately, that will be the feature of this year. There is a determination in the Executive to move to multi-year Budgets beyond that so that we can have much greater certainty. Members will have much earlier sight of what Departments are doing, what their proposals are and what bids they are making. They will see how we try to match those bids and then course that process over a number of years to see how it rolls out even beyond, certainly in indicative terms, the next mandate so that there is a clearer sense of how it is done.

I accept that nobody is arguing that where we are today is part of a very satisfactory process. However, we are trying to get the best level of scrutiny and trying to improve. No matter how early we came back, this was always going to be an uncertain financial year, given what is happening in London. We hope, from next year on, to get much more certainty into the process.

Mr Frew raised the issue that, at only three pages, there was insufficient detail in the Vote on Account. The Member needs to make sure that he does not confuse the Vote on Account with the setting of the 2020-21 Budget. The Vote on Account will always be a high-level document. The detail of the 2020-21 allocations and the services that they will deliver will be contained in the 2020-21 Main Estimates that I will bring to the Assembly later in the year. That will be an opportunity for members on all Committees to fully consider and debate the detail of the spending proposals in the Assembly. Only the Main Estimates can authorise those detailed expenditure plans, not the high-level Vote on Account that we are talking about today.

Mr Carroll had the same misapprehension. He thought that he was voting today to approve some detail. In fact, all that detail will come back to the relevant Committees for approval and scrutiny. Today, we are voting to confirm spending that has already happened. That is to allow a degree of spending into the new financial year so that Departments do not run out of money. The full spending for the new financial year will come with the Budget and with the Main Estimates that follow it.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way on this very important point. I do not want to play politics, but the point that I was trying to raise was about doing things differently. When we talk about the Vote on Account for 2020-21, that is 45% of next year's expenditure. That is not small beer. That is a fundamental slice of the Budget for next year. We debate that here and then move on to an Estimates period. By that point, it is a fait accompli. We will have sleepwalked into that decision without having seen the detail necessary to scrutinise the Budget properly.

Mr Murphy: I do not agree with the Member. I said that, beyond the time of the Budget, the Main Estimates will be scrutinised and debated in the Chamber. There will be a Budget debate on the principles of what it is being proposed to spend, the bids that were able to be met as a consequence of whatever resources we manage to attract over the next number of weeks and how it is proposed to allocate them. We will then bring the Main Estimates to the House. None of the expenditure being voted on today for the new financial year has full authority. The only thing that has been authorised are the detailed expenditure plans, which are voted for in the Main Estimates. There has to be a degree of allowing Departments some authority to spend money into the new financial year — I think the figure of 45% is given — but the detailed approval of that comes on the other side of the Budget and before we hit the summer period, so people have an opportunity to give it proper scrutiny.

I realise that, for a lot of Members, given the very short time frame we have had in the run-up to this debate, there was more concern about scrutiny and making sure that we are across the decisions that are being taken. I repeat the point that this year will not be a very satisfactory year for examining the finances, but we will have an opportunity to look in detail at all the proposed spending for the next financial year. If we can, and the intention is that we will get into a multi-annual budgeting situation, I think that will give us much more certainty going forward.

Mr O'Toole is no longer with us, but he raised the point about the late Treasury announcement that it will give us an additional £18 million resource, which we allocated — people will have seen the statement I submitted to the Assembly last week on this — but it reduced by £52 million the capital available to us, which we, obviously, have to hold over until next year because we cannot deliver capital savings of that scale in the four or five weeks left in the financial year. That means we will start off with a lower baseline in next year's

capital budget. We have complained, and we are trying to arrange dates for next week for the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers and I can meet the Treasury, because they have also suffered the same experience of a very late readjustment to capital and resource budgets. It is not a satisfactory way of doing business. It was a very late announcement to us by Treasury, and the three Finance Ministers are going together to make sure that we emphasise the point that is not how we want to see business being done in the future.

I have responded to Mervyn Storey. On the audit reports, I absolutely accept that there are issues about austerity, which I can certainly refer to, and issues about how Treasury views previous spending, but we cannot ignore substantial reports about how we can spend better and improve systems. I will, as he suggested, look into the voluntary exit scheme to see how it has been rolled out and what the benefits are. I am not sure whether it was built into the scheme, but I know it has been discussed since that people who left under the scheme should not have been allowed to come back into the system and continue to be paid by the public purse. Whether that has been established in it, I do not know, but I am happy to look into it. I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee for many years, so I take the matter very seriously. The Public Accounts Committee performs a very valuable function in ensuring scrutiny across a broad range of spend, because Committees will rightly focus on their own departmental remits. Yes, of course, there are better ways we can do things, and we should always be striving to do better, be more efficient and ensure that there is no wastage, but there are many other issues at play with the finances available to Stormont.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Minister giving way. He has been very generous with his time. At a recent meeting with the Executive Office, we were informed by officials that it is likely that the total cost of addressing the historical institutional abuse scandal could run to more than £600 million. Five institutions have been identified in connection with the scandal, so can the Minister detail for the House what contact there has been with those institutions and what percentage of that £600-plus million he anticipates receiving from those institutions as a contribution?

Mr Murphy: The figures will, obviously, be estimates because it will be a demand-led experience. Undoubtedly, it will be a significant cost however it ends up. It is TEO's responsibility to deal with that. I understand that there has been some contact with the

institutions that are involved in the historical abuse inquiry outcome. I am not sure how detailed that contact has been. I imagine, and I am certain that, from the Finance Department's point of view, there has been no detailed discussion about a contribution or what level it should be; maybe the principle of a contribution has been discussed with the institutions. I agree with your point, and I think others made the point that those institutions involved in the abuse need to play their part.

It is not merely a responsibility for the public purse but a responsibility for the institutions responsible for the abuse that went on in their care at the time.

5.30 pm

As the Deputy Speaker said, a number of other Members covered a range of areas. I want to make best use of the time that I have left. I have obviously read, as Martina Anderson suggested, the report from Professor Hübner. Of course, that is for another debate, as John O'Dowd said, but it is certainly one that will be useful to have.

I have addressed Sinéad Bradley's point about the unsatisfactory nature of this process and her desire to move to multi-annual Budgets. Kellie Armstrong raised an issue about the Department for Communities. It is always an issue for us when Departments surrender money. The financial transactions capital is not money that we had that was given back unspent. Rather, it is money that is available if it can be spent. The legislation, as she said, is being finalised. The difficulty is that the legislation was to have been introduced in Westminster, but it was not because there was no time slot available. That is what I understand. The Department anticipated spending that money last year but the opportunity fell. Of course, we need to ensure that Departments that have access to financial transactions capital avail themselves of it and make use of it. That is something on which we will be engaging with all Departments. However, there was a genuine rationale behind the Department for Communities not being able to do that last year. The Minister for Communities' intention is to have that legislation introduced here as soon as possible. I support her in that endeavour.

Mr Allister asked me for the figures, and I will happily come back tomorrow with them. I had them noted down in response to a question that is anticipated tomorrow, so I will have them for him tomorrow. He may find that there is not

such a gap. Those are not our figures but figures done in Britain. Of course, when we estimate the tax take from here, we do not include a number of things, such as large corporations that are here and that raise revenue here but that pay their taxes in London. That tax take is therefore not included in our figures. As with all accountancy processes, we have to build in a number of caveats. When we estimate the spend here, we also include our contribution to the national debt, defence and the royal palaces, of which we have none. A range of contributions is scored against us, in an accountancy way, that add to what is considered to be the subvention. It is not simply a bald figure of, "This is what you get and what you do not get". It is not black and white. This is accountancy, and there are caveats. I am told that there is a plus or minus £3 billion, give or take, figure on that as well. I am happy to bring the figures tomorrow for Question Time and also to respond to Mr Allister's contribution.

It is an interesting argument that comes from the unionist Benches that the more impoverished we are, the stronger the union is. That is a bit of a perversion. I would rather see us be more prosperous and allowed to decide our own future than say, "What strengthens the union is the fact that we have a begging-bowl mentality here".

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Allister: The Minister distorts the argument. What is the strength of the union is the strength of the United Kingdom, the fifth biggest economy in the world.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Allister: That is why the union is a strong financial bond. He wants to take us into a supplicant state of the EU, which now has to pay money to the EU that it cannot even find.

Mr Murphy: As I said, the arguments on the union, economic benefits and reunification are for another day. What I will say is that the Member made his argument in the context of the fiscal deficit, and I am merely responding. He seems to think that the bigger the deficit, the stronger we are in the union. In other words, the more impoverished we are, the more reliant we are on the connection to the mother ship in Britain.

Almost all contributions in the debate were laced with references to austerity. Many

Members lamented the lack of funding that we have and how things are spent. Some of the criticisms of how Departments have done their business are very valid. Some of the criticisms of how we have done our business collectively in this institution are valid. Underpinning all that, however, is austerity. You can join the dots and arrive at the fact that we have had nine years of Budget reductions. We have £500 million less this year than we had in 2011-12. That cannot happen without there being some damage to public services. When a party, UCUNF — whatever we call that particular marriage — heralded the return of the Tories, and when a party had a choice in 2017 between a Labour Government that was promising an end to austerity and throwing its lot in with a Tory Government that gave us three or four more years of austerity, you cannot lament the choices that you made and blame everybody else for the fact that our public services have been crippled because of austerity policies that have come from London.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr Murphy: The Minister will take one last intervention.

Ms Dillon: Does the Minister agree that it is not only the institutions that are responsible for making an input to the HIA redress scheme? The British Government were the institution in charge here for a number of years. They were responsible for those children, and they let them down. They also need to pay up.

Mr Murphy: Of course some of the abuse took place during the old Stormont regime, right through the '50s, '60s and probably even further back, and some of it through the period of direct rule. Of course, there is an argument for the Government who had responsibility for oversight at that stage paying a share of that, and we intend to make that argument.

I go back to the point I was making. Austerity is a factor. It is not the only factor — there are other factors that we could look at — but it is the main factor in the reduction of the budgets available to us in our struggle and our challenge to provide decent public services. When people are examining all of the issues that face us, they should have that interlaced through it all. They should remember their support for parties that were embarking on programmes of austerity and which continued those programmes of austerity. They should recognise that and recognise their own contribution to all of that as the debate runs on

and as we debate whatever allocation we have for the Budget in the next number of weeks.

I draw my remarks to a close and thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, for your patience, and the Cheann Comhairle for his patience as well. The Assembly approval of the Supply motion today, and the associated departmental expenditure plans laid out in the 2019-2020 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2020-21 Vote on Account, is a crucial stage of the existing public expenditure cycle. Failure to pass these Supply resolutions at this juncture would put at risk the smooth continuation of public services for the remainder of this financial year and into the next financial year. I therefore commend the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2019-2020 and the Vote on Account for 2020-21 to the Assembly, and I ask Members to support the motions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the vote on this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £17,519,166,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2020 and that resources, not exceeding £21,022,321,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2020 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(c) and 3(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2019-2020 that was laid before the Assembly on 19 February 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We now move to the motion on the Vote on Account, which has already been debated. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that

the vote on this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,962,895,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £9,054,440,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates and Vote on Account 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 19 February 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Budget Bill: First Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA 02/17-22], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2020 and 2021; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for those years; to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31 March 2020; and to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of the sum appropriated for the year ending 31 March 2021.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Speaker is satisfied that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

I inform Members that the Speaker has received a letter from the Committee for Finance informing him that, in order to ensure that the Budget Bill can proceed, the Committee has reluctantly agreed that, without prejudice to the level of detail that the Committee will expect when the Department of Finance consults the Committee on future Budget Bills, the Committee is satisfied that under these extenuating circumstances, in this case only, the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2).

Adjourned at 5.41 pm.

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