



# Official Report (Hansard)

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Blair, John (South Antrim)  
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Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)  
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Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
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Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)  
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Dunne, Stephen (North Down)  
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Maskey, Alex (Speaker)  
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Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)  
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Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Weir, Peter (Strangford)  
Wells, Jim (South Down)  
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 24 March 2022

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**22 March 2022**

**Mr Speaker:** The first item of business in the Order Paper is the consideration of business not concluded on Tuesday 22 March. As all business was disposed of on Tuesday, we will move on.

Members, take your ease for one moment, please.

## Ministerial Statements

### Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must also do that, but they may do so by rising in their place as well as notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions: this is not an opportunity for debate per se, and long introductions should not be made. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on my decisions regarding future agricultural policy for Northern Ireland. I published the future agricultural policy framework for Northern Ireland on 24 August 2021. That document identified four key outcomes of increased productivity, environmental sustainability, improved resilience and an effective functioning supply chain that together constitute my long-term vision for the Northern Ireland agriculture industry.

Over the coming decade, the agri-food industry in Northern Ireland will face many significant developments from the impact of changes to our climate, changing internal markets and trading relationships, consumer demand and technological advances and, most recently,

escalating input costs as a result of the war in Ukraine. We face many challenges, but with challenges there are, of course, opportunities. I want Northern Ireland to have a farming sector that is sustainable, resilient, productive and profitable. Since the framework portfolio document was published in August 2021, my officials have worked to progress the policy proposals that constitute the components of future agriculture policy.

I launched a public consultation on my future agricultural policy proposals for Northern Ireland on 21 December 2021 for a period of eight weeks. The consultation sought responses to 60 questions and gave the opportunity for respondents to provide views and comments. The consultation was supported by a communications plan that included notification to a wide range of stakeholders across the agriculture and environment sectors, a series of well-attended consultation information sessions, press releases, radio interviews and advertisements in the farming press, along with an extensive social media campaign. A total of 339 responses were received, 55 of which were from organisations; of those, 30 were from farming organisations and 11 from environmental organisations. Of the 284 responses received from individuals, almost half identified as farmers. I also welcomed the position paper provided by the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I take the opportunity to thank the Committee for taking the time to consider the policy proposals and for providing very helpful comments and recommendations.

Overall, respondents welcomed the opportunity to comment on the future agricultural policy proposals and looked forward to playing an effective role in the future development of a sustainable agriculture industry. Across the majority of respondents, there was a sense of opportunity for Northern Ireland to redefine its agricultural policy for the first time in almost 50 years and to develop a future agricultural policy that is better suited to local needs and will underpin long-term sustainability in the industry.

Today, I announce my policy decisions on future agricultural support. Before I do so, however, I want to take a few minutes to say something about the importance of agricultural support. As the House is aware, farm support administered by my Department has a significant influence on the economic viability of the industry and its competitive position relative to that in other regions. Over the last five years, direct payments amounting to £1.3 billion have accounted for 87% of the cumulative total net income of the Northern Ireland agriculture

industry. In two of those years, the industry as a whole would have been in a loss-making position without that support. That illustrates the importance of those payments in sustaining the industry in recent years and underpinning its competitive trading position. Equally, however, it highlights a vulnerable position, and long-term viability must be secured. The agri-food sector, with the help of this support, continues to provide high-quality, safe, traceable food.

The actions of many generations of farmers and growers have also shaped the appearance of the landscape that we all enjoy today, our natural environment and the biodiversity that it supports. We have noted many times in the House the need for the agri-food sector to play its part alongside other sectors to ensure that excess nutrients do not seep into our waterways, that ammonia emissions are reduced to restore the health of our vulnerable habitats, that agriculture plays its fair share in our journey to net zero carbon and that biodiversity decline is halted and reversed.

With appropriately designed policy interventions and innovation, all of that can be achieved.

I will move on to decisions on future agriculture support. Today, I am publishing some 54 decisions, details of which are now available on the departmental website. Time will not permit me to go through each decision in detail — I am sure that you are glad, Mr Speaker — but I do want to cover some of them this morning.

I have announced a farm sustainability payment, which recognises the need for the continuation of an income support safety net. Initially, that measure will have the majority of the budget allocated to it. Over time, however, and in line with the capacity for delivery and uptake of new measures, its budget will be reduced to a much lower level as funding is released to other measures. The payment will be area-based and will use entitlements. All land-based agriculture and horticulture businesses that meet the eligibility conditions will be able to apply. Current basic payment scheme entitlements will be carried forward into the new regime. Current arrangements will continue in order to enable entitlements to be leased, transferred or sold.

Farm businesses that produced solely grass or grass silage and maintained land suitable for grazing or cultivation but that undertook no further activity during a two-year historical reference period — 2020 and 2021 — will not be eligible to claim the farm sustainability payment. There will be progressive capping of the farm sustainability payment above £60,000

per farm business. I have listened to the significant and numerous concerns raised by stakeholders about my proposals for a minimum claim size, and I have decided to set that minimum claim size at 5 hectares for the farm sustainability payment.

I am announcing a beef sustainability package with two parts to it: a suckler cow measure and a beef carbon reduction measure. Both measures are aimed at increasing productivity, making more efficient use of finite resources and driving down carbon emissions. Again, stakeholders raised concerns about the qualifying criteria for age at first calving, calving interval and age at slaughter and about the pace of implementation that was suggested in the consultation document. Officials have undertaken extensive analysis of the data held on the animal and public health information system (APHIS), and I have relaxed the targets and the pace of implementation to ensure that a significant proportion of the farm businesses can meet the targets over four years. We can then move forward together to increase productivity and reduce the carbon footprint.

No further proposals for support to incentivise productivity in breeding ewes are being brought forward at this stage. Work will, however, be undertaken to explore options for support that will improve the overall performance and resilience of the sheep sector. That will include work to explore how the sheep sector could be incentivised to provide baseline performance data to inform future sector support measures and to engage in a future ruminant genetics programme.

The Department will now proceed to develop the Farming for Nature package through co-design with stakeholders and in line with the principles stated in the consultation document, with an initial focus on actions to reverse the declining trends by creating and restoring habitats that are important for species diversity. All land managers with 3 hectares or more of eligible land who meet the scheme requirements will be eligible to participate in the Farming for Nature package. That includes land under conacre agreements and common land. In principle, a cap on the level of payment available under the Farming for Nature package will be applied. Work will progress on the detail of a cap, including the appropriate level, as elements of scheme design, such as agreement length, are developed.

The need for low carbon emission farming practices was broadly supported during the consultation. I have asked officials to develop low carbon emission farming practices on

reducing the numbers of older cattle and improving suckler cow productivity through the beef sustainability package; on providing further options to reduce the age at first calving and to ensure that replacement rates in the dairy sector are co-designed with stakeholders; on the use of feed additives to reduce enteric methane emissions and nitrogen and phosphorus outputs, which will be progressed by collaborative industry research through a research challenge fund; on breeding cattle that are more environmentally efficient, which will be progressed through the ruminant genetics programme; on the use of urease inhibitor fertilisers, the optimal timing of fertiliser and slurry applications, and the establishment of grassland swards with legumes and herbs to reduce fertiliser nitrogen use, which will be progressed through applied research and knowledge transfer initiatives; on peatland re-wetting and sustainable management under the umbrella of the Northern Ireland peatland strategy; and on biomethane and hydrogen production from agricultural waste, developed through the green growth strategy, employing technologies to capture and recycle nutrients post-digestion that would otherwise be land-spread as farm animal slurries.

#### **10.45 am**

My Department will now proceed with the development of the investment measure on the basis of the guidelines and design principles set out in the consultation, including further engagement with stakeholders to gather evidence on the market failures affecting investment in the agriculture and horticulture sectors. We will develop and expand a suite of knowledge transfer and innovation programmes that build on the success of the current programmes delivered through the Northern Ireland rural development programme, to include an agri-food development programme for professionals interacting with farmers and growers. To encourage longer-term planning for farm businesses, a generational renewal programme will be developed, based on a three-phased approach, to include planning for succession, developing the successor and maintaining support for both generations. The future of the current young farmers' payment will be considered in the context of that programme.

The Department will engage with professional bodies in Northern Ireland dealing with land letting to seek to address some of the misunderstandings that exist around the relative merits of conacre versus long-term lets. The development of the supply chain measures will proceed on the basis of the future approach

and policy proposals set out in the consultation, including further engagement with stakeholders as we review existing measures and systems and explore opportunities to make improvements to meet the specific needs of Northern Ireland supply chains. DAERA will invest in the initiation of an industry-led ruminant genetics programme. Farmers will be required to provide data for the ruminant genetics programme as an eligibility condition for future support payments.

The current cross-compliance statutory management requirements/good agricultural and environmental conditions (SMRs/GAECs) will be replaced with a simplified system of farm sustainability standards. The current verifiable standards will be rewritten as a set of underlying requirements to better meet local needs, and a compliance regime and penalty system for non-compliance that is effective but fair will be devised for the farm sustainability standards. To support that, remote sensing and administrative controls will be used by default, and educational and communication resources will be developed to better inform farmers and improve understanding of their responsibilities and the sanctions that they may face if they do not meet those responsibilities.

All agricultural land is made eligible for payment except for hard features — for example, buildings, yards, laneways etc — under future area-based schemes. The Department will revise its land eligibility documentation effective from 1 January 2024. Further work is being undertaken to fully develop the seven high-level metrics to measure achievement against the four key outcomes. The horticulture policy proposals will be further developed through a pilot programme or programmes, working in consultation with relevant sub-sectors of the industry and focusing on the production of crops with good economic potential.

The purpose of this statement is to outline the decisions that I have taken on future agricultural policy for Northern Ireland. The policy decisions that I am announcing today are absolutely vital to support sustainable farming and rural communities in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I thank the Minister for his statement this morning on the future agricultural policy proposals. The Minister referred to his decision to increase the minimum claim size from 3 hectares to 5 hectares. Does he have any assessment of how many businesses that will impact, in that they currently receive the single farm payment but will not subsequently

be able to apply for the new resilience payment?

**Mr Poots:** The entitlements of businesses excluded from claiming the farm sustainability payment by the changes that I have announced today will not be confiscated. Businesses will retain the option to lease or sell their entitlements to another farm business. In addition, they may be eligible to apply for funding under a number of the other funding streams that fall under the future agricultural support package. Moving it back to 5 hectares, instead of going for the 10 hectares that was consulted on, will considerably reduce the numbers that fall out. The Committee suggested either 5 hectares or 7.5 hectares. I went for the lower option, and that reflected largely what came back from the consultation process.

**Mr Harvey:** Farming with nature is a key element of the policy, and I welcome the outcomes-based model that it follows. However, Minister, how will you ensure that all land types play their part in delivering for nature?

**Mr Poots:** There are so many opportunities in Northern Ireland to ensure that we do our bit to reduce the carbon footprint. For example, we have approximately 100,000 kilometres of hedges. Flailed hedges contain between 4 and 7 tons of carbon. Unflailed hedges contain between 10 and 45 tons of carbon. Do the figures: if the hedges in Northern Ireland were not flailed but were allowed to grow out completely, 4.5 million tons of carbon would be stored in hedges alone in Northern Ireland.

Interestingly, in the 27% that has always been applied to agriculture, that has never been included. It is entirely reasonable to believe that hedges are storing at least 1 million tons of carbon that is not currently accounted for. Single trees are not accounted for either; a mature oak tree, for example, stores 4 tons of carbon. If one thinks of the many hundreds of thousands of mature trees across our farms and of the saplings that are being planted, one sees a clear demonstration that much more work needs to be done to assess the levels of carbon that are sequestered and stored on our farms.

It is important that we look at what is stored underneath the ground in the big carbon sink that we call topsoil and at how carbon is sequestered in grassland and through peatland management, tree planting, hedgerow management — allowing our hedgerows to get wider and taller — and all those things.

Everybody can make a contribution, whether in the lowlands or the uplands, to ensuring that Northern Ireland does its bit in carbon reduction. We want to do it in a way that sustains agriculture in Northern Ireland, however. The nonsense of basically destroying agriculture as a means of saving the planet will not save the planet; it will starve it.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He made reference to the fact that, over the past five years, direct payments have accounted for 87% of net income to agricultural businesses. I note from the statement that the budget for the farm sustainability payment will reduce to a "much lower level". What projections has the Department made on the level to which it will be reduced? It will obviously have consequential, knock-on effects on the basic income for farming activity unless farms have supplementary incomes from elsewhere.

**Mr Poots:** The overall envelope will not fall, but its disbursement will change. People will be paid not on the basis of owned land but for working that land. The payments, particularly for suckler cows and beef finishing, will be set out. The figures are to be finalised, and I hope to announce them very soon, but, at the moment, we are looking at utilising around £50 million of the money that currently goes out in single farm payments. That sum will be taken from the basic payment scheme (BPS) and redistributed to people who are actively engaged in farming.

That is a means of ensuring that people make best use of the land. Land is and will be very precious. It is incumbent on us to ensure that land is well utilised. Ensuring that efficient farming takes place will therefore assist farmers not just to draw down finance from the Department but to become less financially reliant on it, because efficient farms are more profitable farms. We will drive that forward through the ruminant genetics programme and by reducing the period between calvings, the time that it takes to get a heifer in calf and the time that it takes to get that animal away into beef. All those things will make a significant change to the beef sector so that it becomes much more efficient.

**Mrs Barton:** Minister, thank you for your statement. You will be aware that the AERA Committee recently launched a report on the challenges in agriculture for women.

Unfortunately, I see nothing about women in agriculture in your statement. You talked about succession, for example. Will there be extra support to allow women to succeed to the

family farm? Many women have caring responsibilities. If women succeed to a family farm, many are prevented from carrying out some duties, such as the lambing of sheep, due to pregnancy. Have you thought about supporting those people?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for her question. Of course women contribute greatly to the operation of family farms in Northern Ireland. Training for women in agriculture was highlighted in the responses to the consultation on the future agricultural policy programme and in the recent report of the Committee that the Member sits on. As my officials work to develop knowledge transfer and innovation programmes, they will engage with industry and take appropriate actions to encourage the participation of women in those programmes. I spent most of yesterday at the Greenmount campus. It was fantastic to see the number of young women who are training in agriculture. The day before, I was at Loughry, and, again, a fantastic number of young women — in fact, the vast majority of students are young women — are going into the agri-food sector. When you apply for grants, you get a higher percentage if you have an education background in agriculture. Therefore, when those young women go back to the farms, those farms will have greater opportunities to progress than would otherwise be the case because of young women who have that agriculture training.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for the statement. I was a little surprised when I realised that it mentions the word "climate" only once and makes no mention at all of the Minister's Climate Change (No. 2) Bill. I thought that those matters would be integral to any agricultural policy that comes forward at this time. Will the Minister give an assurance today that the policy direction and sectoral plans, including one for agriculture, which the Minister indicated that he will bring forward, will be reframed to include climate change?

**Mr Poots:** I do not have time to go back to the statement, but it mentions the words "carbon" and "carbon reduction" on numerous occasions. The whole emphasis of the programme on beef is to ensure that we become efficient producers of beef animals and proteins. Carbon is captured by photosynthesis in grass, which is then put into soil. We have to make the best possible use of that grass. Grass is a wonderful thing, but humans do not eat it. Therefore, if we are to get good use of grass, we have to utilise it by producing animal proteins, which come in the form of milk and beef. Our dairy sector has shown great efficiencies, and that same

efficiency needs to be delivered on the beef side. That is why there is such a focus on the beef sector because there are massive opportunities to continue to produce the quantities of beef to support the agri-food processors in a smaller footprint of land. That will enable peatlands to be re-wetted and planting in other areas, which will come together to sustain agri-food and produce massive benefits for the environment simultaneously.

**Mr McGuigan:** It seems from the policy announcement that you are a Minister for only some farmers. The sheep sector in the North depends on direct support. The Department said that the sector is viable but vulnerable. However, you indicated that no support for sheep farmers will be brought forward at this stage. That will be very concerning for the multitude of sheep and hill farmers across the North, including those in my constituency of North Antrim. Do you agree that the sheep sector must be recognised for a direct support scheme, such as the previous area of natural constraint (ANC), which must be reinstated?

**11.00 am**

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for his question on the sheep sector. Most farms in the sheep sector are mixed and include suckler cows. The number of sheep-only farmers across Northern Ireland is relatively small. We recognise that they have done reasonably well over the past few years, but that is not to say that that will not change in future years. This is not a finished programme of change. It is the start of a process, not the end, of moving away from landowners, particularly big landowners, claiming on an asset but not actively farming it. Therefore, we need to work with the hill farmers, particularly in providing the support that they need to ensure the environmental improvement that the Member has demanded of farmers, so that we can do that in a way that ensures that they are not worse off.

The sheep sector has its role to play in the future, and we will want to develop how we assist the sheep sector, in the way that we assist the beef sector, to become better at what it does and to have a greater output from the grazing that takes place. There will be stresses on the land available as a result of peatland wetting and tree planting. That is just a reality that we all have to face and that all of us as politicians will have to talk to the farming community about. It is a reality of the Bill that was passed in the House that there will be a reduction in the land available. Therefore, that

efficiency will need to be driven forward. We will commence work almost immediately on how we can work with the sheep sector to develop such programmes. That will be more difficult than it is with the beef sector. The sheep sector will have a transfer of funding from the single farm payment.

**Mr Storey:** I am sure that the Minister will be aware, having listened to the Member who spoke before me, that the farmers of North Antrim will make an informed choice about who best supported farmers during this mandate of the Assembly. Thankfully, our hands have not been on any legislation that would have decimated and destroyed sheep farmers, beef farmers and the farming industry in its totality. I thank the Minister for his statement and for his leadership in the farming industry in Northern Ireland during the mandate and for his many visits to North Antrim.

The statement referred to the beef sector, something on which there has been lobbying for some time. How will the support that the Minister has outlined this morning drive sustainability and efficiency so that our farms will be profitable and will not be destroyed in the way that some Members would have done if they had had their way?

**Mr Poots:** It will do so, first, by having heifers calving at the optimum time, which is in and around 24 months, when they are big enough to have calves. They do not need to be grown out considerably longer to do that; they need to calve at the optimum time. Secondly, we need to ensure that they calve quickly. Instead of running on for 400-plus days, we want to get a much tighter calving pattern: close to a calf every year. Thirdly, we need to ensure that the calf is taken away to be beefed. Year by year, we are reducing the age for the payment to get people to that point.

It will not be a big bang or a sudden shock. It will be a progressive scheme that will deliver that efficiency over five years. We will then deliver a substantial number of kilos of animal protein, but we will do that in a much more efficient way that will enable other uses of land to kick into play and meet the contributions to carbon reduction that the House has requested of us.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, work has been going on for some time on the ammonia action plan. May I get an update on that?

With reference to the statement, can you outline the benefits of removing grass silage growers from the payment system?

**Mr Poots:** First, I regret that I will not get the ammonia action plan to the House before the end of the mandate. Considerable work has been done, a lot of good progress has been made and we have, for the first time, reduced ammonia emissions across Northern Ireland and by a large amount not a small amount. We also have a suite of measures in place to continue to reduce ammonia emissions.

On the issue of grass-only growers, a lot of people own plots of land and, basically, grow a bit of grass and sell it off without making much investment. We want to encourage more active farmers. We do not want to encourage people holding on to those plots of land just to draw down the single farm payment. We want to encourage people to engage in the production of crops, dairy products, beef, sheep and so forth. We are moving away from including grass growers in the payment because it is a disincentive to younger people coming into farming and makes it more difficult for them to rent land to develop and build up their farms. We needed to remove that disincentive for the younger population come in and make something of the farms that they have.

**Mr Beggs:** I declare an interest as owner of 25 acres of agricultural land; also, my parents run a small agricultural business.

There is a shortage of fertiliser, and the Minister has referred to the present difficulties in Ukraine that are contributing to that. That shortage exists even at the exorbitant cost of £1,000 per ton. I learned this morning that Canada is advising its farmers to plant only 60% of their crop because of the shortage of fertiliser there. What role can government play in ensuring that supermarkets bear a fair proportion of the costs? If the costs are shared, they will not fall solely on the producer while the supermarkets continue to make exorbitant profits.

**Mr Poots:** The Government have a grocery adjudicator. Whether anyone thinks that it does a lot of good or not is another matter, and I have my doubts about how effective it has been. The lack of fertiliser is potentially a bigger problem than the lack of grain that is coming out of Ukraine. The feedback that I get is that grain was planted in the wintertime in Ukraine and is still being planted. The question is whether it will be able to get out. The amount that comes out will certainly be considerably less than it was in the previous year because

quite a number of farmers are not planting. However, there still will be grain planted in Ukraine.

The second issue is the problem with fertiliser. That will lead to reduced crops, but it will also lead to environmental benefits because fertiliser releases nitrous oxide. It will not be a bad thing environmentally, but it will be a bad thing for crop production. I have talked about Egypt: it has a population of 120 million and has put out tenders for wheat but has not got them filled. It scares me that we will be looking at a real problem in Saharan regions of Africa, in particular, due to the non-availability of the food that they rely on. There will also be problems with costs for people here who have chickens and produce pork and so forth. It is a global problem. Therefore, global prices will rise, and the supermarkets will have no choice but to move up with them. That is something that we are well aware of.

It is anticipated that cereal growers will probably achieve around 70% greater profitability this year, so we have chosen not to incentivise them because the incentive already exist with the price. If we had a lot more cereal production, the problem would be that we would not have the fertiliser to go with that.

**Ms Sheerin:** In paragraph 36 of your statement, you refer to a "Generational Renewal Programme". I was shocked not to see any reference to women at that point, given the fact that we know that only 5% of farm owners across the North are women, and the Committee has worked on encouraging women into agriculture. You also say that you are considering the future of the young farmer payment. What action will you take to encourage young farmers into the industry and women into agriculture?

**Mr Poots:** I am mindful of the need to encourage females into farming and agriculture and to eliminate perceived barriers to their accessing the industry as a viable career path. I am very heartened by the number of young women whom I see on farms. That transformation is taking place before our very eyes. When I went to Greenmount 40 years ago, there were seven women. We now have a majority of women at Greenmount and at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) in general. That transformation is taking place before our very eyes.

It is vital that everybody, male or female, who is taking over the management and leadership of a business be appropriately qualified for the

role. Future support arrangements will be open to all farm business owners if they meet the conditions, irrespective of their gender. However, we reflect on work streams in order to ensure that there is greater engagement with females in the industry, and, as they work to develop knowledge transfer and innovation programmes, my officials will engage with the industry and take appropriate actions to encourage the participation of females in those programmes. We are absolutely committed to supporting women who want to farm, who come into farming and who do an extremely good job when they come into it.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement.

## **Bovine Tuberculosis in Northern Ireland**

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make another statement.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on my decisions on the way forward for a new strategy to eradicate bovine tuberculosis from Northern Ireland.

It has been a priority for me since taking up my post to put in place a new long-term strategy for the eradication of bovine TB from the cattle herd in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to now be able to update the House on the actions that I intend to introduce as part of that strategy. I believe that we need a realistic and pragmatic strategy that will move Northern Ireland towards the eventual eradication of TB in the most cost-effective way. We need to create an intensive programme that, when fully implemented, aims to finally drive this dreadful disease from our cattle population.

My Department has consulted extensively with our key stakeholders, the wider public and the AERA Committee in developing the new strategic approach. Through the farming industry and government working in partnership, our aim is to reduce and, ultimately, eradicate TB in the most effective way and within a realistic time frame.

Bovine TB is a pernicious disease that has a devastating impact on our cattle industry. It is complex and costs the public purse about £40 million each year. In addition, industry has had to bear the cost of lost production, the loss of

breeding stock that has been built up over years and, of course, the huge emotional burden of seeing animals destroyed. Our efforts to date have, at best, kept the disease in check, but they have not made a significant change to incidence rates. That has to change.

The £40 million annual bill to deliver our programme provides a powerful incentive to achieve eradication. That year-on-year expenditure is a poor use of public money and has been criticised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). That is not sustainable. The increasing pressures on the public purse and public services, particularly as we seek to recover from the economic impact of COVID-19, are key drivers for change. So, too, is our ambition to secure new trade for Northern Ireland, where the high standards of health in our agri-food sector are and will continue to be a crucial selling point for new markets.

The proposals that are outlined in my new departmental strategy are based on the experience of and evidence from other jurisdictions and on solid scientific research. Following a public consultation, I have carefully considered the views of all our stakeholders, and I have weighed those up against the evidence and information in a detailed business case and the recently completed strategic environmental assessment.

I pay tribute to the work of the TB strategic partnership group (TBSPG), which, in 2016, produced a comprehensive report and a series of recommendations to eradicate TB. Its work laid the foundations on which the new strategy is built. I also acknowledge the contribution of the TB eradication partnership (TBEP), which has played a key role in providing independent advice and challenge as my Department developed the strategy.

### **11.15 am**

Fully eradicating TB will take time; there is no quick fix. It will be a difficult and challenging process for all concerned. It will require a strong, committed partnership between government and the industry to see it through to ultimate success. The new strategy recognises and seeks to address all the factors that contribute to disease spread and the maintenance of this costly disease. This is a holistic approach to TB. It will deliver measures that will reduce the impact of TB in the short term while laying the necessary foundations for the eventual eradication of this disease.

We will deliver the actions in the strategy through a series of phases once

implementation commences. We will set goals for each phase that are shared by government and industry. We will review what we have achieved and, after each phase, set new targets and refresh our strategy for the next phase. The strategy addresses three key areas, broadly speaking, with new proposals that relate to cattle measures, others that relate to finance and funding, and, finally, measures that relate to the emotive and difficult issue of tackling the role of wildlife in TB maintenance and spread.

On cattle measures, I intend to introduce additional enhancements to the existing TB testing programme, including the compulsory use of the interferon-gamma blood test where deemed necessary. My officials will work with TBEP and the industry on the criteria for that testing. I also intend to introduce new powers to enable the testing of non-bovines. That will build on the current programme, support farmers suffering TB breakdowns and play an active part in getting rid of this disease.

We will also work with the TB eradication partnership, our independent advisory body and local farmers to improve biosecurity and herd health. My officials will explore how we may pilot new and enhanced approaches and provide support. That will include exploring how we can help farmers make more-informed decisions when purchasing new stock.

We will strengthen and develop our partnership with private veterinary practitioners. Our private vets are already key to the delivery of our testing and surveillance programme, and in the future, they will play an even greater role, working with individual farmers to provide farm-specific advice on how to keep their herds free of TB. We will establish local groups and governance structures in response to significant TB outbreaks to work better with farmers and vets to focus efforts to address such outbreaks and to minimise their impact.

We will broaden the scope of research into the nature and cause of TB infection and spread. We have a number of ongoing research projects, which include looking at TB in deer, the role of fragmented farms, and identifying and mapping strains of TB across Northern Ireland. The new strategy demonstrates our commitment to utilising the best scientific evidence to tackle TB and will enhance the role played by TBEP in identifying research priorities.

As I have mentioned, the annual cost of the TB programme is around £40 million, with around half of that paid in compensation for infected

cattle. Compensation costs are expected to be even higher this year, at around £27 million, as compensation costs for individual reactors have risen. That is simply not sustainable and is a drain on the public purse. I have considered proposed changes to the levels and rates at which compensation is paid, including reductions from the current overall 100% value of cattle paid in compensation for those compulsorily removed under the Department's programme.

It is right that the compensation system is looked at as part of the overall strategy. The reform will underpin the strategy's principles of working in partnership with the industry, sharing costs, sharing delivery and sharing ownership. Changes would also help to re-balance the financial cost of our TB programme. However, I am very aware that the farming industry faces a number of challenges now and in the immediate future. Many farmers operate good buying practices and put in place strong biosecurity but still face TB breakdowns due, in some instances, to the role of wildlife in TB spread.

Taking that into account, I am not content to proceed with the introduction of a cap on individual compensation payments of £5,000, and, whilst I am supportive of a reduction on the level of compensation paid from the current 100%, I do not intend to implement that change now. Instead, I have asked officials to review the position two years after the implementation of the full strategy.

As I have emphasised, to eradicate TB, all factors that contribute to the spread and maintenance of the disease in the environment must be addressed. I am satisfied that wildlife, particularly badgers, are a significant factor in the maintenance and spread of TB. I do not believe there is any argument about whether badgers have TB or that they can represent a disease risk to cattle. They therefore play an important role in the disease picture that must be addressed.

I have considered the evidence presented to me and critically considered the experience of other jurisdictions across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

It is my intention to introduce a programme of badger intervention in areas of high TB incidence, initially through a cull of badgers. In the long term, I wish to see a move to a programme of badger vaccination. Addressing TB in cattle and badgers will, I hope, lead us to a position in which we have a healthy population of both cattle and badgers.

I am aware, however, that this is an extremely emotive matter, with strongly held positions on both sides of the debate. I assure Members that I have considered the options presented to me, the scientific evidence, the experience of other jurisdictions, the robust analysis of the necessary business case, the responses to last summer's consultation and the environmental reports. Following that consideration, I have decided that the most cost-effective and practical way forward is to implement a limited cull of badgers in specific intervention areas where there is a high incidence of TB breakdown and a high density of badgers. It is my intention that that should be delivered broadly in line with the model used in England of the shooting of badgers by skilled and trained operatives, deployed through bodies established and led by farmers.

DAERA will oversee and manage that. We will identify intervention areas and invite applications from farmer-led bodies that have the necessary resources and expertise. Shooters will be required to undergo specific training. DAERA will carry out ongoing monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that high welfare standards are adhered to. The costs for on-the-ground delivery will be fully met by the new farmer-led bodies, but I have been asked by officials to explore whether any other financial assistance can be considered prior to implementation.

For too long, a key factor in underpinning success has been the role that wildlife plays in TB spread. I have therefore asked my Department to progress the necessary work to ensure that wildlife intervention commences as soon as possible. I very much appreciate that some of the changes may be difficult. As I mentioned, this is a very emotive matter. I am aware of the concerns expressed in the consultation by many conservation bodies, of the two public petitions laid in the House and, indeed, of the concerns of some Members, but I am determined to act, because the current position cannot continue. I must do all that I can to address all aspects of TB.

It is important that I make some key points absolutely clear and dispel some of the misinformation that has occurred, particularly about wildlife intervention. This is not the wholesale removal of badgers across Northern Ireland. It is not the eradication of badgers. It is not a shooting free-for-all. It is not anti-badger. Rather, it is a targeted intervention, limited specifically to those areas where badgers may play a significant role in the maintenance of TB in cattle. Evidence from England is that that approach meets welfare standards and has

been effective in contributing to reducing disease spread in intervention areas there.

As Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I recognise the challenges of TB across the industry, the need to protect and enhance wildlife, and the necessary actions that government must take to support and sustain our rural communities. We must therefore now take the steps needed to address the impact that TB has on Northern Ireland. As highlighted, it is the source of significant stress for our farm families and has the potential to inflict serious damage on the wider agri-food industry and its ability to trade on a global scale. For too long, the disease has had a devastating impact on our farming community. Since taking up office as Minister, I have made the eradication of bovine TB a top priority, and I am determined to take every action possible to achieve that goal.

I care deeply about the environment and the wildlife that lives in it. I want to see a healthy population of both cattle and wildlife and to ensure that everyone with a vested interest in the eradication of the disease moves forward together on the next steps towards bovine TB eradication. I want to work together in the short term to reduce TB levels and in the longer term to eradicate the disease from the Northern Ireland herd. The measures that I seek to progress will underpin the great ability of our wonderful farming and processing industry to trade.

This is a strategy not just for today but for the young farmers of tomorrow. I have listened to farmers, veterinary bodies, conservation groups and fellow MLAs, and, although they may have different perspectives, they all want the same thing as I do, which is the eradication of TB from Northern Ireland. I therefore ask for your support for the measures that I intend to introduce.

I thank all stakeholders for their ongoing constructive engagement with us on eradicating bovine TB. I know that success will be achieved through a shared understanding of the issue and a shared commitment to the goals that I have outlined. I commend the strategy to the House.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I thank the Minister for his statement.

TB is a serious issue. It can impact on our international trade. We recently heard that approximately 1,000 cattle are culled per month as a consequence of TB, which is a very

serious disease. Minister, you referred to biosecurity measures to prevent TB. Is the Department minded to support farmers in order to enhance on-site biosecurity measures to prevent the spread of TB? That is certainly something that the AERA Committee has recommended.

**Mr Poots:** One thing that we are encouraging in our future agriculture policies is wider hedges. Wider hedges can help to prevent nosing and can be augmented by good fencing. We have supported those areas in particular through fencing programmes in our environmental farming schemes (EFS). Good biosecurity should be practised by each and every farmer to ensure, through good fencing, that the animals on their farm do not have the opportunity to mix with other animals and to ensure that people who visit their farms go through biosecurity measures before entering the farms, including proper foot dips and all of that. Some of the costs are not big, but the measures involve people consistently taking appropriate steps to ensure that disease does not spread from farm to farm, albeit we believe that the most significant spread will be from wildlife to bovines and bovines to wildlife. Logically, therefore, consistently eradicating the bovines without doing the same for the wildlife in the area will only introduce fresh animals to be reinfected, and that position is not sustainable.

**Mr Harvey:** Minister, do you agree that the wildlife intervention is needed to maximise the success of the next phase of the policy, which is primarily vaccination, by breaking the cycle of infection and reducing the infection load?

**Mr Poots:** Yes. If people want to see the logic of that, they can just look at the response to COVID-19. The first thing that we did was have a lockdown to reduce the incidence, and then we had a vaccination policy. We will have to do the same with bovine TB: reduce the incidence. Unfortunately, that will involve the culling of animals. Up to this point, we have culled only the bovine population, but this intervention may involve the culling of deer and badgers as well. Then there will be vaccination. You get control of the disease — get on top of it — and then you vaccinate to allow a healthy wildlife population and a healthy agricultural population to live side by side without causing each other harm.

**Mr McGlone:** Minister, are you aware that the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) in GB is conducting, or has conducted, clinical field trials on a cattle Bacillus Calmette-Guérin

vaccine in Hertfordshire? The Chief Veterinary Officers in England, Scotland and Wales described those as "ground-breaking field trials". Has anything further been done by the Chief Veterinary Officer and his staff here to explore the success of those trials?

**Mr Poots:** We constantly monitor everything that goes on with bovine TB, because it is such a scourge in Northern Ireland. Our veterinary team has been looking at what has happened in other countries and at every other opportunity. We believe that vaccination has a role, but that we first have to break the level of TB that exists. If you have a population of badgers, for example, in which 20% or more in a local group could have TB, you have to reduce that first before the vaccination will be effective. That is the unfortunate circumstance that we find ourselves in. There is such a high prevalence of TB in wildlife populations in parts of Northern Ireland that you cannot just go in and vaccinate and hope that that will sort it out. It will work in the future, but first of all we need to break down the high incidence of TB. Unfortunately, that involves some reduction taking place in areas where infection is high.

**11.30 am**

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you for your statement, Minister. In paragraph 17, you say:

*"I also intend to introduce new powers to enable the testing of non-bovines."*

Can you expand on that, please?

**Mr Poots:** Yes. Other ruminants can carry bovine TB. That includes deer. There are some farmed deer, which are currently not tested. There would be the opportunity to carry out tests on farmed deer. I do not fancy doing that job myself, because they can be a bit frisky. Nonetheless, we need to ensure that we find and get rid of the reservoirs of bovine TB, because, if we do not, it will continue to exist and spread. Certainly, we will be looking at the testing of farmed deer.

**Mr Blair:** My opposition to widespread culling is on record here. In the recent past, I presented a petition of over 10,000 signatures to the House. I want to record again my thanks to the USPCA and Ulster Wildlife for bringing that forward.

Last week, a report that was published in the 'Vet Record' concluded that there is no evidence that badger culling has had any meaningful impact on the incidence of bovine TB in England. Does that not, therefore, bring

into question the use of public money for culling? Did the Minister consider diverting that investment towards biosecurity on farms or the use of more effective cattle testing and vaccination?

**Mr Poots:** First, we are not using public money for the intervention; it will be paid for by the industry itself. Secondly, if you want to talk about public money, we are looking at spending close to £50 million on bovine TB this year. That has already been criticised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. I note that the Member referred to one report. However, a series of evidence has been provided to us that indicates that the unfortunate process of the culling of wildlife leads to significant reductions in TB in those areas. It also indicates that it will lead to the expansion of other wildlife species, such as hedgehogs and bumblebees, because, often, a high prevalence of badgers can actually reduce the numbers of other wildlife species.

**Mr McGuigan:** Minister, as you know, the island of Ireland is a single epidemiological unit. We need to cooperate if we are to eradicate bovine TB. Any policy divergence between North and South could undermine proposals that are contained in the new strategy. How does the Department intend to cooperate with the Southern Government on the implementation of the new strategy?

**Mr Poots:** We have had discussions, particularly with the veterinary side in the Republic of Ireland, as to what they have carried out. We listened closely to what they recommended. They have been carrying out a culling policy for some years. That has led to a situation where there is considerably less incidence of bovine TB in the Republic of Ireland than in Northern Ireland. That was weighed in the decisions that we made. Perhaps it would enable us to get into a better circumstance in terms of the food that we produce if we had reduced significantly the bovine TB that exists.

I hope that, at some point, we get to a stage where we have the vaccination programme rolled out and bovine TB becomes like brucellosis — a thing of the past. That would be a laudable goal for us all, and it would lead, ultimately, to a thriving wildlife population, because we would have dealt with the disease and, therefore, badgers transmitting TB to cattle, cattle transmitting TB to badgers, badger-to-badger transmission and cow-to-cow transmission would cease. That would be really beneficial to animal welfare. To sit back and say

that we should do nothing would, at this stage, achieve nothing.

Someone once said, "How do you define madness?". It is to keep repeating the same thing and to expect a different result. We have to draw a line under that and stop doing the same thing and expecting different results. Let us do something and get the different result that is really needed.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Clearly, there are some in the House who want to continue with the same old, same old and get the same outcomes at a huge cost to the public purse and to farms in Northern Ireland. The Minister is absolutely right: it is a scourge. We have seen the consequences on farms in our constituencies of what bovine TB does to our farm industry and to the economy.

On the policy announcement, does the Minister agree that reducing TB will improve our ability to access new markets? I think that the Chair of the Agriculture Committee mentioned the cost of that. When we have that intervention, we will see the benefit, which ultimately will be to the advantage of farming for everybody in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Poots:** Some of the biggest markets in the world have already expressed concern at the high levels of bovine TB in Northern Ireland. In spite of the fact that you cannot transmit bovine TB through beef, people in importing countries have expressed their concerns at the high levels. From an international reputational position, we need to do something about it.

My number-one priority is that the mass cull of cows every year becomes a thing of the past. A wider cull in the first instance will lead to many more animals not getting bovine TB, and there will therefore be a healthier population of bovine animals and wildlife.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I have to declare that I am not from a farming background, so I am listening with interest to all this. Some years ago, the Public Accounts Committee investigated bovine TB, and the conclusion was that there was no proven link of transmissibility between badgers and bovine animals. The Minister's statement says:

*"it is a targeted intervention, limited specifically to those areas where badgers may play a significant role in the maintenance of bovine TB in cattle."*

I am not necessarily disagreeing with the Minister's approach, but does that indicate that there is still some doubt about it?

**Mr Poots:** There is little doubt about the spread of TB between badgers and cattle. There are different strains of TB across Northern Ireland; there is not just one strain of TB. It is like COVID; there are different strains. The strains in the wildlife population in particular areas are the strains that the cattle will have in those areas and vice versa. Animals in County Fermanagh will have a different strain of TB from animals in County Down, County Antrim and so forth. The linkages are very clear.

The word "may" is used because there is work to be done by the veterinary side for it to say, "It is OK to cull in that area because we believe that the evidence is strong enough to do that", and, in other places, the evidence may not be strong enough, and vets will say, "No, we are not culling in that area". A lot of the work will continue to rest with the veterinary side to make those decisions. It is not a free-for-all culling of badgers across Northern Ireland. It will be confined to high-intensity areas.

I spoke to a young farmer this week whose partner had a baby recently, and his herd has just been wiped out by half. He said, "I still have my repayments to make. I still have other things going on on my farm, and my income has dropped dramatically as a consequence". Two weeks ago, I spoke to a young farmer in County Londonderry who has lost his entire herd. There are very progressive young farmers who have really high standards of herd management, and, in spite of that, their herds are still getting infected with TB.

Many women involved in farming have written to me expressing the trauma, loss and devastation that befell the family farm as a consequence of losing so many animals. I visited a farm in Downpatrick, and I watched as many young animals that, commercially, had a lot of life left in them were loaded on to a lorry. I talked to the farmer and the family, and the devastation that was left behind there was unreal. We need to realise that is not just about the animals but about the people who farm those animals. The impact and trauma caused to them, leading to some taking their own lives, are immense. Therefore, doing nothing is not an option.

**Miss Woods:** Although we have had two statements from the Minister this morning, there has been nothing about the significant damage to wildlife and the environment caused by the

fires burning on our hills and mountains, which is very disappointing.

The Minister's statement talks about caring "deeply" about wildlife, yet he is happy to sign off on the shooting of protected animals. He talks about scientific evidence but ignores the scientists and the research that highlights the ineffectiveness of killing badgers when it comes to the spread of TB. Has the Minister read section 20 of the Northern Ireland Act, and, if so, why does he not view the shooting and killing of protected species as a "significant" and "controversial" matter that should be referred to the Executive?

**Mr Poots:** I hear the Member, and I am sorry, but it is not me who is not listening to the scientific and veterinary advice; it is the Member. I have struggled with this for two years. I have worked with the Veterinary Service. Let us be honest: people in the Veterinary Service have the greatest expertise on this subject. They have spent years dealing with it. They took specialist university degrees to achieve that expertise, and the veterinary specialism is one of the hardest courses to get on to. Therefore, the people advising me on this matter are the best available, yet the Member tells me to ignore their advice. I am sorry; I am not prepared to do that.

Re section 20, I took legal advice on what I needed to do. Obviously, we do not have a sitting Executive at this point, and I have no doubt that some people will wish to test us, but I have done what I was legally advised to do.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement, Members. If Members are content, we will move on to the next item in the Order Paper.

## Environment Strategy

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that he wishes to make another statement.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you again, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I wish to make a statement on Northern Ireland's first overarching environment strategy.

It is no exaggeration to say that never before have we faced such environmental challenges as those that confront us today. On a global scale, there is unprecedented pressure from population growth, the impact of fossil fuels and

unsustainable living. The impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, droughts and wildfires, pose a real risk to communities and livelihoods across the world. Locally, our environment is under threat from pollution in its many forms.

Action is required if we are to respond realistically to the challenges of climate change, the deterioration of habitats, the loss of biodiversity and the impacts of pollution on land and at sea, including plastic pollution. Meeting and dealing with these challenges can be achieved only through global cooperation in tandem with local grassroots initiatives. We all have a responsibility in meeting these challenges, and it is incumbent on all of us to protect and preserve our local environment as we strive to protect and preserve our planet for future generations.

Against that background, on 11 November 2021, I launched a formal consultation on a draft environment strategy for Northern Ireland during my visit to COP26 in Glasgow. The draft strategy set out a vision for the future of Northern Ireland's environment and the Executive's role in dealing with the challenges that we face. I also advised Members of my intention to adopt the final version of the strategy as Northern Ireland's first environmental improvement plan under the Environment Act 2021.

#### 11.45 am

When the consultation closed on 18 January, 336 responses had been received from a variety of stakeholders, organisations and members of the public. After reviewing those responses and considering helpful comments from members of the AERA Committee, my officials revisited and strengthened many of the key actions and targets in the strategy. I have approved the final version of the strategy, and, as the environment strategy will be an Executive-endorsed document, I have written to ministerial colleagues, enclosing a final version of the document.

My Department is in the process of producing a number of other key strategies and policies on significant matters such as clean air, peatlands, biodiversity and future agricultural policy. Those policy-specific strategies will deliver more detail on the key targets and actions, which, in turn, will be reflected in future revisions of the environment strategy as we seek to enable everyone to play their part in the global efforts to urgently address the substantial climate and biodiversity crises. My officials are considering the best means of ensuring effective

governance and oversight of the delivery of the actions that are set out in the strategy and the necessary resources to achieve that.

Members will be aware of the overarching, multi-decade green growth strategy, which DAERA is leading the development of on behalf of the Executive. It is intended that the environment strategy will be a key document that sets out Northern Ireland's environmental priorities for the coming decades and that it will be a key pillar in the delivery of the green growth strategy.

Members have just heard my statement on the future agricultural policy framework, which has environmental sustainability as one of its key outcomes. Furthermore, the Minister for the Economy launched a new energy strategy late last year, which outlines the path to achieving net zero carbon energy in a way that is clean, secure and affordable. Taken together, those key strategies show the commitment of me and my ministerial colleagues to a future in which we can address our significant climate and nature challenges while facilitating sustainable economic progress.

The environment strategy includes a mix of existing and new environmental targets and objectives for all Departments with a role in improving the environment. It links into the longer-term strategic objectives in our developing Programme for Government, and it aims to build on work that has been done across a wide range of policy areas, taking as its starting point the commitment in the draft outcome:

*"We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment".*

Key aspects that we all want include clean air, clean water, healthy soil and beautiful places to visit and enjoy, which benefit our physical and mental health.

The strategy will provide a coherent response to the global challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss that will be addressed at the convention on biological diversity conference, or COP15, in 2022 and that were addressed at the successful COP26 climate change summit that I touched on a moment ago.

My time at COP26 confirmed to me that climate change and biodiversity loss are inextricably linked. The evidence is clear that the state of our natural environment and its capacity to sustain us has been compromised. We are part of the natural environment, and we have a significant vested interest in accelerating policy

and action to safeguard and restore our nature and biodiversity for the health and prosperity of current and future generations. As shown at COP26, our reliance on Northern Ireland's natural capital and ecosystems to provide nature-based solutions cannot be overstated. We need to protect and invest in nature now to start reaping the benefits and avoid the much higher costs of habitat loss and restoration if we leave it until later to act. We need to act now. I am committed to delivering for nature and climate, and I recognise the importance of meeting the COP26 commitments and the biodiversity commitments that emerge from COP15.

The environment strategy is a response to our environmental challenges. Northern Ireland faces a range of local environmental challenges, including habitat and species loss, agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, waste management, the development of a circular economy, soil quality, air quality and waste crime. In addition, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union provided new environmental opportunities, and as environmental degradation poses an increasing challenge to all parts of our globe, there is a clear impetus for the first long-term, overarching environment strategy for Northern Ireland.

In the last decade, we have made some notable advances in tackling local environmental issues — perhaps foremost in the public's mind would be the successful introduction of the carrier bag levy and the remarkable rise in our household recycling rates to over 50% in 2019-20.

However, it is clear to everyone, not least to me, that more needs to be done — and with urgency.

Northern Ireland's first environment strategy will form the basis of a coherent and effective set of interventions that can deliver real improvements in the quality of our environment and thereby improve the health and well-being of all who live and work here, create opportunities to develop our economy, elevate Northern Ireland to be an environmental leader and enable us to play our part in protecting the global environment for many decades to come.

The strategy sets out six strategic environmental outcomes that encompass all the main environmental challenges that we will face in the coming decades. The outcomes are: excellent air, water, land and neighbourhood quality; a healthy and accessible environment and landscapes that everyone can connect with and enjoy; thriving, resilient and connected

nature and wildlife; sustainable production and consumption on land and at sea; zero waste and a highly developed circular economy; and net zero greenhouse gas emissions and improved climate resilience and adaptability.

Those outcomes will form the basis of how Northern Ireland faces up to the challenges of improving our environment and our ability to connect with, understand and enjoy that environment in a responsible way. They provide us with a framework to foster environmental awareness and engagement through education and to live in harmony with our environment, which provides us with a home, a livelihood and somewhere to relax. In short, the strategy is a guide to how we can preserve, protect and improve our environment for our children and our grandchildren.

Within the framework of the six key outcomes, the strategy includes many concrete actions. The following examples give just a flavour of them: protecting 30% of our land and water for nature by 2030; conserving or restoring all our semi-natural peatlands to healthy, functioning ecosystems by 2040; publishing the final river basin management plans this year; increasing the maximum fine for littering to £200; and applying for DAERA to become the world's first eco-Department.

The strategy will be an open-ended, living document that will be supported by a series of action plans. There will, of course, be costs associated with many of the proposed actions to achieve the critical outcomes, which will require adequate funding through a variety of mechanisms. All Northern Ireland Ministers will work to ensure that Northern Ireland has the necessary resources to tackle the significant environmental challenges that we face.

It is a truism that we cannot make the necessary urgent progress on the environment alone, and my officials have been working with key stakeholders, including other Departments and external bodies, to develop the premise that a better environment can provide greater economic, social and health benefits for individuals and for society and to outline a pathway to realising those benefits. I look forward to that engagement continuing as we revise the strategy in the months and years ahead.

As I mentioned at the start of my statement, my ministerial colleagues have approved my intention to designate the first version of the strategy as Northern Ireland's first environmental improvement plan (EIP) under

the Environment Act 2021. The Act defines an EIP as:

*"a plan for significantly improving the natural environment".*

It will require DAERA and other Northern Ireland Departments to set out the steps that they intend to take to improve the natural environment. Adopting the strategy as Northern Ireland's first EIP will give it a legal underpinning, meaning that there will be a statutory requirement for ongoing reporting and monitoring against the targets and objectives on an annual basis.

As we emerge into the post-COVID-19 world, outside the European Union, we need, more than ever, to be prepared to face the environmental challenges of tomorrow today. Every one of us, collectively and individually, has an important role in how we manage, preserve and protect our local environment. If we all play our part and are ambitious with our plans, we can make a thriving, sustainable environment a reality here and demonstrate leadership on this crucial issue.

The environment strategy aims to focus on ambitious outcomes for the big environmental issues facing us, which will make a difference to the lives and well-being of current and future generations. I believe that the strategy that I have approved today is ambitious in both its breadth and depth. It contains over 50 key actions and targets, with timescales between 2022 and 2050.

Our environment affects every aspect of our existence. It is central to all life: what we do; what we eat; how we work; and where we live and play. It is, unquestionably, our most precious asset. The strategy sets out our plans for protecting our local environment by making sustainable living central to every aspect of our lives in the coming decades. As I said at the outset of my statement, the environment strategy will be a key pillar of green growth, and I commend it to the House.

**Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I thank the Minister for his statement. The statement made several references to biodiversity: what actions does the Department propose to reverse biodiversity loss?

**Mr Poots:** There is a series of things to help biodiversity loss. Re-wetting peatlands is one, and the peatland strategy is a key element of

that. Encouraging the planting of more trees and hedgerows and discouraging the cutting of hedgerows so often will improve biodiversity, as will reducing the amount of nutrients that go into our soils. Yesterday, we launched a soil health action plan that will see all of our soils tested and lidar mapping taking place across Northern Ireland. That will be hugely beneficial in knowing what is going on under the ground and, as a consequence, will help to regenerate soils, and those soils will be of even greater use for farms in the future.

We can also do much to improve the quality of our rivers and water by reducing the amount of phosphates that enter our waterways and waterbodies. There is much that we can do, when we pull all of our plans together, that will ensure that we make a significant difference and improve biodiversity. The good management of our heathlands, particularly the work to achieve the reintroduction of species and the growth of species under threat, such as snipe, red grouse and many of those ground-nesting birds, is a course of work that has already commenced. It is work that needs to be expanded in other areas.

**Mr Harvey:** Will the Minister highlight what steps he has taken in the past two years to improve our environment?

**Mr Poots:** Ultimately, the green growth strategy will lead to substantial environmental improvements as a result of doing things differently and ensuring that future growth is closely linked to the environment. That will help us to deal with animal nutrients, in particular, which will be hugely beneficial to waterbodies. The peatland strategy will see the re-wetting of peatlands, which will make them greater stores of carbon and will increase their biodiversity. The future agricultural policy will assist us in seeing more work, such as the further growing out of hedges, being done on an environmental basis on farms. The Forests for Our Future policy sets out that 1.8 million new trees will be planted each year, and the soil nutrient health policy will ensure that our soils have the best health of any soils in the world, because we will know exactly what is going on and will respond to that.

The suite of actions that we have taken over the past two years and that is in place to happen over the coming years will ensure that Northern Ireland's improvement to its environmental footprint will be massive. That will be a result of the steps and actions that have been taken, which will make a real and tangible difference.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He mentioned the green growth strategy. Which Department will drive that strategy — will it be his? — to ensure that it is cross-departmental and includes all relevant public agencies, arm's-length bodies, local authorities and all of the bodies charged with government and its extended lengths and that it will be inclusive in drawing in community and voluntary groups to ensure that the maximum effect and benefit is derived from it in a coherent and cohesive manner?

**Mr Poots:** I entirely agree with the Member. The Executive need to lead on those issues, and Ministers need to cooperate with one another. I look forward to a future Executive when other issues have been dealt with appropriately.

### 12.00 noon

The green growth strategy is an Executive strategy and is therefore cross-departmental. We have a cross-departmental working group for it. The Member is right to say that we need cooperation. Belfast City Council has an aspiration to plant a million trees, which is great. I received a letter from another council telling us that we needed to plant more trees but not identifying how it was going to do so. People need to realise that this is not something for somebody else to do but something for every one of us to do, be it personally by reducing the amount of waste that we put into the black bin and recycling more or be it companies not sending us products wrapped repeatedly in plastic and so forth. Everybody has to take responsibility, so we will ensure that everybody does. One of the things that we are looking at is extending to producers the responsibility for packaging. Work has also been done on single-use plastics. There are so many areas in which every one of us has to take responsibility, but the Government have to take the lead, and we will demonstrate that by working with one another. I fully agree with the Member's remarks.

**Mrs Barton:** My question leads on from Mr McGlone's. You talked about responsibility for the environment, but everybody has to take responsibility for their local environment, and that is the aspect at which I want to look. What conversations have you had with councils about how they will be able to help you meet the strategy's challenges?

**Mr Poots:** Councils are responsible for waste collection, and we have been working with them on improving it. We need to get to a point at

which we are not sending waste to landfill sites. People who repeatedly object to proposals to remove waste from landfill sites are ensuring that more methane goes into the air. Landfills are one of the biggest emitters of methane in Northern Ireland. Those who say, "No, we do not want this to happen" or, "We are going to object to that because we think that there are a few votes in it" need to recognise that waste needs to be dealt with in a way that is different from landfill.

Many councils are leading on issues. We have seen what they are doing on tree planting. I have to say that Northern Ireland Water's response on tree planting and on renewable energy has been amazing, and I wish it every success as it continues to lead in the way in which it has been leading. Translink is taking significant steps to move to buses that do not use fossil fuels. A lot of groups, organisations and public bodies are making a difference, and I hope that all councils will take that to heart and ensure that they get fully on board to make a real difference to the environment in their area. Everybody doing their bit will help build the jigsaw, which, when concluded, will leave us with a beautiful environment and landscape.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I genuinely wish DAERA well with the strategy, just as I did — also, I hope, genuinely — when the green growth strategy was announced, but there are some problems. The business plan update presented to the AERA Committee just two weeks ago today showed that, in this mandate, there was not the required interdepartmental collaboration on green growth. It also showed that there would not be the promised second iteration of the marine plan and that DAERA was off target with its afforestation plans. What is the Minister doing in his final days in office to rectify or turn around those red-flagged issues so that the new strategy and the existing green growth strategy will have some chance of success?

**Mr Poots:** In just over two years of office, with the issue of COVID-19 predominant for well over half of that period, we have managed to introduce Forests for Our Future. That was never going to achieve the 1.8 million in the first year, but we have funding set aside that will assist us greatly in doing that. Organisations such as Belfast City Council and Northern Ireland Water intend to plant millions of trees, which will be of great assistance when that gets into full swing. I encourage other Departments to ensure that that happens in their areas. It is for every Department and every arm's-length body to help us to do that, as well as the farming community, landowners and others.

We fought hard to get a financial package to deliver on green growth, and unfortunately the Department of Finance, when it had the Executive behind it, did not come forward with proposals that would have ensured that we could make the environmental changes that are needed. The party that held that office gives lip service to the environment and everything that needs to be done, but, when it came to putting money where its mouth was, it was shy about doing that. Let us be clear: Sinn Féin did not bring forward a budget proposal that demonstrated that it was serious about the environment.

Yes, there is further work to do on other strategies such as the marine strategy, but, in the previous month, the environment strategy and the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill have come forward, and the green growth strategy has been further developed. We have made tremendous progress over that time. If Members reflect on the progress that was made in the midst of a global pandemic, they will find that what has been achieved in the past two years has been remarkable.

**Mr McGuigan:** Minister, I thank you for your statement. How has the environment strategy been developed and changed following the passing of the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill, given the more ambitious targets in it and the additional independent oversight bodies that it creates?

**Mr Poots:** The environment strategy is primarily concerned with the protection and enhancement of the natural environment. The green growth strategy provides more of the actions on climate change and greenhouse gas emissions. However, we are all aware that climate change and biodiversity loss are aligned and must be tackled together. That is why I was delighted to visit COP26 on "Nature and Land Use Day" to highlight my commitment to deliver much-needed nature recovery and nature-based solutions and to endorse the 'Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use'. With that focus on nature, it will give Northern Ireland a unique opportunity to showcase to the rest of the world the positive action being taken to restore nature, as set out in the recent UK 'Nature Positive 2030' report, and our commitment to deliver for biodiversity and implement nature-based solutions to tackle climate change. We need to build on and accelerate those actions to ensure that they build a low-carbon, high-nature future for all.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for his statement. It will be noted that there are those

who cry much about the environment and purport to be the champions of the environment who did not have the courtesy to come to the House and be present when the statement was being made.

I declare an interest, as I have a brother-in-law who farms near the Garry Bog in my North Antrim constituency. Will the Minister outline how the peatland strategy will contribute to reaching our carbon targets and allow our farmers to produce food? It is not a case of either/or. The Minister visited the Garry Bog with me some time ago and saw the challenges. I commend the farmers in that area, who, despite many of the challenges, have produced some of the best outcomes in farming.

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. The environment strategy will reference the Northern Ireland peatland strategy, which is currently under development. It will provide a framework for conserving our intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands. In Northern Ireland, our semi-natural peatlands are of enormous importance to the stability and general well-being of our environment. In addition to the ecosystem services that they provide, semi-natural peatlands can provide a nature-based solution to climate change. They can store and sequester carbon, with implications for the regulation of our climate. To provide those services, however, semi-natural peatlands need to be in a healthy state. Currently, most of our semi-natural peatlands have been degraded or are in poor condition and act as carbon sources as opposed to capturing carbon.

The peatland strategy is being taken forward under the auspices of the UK peatland strategy. A public consultation was carried out from June to September last year. We will be in a position to publish an agreed peatland strategy in 2022. That will set the direction of travel for the next two decades. The work that we did to support low emission slurry spreading equipment (LESSE) will reduce the amount of ammonia in our atmosphere by around 25%. That will be hugely beneficial to peatlands, which are overburdened with ammonia. That work, in conjunction with wetting peatlands, will be of considerable benefit. We have other steps to take that can reduce the ammonia burden by closer to 50%. That work needs to continue to ensure that we continue to restore our peatland habitats to where we want them to be. There will be great benefits from those peatlands capturing carbon. We will work with local landowners and farmers to ensure that we have their cooperation in delivering on that.

**Miss Reilly:** Minister, you mentioned the success of the plastic bag levy. However, it has been three months since the EU single-use plastics directive was due to come into law here, and there is still no sign of it. You previously told us that you had repeatedly contacted the British Government about that. Do you have an update for us, or are those British Ministers ignoring you?

**Mr Poots:** I do not need the European Union to tell us what to do about plastics. We in the House are capable of making our own decisions. I was not elected to be answerable to Brussels; I was elected to be answerable to the people of Northern Ireland. We are doing work on single-use plastics, extended producer responsibility and single-use bags, the fee for which will be raised, as Members know. Those things are all happening without Big Brother telling us what to do or looking over our shoulder. We are quite capable of protecting the environment here, thankfully.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, that concludes questions on the statement. Please take your ease for a moment or two before we move to the next item in the Order Paper.

12.15 pm

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

## Private Members' Business

### Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Alan Chambers to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill.

*Moved.—[Mr Chambers.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for the debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There is a single group of six amendments that deal with definitions, and we will debate the amendments in turn. I remind Members who intend to speak during the debate on the single group of amendments that they should address all the amendments on which they wish to comment. Once the debate is completed, any further amendments will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. If that is clear, we will proceed.

#### **Clause 2 (Meaning of “relevant document”)**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** We now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 to 6. Within the group, amendment No 6 is consequential to amendment No 2. Members may also wish to note that amendment No 4 is a paving amendment to amendment No 5. I call Paula Bradshaw to move amendment No 1 and to address the other amendments in the group.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 2, line 12, at end insert—

*“(da) a body involved in the removal, retention, storage, use or disposal of human tissue from deceased persons,”.*

*The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:*

No 2: In page 2, line 22, leave out "1995" and insert "2021".— [Ms Bradshaw.]

No 3: In clause 3, page 3, line 5, at end insert—

*"(ha) the removal, retention, storage, use or disposal of human tissue from deceased persons,".— [Ms Bradshaw.]*

No 4: In clause 4, page 3, line 19, leave out from "L or" to "(3)" on line 20 and insert ", (3) or (3A)".— [Ms Bradshaw.]

No 5: In clause 4, page 3, line 30, at end insert—

*"(3A) An institution falls within this subsection if it was a public body or voluntary organisation that facilitated arrangements for the adoption or fostering of children.".— [Ms Bradshaw.]*

No 6: In the long title, leave out "1995" and insert "2021".— [Ms Bradshaw.]

**Ms Bradshaw:** Amendment No 1 is similar to amendment No 3. Members will probably be aware that, in the past couple of years, there has been some media attention on the at least 27 babies' bodies that were bequeathed by mother-and-baby homes to Queen's University for medical research. It is our understanding that that was done without the mothers' consent. I would like Members to support me in amendment Nos 1 and 3, because those babies deserve to have their voices heard through any records held by Queen's University or any other body that may have taken the babies' bodies into its possession.

From the research done by Queen's, which was published in January 2021, we know that there is evidence of very high mortality rates among the babies born in the mother-and-baby homes. I hope that, when we come to the public inquiry stage, the records that are held will help to tell the story of how and why the babies died prematurely. Hopefully, that information will be forthcoming and will bear testimony to the harsh treatment of the pregnant women and their children.

I draw Members' attention to an article in 'The Times' from July 2021, when the story made the headlines. On the anatomical donations, it states:

*"Queen's said its records are based on a mortuary technician's log and 'do not represent an official university record'."*

My concern is that, if those are not properly preserved and safeguarded, they could become unavailable.

I also draw Members' attention to the Commission of Investigation's fifth interim report in the South. Obviously, that report does not relate to here, but it states that many of the stillborn infants whose bodies were donated in the South had with them a note saying, "Not to be interred". In some ways, therefore, there is concern that those infants may not even have been buried and may be:

*"preserved as 'wet specimens' for display purposes in medical schools".*

We have to speak for those babies. Through amendment Nos 1 and 3, we can give them a voice in the inquiry, that was recommended by the truth recovery design panel. I will leave that there.

I will speak to the other two sets of amendments that I will not move. On amendment Nos 2 and 6, which deal with extended timescales, I put on record that I am concerned that some institutions were operating on a cross-border basis well into this century — into 2006 — and that some of the records relating to the movement of those children might not be preserved. However, anyone who knows how hard I have worked with birth mothers and their children over the years will know that I do not want to do anything that could jeopardise the Bill, so I will not move those amendments; I just place on record that I am not entirely convinced that the timescale that is laid out in the Bill covers everything that a subsequent inquiry would need.

I worked with haste with the Bill Office on amendment Nos 4 and 5. We had Consideration Stage on Monday evening, and we had until 12.30 pm on Tuesday to submit amendments. The Bill Office and I came up with a clause about other institutions. We were not sure whether that was in the right part of the Bill. Again, I do not want to move anything that could have unintended consequences. I spoke at length with departmental officials — I appreciate the time that they gave me — about that issue. They agreed with the sentiment, and they stated that they will prescribe the intent of the amendments in any resulting guidance.

A live issue today, and one that speaks to the amendment, is support for those who were in foster care. One of the members of the truth recovery design panel, Professor Phil Scraton, emailed me today about the intent of the panel.

With Members' indulgence, I will read that into the record:

*"The ... panel was not commissioned to investigate the operation of the foster care system, but to focus on the operation of the mother and baby institutions, Magdalene Laundries and workhouses. However, our detailed recommendation is to secure: a dedicated records facility; preservation of all personal records held by state, religious institutions and non-governmental organisations; full access to all information held by institutions and agencies regarding the operation of the 'care' system; and necessary research and advocacy support, should include those fostered via state and religious organisations. Appropriate redress, reparation and compensation should extend to those who suffered abuses in foster care."*

I will leave it there. As I said, I am moving only amendment Nos 1 and 3 today.

**Ms McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):** I will briefly address amendment Nos 1 and 3. The priority of the Committee is that the legislation provides for the preservation of any document that may provide information on what happened to individuals in these institutions and, in the case of children born in them, what happened after they left. That requires the widest possible interpretation. I do not want to see any victim or survivor at a disadvantage because we failed to include the relevant category of document in the legislation.

The Committee has engaged with victims and survivors who are concerned about the fate of individuals who died in those institutions. In this case, it concerns the transfer of bodies for anatomical study, some of whom were infants. The Committee has called for an independent investigation into those circumstances. For that reason, the inclusion in the legislation of documentation relating to the disposal of bodies from those institutions is essential. As an extension of that principle, while it has not been discussed in detail by the Committee, it would make sense for amendment No 5, and, therefore, amendment No 4, to stand part of the Bill, but I emphasise that we, as a Committee, did not discuss those amendments as they came late in the day.

We look forward to the Bill's passing its Final Stage later today.

**Ms Dillon:** I welcome amendment Nos 1 and 3, which, hopefully, will be included in the Bill. I

put on record my appreciation to the proposer of the Bill, the Health Minister and the officials in the Health Department who worked with all of us who worked closely with the victims and survivors organisations, mothers and babies, and adopted children. It is really important that we get this right, so, given the short time frame, it is good that Members looked to see what amendments could be tabled to ensure that, as other Members have outlined, we do not leave anybody out but make sure that everybody whom it is humanly possible to include in the Bill be included and that all documentation that can be protected be protected.

Amendment No 1 makes provision for records kept by:

*"a body involved in the removal, retention, storage, use or disposal of human tissue from deceased persons".*

That is an important amendment. As has been outlined, it recently came to light that the remains of residents, including babies and children from mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses, were donated to Queen's University Belfast for an anatomical study. Those records must be recovered and used for the upcoming inquiry. Parental consent was not required for those donations, so many families may not know where their loved ones were taken to, what happened to them and where they were buried. That fits into the wider issue of burials, which is covered by the Bill. The matter should be handled in the most sensitive way possible, as it is likely to reveal yet another tragic element of this scandal and how the state and institutions treated women and children.

Amendment No 3 is, obviously, consequential to amendment No 1, and it, again, makes provision for the retention of records regarding:

*"removal, retention, storage, use or disposal of human tissue from deceased persons".*

I think the same about this amendment as I do about amendment No 1, which I spoke about, and I fully support both amendments.

I will turn to the other amendments, which are not being moved. Amendment Nos 4 and 5 were well intentioned. Their proposer, Paula Bradshaw, outlined their intention, which I think was right, good and proper for ensuring that we do all that we can to include everybody, everything and every piece of information that can be included. An important point is being made, particularly in amendment No 5, to remind us that children were adopted and

fostered by organisations that were separate from the institutions, including state-run organisations such as social services. Many independent adoption agencies were involved in the illegal adoption and trafficking of children, and it is important that that is not forgotten. However, I feel that that element may already be covered in clause 4(3) of the amended Bill, which provides that:

*"An institution falls within this subsection if it was an institution in which a voluntary organisation provided residential accommodation for women or children, took decisions about the women or children and",*

as paragraph (d) states:

*"provided such other service as may be prescribed".*

It is my understanding from my reading of that subsection that the line:

*"a voluntary organisation ... took decisions about the women or children"*

can have that practice read into it. Furthermore, if that does not hold up, paragraph (d) allows the Department to make regulations that can specifically mention the public and statutory organisations that facilitated adoption and fostering.

I appreciate that Paula Bradshaw has said that the Department has given some assurances on that. Given the work that the departmental officials and the Minister have done with us on that, I believe that their intentions on the Bill are good, so I am hopeful that we will get the right outcomes. On that basis, it is right and proper that the Member is not moving either of those amendments for fear of unintended consequences and because we believe that it may well be covered in guidance that will make it better in the long run.

I will now refer to the last point that Paula Bradshaw made about fostering. I am sure that many of you will have heard Maria Arbuckle, and I have to say that this is not the first time that I have listened to Maria's story about being fostered and what she went through as a foster child. She speaks on behalf of herself, her siblings and others, and, when she tells her story, it is horrendous to listen to. It is very difficult to understand how anybody who would take children into their care to look after them and supposedly show them compassion and love and to look after children who have already been through some of the most difficult

circumstances that life can ever throw at a child would then abuse them, let them down, neglect them and cause them serious mental, physical and, in some cases, sexual abuse.

### 12.30 pm

As Maria said, she has been diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder — not surprisingly, given what she went through. I also listened to Professor Phil Scraton, who has been excellent on this subject. We all know that what came out of the panel was excellent and is what we will, hopefully, deliver for all the victims and survivors of mother-and-baby institutions. If there is a way that we can include the children who were fostered out and ensure that they are included in the inquiry and redress scheme, it is incumbent on us to do so.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, let us deliver for these people as quickly as we possibly can in the most compassionate fashion that we can. They have been through enough. Maria has been through four cancer diagnoses. These people, very often, are in circumstances where they may not have a long life expectancy, so it is important that we deliver for them as quickly as possible. For the record, that is why I am glad that this Bill has been brought forward, through accelerated passage, to ensure the preservation of records. It was important to do so, and I welcome the support of everyone across the Chamber for Alan Chambers's Bill.

**Mrs Cameron:** I speak as my party's health spokesperson on the Further Consideration Stage of the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill. I will keep my comments brief and specifically on the amendments before the House. My party and I will be supporting amendment Nos 1 and 3 proposed by Ms Bradshaw. These amendments bring information on the use and disposal of human tissue relating to a deceased resident of an institution into the scope of relevant information and relevant institutions set out in clauses 3 and 4. Presumably, it will extend to hospitals, research and teaching organisations, coroners and pathologists, particularly where their work touches on residents or babies born in these institutions who have later died.

I thank my Committee colleague Paula Bradshaw for outlining the detail of her thoughtful amendments on what is an incredibly difficult and emotional area. I agree with her that it is very appropriate that documents relating to the remains of those babies — the bodies of the 27 children donated to Queen's University for medical research is a very stark

example — are preserved. I am glad that we have been able to debate that today.

I also put on record my thanks, once more, to the sponsor, Mr Alan Chambers, for bringing forward this private Member's Bill. I look forward to the Final Stage this evening.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** A number of Members have already referenced the work of the panel. I place on record my thanks for the work that they completed, not just in publishing the report and the recommendations but the engagement process that they facilitated to allow us to get to this stage today, where we are seeing that continued all-party support for their work and the outworkings of the Bill. I fully appreciate that the timescale for the Bill's passage has been extremely tight, allowing little time for detailed scrutiny or the production of amendments. However, that should not prevent the House from striving to ensure that the Bill remains fit for purpose, as was the intention of its sponsor, Mr Alan Chambers.

I do not consider that all the amendments that were tabled for today will achieve what they were intended to achieve, and, for that reason, I set those out. I am grateful to Ms Bradshaw for her reconsideration of the implications of a number of her amendments, her detailed engagement with departmental officials and her indication that she does not intend to move amendment Nos 2, 4, 5 or 6.

Amendment Nos 1 and 3 relate to and rely on each other and, as Ms Bradshaw has explained their purpose, I now understand that they were prompted by a freedom of information request that was submitted to Queen's University Belfast, the purpose of which was to establish whether the bodies of children had been donated by mother-and-baby homes, workhouses or hospitals to the university. According to information published in the media, the response to the request indicated that the bodies of at least 27 children were donated to Queen's University Belfast for medical research in the middle decades of the 20th century. It was also reported, however, that the number may have been higher. On the basis that the information was found to be held and then disclosed under freedom of information legislation, it could be argued that it is unnecessary to include the provision. That having been said, it is, of course, a significant matter, which I accept is likely to be of significant interest to a future statutory inquiry.

If amendment Nos 1 and 3 had been tabled at Consideration Stage, that might have given Members the opportunity to examine them and

make any necessary adjustments. Members will note that both amendments refer in very broad terms to "deceased persons". Their intention may have been more accurately captured by making the connection with residents of the relevant institutions or their children, but, given the stage that we are at, Members will need to decide whether to accept the amendments as drafted. Unfortunately, the alternative is for amendment Nos 1 and 3 to be voted down and for the prescribing power at clause 2(3) to be used, in conjunction with the prescribing power at clause 3(3), to deliver what the Member intends. That having been said, I am content, on balance, to support amendment Nos 1 and 3, given the significance of the information that they seek to require be given.

The Member indicated her intention, on further consideration of the matter, not to move amendment Nos 2 and 6, for which I am grateful. We are trying through the Bill to capture information relating to the institutions, not just information held by them. Although information held by them is captured by the duty at clause 1 to preserve and not destroy, it matters not that the information was created before or after the relevant period. What matters is that the information relates to the women and children or to the institutions themselves during the period in which we know that they were in operation. Members will note that some time to allow for the full winding-up of the institution has been built into the definition of "relevant period".

Reference has been made to institutions in the Republic of Ireland, to which we know that some women went. Although the reach of the Bill cannot extend beyond this jurisdiction, any relevant information relating to a woman or child held in this jurisdiction that was created either by the institution in which they resided between 1922 and 1995 or by the persons or bodies listed at clause 2(3) is captured by the duty to preserve and not destroy at clause 1. That includes relevant information that may have been created after 1995. Members will note that information relating to a resident's departure from a relevant institution is specified at clause 3(3)(b). Information relating to the care and accommodation of children when they were separated from their mother is specified at clause 3(4), because that should be read in conjunction with clause 3(5).

I turn now to amendment Nos 4 and 5. I am grateful to Ms Bradshaw for indicating that she does not intend to move them. Again, I would not have been able to support them, because, in my view and that of departmental officials, they are technically incorrect. That is largely to

do with their positioning in the Bill. Both amendments are to clause 4, which provides a definition of "relevant institution". All the other definitions in the Bill are related to that definition. Clause 2, which defines "relevant document", refers in a number of places to "relevant institution". Clause 3, which defines "relevant information", likewise refers in numerous places to "relevant institution", or simply to "institution".

The definition of "relevant institution" is intended to capture the places where women and their children resided, received care, worked, gave birth to children and had decisions taken about them. Other persons or bodies with a connection to the institution but external to it are captured at clause 2(3). They include, for example, the health and social care trust that may have arranged children's care subsequent to their separation from their mother, an adoption agency — statutory or voluntary — that was involved in making the arrangements for child adoptions, a resident's parent, a GP and a member of the clergy who communicated with the resident or with an institution.

Amendment Nos 4 and 5 sought to capture a body that has a connection to a relevant institution but is external to it. My understanding is that those amendments were intended to capture, for example, a church institution that facilitated a child's adoption or foster care. A statutory body undertaking that function is already captured under clause 2(3)(d). Clause 2(3)(d) will also capture a non-statutory body that held some responsibility for the health, care or welfare of a woman or her child. While I support the intention behind the amendments, I cannot support the way they have been drafted — helpfully, the Member indicated that in her speech — because, in our opinion, they corrupted the definition of "relevant institution" and ran the risk of rendering the Bill incompetent. If necessary, as the Member also indicated in her interaction with my officials, the prescribing power at clause 2(3) can be used to capture the intention behind that.

Once again, I am grateful to Members for their input to the Bill and, in particular, I extend my thanks to Ms Bradshaw for her reconsideration of the four amendments before us today, but also for the two that she has moved that we are able to support.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I now call the sponsor of the Bill, Alan Chambers, to respond to the debate.

**Mr Chambers:** The proposer of today's amendments and the Minister have already spoken in detail on the intent, but also the possible implications, of each of the possible changes before us, so I only intend to make a few brief remarks.

First, I thank Members again for their ongoing interest in and support for the Bill, as well as for making themselves available to facilitate the very short timescales involved. It is not easy having so many stages in such a short time frame. However, the approach of the House so far is a testament to the collective recognition of what the Bill is trying to achieve and why it is so important.

I thank Ms Bradshaw for her sensible approach in not moving a number of the amendments, as well as her decision not to seek support for some others. Whilst I, of course, welcome her interest in trying to help make the Bill stronger, it is very important that the Bill is not unintentionally undermined either through a fundamental change to its intent of applying to historical institutions or by introducing legislative deficiencies at this very last stage. Nonetheless, today's debate has allowed the House to put a number of points on the record, and that is important. Having spoken to the Minister before today's debate, I am very confident that, due to our not ultimately introducing some of those changes, the Bill remains a competent piece of legislation and will still very much deliver what it was always intended to do.

Again, I thank the House for its continuing support for and helpful scrutiny of the Bill. I look forward to the Bill's, hopefully, reaching its Final Stage later this evening.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Paula Bradshaw to wind up the debate.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I will touch on some of the comments that were made in the course of the debate. I very much welcome the comments of the Chair of the Executive Office Committee, particularly in relation to the Committee's determination or thoughts on an investigation into this issue. Hopefully, that will be a very worthy piece of work in the next mandate. Ms Dillon talked about the sensitivity around the burials. Obviously, we all get that sense. She spoke well about Maria Arbuckle and the need for those people who suffered abuse while being fostered to be captured in the recommendations and actions going forward from the panel's report.

Pam Cameron, the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, agreed with me that it is right and proper that the records of those young children are preserved so that their voices can be heard in the inquiry.

The Minister acknowledged the very tight timescales that we have all worked under, not just with this Bill but over the course of the last two weeks, to get some legislation over the line. I always wanted to get things into the Bill, but I would never want to do anything that would have rendered it incompetent.

### 12.45 pm

As the Bill sponsor acknowledged, this and the previous debates have allowed us to get some points on the record so that, hopefully, when officials come to look at prescribing the guidance, they can reflect on what is in Hansard.

I will leave it there.

*Amendment agreed to.*

*Amendment No 2 not moved.*

### **Clause 3 (Meaning of “relevant information”)**

*Amendment No 3 made:*

In page 3, line 5, at end insert—

*“(ha) the removal, retention, storage, use or disposal of human tissue from deceased persons;”— [Ms Bradshaw.]*

*Amendment Nos 4 and 5 not moved.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I will not call amendment No 6 as it is consequential to amendment No 2, which has not been made.

That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members should take their ease for a few moments.

## **Period Products (Free Provision) Bill: Final Stage**

**Mr Catney:** I beg to move

*That the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill [NIA 39/17-22] do now pass.*

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

**Mr Catney:** It is a great day for me. It is very fitting that my last speech of the mandate is to introduce the Final Stage of my private Member's Bill.

Passing the Bill sends a strong message that, as my friends in Homeless Period Belfast state, “Menstruation matters”. Those are powerful words, and they should ring out as we try to pass the legislation. Menstruation matters to us all — to all girls and women. It tells people that no one should feel ashamed or embarrassed by their period. It makes it clear that menstruation is normal and that access to period products should be universal.

I have so many people to thank. It is right that I mention Monica Lennon, Member of the Scottish Parliament, who has been very helpful to me. She came up with the legislative framework to allow for the provision of free products. I am so grateful for her guidance and support. If we pass the Bill today, we will become the second jurisdiction in the world to allow for universal free provision of period products.

When I was elected five years ago, some of my greatest strength and support came from my wife, Rosemary, and my three daughters, Katherine, Sarah and Emma, not to forget my son, Patrick Jr. My daughters encouraged me to take on this fight, and their support has meant the world to me.

Thanks must be given to those from my team who have worked on the Bill for coming on two years: to Ally for her work at the start, as the Bill was coming about, and to Johnny in my office, who has given me unrelenting support and the time that was required. I thank Emma and Frank for guiding the Bill skilfully through each legislative stage and for keeping me on the level throughout the process. Thanks to those across the Assembly who helped. Thanks to James and Gerry and to BDB Pitmans LLP for the skilful drafting of the Bill. I had a lot of back and forth with them, and I am thankful that they helped to get the Bill to where it is today.

As I stated earlier, some of the Bill has drafting from Scotland. Later, I will thank the Minister for Communities. Some of the departmental amendments were changes from the way in which the Scottish legislation is worded to how we word it in Northern Ireland.

I thank Caroline Perry and Denise Morgan. I feel like I should table a final amendment to give those two people and, in fact, most of those who worked with me in the Bill Office a pay rise. They have been at the end of the phone and have taken time at all hours of the day and night. They have been so patient in explaining the process, explaining amendments and in helping me with all the changes to the Bill.

I thank the Minister for Communities and the team from her Department: Gerry, Martina, Beverley and Dianne. The amendments that they developed will make the Bill more workable and improve the programmes that come from it. There was a bit of toing and froing, and I did not know which Department was going to lift the Bill and take up the chalice, which some people may have thought was a poisoned chalice. I thank the Minister, Deirdre, for taking that chalice. It was brave and correct to do that. You know that it was the right thing to do, Minister, and I am delighted that you came on board.

Thanks must be given to all the political parties for their support and to some key Members across the political spectrum who helped the Bill to move at pace in order to make sure that it passed before the end of the mandate. I give thanks to the Chair of the Education Committee, Chris Lyttle, for his unwavering support, and to the members of the Education Committee for their diligent and clear scrutiny of the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take a moment to wish Chris Lyttle MLA all the best as he moves forward, as I know that he will not run for the next mandate. He will be missed. I am honoured, as an older man, to call Chris a friend; I have made a great friendship with him.

Some of the scrutiny was tough; in fact, if I am lucky enough to introduce another private Member's Bill, my list of consultees may be extended to include statutory interested parties. Top of that list would be Diane Dodds from the DUP. *[Laughter.]* I can tell you that Diane went over every detail, but that is great. That is what we are here for. We are here for scrutiny, and we try to make legislation better. I thank her and all members of the Education Committee.

I thank Aoibhinn Treanor and Frank Geddis. I give a big "Thank you" to them for all the help that they gave in explaining things to me, as did the Bill Office, and for their support and patience throughout all our work together.

I ran out of time this morning. I meant to buy the little round doughnuts that are a bit a tradition in the Bill team. They will come; I will get them down next week, eventually.

I also thank the Speaker and all those in his office and the Business Office for the quick approval and turnaround of the Bill. I thank Alex and give him my best wishes for his retirement. Knowing Alex, I know that he will be working and doing something.

Finally, I thank each and every campaigner who pushed for the free provision of period products. I had a great time with some of them this morning. I thank Katrina, Ele, Grace and Alexa in particular, and I thank all the young students from the universities and schools who made it out on to the steps at the front of the Building this morning. They are the people who drove me on and helped me every single moment. When I needed a question answered, they were there. They were the ones who went out on to the streets and delivered period products to the people out there who need them. They go out day and night. I was delighted to have them on the steps here today, because, while the Bill may have my name on it, it belongs to the campaigners and activists who have pushed us all to get here.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Catney:** They have not given us an easy ride. Every single one of them went through the Bill with a fine-tooth comb and questioned me on every clause, timescale and duty. However, they have always been supportive and keen to work it through.

Am I time-limited on this? *[Laughter.]* I will not be much longer, folks. I want to say that, as I was coming down this morning, I had the radio on, and I heard about an art project that is going on in Belfast. This may well be my last opportunity to speak about the ring of steel. I operated behind that ring of steel, and the project in Belfast marks its being built 50 years ago. I will be only a second, Mr Deputy Speaker; this is important and relevant, and I will keep moving on it. Sometimes, we forget where we have come from and the harshness of the place that we call home. It is a fantastic to be here today to make this change.

For each person who has filled me full of hope for the future, there are so many more for this fight. I hope that, now, with the backing of legislation, the aspirations of all those young people will be met soon. I am excited for the future. I will go back to the Minister. I have done so twice and will do it again. I do not know how the relationships required by the Bill's cross-cutting nature will go or which Department will hold the powers that the Bill provides to ensure that period products are available as widely as possible. The provision of funding must follow. Whether or not I am re-elected, I will make sure that funding is allocated for period products in the next Budget. That is a promise, and I will be watching to see whether it goes through.

The Bill is a first step — a momentous one, no doubt, but a first step nonetheless. We must now ensure that, backed by the legislation, products are made available as soon as practicably possible so that all citizens can live their lives with dignity.

To finish —

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

**Mr Catney:** I will give way.

**Mr McNulty:** The joy that you have brought to this place today, Pat, is something to behold. It was absolutely marvellous to witness and be part of that joy among the campaign group in the Great Hall and on the front steps. We are all very proud of what you have done. Do you agree that, as well as the universal accessibility of period products, an element of the Bill is about destigmatising periods, and there will be knock-on effects and implications of that access for young girls continuing their participation in sport? That will be a crucial impact of the Bill.

**Mr Catney:** I thank the Member from Armagh for his intervention. I can only agree with him. I may well have been one of those men who was a little bit frightened about speaking about the issue. However, I share offices with and am next door to some of the great women in the SDLP. I can tell you that they pushed me and made sure that I stood up to the mark. That is change. We need change, and the Bill will bring change.

**1.00 pm**

To finish, I welcome the Bill and commend it to the House. I trust and hope that it passes through the Assembly.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Ferguson:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Final Stage of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill. I commend all those who have campaigned for the legislation, including the Bill sponsor, Pat Catney, Minister Hargey for taking up stewardship of it and all those who worked so hard to bring its Final Stage before us today.

This is a good-news story, Pat. It is a good-news story for the one in 10 of those who said that they were unable to afford period products at some time in their life. It is good news for the one in seven who said that they regularly struggled to afford period products and for the almost 50% of girls who said that they had missed days off school because of their periods. It is also good news for the hosts of women and community and health organisations in my constituency of Foyle who have campaigned for many years and, in particular, my party colleague Sandra Duffy, whose motion to back the On the Ball campaign to provide free sanitary products in as many public buildings as possible was unanimously backed in Derry City and Strabane District Council back in 2018. That was the first local authority across Ireland to offer free sanitary products in its public buildings, and I know that we have all worked collectively to encourage other public bodies to have that initiative extended to our schools and hospitals.

The Bill makes specific reference to giving access to free period products in education and health premises. That provides a sound foundation beyond which the full aim of the legislation can be realised, which is to provide universal access to free period products to all those who need them for personal use.

This is an inclusive Bill. It recognises that some people may have difficulties accessing products, so there is provision for collection by another person or for delivery in certain circumstances. It is gender-neutral in order to ensure that women, girls and all those who menstruate have access to period products. I hope that, in its implementation, measures will be taken to include hard-to-reach groups such as homeless people, people from the Travelling community, asylum seekers and refugees, those for whom English is not their first language, as well as those living in more hard-to-reach locations in our rural communities. Make this a good-news story for them too.

Once again, I commend Pat for introducing the Bill and for all his hard work. I call on the Assembly to support the Bill.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I call Diane Dodds on to our screens.

**Mrs Dodds:** I apologise that I cannot be in the Chamber today. I send huge congratulations to Pat Catney for getting the Bill to this stage. I know that he thinks that I asked him some very awkward and difficult questions as the Bill was progressing, but he has always known that I am supportive and will continue to support the premise of the Bill, because it is about inclusivity and equality, and it will change the lives of some young people in Northern Ireland.

As has been mentioned, the Bill is necessary because one in 10 young women find it difficult to buy sanitary products, and one in seven find it a struggle to afford to buy sanitary products. We do not want to see young women and girls who are at school or in education be unable to continue with their education journey because they are unable to buy sanitary products. It is also a Bill about dignity. It is very important to remember that we took some time in the Education Committee to look at that particular aspect of the Bill and added some amendments, which were accepted by the Bill sponsor, in order to look at dignity.

It is important that people can have access to the products in a dignified and confidential way.

The Bill comes on the back of pilots already introduced by the Northern Ireland Assembly. When I was Minister for the Economy, I introduced pilot schemes to provide sanitary products in further and higher education institutions. The Minister of Education, my colleague Michelle McIlveen, has made £2.6 million of funding available to provide free sanitary products in schools. Those were important staging posts for the Bill, and I am glad that we have been able to make progress and show how necessary they are.

I again thank Pat Catney, the Bill sponsor. I reiterate, Pat, that we still need to ensure that the funding and business case are absolutely sound. I trust that the Ministers in each Department will take this work on board and that it will not take too long before the practical effect of the Bill is seen in education, health settings and the wider community. Thank you for all your work, and thank you, as well, to all who presented from community groups and those who advocated on behalf of women and girls.

**Mr Lyttle:** As Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I am absolutely delighted to support the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill at

Final Stage. I commend the proposer of the Bill, Pat Catney MLA, for the work that he undertook. Also, to echo his words to me, I am delighted to have made such a good friend during my time in the Chamber. I am delighted at the passion that you bring to the Chamber, Pat. Thank you for all those things.

Access to period products should be universally available, as is the case for many other basic hygiene products. Is it inconceivable that it would be otherwise, and I am glad that the Bill will correct the fact that it is not.

The Education Committee worked on period product provision for some time and on period dignity. We made progress in recent years, working with campaigners and activists, on those key issues. The Committee met The Homeless Period Belfast on a number of occasions. It was my privilege to invite the charity to give evidence to the Education Committee and to present a petition, on behalf of 5,000 people, to the Assembly for free period products in schools. Pat has recognised, and it is important that we, too, recognise, the work of the campaigners and activists in The Homeless Period Belfast, a volunteer-led initiative, managed by Katrina McDonnell, and the other organisations that worked on period product provision, such as the Red Box Project and Equality Period.

The current Education Minister and her predecessor worked to support the provision of period products in schools. That is an important start in support of the implementation of the provisions of the Bill.

The Education Committee undertook Committee Stage scrutiny of this cross-cutting Bill — I am proud that we did — on behalf of other relevant subject Committees. We endeavoured to coordinate evidence taking and scrutiny to enable the passage of this important legislation. We drew in feedback from a range of key stakeholders and conducted meaningful consideration of the issues, within a tight time frame, that allowed the Bill to complete its primary legislative stages.

The Department of Education has demonstrated action on this issue with a period dignity pilot scheme and accompanying Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) webinars and other educational resources to present the issue in context. That is important progress on the Bill.

The Department for Communities, councils, the Department for the Economy, further education stakeholders, the Department of Health and the

Department of Finance all responded with their perspectives on and experiences of the provision of free period products and with ways in which the Bill's provisions could be coordinated and funded. The Minister for Communities coordinated the Bill's amending stages, which was a welcome intervention that allowed the Bill to progress. The Committee for Education will continue to work to advance the provision of period products as a means of delivering equal opportunity, particularly along the pathway from school to employment.

The Committee is proud of the work and combined efforts of legislators and stakeholders throughout the legislative process of the Bill that Pat Catney sponsored. Society and campaigners emphatically told the Assembly that free period products must be made available for all, and Pat and the Assembly responded. We hope and anticipate that the legislation will improve access to education, work and sport and improve dignity for women, girls and those who menstruate. We trust that it will improve understanding of menstruation and create supportive conversations about periods. I commend Pat for his committed and passionate sponsorship, and I support the passing into law of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill.

**Mr Butler:** As a Lagan Valley MLA and someone who served on council with the Member —.

**A Member:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Butler:** A good one sing. I feel like a pop star now.

**Mr Catney:** You look like one *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Butler:** I appreciate that, and it is good to have that on the record. *[Laughter.]* It was my pleasure to work —

**A Member:** Which one?

**Mr Butler:** *[Laughter.]* It was my pleasure to work with Pat Catney as a councillor on Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, and, indeed, it has been my pleasure to work with him as an MLA since 2017. As born-and-bred Lisburn men, we are particularly passionate about Lagan Valley.

Sometimes I look at legislation such as that tabled by Mr Catney and other politicians and ask myself, "Why did I not do that?". I am envious of the Bill. It is excellent legislation, and I again commend the Member for introducing it.

I recall his party colleague Cara Hunter, who is sitting behind him, talking about a conversation that they had had in their office at the beginning of these two years about Pat's fear, as a man, of sponsoring a Bill that dealt with menstruation and period products. That he sponsored the Bill is very fitting and a testament to the man who he is. Pat, regardless of what happens in the election, you can be very proud. The Bill will bring about serious changes and improvements to the lives of young girls, women and those who menstruate.

When we legislate, there is always a Bill title and the written text. People will look at that and say, "Yes, it gives universal access and defines the premises where the products will be, and those products will be in the hands of the people who need them". That is the purpose of the Bill. Do you know something, however? The unintended consequences of the legislation that we make are sometimes even better. This Bill is an example of legislation that will reach places and affect people's lives in positive ways that were not even intended.

If you will indulge me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will speak about a few of those. First, the Bill does what it says on the tin, in that it provides universal access to period products for those who need them and defines the places where they will be available. I am proud to have been on the Education Committee when we discussed a number of other issues. Those included the need to determine the quality of products so that they were not bargain-basement-type products and to make sure that the environmental and climate-affecting aspects were picked up on.

Moreover, by meeting different groups and engaging with the Bill sponsor, the Committee identified that one of the barriers to accessing period products is poverty. It was not necessarily its purpose, but the Bill will, in a small way, tackle poverty. It will keep money in the pockets of some people who were not previously able to procure period products because they did not have enough money and who perhaps at the moment are having to choose from heating, eating, period products and all the other essential things in life. In a small way, the Bill has therefore started to chip away at how we deal with poverty.

**1.15 pm**

The thing that probably excited me most when talking to young people in the community groups, and especially to teachers, was the stigma and the dignity that is not there for some people. The fact that people will now be able to

go into premises discreetly, without having to ask, and access products is absolutely marvellous. I do not think that that was the intent of the Bill, but it will really bring dignity and raise the profile of talking about menstruation and menstrual items, especially, perhaps, among young men. That is brilliant. The impact on young people that came out of the problem — the lack of dignity, the stigma and the inability to talk about it — fed into the poor mental health of a lot of people. Again, this will help reduce poor mental health among young people.

Teachers gave evidence in one of the sessions about participation in activities, particularly sports. Justin McNulty will remember this. They found that COVID led to some issues being identified and that the lack of availability of products, for whatever reason, was stopping young women from being able to participate in sports and activities. Therefore, we are actually addressing a fourth item of unintended consequences. I would call this the win-win-win Bill, Mr Catney, so well done on that.

I thank the Bill sponsor and his team, and I thank the Minister for Communities for coming in as she did. I also thank the Chamber for supporting the amendment, which I thought was useful. We debated the overall responsibility being in TEO, but, like the Bill sponsor, I thank all the agencies that have been chasing this dream for many years and the young people, teachers and parents who spoke so well to define and design the Bill. Once more, I congratulate my Lagan Valley colleague on this piece of legislation. It is win, win, win and win.

**Ms Sheerin:** I start by echoing the congratulations to Pat, a Member for Lagan Valley, on this important legislation. Mr Catney is one of the characters of the Assembly and is an embodiment of dedication to women's issues, fighting misogyny and being a feminist. I can attest to that. I have received kindness from you. We are not on any of the same Committees, and you do not always have reason to, but you have gone out of your way to show me kindness, and, as a young woman in this place, I appreciate that. I just want to put that on the record. This is a legacy that you will have left in this place, but you live and breathe that every day, so you deserve commendation for that.

This legislation is evidence of the difference that we can make when we all work together. As an institution, this place often receives an awful lot of bad press, but this is a piece of progressive legislation that we have delivered together. It has been sponsored by a Member

from the SDLP, driven forward by a Committee Chair from the Alliance Party and implemented by a Sinn Féin Minister, with the support of all parties across the House. We should reflect on that. It is to be welcomed, and it will probably not receive the coverage in the media that other, more negative stories might.

The Bill is another piece of legislation that has been passed during this mandate that starts to unpick the misogyny that we have seen across this state for decades. It is systemic and has been established, and we need to work against it. The Bill complements a lot of other legislation that has been passed or is in the process of being passed, such as the safe access zones Bill from Ms Bailey from South Belfast and the work that has been done on domestic violence, upskirting and downblousing. All those things are progressive and will start to work towards a fairer and more equal society, which is what we need to deliver for all our constituents.

I agree with the Member for Newry and Armagh about the stigma around periods. Half the population goes through periods, but they have been shrouded in secrecy. The idea that a period leaves a blue liquid stain is not reality, but that is what was propagated for decades and was expected. We saw the end of the tampon tax only last year. That is the situation.

Period products are not luxury items, and people cannot decide whether or not they want to buy them. They are not bars of chocolate; they are essential items. We are in a cost-of-living crisis, and we have a real situation to deal with. Members have referred to the percentage of people who have struggled to buy period products during their life and the impact that that has on their mental health. Another Member for Lagan Valley referred to that. We have young people growing up who are terrified to ask their parents for money to buy tampons or sanitary towels because they know that their parents are already struggling to heat the house or put food on the table. That is the situation. The Bill, therefore, is important in giving people an opportunity to get those products for free, when they are in public spaces. It is the beginning. I hope to see Mr Catney back in the next mandate and building on this legislation.

**Mr Weir:** I welcome the passage of the Bill's Final Stage and commend all the campaigners who have pressed so hard for it and the Bill sponsor. For Pat Catney, hearing some of the tributes must be like hearing eulogies at your funeral, without having to go through the indignity of dying, which is always a double advantage. He is to be commended for bringing the legislation forward.

Members across the Chamber have seen and know the problems that are created by period poverty and a lack of period dignity, and we know of the issues around trying to remove the stigma around periods. That has been recognised by all parties — Executive and non-Executive — and, over the past few years, we have seen a positive step change in trying to tackle the issues. Today marks the culmination of those actions. As highlighted by a number of Members, the impact of period poverty, though not confined to it, has been particularly acute in young women's education. We know that the impact can lead to the missing of education and constraints within education, and that it does so in a disproportionate way.

Mention has been made of various campaigners. I want to put on record one person and one group. When I was Education Minister, there was a campaign on period poverty from Ellie Massey and a group of classmates from Strathearn School who pushed hard on the issue. They were able to shine a focus on the issue. I was able to bring a proposal to the Executive to introduce a pilot scheme on period poverty, and that was unanimously and enthusiastically supported by the Executive. Funding was secured for that scheme, and we have been able to take further steps on it. As highlighted by my colleague Diane Dodds, we have seen my successor, the current Minister, be able to implement it at the beginning of September 2021 and funding be made available for it. The then Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, was able to ensure that it was extended to further and higher education. Through the passage of this Bill, in particular, there has been good cooperation across Departments, particularly through the Minister for Communities, in coordinating those efforts.

There has been that important step change, but the Bill takes us a further step forward on at least two grounds. First, the various schemes that were put in place, particularly by Education, are now on a statutory footing. They are now part of the law of the land, rather than being simply down to the good wishes and simple actions of individual Ministers. We all know that, at times, Ministers can change and that, sometimes, opinions and priorities can change, but the Bill enshrines it in legislation, which means that it covers the issues and gives a guarantee into the future.

Secondly and critically, the Bill ensures that all the actions that have been taken, particularly in education, including higher and further education, and in other sectors will be carried out in a comprehensive fashion and applied across the board. No female, irrespective of

their location in Northern Ireland or whether they are in full-time education, are older and in employment or are involved in a range of activities, be that sport or whatever else, should be denied the opportunity to reach their full potential because of period poverty or a lack of period dignity.

This is a good legacy of the Assembly. I welcome the Final Stage. I look forward to the Bill receiving Royal Assent and being implemented, and I commend the Member, once again.

**Ms McLaughlin:** This is a great day for everyone in Northern Ireland. Six really important Bills have reached Final Stage today, and they will improve the lives of everybody in Northern Ireland. I am really delighted that we have managed to get the Bill to its Final Stage in this mandate.

We have heard from people who have missed school or work because they could not access period products. We have heard from people who have been forced to use unsuitable alternatives, including toilet paper, and from those who simply cannot afford the cost of these vital healthcare products. When we carried out the survey last year, 45% of respondents said that they had struggled to afford period products, and 69% said that they had resorted to using period products for longer than advised or had used unsuitable alternatives. As Members have said, the cost-of-living crisis has accelerated significantly since we carried out the survey. Sadly, I expect those statistics to be greatly increased, and no one should face going to school, college or work worried about not being able to afford vital healthcare products to manage their period.

The impact of the Bill should therefore not be underestimated in any way. It will change lives and will ease a financial burden for so many. Gone will be the days of worrying about being caught out without period products or about being able to afford them at all. There will be no more improvising or discomfort, and the stress will start to ease. The issue will no longer burden future generations: what an absolute legacy. I am delighted that young girls will grow up in that new world.

I reiterate how proud I am of the Bill sponsor, Pat Catney, for his unwavering commitment to ensuring that the language in the Bill remained inclusive. Every person who needs to access period products will be included, and equality of access will be ensured: how SDLP of him.

The shame will also start to lift as we break the stigma around talking about periods. It has been incredibly heartening to listen to so many people across the Chamber speaking on a subject that has been discussed in hushed tones for far too long. The conversation should not and will not end today, however. Let us keep the conversation going until we dismantle period stigma entirely. Let us keep the conversation going around other women's health issues that are currently treated as taboo.

I thank all the stakeholders who have advocated on behalf of the Bill and all who have engaged with the Committees and pushed the Bill forward. Thank you again, Pat, for listening and engaging with those campaigners to make the Bill a reality. I thank the Department for Communities and you, Minister, for taking the Bill on and ensuring that it had the opportunity to pass in this mandate.

We will finally have real measures in place to end period poverty once and for all. That is positive politics in practice, and I am proud of what my friend and party colleague has done. I am also proud of Members throughout the Chamber who worked collectively. We got behind the wheel and pushed, and we have got to a place that everybody in Northern Ireland should be proud of. There are not many days on which we can stand up and speak with pride, but

*"My mama told me, 'There'll be days like this'".*

**Ms Hunter:** As this is my last speech at the end of the mandate, it is a privilege to speak on a topic as important as this. Today is a very good day. For generations, women have had to make do, suffer and struggle but, thanks to the Bill, that is no more. The Bill is another strong step closer to true equality in the North of Ireland. It is about social justice and keeping girls in school, the workplace, the study hall, the library and, of course, in sport. I welcome the comments of my colleague from Armagh on the importance of females in sport, including the GAA.

### 1.30 pm

My admiration for Pat is no secret, and I reflect often on his incredible work ethic. Today, Pat, everyone can see the heart and soul, the effort and the hours of work that you and your wonderful team have put into this unbelievably important Bill, including talking to activists from a variety of sectors, hearing the voices of

women across the North and responding with kindness, consideration, the spirit of inclusivity and, most importantly, an open mind. I thank all those activists, many of whom are here today or listening at home. We thank the students and volunteers, community leaders and others for their grit and determination and for maintaining hope that a Bill like this could and should go through our Assembly.

As I mentioned at a previous stage, the beauty of politics is that none of us is permanent, but the Bills that we pass remain long after we are gone and create real change. What a legacy Pat will leave for the years to come, although I hope that he will be here for a good while yet.

I thank, as my colleague did, every party and MLA across the House for their support. It really is a day of great importance. Regardless of how we identify politically, we all have the shared goal of improving our communities and the lives of people across the North. The Bill will do just that. No longer will those who have periods suffer the indignity, distress and anxiety of makeshift alternatives. Today, this is what real change looks like: free products that are not means-tested and universal provision for all who need it. As the cost of living continues to go through the roof, that policy is needed now more than ever.

In closing, as a young woman, I thank Pat for introducing the Bill. I have seen behind the scenes, and I am truly so grateful for what the legislation will mean for the women of today and the women of tomorrow. He will have saved hundreds of thousands of moments of embarrassment, discomfort and indignity, and that is the measure of the man. Thank you, Pat.

**Ms S Bradley:** I, too, support the Bill, and I thank Pat Catney, my friend and colleague, for introducing it.

As a Member who sat on the Justice Committee, I am all too aware of some of the harrowing circumstances that young women face every day. While the Bill was passing through the Assembly, at the back of my mind was always that young girl who might have no access to funds of her own and is dependent on the goodwill of others. Now, with absolute dignity and no questions asked, she has access to period products, and that is because of Pat Catney. I commend Pat for recognising the plight of many women, and I focus on young girls, because, at that stage of life, they are perhaps the least comfortable and least empowered when it comes to managing their period.

Periods have had many different names and have come, as Emma correctly pointed out, in many different colours. Mostly, they were talked about in hushed tones, but that is no more. It is no more because people like Pat Catney, who were uncomfortable sitting in a room full of women — I think that he would admit that openly — found the confidence to say, "This is a wrong that needs to be righted, and I will do it". We were and are so proud of Pat for doing that, and we always will be.

If I may say so, plenty of private Members' Bills have come through the House, and, no doubt, plenty more will come, but very few will come with the charismatic style attached to them that only Pat Catney can deliver. Few will have every Member of the House sitting with a big grin on their face, regardless of the topic. Pat's charm allowed everybody to embrace what he is trying to achieve today. I genuinely mean this: the people of Lagan Valley served the House proud when they put Pat Catney here. It is having people like Pat, with a good heart and good intentions, in a place where change can happen that results in days like today. Thank you, Pat, and thank you to every person in the House who spoke on the Bill and supported Pat in getting it to its Final Stage.

**Mr O'Toole:** A few SDLP Members have spoken today, as people will have noticed, but so have Members from across the House, which is testament to how important and popular the Bill is. The Bill sponsor is also popular, and he is popular for good reason. His party colleagues and Members from across the House are proud of him for a reason: the Bill is a hugely positive step forward. It will pass today, which is wonderful.

It is important to acknowledge some of the extraordinary campaign groups that have put pressure on us as legislators and on legislators in other places to remove the stigma around menstruation, to use our power as legislators to do what we can to make access to period products universal and routine and, hopefully, to do something else, which is to start making it much more normal for all of us to talk about issues like menstruation that, for too long, have been shrouded in euphemism and awkwardness. Too often, that has caused not just discomfort for women but shame, embarrassment and a huge range of other difficulties. Those campaign groups — EqualityPeriod, Homeless Period Belfast, the Red Box Project and a huge number of others — deserve so much credit for moving the issue forward.

Often, in this place, people think that positive things cannot happen. Positive, progressive things are for someone else; they are for another place. We are proving with this legislation and with other legislation that will go through today and has gone through in recent days that that is not true. This can be a place where progressive change happens, and we do not have to wait for other people to do it for us. We will now be, I think, the second place to introduce ambitious period poverty legislation. We have been able to do that because people with a big heart and generosity who were determined to use their mandate to improve the lives of people came here and did that. That is what Pat Catney is. Over the past couple of years, I have got to know Pat fairly well. We are more than just colleagues; we have become very good friends. To say that Pat has a big heart would be a crude understatement: Pat Catney is a giant of a man with a big heart. He wanted to use his mandate to do something positive for people, and this is positive for all women and girls and those who menstruate. The legislation is testament to what good people can do when they come here.

It is also worth acknowledging and celebrating the fact that the Bill will be passed by parties from across the House and that a Sinn Féin Minister will implement it. That is important to acknowledge. The Alliance Party Education Committee Chair, who will be a huge loss to the Assembly, helped to shepherd the Bill through when he had his own private Member's legislation and other private Members' legislation to scrutinise, so credit must go to him today as well and to some Members from other parties. The DUP and the UUP have both spoken in support of the Bill today.

The Bill is a hugely positive step forward. I am genuinely delighted. I think that most of us will have a smile on our face when the Bill passes because we are proving that this place can do important things for people when we put our minds to it. I am so proud of my friend, the indefatigable and amazing Pat Catney, and I am proud of the Assembly for passing the legislation today.

**Miss Woods:** On behalf of the Green Party, I support Mr Catney's Bill at its Final Stage. I have supported it from day one. We have had many conversations about the Bill, and he knows that he had our support from its inception. We know that steps have already been taken in Northern Ireland to pilot the provision of period products for those who need them. As we know, however, that is not universal. This year, we saw the long-awaited launch of the Economy Department's pilot

scheme, as well as the Department of Education's scheme to provide free products in schools. The Bill closes the gaps. As we know, many businesses, especially those in the hospitality sector — an area of work that Mr Catney and I share — are leading on this, and that is very welcome.

As I said at Second Stage, period poverty must be viewed through the lens of children's rights and how the Bill meets our obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). As a political youth champion, I thank all the young girls who reached out to me and, I assume, to many Members over the last number of months to discuss their experiences and to speak in support of the Bill.

Period poverty is unnecessary and unfair. Products should be universally accessible, as they are a vital everyday health product and are essential for accessing education, play and recreation. We know that many who experience period poverty miss school and are absent from class. We also know that poverty is directly linked to educational underachievement. Period poverty is another way in which poverty disadvantages people.

The Bill recognises, as we all should, at every government level, that this is about dignity. That is what the Bill is fundamentally about. Periods are more than just tampons, pads, Mooncups, cramps, paracetamol and ibuprofen. We have all had an opportunity to remove the unhealthy narrative around this so-called taboo subject. It is not taboo, dirty, unclean or something to be ashamed of. I am sure that I speak for everyone here who has had direct experience of their period arriving when, perhaps, they were not prepared for it. Maybe it has happened when they were out — I know that I have had to go and find some toilet roll from somewhere — or they have had to go to the toilet next to them, bang on the door and ask whether anybody had a spare pad, because, guess what, the machine was out of order or because they did not have a pound in their pocket.

I will go back to the Bill. We are really overcoming the stigma attached to periods, but it still exists, and we must facilitate a public conversation about it. As part of the Bill's passing, we must consider how we talk about periods and how we learn about them in school, as young people grow up, and as a wider society. Powerful street art about period poverty should never have been vandalised or painted over. This is our life. As I said at Second Stage, there is no doubt that many of us here will remember our first conversations about periods

with our parents, family or friends. I found those conversations uncomfortable, but I do not know why. We need to overcome that. I hope that the Bill will go some way to encouraging that in our society.

That ends my remarks, but I want to thank Mr Catney for taking the Bill forward. Very well done.

**Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):**

As others have said, it is great to be here on the Assembly's final day in the mandate and to get to the Final Stage of this important Bill.

As Pat reflected, we have come a long way as a society that is emerging from decades of conflict. That can often lead to division. That is also reflected in the art installation in Belfast that Pat mentioned, which looks back over those 50 years. He had a business in the city, just a stone's throw from where I grew up in the Market area of south Belfast, an inner-city, working-class community. As I said a couple of days ago, the media and others sometimes focus on the negativity or disagreements, but a lot of good work has been done, even in the shortened mandate. Looking back, there has been huge change over those 50 years, which is reflected in that art installation.

This final day of the Assembly reflects that change. Let us hope that that is reflected in the media and on the air waves this evening. We are seeing progressive, rights-based legislation progress, not just with this Bill. There is the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill, and we know the impact that that will have on women in particular. For other people who have suffered abuse in our society there is the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill. The Hospital Parking Charges Bill will have an impact on our health and social care sector. There is the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill and, of course, the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill. All of that is progressive, rights-based legislation being passed on the final day to ensure that it becomes law and that those protections will be instilled in legislation here, going forward.

That got me thinking that change happens with people: it is people who make change. We often look only at the big events like today. It is a good day, because we are passing legislation, but that happens only because of the everyday, slow, daily grind of our activists out there, whether they are political activists, community activists or others, who campaign daily and are involved in activism to create change in our communities and across society.

That activism is clear in the legislation that we will pass today.

Last night, I saw the video by The Homeless Period Belfast, which really showed the importance of what this Bill will mean to people's daily lives.

Period products should be available in the same way as toilet roll is. In the video, someone holds up toilet tissue and says that period products should be viewed in the same light as it. It is about dignity. It is about normalising the issue. It is about creating visibility. This is not some dirty thing that should be kept behind closed doors. Over 50% of our population menstruate, have periods and bleed. It will happen to a new generation of people as well, so the more that we can build dignity and normalise the issue, the better.

#### 1.45 pm

As I said, we are seeing change happening right across the Chamber on rights and equality, and that benefits all of society. That change is reflected not just in the Chamber but on the streets. It is reflected in the activism and campaigning that we have seen outside the Chamber today and on the streets over the past week. While I was sitting here, I received a photo from my sister of my niece, who is coming two soon. She is standing in a local shopping centre, as they are out doing the shopping. In the background, there is a Mother's Day installation, with a sign that says "Love". The legislation is important for future generations, including young children like her growing up. There will be protections around her rights and her dignity. That is what such legislation really means. It is what a functioning Assembly and a functioning Executive really mean for people out there on the ground. It is about building an inclusive, rights-based society for generations to come. This is therefore a good day, with this Bill and the others that we are finally concluding today.

I thank my team in the Department, which worked with Pat and others to make sure that we got the legislation through before the end of the mandate. I am sure that those officials loved it when I came to them to say that we needed to get this done in a couple of weeks. In true fashion, they all put their shoulder to the wheel to make sure that it got through in time. I thank the Office of the Legislative Counsel; the Assembly Bill Office; TEO, which is to where the legislation will now go; and Education, Health and the other Departments that did work on the technical and other amendments and

that ran pilots on the issue. I also thank the campaigners, whose slow, daily routine of campaigning and activism really created the change that we are seeing today. As an activist myself, I am sure that this will not be the end for them. They will be thinking about the next campaign and continuing to look to build the type of society for which we all strive.

Last but not least, I thank Pat for, first, listening to your daughters and for listening to and engaging with the campaigners out on the ground. I also thank you for working with the Department to bring forward this much-needed legislation, which will now become law. There is much more to do. We need to continue to organise in order to effect the change that we all want to see to improve the quality of life of people outside of the Chamber.

**Mr Catney:** I was not too sure at the start whether I was going to wind or whether it would be the Minister.

Before I start, I thank you, Emma, for your act of kindness before we met on the steps of Stormont. It had a huge impact on me, as it did on a lot of MLAs. I have heard great words spoken. I am a big, strong, burly man, but, at times, I get a little bit emotional. I am delighted to be part of this Assembly, working with some great people. In fact, I am delighted to be working with everyone. I believe that every single one of us is here because we want to do better for where we come from and enrich our home place.

I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. I thank Ciara Ferguson and Diane Dodds. I am going to call Diane "the Baroness". Diane looked at the Bill and went through the scrutiny of it. I have to commend her, and I commend everyone who does that, so I am giving her her full title. From an Irish nationalist to the Baroness, I thank you.

The impact on those who cannot get access to period products is huge. Giving that to pupils, workers and all people will improve access to education and work and will allow them the level of dignity that they all deserve.

I thank Chris Lyttle. It has been great to see how Chris works, how he does his politics and how he engages, how he was the Chair of that Committee and how things were pushed upon him. I am delighted that he will get his own private Member's Bill through, which will bring equality, again, within teaching. He had to do a huge piece of work on the back of that.

It makes me proud to be part of this Assembly. I am not going to apologise: I left school at 15, and I do not have any O levels or qualifications, but I will tell you what I do have: I have a grounding in Belfast and seeing the best in people, because I left Moira to come into Belfast. We live in a great place, and we have seen that, when we work here, we can deliver. This is a positive message.

We should have got rid of the stigma of period poverty and the stigma of talking about periods years ago. I am a son, a brother, a father of three girls and a grandfather of three little girls, and, as the Minister said, this changes it for them. It must be absolutely terrible to wake up in the morning and find that you are going out to school and you do not have access to the products that you need for a natural bodily function. I hope that this changes it for every little girl, every person, every woman and everything that goes on from here. I am delighted to welcome the fact that we are able collectively to change this.

As I said, we should have got rid of that stigma years ago. My colleagues here have supported me throughout all of this, including a lot of the women from the UUP, the DUP, Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Greens. I am sure that I have had your heads turned, because I had to ask questions. I was on a journey, and I was asking questions, and all those questions were answered and all that help was given. When I started out, I did not know the whole process of where or how it goes, but I know the process now, and I know that there is a lot of work, including from the civil servants. Mr Deputy Speaker, I will go back to tell you about when I had the little pub next door to Churchill House. I saw the civil servants going home at 5.00 pm, and I thought, "God, that would be a great job. I am still having to work until one or two o'clock in the morning". I am glad that I did not go into the Civil Service, I can tell you, because I see how hard they work.

I thank Dolores Kelly, Nichola Mallon, Sinead McLaughlin, Sinéad Bradley and my room-mate, young Cara Hunter, for all that help. What a team of Members. I have sat with them and talked about every aspect of this Bill, its impact and the change that it will make. I have done that with every single Member whom I have met out there and talked to. I thank Members across the Chamber for their kind words to me personally today. This is not electioneering, folks, but I will tell you this. As we walk out and face the general public, no one knows what way they are going to go. I do not even want to give you Winston Churchill's quote after the electorate had spoken in 1945. Winston said,

"The electorate have spoken", and he then used a bad word that started with b, but I will not say it.

We are going out there, and I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the way that you have conducted this debate. This has been one of the great experiences for me as an MLA who came here quite late in life. I was over 60 when I was elected here. This is a day when we are working on important issues. People have dedicated their lives to campaigning for this, and we are passing legislation that will make a tangible difference to many. I hope that you can all join in that support. I will not leave the Floor without going back to our Minister. I thank you, Deirdre. You have stated that you are from a working-class area of south Belfast, and I had a little bar that was close to it. I say that, if this is my last day and my last word in the Chamber, the support from all the parties — all of us together — gives me hope for the future. That is what we need and what is in short supply. We can do it when we work together.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill [NIA 39/17-22] do now pass.*

*[Applause.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** That concludes the Final Stage of the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

### **Standing Order 42(1) - Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill: Suspension**

**Miss Woods:** I beg to move

*That Standing Order 42(1) be suspended in respect of the Final Stage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill [NIA 41/17-22].*

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

**Miss Woods:** Standing Order 42(1) requires that there should be a minimum interval of five working days between each stage of a Bill,

apart from where it is subject to accelerated passage or between Second Stage and Committee Stage. As the Bill completed its Further Consideration Stage on Monday 21 March, I am asking the Assembly to approve the suspension of Standing Order 42(1) in respect of the Bill to ensure that it can complete its Final Stage today, the last scheduled sitting day of the Assembly before dissolution.

The Bill's significance and the difference that it will make to the lives of workers and employees who are suffering through domestic abuse is reflected in the widespread support that it has received from all corners of the House and the political consensus that has been crucial in progressing the Bill through its various stages.

Once again, I ask all parties to support the motion to ensure that we have the opportunity to complete the Final Stage before the end of the Assembly mandate. The Bill has the potential to save lives, and we must seize the opportunity today to get it passed.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** No Members have indicated that they wish to speak on the motion. Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 42(1) be suspended in respect of the Final Stage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill [NIA 41/17-22].*

## **Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill: Final Stage**

**Miss Woods:** I beg to move

*That the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill [NIA 41/17-22] do now pass.*

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

**Miss Woods:** Today is a hugely significant day for victims and survivors of domestic abuse and for workers' rights in Northern Ireland. Today marks a step change in how we, as a society, respond to domestic abuse. From 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021, the PSNI responded to 32,219 incidents of domestic abuse. That is a response roughly every 16 minutes, and that is only for the incidents that

we know about. Last year, the number of domestic abuse crimes increased by 9% to 20,827. That is the highest since records began in 2004.

Since 2020, when the pandemic instigated mass social and economic shutdowns and the Government imposed "Stay at home" orders, 17 people in Northern Ireland have been killed by someone close to them. Nine were women murdered by intimate partners. Home, as we know, is not always a safe place.

### **2.00 pm**

We have a problem — a really serious problem — the scale of which is not fully captured in official statistics. As my Green Party colleague and Member of Parliament in New Zealand Jan Logie put it when speaking to her Bill in 2018:

*"We will not solve this problem by continuing to focus all of our resources and efforts on what happens after the police have been called."*

She spoke about a "stocktake" of government spending in New Zealand that showed that only 1.5% of its budgets go towards prevention and only 6.6% towards early intervention. As far as I am aware, we do not even have those figures for Northern Ireland. We have not taken stock of our spending or where it is directed. That needs to happen urgently.

Again, in Jan's words:

*"We wait until things get really bad or someone is killed, and then we wring our hands, squeeze in another hospital bed, and build another prison."*

No more. We cannot do that any longer. The Executive and our Departments must commit to prevention and early intervention. We must invest in our children and educate them about what a healthy relationship looks like. We have to dispel the stereotypes and myths that prop up the harmful culture of misogyny in our society and form the roots of gender-based violence. We all have our part to play.

Some businesses and employers are already leading the way in their response to domestic abuse. Those organisations recognise the significant costs of domestic abuse, social and economic, to their businesses and are doing something about it. Those businesses are saying, "Enough is enough. We have seen too many employees suffer through abuse, too many forced to take time off work, too many

forced to leave or resign, too many promising talents stifled in their career progression and too many marginalised and isolated in the workplace".

Those employers are acknowledging that, if they support their workers and enable them to seek help and assistance, they are not just doing the good, decent, right thing on a basic human level but are going a considerable way to addressing the costs of covering employees' time off work, hiring temporary and agency workers, running recruitment exercises, losing talented and experienced staff and spending resources on workplace issues.

Domestic abuse is not confined to the home. It always finds its way into the workplace in some shape or form, because it is and always has been a workplace issue. Survivors have told us what they have endured. They have, for example, been forced not to go to work, deliberately made late for work, followed, stalked, in receipt of phone calls and emails at work, threatened and attacked inside or outside their workplace and, in the most extreme circumstances, some victims have even been killed at work.

Employers are now recognising that domestic abuse is no longer none of their business and that they have to make it their business to help and support their staff. I commend all those who have begun that journey. Since paid time off work to deal with issues related to domestic abuse became a statutory right in New Zealand in 2019, we have seen global companies such as Vodafone and, here, Danske Bank introduce policies and safe leave. Councils across England and Wales and in Scotland that have done so too include South Ayrshire and Neath Port Talbot. The Northern Ireland Civil Service has a special paid leave policy that would cover similar circumstances.

I take this opportunity at Final Stage to thank officials and members of the councils who took the time to discuss with me their policies, the background to them and how they are working in practice: thank you for everything that you are doing for your staff, and I hope that, should the Bill pass, your regional Parliaments and Assemblies will take it up a notch, just as we are doing in Northern Ireland.

When every employer stands up and says, "We will help you. We will protect you. We will do what it takes to keep you safe, just to make sure that you keep your job", we will begin to disrupt and transform the fundamental social dislocation that allows abuse to happen and

continue. That is why we are here today: we are standing for a future free of domestic abuse.

Today is the day that we finally address the inequality between workers who have access to some form of safe leave and those who do not. Today is the day that the Assembly says to all victims and survivors of abuse, "We are with you, we support you, and we will do everything in our power to keep you safe".

Before I finish my opening remarks, I thank all those who helped to get us here. I thank all those who took the time to respond to our consultation, many of whom have been through the most difficult circumstances imaginable and suffered some of the most appalling abuse. Thank you for telling your stories. Your words and experiences have shaped this legislation and will help others in the future so that they do not have to go through what you did.

To Women's Aid and the Men's Advisory Project, thank you for all your work and lobbying. It was your efforts to push for some form of safe leave for victims and survivors that led to the first real discussions and debate in the Justice Committee. You made sure that it was on the agenda, and I am grateful for all your support through the Bill's journey, including the very important evidence that you gave to the Economy Committee.

I thank the Women's Resource and Development Agency, the Women's Policy Group and Victim Support NI. Many voluntary and community sector organisations offered support. I am sorry if I forget to mention them by name, but I thank everybody who contributed.

I thank the trade unions that supported the Bill's journey. In particular, I thank those at NIPSA and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions — you know who you are — for all your engagement and work on this issue over many years prior to the Bill's coming to fruition. You spread awareness of domestic abuse as a workplace issue because you have always known that it was. You have looked after your members. You have represented your workers, raised issues on their behalf and fought for their jobs. Thank you.

I thank all those in the Bill Office and the private Members' Bills unit. I thank the legislative drafter for their guidance, advice and professionalism. I also thank the Committee for the Economy, its staff, departmental officials and the Minister for the Economy. Everyone spent considerable time examining the Bill in detail, scrutinising its provisions and developing

the amendments made at Further Consideration Stage.

I look forward to hearing Member's contributions. I urge you all to pass this incredibly important Bill today.

**Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** I am very pleased to speak at Final Stage of this important Bill. I am glad that it received cross-party support to get to this stage. I thank Rachel Woods, who introduced the Bill, and the Bill Office for its efforts to bring it to Final Stage. I also put on record my thanks to the Minister and to the Department officials who engaged positively with the Bill and helped to progress it to this stage today. Most importantly, I, too, thank those who campaigned for this legislation and the victims and survivors whose evidence helped to shape the Bill and helped us in our deliberations on it.

I mentioned previously that my party colleagues introduced similar legislation in the South. It will be great to see domestic abuse safe leave available across this island. As a result of the Bill, workers who are the victims of domestic abuse will be entitled to safe leave from work. Far too many people — the vast majority are women — experience domestic abuse. Rachel Woods said that 32 reported instances of domestic abuse were dealt with by the police last year. That is the tip of the iceberg. The abuse affects every aspect of people's lives, including their work life. For some victims, the abuse follows them to their workplace, and it can take many forms. For others, their workplace will be a sanctuary. Given the figures on domestic abuse, you can be assured that there are people in all our lives and workplaces who have experienced or are experiencing abuse. Therefore, domestic abuse is very much a work and employment issue.

I have spoken before about the direct cost of domestic abuse to employers through absence or the loss of valued staff who leave if they do not have the time and space to deal with the issues that arise from their abuse. Therefore, safe leave is very much needed. It will give workers who are the victims of abuse the ability to have up to 10 days off in a leave year, which could be to deal with the physical, mental or practical issues that arise from abuse, such as finding housing, childcare and legal or medical appointments. The legislation could be literally life-saving. We need to ensure that all victims have the space and time that they need to deal with their experience, and the very fact that safe leave exists will, I hope, be part of the process of destigmatising domestic abuse.

We all need to do much more to tackle the root causes of abuse. We need to tackle misogyny and toxic masculinity.

Far too often, those who experience the shame of abuse are the victims. That is part of the control exerted by perpetrators. We all have a role to play in taking away that control and ensuring that victims of abuse have the space to speak out and to seek help. No one but the perpetrator is responsible for abuse. They need to be held accountable for their actions, but the consequences of abuse are felt by many more people. The Bill can help to make things easier for victims.

This is the final day of a mandate that has been very productive in passing much-needed legislation, much of it progressive, that will improve and even save lives. The Bill that we are debating and that, I am sure, will pass into law, sits alongside several other pieces of legislation that tackle violence and abuse, in particular, violence against women. It also sits alongside other important workers' rights legislation, including the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, which officially became law this week. I am proud of the part that we played in delivering those important pieces of law in the mandate. Many more important and progressive Bills have passed, and, far from patting ourselves on the back, we should see that that shows what good can be done in the Assembly when we work collectively and when progressive parties and representatives work together. I really hope that we will see much more of that in the next mandate.

**Mr Weir:** I support the Bill's Final Stage, and I commend the Bill's sponsor for introducing it. I thank the Minister and the Department for the positive attitude that they have taken towards it. I commend all the hard work of Assembly officials, not least the Committee officials, in progressing the Bill and all those who gave evidence when we on the Committee were scrutinising it.

I give particular commendation and support to those who have been victims of domestic violence who were involved either directly in the passage of the Bill or outside it. They took the courageous step of sharing their experiences and raising their voices to make sure that what has happened to them should not happen to others.

The Bill has two levels of significance. There is the detail that is in the Bill, and there is the message that the passage of the Bill sends. I hope that Members will take it in the right spirit if I say that, somewhat ironically, I wish that this

was a Bill that we did not have to have. I wish that, even when it receives Royal Assent, it never has to be used, and I am sure that the Bill sponsor will concur with me. Domestic abuse is evil. If we could reach the point in our society where there was no domestic abuse at all, it would be a miraculous and beneficial day for all of us. Sadly, however, that is not the society that we live in.

There has been much debate about the restrictions that were put in place during the pandemic. One of the great fears — I saw it particularly, as Education Minister, from the point of view of children and the domestic setting between partners — was what was going to happen in families when the doors closed and the locks went on. What was happening behind closed doors? Sometimes, one of the biggest problems with domestic abuse is the lack of transparency and knowledge of it. We are sometimes aware of families and relationships where clear problems have been brought to the police, but in how many cases have we simply no idea of what is happening behind closed doors? It is critical, in looking at this, that we offer the maximum support to those who suffer domestic abuse. As the sponsor indicated, we should look at where, in education and prevention, we can take action to combat domestic abuse.

I commend the many employers who take the issue seriously and who have been proactive in making provision for it. The advantage of the Bill is that it takes that good practice and ensures that, whoever suffers domestic abuse, there is equality of provision and they have a statutory right. Overwhelmingly, as has been indicated, the victims are female, but we should remember that there are victims of domestic abuse who are male. Irrespective of gender, it is important that that protection and those rights are put in place as well.

## 2.15 pm

There is another significant element of the Bill. I have spoken about it in the Chamber on a couple of occasions. There is always a slight danger that we, as legislators, see legislation as being the end of a process and think that we can pack it away, put it on the shelf and forget about the problem because it has been solved. That should never be our attitude to legislation. I have used this phrase before: legislation should be a comma rather than a full stop. In trying to ensure that the Bill gets on the statute books, I think that the Bill sponsor has largely acknowledged that, when it comes to the examination of the guidance that will be needed, a level of detail is required that simply

could not be provided in primary legislation. There are direct requirements in the Bill for regulations. That means that the focus will remain on the issue, and further information will have to be brought back as we refine the detail. That will be critical in ensuring that what we have in place for those who suffer domestic abuse is fit for purpose and can protect them.

Finally, as well as the specific contents of the Bill, this is about the message and the signal that the Bill sends. The Committee was certainly unified on the issue, and I think that the House is unified on the issue. As a society, as an Assembly and as legislators, we want to send out a clear, single and unambiguous message that domestic abuse is wrong and evil, that it is never justified; and that it must stop. Today, we can add our voices to that message in a tangible way by passing the legislation and saying not simply that domestic abuse has to stop but that, where it happens, we will be there to support the victims and meet their needs. I commend the Bill to the House and believe that it will receive support across the Chamber.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am delighted to again speak at the Final Stage of a progressive piece of legislation that will make people's lives better. It is worth saying, of course, that the people who need to make use of the legislation that we are passing today are in difficult circumstances. As the previous Member said, this is, in a sense, legislation that you never want to be used. The truth is, however, that this is why most legislation in relation to protection for workers and individuals has to be passed: for the eventuality that people find themselves in difficult circumstances. That was also the case with the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act that passed earlier this year.

I commend the Bill sponsor, Rachel Woods, in the strongest possible terms for introducing the Bill. As politicians and people in society here, we all live with the pernicious sense that this society cannot get better, that things cannot be improved and that progress cannot be achieved. However, with the previous Bill, this Bill and other legislation that will come later, including the Bill from Rachel Woods's party colleague, we are today proving that people in this place can have the courage, the will and the intelligence to pass progressive legislation that will make things better for people here.

The Bill is not only progressive and ethical but timely. It is timely because we know that, tragically, there has been an increase in domestic abuse over the past two years in the context of the pandemic. We know that, at

times and in a certain context, there is an epidemic of domestic abuse. People in those extremely difficult circumstances need to understand that they will not be relying just on the goodwill of their employer — I certainly hope that most employers in Northern Ireland are decent and ethical; the vast majority, of course, are and would be understanding and supportive, should their employee find themselves in such a situation — and that, today, we are putting that right in statute and guaranteeing that someone who finds themselves in that appalling situation will be guaranteed at least 10 days of paid leave.

To go back to my earlier remarks, it is also true to say that we are offering an antidote to the idea that this place cannot change. As we all put ourselves forward for election, given how bad the reputation of this institution has been at times, not just for party political reasons but because of people's lack of trust that we can make laws and deliver things that make their lives better, legislation like this will be part of being able to prove to people on the doorsteps that we can. Of course, I do not want Miss Woods to think that I will steal her thunder. I will happily give her credit for the legislation, but we all need to cast our vote in favour of it.

The Assembly will be a world leader when the Bill is passed, because not too many jurisdictions — Australia is one example — have passed such legislation. The truth is that one reason that we will be able to pass the Bill in pretty quick time is that the Bill sponsor and her researcher brought to us robust and mature legislation that was ambitious in its provisions and realistic about how those provisions would be met. I think that one of the first lines of the Bill states that the Department must make regulations to provide for paid leave in these circumstances. Credit to the Minister and his officials for engaging on the Bill productively, as did the Committee in its scrutiny. We gave it pretty rigorous scrutiny, albeit in an abbreviated time. The Bill sponsor worked with the Department to ensure that the Bill was workable from its perspective. The commencement is not just realistic but generous, in a responsible way, to the Department, giving it the space to draft the regulations and make them workable. It cannot be said by anyone who might be looking at this that the legislation is happening quickly in order to impose a burden on business. First, it is no burden to give your worker safe leave in such appalling circumstances. The rights of the worker to have leave outweigh any concern on the other side. For any business that thinks that it is happening quickly, I say this: it is not happening quickly. We are passing the legislation so that it is on the statute book, but,

as I said, there will be a period in which the Department will have space to make the regulations and get them right.

I want people out there who are concerned about the epidemic of domestic abuse that Women's Aid and other organisations have been reporting to know that the Assembly is today doing what it can to make things better for people in that appalling situation. I am proud to have served on the Committee that scrutinised the Bill. I am proud that we will pass the legislation today. In a cross-party way, I again say, "Well done" to Rachel Woods on introducing the Bill. You should be extremely proud. It is a positive step forward. I am pleased to support it.

**Ms Dolan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly at the Final Stage of one of the most important and progressive Bills of the mandate. I commend the positive cross-party engagement to ensure that the Bill was prioritised to make it through the House in this mandate.

As other Members have said, it is regrettable that we have such an epidemic of domestic abuse that a Bill of this nature is required. I hope that the Bill, along with the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021 and the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill, will be another indication from this mandate to victims of domestic abuse that their situation is not of their making and that support is there for them when they build up the courage to ask for it. Just as importantly, I hope that the legislation that is passed in this mandate sends a clear message to the perpetrators of domestic abuse that their evil and atrocious actions will not be tolerated. I commend the sponsor for bringing forward the Bill and support it at Final Stage.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I support the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill at Final Stage. This Final Stage debate and the previous one have provided a useful insight into how our society, governed largely by men, has treated women for generations. I was watching the previous debate — I assure you that I will come to this debate, a LeasCheann Comhairle — and was thinking to myself, "Every day is a school day", because, even though I have been involved in politics for many years and see myself as a liberal, moderate individual, I got an insight into women's experiences in relation to period products that I did not really understand previously.

With regard to the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill, I, as a man, am having an insight

into the lives of the — mainly — women who are abused by — mainly — men. It is clear that the vast majority of victims of domestic violence are women and the vast majority of perpetrators are men. That includes when men are the victims of domestic violence: in the majority of cases, it is a man who is carrying out that violence against a man. Of course, there are men who suffer domestic violence from women as well. I say that because it is important that men who are victims of it come forward and seek the support that is there; it is not a sign of weakness or of being unmanly to do so.

We, as men, have a lot of catching up and repair to do for what we have done to women over generations. Much more legislation needs to come through the Assembly and future Assemblies for us to achieve true equality of the sexes in our society. We have made a significant step forward in this mandate. For the reasons that I have outlined, the Bill is important, but the purpose of the Bill is the most important reason why the Bill is coming forward today. It gives an avenue to the victims of domestic abuse to escape the abuser, because one way that abusers hold on to their victims is through financial control. Now, victims of domestic abuse can be assured that they will not lose their job because they have to take time off or because they are unable to go into work or whatever it may be, and the abuser cannot then hold on to them through financial control. We now recognise that domestic abuse impacts on the person in the workplace, and we will support them through that avenue, which is a huge step forward.

At the end of the previous debate, there was cheering and applause from the Great Hall and understandably so. I suspect that, in reaction to the passing of this Bill, there will be a quiet sigh of relief in many living rooms and workplaces across the North when victims realise that they have support in place. Many of them will not be able to cheer, because it will only bring attention from their abuser, but the recognition and support for this Bill is as loud in its own way as it was for the previous Bill.

Unfortunately, the Chamber will fall silent for the next six weeks. There will be no cheering in the Hall or elsewhere, and my concern is that it will fall silent for much longer than six weeks. We may return to some form of shadow Assembly or shadow Executive, but we will do people a great disservice by doing so because we can pass legislation such as we have passed and make massive change through the Executive. We will not be able to do the same in some form of shadow Executive or shadow Assembly. I appeal to the Members opposite. I am as good

as anyone at lambasting my political opponents — I can do it, and I can take it — but I appeal to my colleagues across the Chamber. I, as an Irish republican, could stand here and make a very sound speech and statement as to why I should not come into the Assembly because there is a border on the island of Ireland. I could be self-assured and confident in my contribution and say that I was right in what I said, just as Members across the Room are deeply concerned about what they see as a border down the Irish Sea, but I will tell you now that, if I were to do that, I would be wrong.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** I draw the Member back to the motion.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will, yes.

I would be wrong for this reason: we have shown in the last two years what a difference we can make to people's lives through Bills such as this one. I urge the Members opposite to reconsider their position, come back to a fully functioning Assembly and Executive and ensure that we collectively make differences to people's lives and create the equality for women and others in our society that has been missing for far too long.

**2.30 pm**

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for the Economy):** Once again, I commend the Member for sponsoring the Bill. I thank not only her but the Committee for the Economy and other Members for engaging so constructively on the new legislation.

I am proud that Northern Ireland will be the first region in the UK and Ireland to provide such an important employment protection for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. More importantly, to anyone who is here or listening today and is dealing with domestic abuse, I say that I hope that it sends a small signal of hope to you that the Assembly cares about your situation, that we want to find ways to help you where we can, and that we will work constructively to try to do better for you.

During the Bill's passage, we reflected on the appalling statistics that, all too sadly, demonstrate just how prevalent domestic abuse is in our society. I know that, as an Assembly, we agree that domestic abuse in all its forms is utterly abhorrent. Domestic abuse has a devastating impact on families, individuals and society as a whole. I welcome the support that the new employment rights in the Bill may offer to workers who find themselves in the most

distressing of situations. The Bill will also play an important role in raising awareness of domestic abuse and, hopefully, will reinforce the message to those who may need to hear it that help and support are available. It is for those reasons that I reiterate my firm support for the principles of the Bill.

This important new employment right will provide a valuable space for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. That space may help a person to stay in employment at a time when they need it most and when that employment offers, albeit temporarily, an escape from the horror that they are experiencing at home. It could help an individual to retain some financial independence. It may also help to alleviate some of the pressure that they face as they seek to deal with important issues arising from that domestic abuse. It may help a person to reorganise their life and adjust to any new circumstances in which they find themselves due to such abuse. It may mean that if or, more hopefully, when a person manages to escape domestic abuse, they still have a job to go to.

Helping victims and survivors to stay in employment will bring benefits to wider society. I hope that it will benefit employers by giving a clear instruction as to what they can do to provide support to their workers at such a difficult time. It may also benefit employers by reducing the likelihood of valuable and experienced employees feeling that they must leave their job due to the awful circumstances of domestic abuse. Who knows: maybe this route of encouraging people to tell someone sooner may even help to reduce the overall occurrence of domestic abuse. We can but hope.

Most employers are decent and want to help and look after their staff. Many already offer support to their workers, from time off to flexible working and workplace advice and support services. Furthermore, many employers have workplace policies to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse, and that is to be commended. I hope that the legislation will build on that existing support, as well as bringing it to the attention of employers who may not have had to consider the issue.

The Bill was drafted to allow my Department to undertake the necessary consultation and policy work to develop the detail of safe leave and how it should operate in practice. I fully support that drafting approach. This is a new employment right, and my Department will need to engage extensively with stakeholders to develop the regulations and accompanying

guidance. My Department will, particularly, wish to seek views from employers, workers and organisations that support those who suffer domestic abuse. That may take time as there is a lot of detail to work through, and we want to make sure that we get it right. We need to ensure that the regulations support and protect workers who are victims and survivors and respect their needs, vulnerability and confidentiality. We also need to make sure that employers know what they have to do and when they have to do it. We need to develop a regulatory framework that encourages and helps to build the capacity of employers to be able to provide support in the workplace. It is appropriate that my Department will have the time and flexibility to carry out that work.

That said, while there is still a lot of work to do, it does not mean that we will be slow to act. As I stated during the debate at Consideration Stage, it is my intention that officials will commence the necessary policy development work as soon as possible. That work will include developing the procedures, conducting the required impact assessments and consultation with stakeholders, engaging with the Committee for the Economy and drafting the regulations. As Minister for the Economy, I intend to provide a clear instruction to my officials to take forward the necessary work to allow the Assembly to pass the regulations that will give effect to the Bill.

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

Although it will take time to develop the new regulations, the sad reality is that there are people in employment right now who are experiencing domestic violence. I take the opportunity to encourage all employers to continue to support their employees who are victims of domestic abuse with empathy and flexibility. Once again, I refer to the existing guidance for employers on developing a workplace policy for domestic and sexual violence and abuse that was developed by the Department of Health and the Department of Justice.

In conclusion, the Bill is an important step in helping to tackle the wider societal problem of domestic abuse. I am pleased that we, as an Assembly, have been able to ensure that the Bill has had the opportunity to complete its progression into law as the mandate comes to a close. More importantly, I truly hope that the measures will make a real difference to those workers who are victims and survivors of domestic abuse. I look forward to supporting the Bill.

**Miss Woods:** I thank every Member who spoke during the debate for their comments and support for the Bill. I will address the Minister's comments first. I thank him for being here, and I am glad that he is feeling better.

The Assembly cares, and we need to work constructively together to help. Domestic abuse is utterly abhorrent, and I welcome the Minister's firm support for the Bill. I thank the Minister and his officials for their constructive engagement so far. We need to help victims to stay in their employment. We need to support everybody to stay in employment.

I agree with the Minister's comments on employers who are offering support and resources. They are already doing that, which is very welcome. However, not all of them are doing it, and that is what the Bill is for. We have to get it right, but we are not starting from scratch. We only have to look across the water or down the road to the public and private sectors that already offer that type of leave.

I now turn to the comments of other Members. The Chair of the Economy Committee mentioned that safe leave should be available across this island. I agree; it should be available everywhere. Northern Ireland is set to become the only place in these islands to have such legislation, and I encourage others to adopt the same provisions or to go further. The Chair said that the Bill could be life-saving, and I agree. For whatever reason it is needed, that leave being available could be the deciding factor for someone leaving. Far too many people are affected by domestic abuse. It is a work and employment issue as well. There is no direct cost to employers from safe leave, and it is needed to deal with the issues related to abuse. We need to destigmatise abuse and tackle root causes, misogyny and toxic masculinity.

I agree with Mr Weir's comments. We should not need to have the protections in place. We should not have the scourge of abuse in our society, but the Bill provides a safety net that can be used when needed. One of the great fears of the "Stay at home" message was the problem of abuse and the lack of knowledge of what was going on. We do not know what is going on behind closed doors. Mr Weir also made the point about this being the end of the process. It certainly is not, and I know that the Minister and his Department would agree that it is only the beginning. There is much work to do.

A number of months ago, some people told me that there would not be time to pass the Bill, but it will pass. Mr O'Toole outlined that one of the reasons that we were able to pass the Bill in

time was that it is a power-making Bill. The fact that it has the power to save lives also means that it needs to be dealt with urgently. We are offering an antidote to the idea that the Assembly cannot change things for the better. We are about delivering legislation.

I thank my Justice Committee colleague Jemma Dolan for her kind words and for her support for the Bill throughout its progression. I hope that this "progressive" Bill, as she described it, is an indication to victims that we are doing everything that we can and that abuse is not tolerated.

Mr O'Dowd, I am glad to have been part of your education today. There is a lot of repair work to do — you are right — but we need societal change alongside legislative change on equality. I am glad that he recognises that the purpose of the Bill is to formally recognise domestic abuse as a workplace issue, and I, too, appeal to everybody to re-form the Assembly post the election, because we have much more work to do. I am glad, though, that the Minister has committed to leaving a direction to his Department in relation to the legislation.

The Bill supports victims and survivors of domestic abuse by introducing a legal entitlement to paid time off work: a safe leave day-1 right for all workers. It will give them the space and time that they need to go to court, see a solicitor, move house, seek healthcare, including mental healthcare, obtain welfare support and support family members. Providing a statutory entitlement to safe leave will address the inequality between those who currently have access to it and those who do not. When it comes to people's lives, we cannot have a lottery based on how compassionate their employers are or how well developed a business's domestic abuse policy may be, if it has one.

Allowing for access to safe leave across the board will help to remove one of the biggest barriers — the financial one — preventing victims and survivors from seeking help and leaving an abusive relationship. The Bill enables them to stay in employment. It means that they can take time off to deal with issues related to the abuse and find a safe place to live without being penalised financially. We know that abusers deliberately target and control finances, which is why paid safe leave is so important. Yes, employers will cover the cost of safe leave, but they will also reap the benefits. We have to look at those two things together. All research and evidence elsewhere points to the cost of this leave being offset by savings,

increased productivity and a reduction in the other types of leave taken.

The last few weeks in the Assembly have shown that, when it comes down to it, on some occasions, the House can work together when it matters. We can pass laws. We can do what we are here to do, and that is to legislate for the betterment of our society and everybody in Northern Ireland. We can listen to our communities and our constituents, and we can consider our friends' and families' experiences — or our own — of domestic abuse and make a change. The Bill is a response to those close to me who have been through this and who have been controlled and abused, suffered and had nowhere to go. We are in an incredibly privileged position sitting in the Chamber, and being a member of a Committee brings a scrutiny role with it. There are many responsibilities that come with being elected to this place, and we can help the people who elected us and those who did not. The Bill is a prime example of that, and, like many others that we have worked on, it is a progressive step for victims and survivors of abuse. Granted, it is one that we should not have to have in the first place, but it is one that is much needed.

We have so much more to do, not just in tackling the scourge of domestic abuse across our society, which the Bill will go only some way in addressing. It cannot stop the abuse, but it can be a lifeline to those who are trying to escape. On a much wider level, we need to tackle the fundamental structures of power and relationships that enable violence and abuse to happen and go unreported and unacknowledged. Only then can we challenge the cultural factors that are the root of violence against women and girls.

It is time to end the coercive control that criminal gangs have over our communities. Victim and survivors' voices must be heard and reflected in our laws and policies. Minority groups should not be sidelined or silenced. We need to educate from a very young age. We need to learn what a healthy relationship is and teach our children and young people what consent is and what abuse looks like: it can be emotional and psychological. We have to empower people and teach them that it is OK to say no, that there is support out there and that they will be believed and understood. We must build a society that is safe for everybody, where everyone is valued and where we have happy, healthy communities. That is our purpose going forward, and I hope that every single person here today can get on board with that.

I will say one final thank you, and it is to my researcher, who will not be named but is sitting upstairs listening to this. He knows who he is. The Bill should have his name on it as well as mine. He should be very proud, because I am.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in my final contribution in this mandate, I commend the Bill to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill [NIA 41/17-22] do now pass.*

*[Applause.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Final Stage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill has passed. The Bill now stands referred to the Speaker.

**2.45 pm**

Members, please take your ease while we move to the next item of business.

### **Standing Order 42(1) - Hospital Parking Charges Bill: Suspension**

**Miss Reilly:** I beg to move

*That Standing Order 42(1) be suspended in respect of the Final Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill [NIA 40/17-22].*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Más maith leat labhairt chomh maith, tá fáilte romhat. If you wish to speak, you are welcome to do so.

**Miss Reilly:** Standing Order 42(1) requires there to be a minimum of five working days between each stage of a Bill. As the Further Consideration Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill was completed and passed at the beginning of this week, I am asking the Assembly to suspend Standing Order 42(1) in order to ensure that it can complete its Final Stage today, on the last sitting day of the Assembly before dissolution, and complete its legislative journey. I ask all parties to support the motion.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 42(1) be suspended in respect of the Final Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill [NIA 40/17-22].*

## **Hospital Parking Charges Bill: Final Stage**

**Miss Reilly:** I beg to move

*That the Hospital Parking Charges Bill [NIA 40/17-22] do now pass.*

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

**Miss Reilly:** I took over the Bill from former Sinn Féin MLA Fra McCann, who is supposed to be here. He may well yet make his way here, so, hopefully, we will see Fra in the not-too-distant future to witness the Bill's passage today. The Bill reflects Fra's desire to help people, and I am proud to carry on that important work.

It is my honour to stand as a Sinn Féin Member and to bring the Bill to its Final Stage. The Hospital Parking Charges Bill is something that I have worked hard on over the past few months, and I am delighted that I have been able to deliver a Bill that will help everyone across our communities. I thank the Bill Clerks and the Bill Office for supporting and guiding me through the process. A private Member's Bill is a large piece of work, as every Member who has taken one through the House will know, but, with the support of the staff in the Bill Office and the Speaker's Office, it has been made much easier for me. I thank my party support, Catherine and Ciaran, who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes supporting not just me but our entire MLA team.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest appreciation for all of our health and social care staff across the North, who, in the past two years, have brought us through an unprecedented event. That is not just a cliché: it is the truth. You are the heroes who walk among us, and you deserve fair pay, safe staffing and good working conditions.

It is my wish that this legislation will ensure that workers, families and patients are no longer burdened, worried or at a disadvantage as a result of hospital car parking charges. The Bill tells workers, patients and families who attend a hospital, either for work or for care, that we are

listening and that we heard them when they told us that hospital car parking charges are an unfair tax on them and that they simply cannot afford it.

I hope that this Bill will be the first step towards full recognition of the sacrifices that our health and social care staff make for us daily. The Bill will make a difference to so many people, and we know that from listening to Unite, UNISON, Macmillan Cancer Support, Marie Curie, allied health professionals, the Royal College of Nursing, the Rural Women's Network and others. Again, I thank them all for taking the time to meet me and for attending the Committee to show their unwavering support for the Bill.

**Mrs Erskine:** This is a significant Bill, which will be well-received by the staff of our hospital settings and those extremely ill patients who attend them. I want to thank the Bill sponsor for bringing the Bill forward. She came into the Assembly around the same time as I did, and she followed her predecessor Fra McCann, who introduced the Bill.

In the Health Committee today, we spoke to the Minister about the workforce pressures and stresses that our amazing healthcare staff are facing. We also spoke to the representatives of the health trusts and the Royal College of Nursing, who gave us stark warnings about the workforce pressures that are facing staff in our healthcare settings in Northern Ireland every day.

I hope that the passage of the Bill today will go some way towards showing our healthcare staff that they are valued and that they will not have to pay for the privilege of parking their car at work. We still have an awful lot to do — I am sure that the Minister realises that — in relation to workforce pressures and on ensuring that our workforce is better supported. I hope that today is a step in the right direction.

It is important that ill patients do not have to worry about the costs incurred in having to attend hospital settings weekly or even daily. Often, that can be too heavy a burden for patients and their families to bear when they are already anxious. It is important that they, too, have that support in place.

I want to place on record my hope that the concerns that I raised at the Bill's earlier stages about its outworkings are ironed out, that the Bill will operate for the benefit of all and that its intent is fully realised. Therefore, I press the Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Health to put in place

mechanisms to support better public transport availability to hospital settings and to deal with capacity issues.

I thank the Bill sponsor for her engagement with the Health Committee on the Bill. I hope that she feels that the Health Committee's scrutiny was constructive. Furthermore, I want to thank the Bill Clerks for their work, as well as the Department of Health officials and the Minister, for his amendments. I pay tribute to those who gave evidence to the Health Committee and who helped us to scrutinise the Bill.

I will be supporting the Bill and I thank the Bill sponsor for all her work on it.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I will speak briefly to congratulate the Bill sponsor on bringing the Bill forward, especially as she came to the Assembly only very recently. It is another example of great work, from the initial idea to the objectives and, then, working through the Committee with departmental officials and the trusts etc, to come up with a well-rounded and workable Bill. I want to place on record my thanks to those people who came to the Committee or wrote to us to provide evidence so that we could scrutinise the Bill properly. It is another great Bill and I look forward to seeing how it benefits the people who work in and use our hospitals.

**Mr Chambers:** I will be brief. I thank the Bill sponsor, and Mr McCann before her for introducing the Bill. It is certainly well-intentioned, in that it removes car parking charges for staff and many groups of people who attend hospitals.

I had a couple of concerns about the Bill in its early days. From the get-go, the main thing that concerned me was the six-month period between the Bill's receiving Royal Assent and its being implemented in full. My party and I have absolutely no difficulty in fully supporting the Bill as amended, because that concern has now been taken account of, and the Bill includes a more sensible and doable period in which the various trusts can examine the logistics around what they will have to purchase and deploy at the various sites.

That little bit of extra grace time does not completely remove the pressure on the Department of Health's budget, because it will still have to make up the money that formerly came in through car parking, but a period of up to two years for implementation will at least give the Department a chance to be able to budget around that rather than have to scramble to find that missing money out of its budget over a

short period like six months. I welcome the Bill sponsor's willingness to accept the amendments. I wish the Bill well and again thank its sponsor.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I will make some brief remarks as Committee Chair before doing so as Sinn Féin health spokesperson.

The purpose of the Bill is to prohibit the imposition of charges for car parking at Health and Social Care hospital sites. During evidence sessions, the Committee heard about the significant issues faced by staff to access parking and about how they had to pay significant amounts for parking to enable them to carry out their duties. I thank the Bill sponsor, my party colleague Aisling Reilly, and her predecessor, Fra McCann, for introducing the Bill and bringing it through the necessary legislative stages.

Staff highlighted to the Committee costs of up to £11 a day to access safe parking. We heard that many staff have to park off-site, which leaves them feeling unsafe and vulnerable when coming to and leaving work outside normal working hours. The significantly increasing cost of fuel at present puts into context that £11.

We also heard of the difficulties that staff faced when carrying equipment to and from the hospital and out into the community and how having parking is essential in order to do that. We heard from cancer charities about the impact that the cost of parking is having on staff and on some patients who need to come for regular treatment. That is also evidenced by the experiences of people in rural communities, who do not have the same access to public transport as those in other parts of the North. The Committee welcomes the review that the Department has outlined and is pleased that there is now a time frame in place for it. The work that the Department has done with the Bill sponsor to improve the Bill and bring it to fruition in the shape that it is in today is also very welcome.

I thank all Committee members for their consideration of and work on the Bill and for their engagement throughout its progression, during what was an extremely busy time for the Committee. I very much thank the Clerk and all on the Committee team for their support, guidance and advice at the Bill's various stages. I also thank the Bill Office and all other teams in the Assembly that provide backup and support to allow legislation to be put in place.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly, and I am sure that any incoming Health Committee will consider the review's progress and ensure that the Bill is implemented fully after that review is complete.

### 3.00 pm

I want to say a few words as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. This Bill is a fantastic example of our recognition of, in the first instance, health and social care staff and those front-line workers who have maintained services throughout very difficult periods, even preceding the pandemic, but then exacerbated by it. I know that we all took part in the clapping of appreciation for staff, and rightly so, at the start of the pandemic. However, the point was made at that time that claps do not pay the bills, and they certainly do not pay the parking charges. It is appropriate that, as this mandate draws to a close, we send a practical and realistic message to staff that we understand the role they play and the difficulties they face and that we are prepared to engage in legislating in order to do something about that.

It is also indicative of the wider situation in health and social care. I acknowledge Deborah's earlier remarks. We have heard worrying evidence today about where staff are at and the pressures they are under at present. The fact that the chief executive of a trust is stating that the service is limping along on a wing and a prayer indicates the serious concerns that are out there.

While the future is unclear and uncertain, what the Assembly has achieved over the past number of weeks and days, and even today, demonstrates the way forward. It is about identifying the issues that are causing problems for people — all of our people — on the ground, drawing up legislation to do something about them, bringing that to the Assembly, putting it through the Committee process, engaging with the sectors and going back to the relevant Departments. Members and Ministers have all demonstrated the ability to bring forward realistic, pragmatic and helpful legislation. That is what our community and our population want to see happening in the time ahead. They want to see the Assembly back up and running, and they want to see it doing things that acknowledge and address the issues of concern in their everyday lives.

**Ms Kimmins:** First, I thank my colleague Aisling Reilly, her predecessor Fra McCann and all of our Sinn Féin team for their work on this really important Bill. This definitely is a good

day for the Assembly. Sinn Féin is committed to standing up for workers and families. This Bill will help to reduce the burden on health and social care workers and on patients and their families as they access essential healthcare services.

There must be no more platitudes. Our health and social care workers and the most vulnerable in our communities deserve to see more actions like this that support them effectively. We can do more, and hopefully, in the next mandate, we will do more, to improve staff pay and conditions and to ensure that there is better workforce planning to help to support staff in their jobs and all of our healthcare services.

This Bill will help to reduce the financial pressures on the staff and patients who access Daisy Hill, which is in my constituency, and to ensure that staff have access to safe and secure parking close to their place of work. That will hopefully reassure them, particularly in light of recent incidents, that we are listening and that we value and care about them.

I am so delighted to see the Bill reach its Final Stage and that it has such vast support across the Chamber. I look forward to seeing the legislation in action in the time ahead.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** There being no Members listed, I call the Minister, Mr Robin Swann.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Sorry, Minister. Do you mind? I see that Mr Carroll has indicated.

**Mr Carroll:** Thanks to the Minister — not the Deputy Speaker — for letting me come in late, as it were. I just want to say briefly that I support the Bill at its Final Stage. I have supported it throughout its various stages. I commend the Member. I do not want to tempt fate, but it looks as though it will be passed today. If that is the case, it will lift one burden off the shoulders of our health workers. However, the burden that I raised this morning with the Minister of pay and below-inflation pay still stands. I hope that that will be addressed soon. I support the Bill at its Final Stage. Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker and Minister.

**Mr Swann:** I am pleased to be here to respond to the Final Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill. I start by commending the Bill's

sponsor, Aisling Reilly, for her work on bringing the Bill through the legislative process and all of its stages in the House. I acknowledge, as others did, Fra McCann for initially introducing it during his tenure. I also commend the members of the Health Committee for their commitment to scrutinising and progressing the Bill, those who give evidence and my departmental officials, who engaged both with the Health Committee and the sponsor to bring us to the legislation that is in front of us today.

I thank Members for supporting the Department's amendments at Further Consideration Stage to ensure that the prohibition is delivered in the best way possible, that its terms are simpler to follow and that it is expressed in ordinary language. It is clear how many important issues the Bill touches on and how important it is that we get it right. What we are talking about will impact on the lives of staff, patients and visitors.

Although elements of the Bill will undoubtedly present challenges and require significant resource from the Department and health and social care trusts, the extended commencement date will ensure that proper consideration can be given to what alternative arrangements can be put in place to manage and control spaces in hospital car parks when parking charges are abolished.

At present, there is not enough space to provide free parking for everyone, particularly at sites where space is limited. Sufficient time is therefore required to put in place any necessary provisions to deal with capacity. The agreed extended implementation period will allow our health and social care trusts, in partnership with my Department, to agree and finalise the new policy to direct and drive consistency regionally across all our hospital sites.

As Mrs Erskine commented, the implementation period will enable not only staff, patient and visitor involvement but collaboration with other, related Departments on infrastructure, such as public transport solutions, and on the House's commitments on climate change. Anything less than the two-year implementation period would certainly have caused major disruption to the running of our hospital car park sites, which would have had a detrimental impact on service delivery at those sites. As Mr Chambers highlighted, the implementation time frame will also allow my Department to prepare for a reduction in income and to identify any as yet unidentified costs associated with passing the Bill.

When the Bill passes Final Stage today, which, as Mr Carroll indicated, is probable, my Department will be duty-bound and legally required to comply with any change to legislation. I assure Members that my officials will work with the health and social care trusts to implement the changes as directed by the Bill and the House and as brought forward by the Member. I thank her again for sponsoring the private Member's Bill.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Glaoim ar Aisling Reilly le críoch a chur leis an díospóireacht ar an Chéim Dheiridh den Bhille. I now call Aisling Reilly to conclude the debate on the Final Stage of the Bill.

**Miss Reilly:** This is my final speech in the mandate, so I will take the opportunity to thank all Members for their contributions and remarks this afternoon and for showing their unwavering support for the Bill.

I particularly thank the Minister and his Department for working closely with me. His amendments also showed his willingness to work to ensure that the legislation is practical. The Bill will make a massive difference to people. I hope that the amendments address most of the concerns that Committee members raised, including concerns about the time frame and the potential unintended consequences.

There is nothing much more that I can say that I have not already said at each stage about the debt of gratitude that we owe to our health and social care workers. The banning of hospital car parking charges will put money back into workers' pockets. At the end of the day, that is what we want to do. We do not want to see anybody being out of pocket through going to work; we certainly do not want to see ill patients being out of pocket through going to hospitals. The Bill will put money back into people's pockets. It will allow the sick and ill to progress their medical treatment without additional worry, and it will rectify an inequality felt by those who live in our rural communities.

Today in the Assembly we have passed numerous progressive Bills that will improve the lives of so many of our constituents. We have passed Bills on period poverty and domestic abuse, and another couple of important Bills will come after this. I am proud that my Bill will be added to that list.

There is nothing more for me to add other than to commend the Bill to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Hospital Parking Charges Bill [NIA 40/17-22] do now pass.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Final Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill has passed, and the Bill stands referred to the Speaker. Comhghairdeas leat.

*[Applause.]*

Members should take their ease until we move to the next item of business.

### **Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill: Final Stage**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** I call Chris Lyttle to formally move the Bill's Final Stage, please.

**Mr Lyttle:** Excuse me. Apologies. Give me a second, Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Chris, all I want is for you to say, "So moved". *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lyttle:** I beg to move

*That the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill [NIA 51/17-22] do now pass.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Thank you for that. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call Chris Lyttle to open the debate. Are you good to go?

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to move the Final Stage of the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill. It will remove the anachronistic exception of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (FETO) and ensure that it is no longer possible for any teacher to be discriminated against because of their religious background when applying for a job.

Fairness and equal opportunity are key values of the Alliance Party, and the legislation delivers on them. The Assembly and the Executive are often — rightly — criticised for failing to deliver the leadership and services that the people of Northern Ireland need and deserve. There is a real and urgent need for a functional power-sharing Executive to be restored as soon as

possible to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

The Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill is a small example of what we can achieve in the Assembly when we work together. It should not be legal for teachers to be discriminated against because of their religious background when applying for a teaching job. The Bill presents us with an opportunity to end that provision. The Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act outlawed employment discrimination on the grounds of religious belief in Northern Ireland in 1976, but the Fair Employment and Treatment Order continues to permit discrimination on the grounds of religious belief in the recruitment of teachers to this day.

Almost all workers in Northern Ireland can rely on legislation to protect them from discrimination on the grounds of their faith, but teachers cannot. Under the Fair Employment and Treatment Order, employers in Northern Ireland with 11 or more employees must register with the Equality Commission and monitor the composition of their workforce. That does not apply to the teaching workforce. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland recommended the removal of the exception of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order for secondary-level teachers in 2004 and early consideration of removing it at primary level on the grounds that it was no longer acceptable to exclude the entire teaching workforce from fair employment legislation that covered all other occupations. It also recommended that teachers be included in the monitoring and review requirements.

There is an increasingly clear consensus that teachers must be included in the Fair Employment and Treatment Order and be afforded the same legal protection from discrimination when seeking employment as anyone else in our society.

The Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill will give effect to those long-standing recommendations. It presents the Assembly with the opportunity to remove the exception of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order, and I trust that that is an opportunity that we will take today.

### **3.15 pm**

This opportunity has been made possible by a collective effort from many people, and I put on record my thanks to research officer Connie Egan and constituency officer Nick Mathison for the work that they contributed to the Bill's

progress. The Bill and, indeed, my service as an MLA would not have been possible without their dedication and that of all staff members who served on our team over the past decade, and I would like to recognise them for that. I thank everyone in the Bill Office, the Speaker's Office and all Assembly staff who support the progress of private Members' legislation. I thank the Executive Office Committee. To be completely frank, the Committee's proactive and comprehensive approach to Committee Stage made the Bill's progress possible. I am very grateful for that approach. I thank the Education Minister and officials from the Department of Education and the Executive Office for their engagement at key stages of the Bill, particularly with the education management sector to ensure that a small number of amendments would deliver a good, manageable period for implementation of the provisions. To everyone who responded and contributed to the Bill, I say thank you. I also thank my colleague Kellie Armstrong MLA and her team, who provided me with valuable assistance and support throughout the progress of the Bill.

I hope that the Bill will give teachers the fair employment protection that they deserve. Hopefully, I will be able to dedicate the Bill to them after Final Stage today, given the courage, leadership and sacrifice that they and everyone across our education sector have shown for many, many years, particularly in the pandemic of recent years.

**Ms McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):** First, on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office, I congratulate the Bill sponsor, Chris Lyttle, on bringing the Bill to Final Stage. It has not been a straightforward journey, and it was not always certain that the Bill would make it to this point. However, Chris's belief in the importance of the Bill and in the potential for positive change in the education sector through its provisions provided the impetus to carry on.

What will the legislation mean? It will mean that teachers will be free to apply for teaching posts in schools without being asked about their religious background. Yes, some schools will still ask for the certificate in religious education, but that is now more widely available, and there may be conversations in the future to discuss where that is necessary. It will mean that discrimination on the grounds of religious belief will not be allowed when teachers are being recruited. The fact that this has been allowed until now is an anachronism. It will mean that teachers who previously did not apply for certain posts, believing that they would be

turned away on account of their religious background, can now, with confidence, apply to teach in any school.

The Bill will mean that there is the potential for greater diversity in our schools. The lack of diversity in our education system has been cited as one of the factors involved in keeping our society divided. Our communities are changing. Our schools need to change with them. The Committee acknowledges that this will not be straightforward for many. We have heard that schools are worried about how to preserve their ethos. Those discussions will need to take place, and the Committees believe that the two years is sufficient time for them to happen. We have heard that schools will need time to implement the monitoring requirements of the Fair Employment and Treatment Order. Again, the Committee feels that two years is sufficient time for those arrangements to be put in place. With the exception of a small number of individual submissions to the online call for views, all stakeholders who came before or provided written submissions to the Committee agreed that the exception for teachers in the 1998 Order had to go. The only question was when. That time is now. The Committee for the Executive Office supports the Bill.

In closing, I will say a few words in my capacity as an SDLP MLA. I would like to say a very big thank you to Chris Lyttle, the Bill sponsor. Chris, it was a pleasure to work with you on the passage of the Bill. As you leave public life, as a legislator, you leave behind a legacy to the education sector and to teachers all over Northern Ireland. For those in our universities who are studying to become teachers — they will be the educators of the next generations — you have opened doors that were previously closed. I applaud you and wish you well in your future contribution to society, which I know will not stop when you walk out the door of the House. I commend the Bill to the House.

**Mr Sheehan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak at Final Stage. On the face of it, this is not a massively important Bill. It does not put money into anyone's pockets. It will not hit the news headlines tonight. Why is it important? I think that it is important, and there are a couple of reasons for that. First, it exemplifies what can be achieved when parties work together. At one stage, not so long ago, the Bill would have been seen as a lost cause, but, through parties cooperating and working together, we were able to move it forward quickly, get it on to the Floor of the Assembly and get Committee Stage done and dusted. Now, here we are, on the last day of the mandate, with the Bill ready to pass.

The second reason why it is important is that there was a time when people thought it necessary to have an exemption from fair employment. Through engagements in the Committee, it became clear that none of the stakeholders in the education system believed that the exemption from fair employment legislation was necessary today. To me, that signals a massive step forward for society in general, and that is why the Bill is important. Its outworkings are that any teacher will have the same protection under fair employment legislation as any other worker.

I congratulate the sponsor, Chris Lyttle. I have worked closely with him, not just on this but with him and Kellie on the Integrated Education Bill. The raft of legislation that has come through the House, not just today but over the past few weeks, is an indication of what the Assembly can achieve when people work together and cooperate. I support the Bill.

**Mrs Dodds:** As the DUP Member who has spoken on the Bill, I assure the sponsor of my support and congratulate him on getting it to this stage. I also wish him every success as he takes on new roles in life. This will absolutely not be the last time that we hear from Chris Lyttle. I am confident of that, and I wish him well as he goes forward.

The Bill is important in Northern Ireland. I have had reservations about the process by which we arrived at Final Stage today. I would have preferred that the Bill had more consideration, because it deals with one element of discrimination in employment but is silent on some other issues that are very important and that we need to discuss, such as ethos and the Catholic certificate in religious education that is required by some schools. We do not want to take away a legal form of discrimination and leave anomalies behind. That is important. I hope that, given the amendment that we supported and the time that we have in which to do this, there can be sensible conversations about how we take all these issues forward in their totality.

I want to put on record that I have engaged with a number of education sectors on the Bill; indeed, as Pat Sheehan said, it was, largely, supported by all the sectors that gave evidence to the Executive Office Committee. We will therefore support the Bill today, but I want my remarks on the additional issues to be noted, so that we can go forward and look at the whole landscape and make sure that everybody has every opportunity for every job, no matter who they are or where they come from.

I thank the Bill sponsor and those who made it possible.

**Mr Stewart:** I will be brief. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I support the Bill at Final Stage. I commend Chris Lyttle for all his work in getting us here. Three or four weeks ago, we probably thought that it might not be possible, but, as other Members have said, it just shows what is possible when we have a collective will, an efficient and effective scrutiny process through the Committee, and the collaboration of the various offices — the Bill Office and the Department — to get us to this stage.

The Bill is mercifully short, as I said at previous stages, but massively significant and symbolic. Mr Sheehan said, rightly, that it reflects a change in society and in where we are today. Perhaps it would not have been possible in the past, but I am glad that, through cooperation and working with the sponsor and with other Members, we have been able to get here today.

I pay tribute, as others have, to the Member, not only for this Bill but for his dedicated service to the people of East Belfast and to the Assembly over a number of years. I wish him well. I am sure that we have not seen the last of you, Chris. Thank you for all your efforts to get us here. It would have been nice, I suppose, if we had been able to get this change through in other ways. He and I and others attempted, through many questions, motions and whatever else, over a number of years, to get movement from the Executive Office on this matter, but we are where we are. The failure there has become Chris's success in getting us to this stage. I commend the Bill.

**Ms Brogan:** I will be very brief. I am happy to support the Bill. It is important legislation that will benefit many teachers and student teachers. I, too, commend those who have worked hard to ensure that the Bill made it to Final Stage and that it gets through in this mandate. As my colleague Pat Sheehan said, it shows how successful we can be when people work together and how we can pass legislation that will have a positive impact on real people and their lives.

I commend and thank Chris Lyttle for the work that he has done on the Bill and as Chair of the Education Committee. He has shown real integrity, fairness and equality throughout. The Bill reflects the MLA and the Committee Chair that he has been. Well done and thank you, Chris, for all that.

**Mr Weir:** I, too, support the Bill. Dealing with the issue of fair employment in the teaching profession is an important step forward; the Bill represents a positive step. As Diane Dodds highlighted, it is important that we see it not as a single action but as part of a wider process. There needs to be a review to say that this is the first step forward, but there is further work to be done in a future mandate to deal with all the issues concerning this.

The exemption of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 is an anachronism that, many if not all of us will agree, should have been swept away years ago. It is important that we take that step today, however.

### 3.30 pm

Education is very much at the heart of our society. It is one of the most critical things in itself but also because of the extent to which it shapes a new generation and provides it with opportunities. To send a signal to that new generation that it is all right for society to have discrimination at the heart of the structure for the appointment of teachers is fundamentally wrong. We should send a signal that selection for employment is based on merit. The legislation is therefore a useful and important step forward.

Finally, I wish my old sparring partner Chris Lyttle all the best. At times, we have not seen precisely eye to eye on every issue, but many of our exchanges about education have shown that we both have an undoubted passion for it. I thank Chris for his service to the people of East Belfast and to the wider education system in Northern Ireland. I wish him and his family all the best as they move ahead. He is voluntarily stepping away from the Assembly, and that is not a choice that everybody gets to make. I wish him all the best for the future.

I commend the Bill to the House.

**Ms Armstrong:** I thank the Bill sponsor not only for introducing the legislation but for getting it through to its Final Stage on the last day of the mandate. I, too, thank the Executive Office Committee, because, had it not been for its actions, I very much doubt that the Bill would have got this far. As Mr Stewart and Mr Sheehan said, when this place has a mind to get something done, it can get it done very effectively.

It is a matter of regret that we did not see the Executive Office bring through the Bill. For it to

be introduced, it had to go through a private Member. As Mr Sheehan said, however, its timing was just right. There has been no fighting about it. There have been no concerns that one sector of our community was being discriminated against in the Bill. The Bill omits article 71 from the Order, and that means that schoolteachers are now protected by fair employment legislation. It also shows that private Members can make a difference.

This will be the last time that I speak in the House in this mandate. I say this to all those teachers: in 2024, when you are applying for jobs, it was Chris Lyttle who made sure that fair employment legislation will protect you. Chris is finishing off the Bill today, and he is finishing off his political career. Today has been wonderfully progressive. The legislation going through today — the cheers in the Great Hall were nice to hear throughout the Building — goes to show, as others have said, how positive this place can be. It is fitting that the whole day has been about private Members' Bills.

The Bill changes a few things that I will put on record. We have very good teacher training colleges in Northern Ireland. Those colleges can now prepare our student teachers to teach in any school in Northern Ireland. I look forward to their taking forward that challenge. There is an opportunity for young people, as Mr Weir said, to look to their teachers knowing that they reflect Northern Ireland and that they have the best person for the job standing at the front of the classroom.

In my final couple of sentences, all that I want to say is that, in Chris Lyttle, we have had a champion for children, a champion for disabilities, a champion for sports, including football, and a champion for learning disability. Now, in his final piece of work for the Assembly, we have a champion for teachers. Thank you very much, Chris Lyttle MLA. It has been an absolute privilege and pleasure to work with you. I cannot wait to see what you achieve next.

**Mr Lunn:** Like everybody else, I congratulate the Bill's sponsor on bringing this Bill through at such speed, with the cooperation of the Committee — the Chair is smiling — the Department and everybody else. A one-line Bill should not be that complicated, but this one raised issues, which we managed to resolve fairly quickly.

I should also say, before I forget, that I was not expecting to be retiring on the same day as Chris Lyttle. *[Laughter.]* I know what I am going to do: I am not quite sure what he is going to do.

In discussion at the Committee, we had submissions from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service. I must say that, from listening to the discussion, I thought that there was an element of reservation from those two organisations. I thought perhaps that they were even going to oppose the Bill. Therefore, it was a pleasant surprise when, at the very end, it was indicated by Gerry Campbell from CCMS, and in particular from Bishop Donal McKeown on behalf of the trustees, that they had no problem with the Bill and they were OK with it.

Others have said that things have moved forward in Northern Ireland. That is a pretty good example of it. Ten years ago, there would not have been that reaction. They are relaxed about this. I know that they have some concerns about the Catholic ethos of their schools, but I cannot believe that the admission of non-Catholic teachers into Catholic schools will change the ethos of those schools at all. There is more of an obligation on teachers coming in to accept that ethos and run with it. There are — I am trying to avoid the word "Protestant" — non-Catholic teachers already in Catholic schools, and the roof has not fallen in.

This is a good day. I congratulate Chris, my past party colleague, also on his tenure as Committee Chair. He has done a fantastic job and I wish him well wherever life takes him; let us put it that way. I do not think that he will be lost to the public service. I hope not. He may not even be lost to politics, because I know that he has caught the bug. He tries to deny it, but we will have to wait and see. He is very quiet about what he is going to do next. I wish him well.

This is a pretty good day for smaller parties, is it not? We have had the Hospital Parking Charges Bill — well, that was not from a smaller party [*Laughter*]. Not yet, anyway. We have had this Bill from Chris, two Bills from the Green Party, and I forget the others. It has been a good day and, as others have said — yes, Pat Catney, of course, my constituency colleague, as well — it indicates what the Assembly is capable of. People will remind us — well, remind you, because I will not be here — of that after the election. They have often said to me in the last few weeks, "Why could you not have done this over the last three years? How much legislation would you have passed?". They have a point.

I am not looking in any particular direction, but I hope that good sense will prevail and that perhaps Members can get back to work after the election at an early stage. I really hope so,

and I wish everybody in this Assembly well, including yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Thank you, Trevor. I have already wished you all the best for your retirement, if that is what you want to call it. Please enjoy the rest of your time. It will be a lot different to this political forum, but have a good time; I am sure that you will. We have worked well together on many things during my time in the Assembly. All the best to you, Trevor.

On that point, I come to the Bill's sponsor, Chris Lyttle, to conclude the Final Stage.

**Mr Lyttle:** I am really grateful that my final act in the Assembly Chamber as an MLA is to move the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill. I am hopeful that it will deliver positive change for our education system. It delivers for fairness, a value that I, the Alliance Party and this Assembly hold dear; education, the engine room for development and equal opportunity for children and young people across Northern Ireland; peace and prosperity; and teachers, the leaders of this engine room and the people who play one of the most important roles in our society. As I said, I want to dedicate the work that we have all contributed and the Bill to the teachers and everyone who is working to deliver the best education system possible for Northern Ireland.

I thank my Assembly colleagues without whom the Bill would not have progressed to this stage and would not pass. I thank Sinead for the role that she played as Chairperson of the Executive Office Committee and for the time that she made available to me outside of Bill stages and Committee meetings, which, as I said, made the progress of the Bill possible.

Thank you, Pat Sheehan, for the advice that you gave to me at key times throughout the Bill process when it seemed like there may not be an opportunity for the Bill to pass. That heads-up and cross-party cooperation contributed to the passage of the Bill.

I thank Diane Dodds, another sparring partner from the Education Committee. I have really valued the opportunity to engage with Diane on the key issues. Even if our starting point was different on some of the issues, I have really valued our engagement on them. She raised valid points about other issues relating to the matter that a future Assembly could consider, such as how we approach certificates of religious education.

I also give a massive thank you to John Stewart, the Deputy Chairperson of the Executive Office Committee, for the time that he gave me at key stages of the Bill. There was a key day when we went from the Bill not going to pass to it potentially passing due to a visit to his office in the Assembly. Perhaps for good reason, people do not see all the work that goes on behind the scenes or the level of cooperation that can happen at times to make things possible. They see us arguing robustly *[Laughter]* and fighting our corners in media studios. Perhaps the hosts of some of those programmes see fit to encourage that type of approach, but I am thankful for the level of cooperation between parties on the key issues and hope that that will be the legacy for the next Assembly. I also recognise John's party colleagues, Sandra Overend and Danny Kennedy, who previously attempted to move this legislative reform. That work was not wasted; it contributed to the destination that we will hopefully get to today.

Thank you so much, Nicola Brogan, for the opportunity to work with you on the Education Committee and for being the champion that you are for early education and childcare. Those are huge issues that the Assembly and Executive must prioritise, and I know that, if returned, you will ensure that they do. Thank you for the opportunity to work with you.

Thank you to Peter Weir for his contribution to the Final Stage. He has, indeed, been a sparring partner on many issues in relation to education. I really value the fact that, whenever we disagreed, we still had a degree of humanity and respect for each other afterwards. I am really grateful that Peter took the time to contribute to the Final Stage debate today.

Thank you, Trevor Lunn, for your contribution and for your support as a member of the Executive Office Committee. You are a friend of mine and a friend of the party: I think that you said that you got on better with us after you left. *[Laughter.]* I have always valued your interaction, whether you were in or out of the party, and I appreciate the work that you have done on education throughout your tenure in the Assembly, delivering on some key issues for our education sector. I appreciate that. Regarding your commentary about getting the bug for politics, I suppose that there is a slight element of 'Hotel California' about it, in that you can get out any time you like, but you can never quite leave. I hope that I will be able to keep contributing in some positive way.

Last but not least, thank you, Kellie Armstrong, for the advice that you have given and the

support that you have been to me throughout the passage of the Bill. Thank you to all my Alliance Party colleagues for their support and, on occasion, friendly prompts to try to make sure that I got on with progressing the Bill. *[Laughter.]* I am really grateful for the support that they have been in that regard.

**3.45 pm**

To everyone who will return to the Chamber in May to contribute to the peace and prosperity of this wonderful part of the world that we all call home, I say a really sincere: God bless you and keep you. It is an immense privilege to serve in this role. I wish every one of you every success in building a united, prosperous Northern Ireland for us all.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** Thank you, indeed, Chris, for your very kind words to us all. I have already told you in person, but my sincerest best wishes to you on whatever path you choose to go when you leave here. I have no doubt that it will be a successful role.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill [NIA 51/17-22] do now pass.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Bill has passed Final Stage and stands referred to the Speaker. *[Applause.]* It is a pity that it could not be like this all the time *[Laughter]* but anyway. I think that most people have got the message about that bit. I ask Members to take their ease until we move to the next item of business.

### **Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill: Final Stage**

**Ms Bailey:** I beg to move

*That the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill [NIA 35/17-22] do now pass.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone):** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit for the debate.

**Ms Bailey:** It is a great relief to finally be able to move my Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill at Final Stage. When I was first elected, I pledged to the people of South Belfast that I would work hard on equality

issues, for human rights-compliant legislation and, particularly, for women. Today is the last sitting day of the mandate. The Bill is part of that pledge. It has been a long time coming. I began working on the Bill in 2016, shortly after I was first elected to the Assembly. The issues have been well debated and mostly understood across the House. I thank Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the UUP, the Alliance Party, Claire Sugden, Gerry Carroll and Trevor Lunn for their steady support in getting the Bill this far. Many staff behind the scenes, whom I have been told that I cannot name, have been absolutely invaluable on that journey. While I cannot name them, I want to let them know how much they are appreciated and how helpful they have been. Their skills have been invaluable to me throughout the Bill's development. Of course, I thank the Health Committee for its engagement during its scrutiny of and work on the Bill.

We are all aware that we are coming up to elections. Yesterday, I was on the Electoral Office's website and bumped into a code of conduct for canvassing in the vicinity of a polling station. I thought that Members might be interested to hear some of the rules of engagement that we are afforded in order to uphold a democratic process.

That code of conduct states:

*"Canvassers shall be polite and courteous at all times when speaking to members of the public. They should be careful to avoid any behaviour which may leave them open to complaints of harassment or intimidation.*

*Canvassers will not engage in canvassing activities inside the grounds of a polling place.*

*Canvassers should not restrict or in any way impede pedestrian access to any entrance of a polling place.*

*Canvassers shall not attach flags, emblems, banners, posters or any other item used in connection with canvassing to a polling place or to any part of its perimeter wall or fence."*

None of that is what I have experienced with abortion services.

I went out to consultation on the Bill in 2017, just as the Executive was collapsing yet again, and the three-year hiatus meant that I could not progress the Bill any further. What happened in those years was that abortion legislation was changed at Westminster, and abortion is now no longer a criminal offence in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Office went out to public consultation to commission services, and it considered imposing buffer zones. Unfortunately, despite overwhelming support, the NIO decided not to bother. We got a new Health Minister, and he is aware of what is happening. However, yet again, he has not moved to end the intimidation and harassment levied against women and staff. There is no movement from the Executive to commission services, and, still, we watch as women are traumatised on our streets as they seek healthcare services.

Staff are harassed for doing their jobs, security measures are put in place, and services are moved and kept secret. The Abortion (NI) Regulations 2020 commenced on 31 March 2020, and, since then, 2,794 women have been able to access free healthcare safely and legally here at home. That should end the nonsensical claims that there is no need for abortion provision in Northern Ireland.

During 2020 alone, an estimated further 371 women were forced to travel to England or beyond to access the services that they needed. When the regulations meant that everyone else had to stay at home, hundreds of our women were forced to travel, sometimes alone, without the care and compassion that they deserve around them. That should be enough to end the nonsense of the Executive being unable or unwilling, or both, to commission the services needed.

We are hours away from the end of the mandate, and the Secretary of State has had to step in again with an instruction to commission services by 31 March; otherwise, he will. Although we do not yet know what those services will look like, we know all too clearly that, when trying to overcome the many barriers, including the lack of services and finding the help that they need, women and, indeed, staff are then forced to run the gauntlet of public shaming by a deliberate, concerted campaign of harassment and intimidation at some healthcare settings.

Due to the emergency response to the COVID pandemic throughout 2020, I was again unable to make any meaningful progress with the Bill in the Chamber. Yet, despite "Stay at home" messaging and regulations to prevent public gatherings, the concerted campaign of harassment and intimidation against women and staff continued unabated, and all authorities — the Health Department, the Department of Justice, the PSNI — claimed that they could do nothing to stop it. Despite the travel restrictions in place, legislative reforms

and the pandemic, women and healthcare staff were still forced to run the gauntlet of public shaming by that deliberate, concerted campaign of harassment and intimidation.

When the Black Lives Matter protest happened during lockdown, there was swift, unified action from the PSNI, supported by Ministers, to fine some protestors for breaching regulations. Yet women and healthcare staff continued to run the gauntlet, and no action was taken. They were told that neither the current legislation nor the lockdown regulations were deemed sufficient to act. That is simply not good enough. If this Bill is passed today, we can right that wrong, and I urge all Members to support it.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I will make some remarks as Chair of the Committee in relation to this Bill.

I welcome the Final Stage of the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill. I thank the sponsor, Clare Bailey, for introducing the Bill, and I thank all who engaged with the Committee during its consideration of the Bill. This issue was first raised in evidence during the Committee's consideration of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill last summer. The Committee sought further information from trusts on the number of incidents and the actions that they had to take in response to the protests. The responses indicated that trusts had to introduce new security measures, and some had to move the location of the services.

All members of the Committee commented that there was no place in our society for the harassment, abuse and intimidation of women and girls accessing health services, and that patients, staff and visitors should be able to access health premises free from harassment, abuse and intimidation. The Committee therefore welcomes the aim of the Bill, which is to establish safe access zones around registered pregnancy advisory bureaux and clinics in order to protect the women and girls who use the clinics, as well as the people who work in them. The Bill will make it a criminal offence to harass people in a safe access zone around clinics and will stop activity directly outside centres that can cause distress to those attending the clinics and to staff.

During consideration of the Bill, the Committee agreed that it would take evidence only from statutory bodies, as the views of organisations and individuals on the Bill were clear from the written submissions that the Committee received. Those written submissions informed

members' views on the Bill and were published in the Committee's report on the Bill. During its evidence sessions, the Committee heard examples from the trusts and the PSNI of some of the difficulties that women and staff face when accessing health services. It is fundamentally important that people can safely access health services when they are needed, without the fear of harassment.

During Committee consideration of the clauses and amendments, a majority of members were in support of the Bill and the amendments. I note that the members of the Committee from the DUP did not take part in the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. I thank all Committee members for their consideration of the Bill, and I thank Members for their engagement throughout the progression of the Bill in what was a busy time for the Committee. I also thank the Committee team and the Bill Clerks for their support through the various stages of the Bill. I commend the Bill to the Assembly, and I am sure that any incoming Health Committee will look to the implementation of this Bill to ensure that it is meeting its purpose and protecting people accessing these health services.

As Sinn Féin's health spokesperson, I will just very briefly say that it is surely long past time when women, girls and staff who are attending or working in these clinics are subjected to the harassment and abuse of the levels that we heard about on the Health Committee. Sinn Féin will be supporting the Bill.

**Mrs Cameron:** I do not intend to speak for long in this Final Stage debate. As I have said during debates at previous stages, the position of my party is clear, and our concerns about the legal implications of the Bill remain.

Everyone will agree that harassment and abuse in their many forms are not acceptable. No one should be intimidated or harassed entering his or her workplace. No one should be intimidated or harassed as a patient entering a health facility. No individual should ever be intimidated or harassed under any circumstance or at any place. The proper home for this issue is within a review of our harassment laws.

As I have stated before, I sincerely believe that this Bill will not have the impact that its supporters believe it will have, and it will almost certainly result in protracted legal action. The Bill is not good legislation. It is vague and leaves many grey areas, particularly around the definition of "influence" as an offence. The right to protest is incredibly important to all of us, and surely the whole point of protest is to attempt to

effect change or, indeed, to influence. How this offence of influence will or can be implemented remains to be seen, and the operational concerns of the PSNI have certainly not been addressed. Potentially criminalising someone on the basis of perceived influence is a very dangerous road for our Government to take. I am in no doubt that it will lead to a direct conflict with several articles of the European Convention on Human Rights.

#### 4.00 pm

I note Ms Bailey's comparison with the electoral law and polling stations. I point out that, as members of political parties, we stand outside those polling stations at every election, where we absolutely seek to influence voters. Perhaps the comparison is not so good when it comes to this particular part of the Bill, which we oppose, on the creation of an offence of influence.

The DUP will be opposing the Bill. It believes that there are better ways to strengthen harassment legislation and to give the police the proper resources to prevent incidents, wherever they may occur.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I am pleased to stand in the Assembly to support and, indeed, champion the legislation at its Final Stage.

The legislation is long overdue. It does not take away anything from anyone. It does not remove anyone's civil rights. It does not take away freedom of speech or the right to protest. It does not prevent anyone from praying. However, it does protect the right of passage for anyone who is seeking healthcare and assures them of a safe access zone.

Just down the road from my office, it has become a weekly routine for protesters to gather. That has been upsetting and exhausting for patients, staff and the local community. Somewhat ironically, that persisted throughout what is now approaching a full year since the Western Trust's early medical abortion service was suspended as a result of the Health Minister's failure to commission services.

Attempts to influence personal healthcare and decisions at the clinic doors are unacceptable. Some women who are seeking abortions will have made their minds up as soon as they found out that they were pregnant. Others will take longer. No matter how easy or difficult the decision, if someone has made up their mind, made an appointment and is walking through the doors of a clinic, their decision has been made. How dare anyone suggest that they

know better. Women are fed up to the teeth of that condescending attitude and of constantly being told, "I know what is best for you". We women know that all only too well. I do not need to spell out the damage that that has caused to women throughout the centuries or that it continues to cause. Sadly, it is prevalent across these islands.

Attempts to interfere in personal healthcare choices also constitute an invasion of people's privacy and deny them confidentiality. Some women reported feeling forced to rebook later appointments to try to avoid the groups of protesters. That disrupts their treatment and can cause emotional distress. It particularly risks causing additional issues if they are approaching certain week limits.

The Bill will not only help to prevent that interference but will enable anyone to enter a healthcare building without fear. The abuse of people who are seeking or providing care is always unacceptable, but it happens far too often, and it requires this intervention. Their rights and well-being will finally be protected.

It is also worth pointing out that many of the posters and leaflets that are distributed by those groups of protesters distort reality, are factually inaccurate and are often emotionally manipulative. Distributing that kind of unregulated, false information is dangerous.

On the topic of falsehoods, no matter what is bandied about inside or outside the Chamber, the fact of the matter is that existing legislation is not enough to prevent the intimidatory behaviour that is taking place outside clinics. Everyone who is accessing abortion services, to which they are legally entitled, must be allowed to do so in safety. The reality is that patients and healthcare workers are routinely subjected to targeted abuse. The Bill will finally put the necessary protections in place to put an end to that kind of harassment.

I thank Clare Bailey, her team and all the stakeholders for their hard work to bring forward this private Member's Bill. On Tuesday, Clare Bailey, you were pure scunnered by the naysayers, but, today, Clare Bailey, in my best Derryism, I am all lured for you. You have delivered protections and support for many years to come, and that is a legacy of which you should be very proud. I am proud of you. I commend the Bill and look forward to its implementation.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I congratulate Clare Bailey on getting the Bill to its Final Stage. I very much commend her on her work and engagement

with the Health Committee, at which, on many occasions, she listened to the issues that we raised, and on her very constructive work with the Health Department on the amendments that she tabled at the amending stages. I very much welcome the Bill's Final Stage.

What a society we live in where these zones are needed, but the passing of the Bill today will send a message from the Chamber that that behaviour will no longer be tolerated. It also sends a message from us to those women and the people who are accompanying them that we support them, support their reproductive healthcare rights and support their seeking healthcare provision without the need to have to run the gauntlet and experience harassment when doing so.

I put on record my thanks to Brandon Lewis MP, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, for his written statement today on strengthening the regulations around the commissioning of abortion services here. I was, however, a bit disappointed that there was nothing in the statement about timescales. That should have been tightened up. He probably could have had the regulations drafted and ready to be laid this week. We are all losing patience in Northern Ireland waiting for abortion services to be commissioned. Women have waited far too long.

In closing, I thank the Health Committee and my colleagues for the work that we did on the Bill. I also thank those people who provided evidence to us. I place on record my thanks to Informing Choices NI, Alliance for Choice and the entire women's sector for their role in lobbying and championing safe access zones. Again, I thank Clare Bailey for bringing forward the Bill.

**Ms Kimmins:** I, too, will speak in full support of the Bill at its Final Stage. Despite the protracted attempts of others to block progressive change this week, if the Bill passes today, it will be another momentous day in the Assembly. It will be a day on which we send a strong message that we are committed to protecting women from abuse and intimidation; that we are standing up for women at one of the most vulnerable times in their life; and that we are listening to the resounding calls from across the North that women have the right to access healthcare safely and free from intimidation and harassment.

I, too, thank Clare Bailey for bringing forward the Bill and congratulate her on pursuing it to the end, which has been a very challenging task. I also thank all the women who contacted

me and shared their personal stories, some of which were very harrowing. I thank them for trusting me with those stories. They included women who are patients, women who are staff, women who are parents and women who have just encountered these protests when going about their daily lives. Those protests have had a significant impact on them, and they want to see this change made.

Finally, I pay tribute to Cara, Fiona, Angela and Sharon and the whole Supporting Women Newry group. For almost two years now, they have been steadfast in their commitment to standing up for women week in, week out and to trying to support women when they are accessing John Mitchel Place in Newry and Daisy Hill Hospital. I hope that their efforts have not been in vain.

Today, we have an opportunity to ensure that never again will women have to run the gauntlet of protesters when trying to access healthcare or when going to their work. I sincerely hope that Members across the House will make the right decision to show that we take the rights of women seriously, that we respect women's choices and that we are serious about our commitment to tackling violence and abuse against women and girls.

**Mrs Erskine:** I will be brief, as I have made my comments clear both in the Committee and in the Chamber during the various stages of the Bill. It will come as no surprise to hear that I am against the Bill. I fundamentally believe that it is poor legislation and will be difficult to enforce on the ground. I also place on record again that my voting on the issue has been consistent and clear.

If we all took a step back in relation to the legislation, I do not think that there would be anybody who would not agree that there are things that still need to be ironed out but have not been, due to the rushed-through nature of the legislation. We have not had the time that we might have had, had it not been for time constraints, to fully engage with other organisations. Not least, I wonder if businesses will know that a safe access zone will be enforced close by. I wonder if that will deter the public from entering such public spaces due to worry or concern.

I recognise that there have been awful incidents that have deeply upset people, including staff, and I know that there have been incidents in which protesters have met with abuse. We cannot dispute that staff and those entering premises should be free from intimidation and attacks, but it is also important to remember

that we must strike a balance in relation to freedom of speech, which is enshrined in law. Again, I point out to the House such wonderful organisations as CARE and Both Lives Matter and, indeed, the Churches that have submitted evidence to the Committee with concerns about how the legislation will work in practice. I felt that it was important that we listened to those concerns. It is a small minority of people who have created such situations, and it is important to point out that it is wrong to tar everyone in the pro-life community or even pro-life advocates involved in mainstream protest activity as people who are abusers or who harass people. During some of the debates, it seemed that, if you are against abortion, you harass people, you are someone who shows distressing imagery and you are against women. That parallel is wrong. It is important to call that out today. I utterly condemn actions that have furthered no cause but that of causing distress and harassment, which, unfortunately, have been carried out by a small minority of individuals in the vicinity of these settings. Such actions are malicious and can be reasonably regarded as being criminal in nature. However, it is an oversight that there has not been more engagement with the Department of Justice on the legislation. The best way of dealing with the issue may have been to look at our current harassment laws and strengthen them.

The police will have difficulty in enforcing the legislation, and therefore I raise questions yet again. In particular, why is the legislation going through today, considering that it will be difficult to enforce? That will help no one, and it will certainly raise the expectations of those who will expect it to work for them. Given my previous opposition to the Bill, it will come as no surprise that my party and I are against the Bill.

**Mr Allister:** It should be no surprise to anyone that there would be protest against the widespread facilitation of abortion. Though abortion, by its advocates, is constantly described in the House as a medical procedure, the truth and reality of abortion is that it is, by choice, the deliberate killing of a baby in the womb. A woman's womb should be the safest possible place for the unborn. Yet, with abortion, it is the most dangerous place for the unborn, because it is there, in the womb, that, consciously, deliberately and by choice, death is visited on the unborn. It should therefore be no surprise that that provokes unease, distaste and protest. When it ceases to do so, this society will have entirely abandoned any semblance of a moral compass.

4.15 pm

Thus, when we come to a Bill that would criminalise the merest attempt to influence someone against the deliberate choice of killing in the womb, it is but a reflection of how some think so little of human life that they want not just to have absolute legality and protection for the taking of human life but to quell, suppress and extinguish any opportunity for anyone to say that it is wrong. They want to expel from the public space anyone who dares to take a stand that is compatible with a basic tenet of belief: "Thou shalt not kill". Under the Bill, an individual who dares to silently hold a placard or a piece of paper with those few words on it is to be criminalised. They do not have to say anything, shout anything or approach anyone. If their words are capable of influence, under this pernicious Bill, that is a criminal offence.

We really have reached a sorry pass if we are now in a society where the liberalism of some is so illiberal that they cannot abide the very articulation of a message contrary to their own and that they believe that they should be able to self-certify public territory and to say, "Only our world view will prevail within this 150 metres: only a pro-abortion view". You are allowed to influence pro-abortion terms, but you are a criminal if you dare to try to influence against abortion. That, to me, is the oppressive and vindictive nature of the Bill.

Its vindictiveness is underscored by the fact that the House deliberately refused any amelioration in respect of clause 5 and the criminal offence of influencing. It refused to accept that there should be written into the law, as there is with a vast panoply of criminal offences, the defence of reasonable excuse.

Just a couple of weeks ago, the House deliberately decided that the most basic of defences — reasonable excuse — would not be available for this criminalisation. Instead, the House decided that it would have to be and would be an absolute offence. No matter what your motivation or mode, just being there or engaging in silent prayer, if it could be interpreted as being capable of influencing someone, would be an absolute offence. It does not matter what the reasonable excuse was. It does not matter if you are the mother of a 14-year-old who insists on going through with the abortion. Those are the depths to which the House sunk in its blind determination to ram down everyone else's throat its world view about the taking of innocent life.

I have heard talk today about human rights. It really is quite galling to hear talk of human rights when the rights of the voiceless — the unborn — are so trampled upon and despised

that you cannot even abide anyone seeking to influence others against abortion.

The Bill is unworthy and, in that sense, disreputable, because it goes way beyond what was ever necessary to protect people from and deal with illegitimate protest. The criminal law and provisions on disorderly behaviour are all there, but, no, that was never enough. There had to be a special UDI approach to abortion clinics: special places that can abide only their view of the world. Because I think that that is an abhorrent position to take and because I believe in the right to protest — whether I agree about the issue being protested against is neither here nor there — I will vote against the Bill. I will only regret that some who tell us that they are against the Bill would not take the step that would have saved their statute book from such unnecessary and inappropriate legislation.

**Mr Carroll:** I am happy to speak on the Bill today. I have supported it all the way through and am happy to do so at its Final Stage. I commend the Member for getting to this stage with the Bill. Hopefully, it passes today.

It is also welcome news today that the Secretary of State will intervene if the Health Minister and the Department do not move to introduce legislation to allow abortion services. It is a real shame that the Minister did not move to commission services earlier in the mandate. His party is obviously rebranding as progressives but has not moved to allow basic services for women to access terminations in this part of the world, which, as we have heard, has forced thousands of women to travel for terminations. Anti-abortion laws and laws or policies that do not commission abortion services do not stop abortions; they merely export the health issue, which is exactly what abortion is.

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

There has been some talk about freedom of speech and the right to assemble, but the truth is that there already are general restrictions in place for protests but not people who are anti-choice. I have been on anti-racism protests. Several years ago, a diversity carnival, no less, was not allowed to go through Belfast city centre and was redirected so that people could take the back roads, the excuse being sensitivities around the Primark fire and potential threats to businesses' profits. We hear nothing about that from people who oppose the Bill. Black Lives Matter protesters who had no freedom to assemble on 5 June were, despicably, targeted and fined.

Therefore, as the law stands, restrictions, written and unwritten, are already in place.

The restrictions in the Bill are limited, but that, as much as I vigorously oppose anti-abortion organisations and the way in which they conduct themselves in their activities, is as it should be. I have been on many counter-protests, as has the Member. Those organisations will still be able to demonstrate and put their point across, just not outside healthcare clinics, and that is as it should be. They should not be and are not banned from protesting in cities and towns across this place. I commend the Member on the Bill and am happy to support it.

**Mr Lunn:** I will, of course, support the Bill today. I congratulate the Bill sponsor on introducing it. The House has a history on abortion matters that goes back to before 2016. I remember when Stewart Dickson and I tabled an amendment to try to introduce a concession for fatal fetal abnormality, which the House rejected. That was in perhaps 2015. There has been a lot of discussion about it. At least, in the end, the British Government saw sense and decided to introduce legislation on behalf of the Assembly. It is no tribute to the Assembly that that had to happen. Where we are today is the latest piece in a jigsaw of regulations and rules. It is finally becoming a reality that women's rights are fully recognised, including their right to control and make decisions about their body.

Back in 2015, I decided to visit the Marie Stopes clinic. I wanted to find out exactly what it was about. That year, the police had been called to the front of the clinic 200 times. There was, I think, one attempted prosecution of a very well-known lady activist, who complained about nearly everything but particularly abortion. However, the prosecution was not successful; she got off. She would only have been given a fine, but it was not enforced. What does that say about the existing legislation, which has been referred to a couple of times here? Some have said that it is powerful enough and that we do not need this legislation. We clearly need it, because everything else has failed.

People are saying that the Bill restricts freedom of speech and freedom of movement. All that I can say to that is that the women, mostly, and couples who go to an abortion clinic, advisory service, hospital or private hospital are also entitled to freedom of movement and freedom of action. They are entitled to that under the law that was brought in by the British Government. Every time that there is an abortion debate of some kind in this place, it turns into some sort

of conscience thing. We now have abortion services provided under the law. Hopefully, in the new mandate, whoever is the Health Minister will move to commission them properly. If not, by the sound of Brandon Lewis's comments today, the British Government will again step in and do that for us.

The Bill is designed to stop the possibility of harassment, abuse and confrontation as well as people filming and taking photographs. All of that will be banned in the vicinity of a designated area, which will be a space of 100 metres or perhaps 150 metres, depending on the geography of the location. It will not stop people protesting outside that area, and it will not stop people railing against abortion till the cows come home, if they want to do that. It will, however, stop them harassing women who are in a very fragile state and who are making serious decisions — not easy decisions — that will affect the rest of their life.

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

**Mr Lunn:** Yes, certainly.

**Mrs Erskine:** The Member talks about the fact that the Bill will allow people to move without fear of protest. Does he accept that the legislation will mean that protesters will be displaced elsewhere, so it will not do what he is indicating?

**Mr Lunn:** I did not quite get the logic of that, with all due respect. The Bill will stop people protesting in any material form inside the designated area outside a particular premises. I am happy to give way again, if the Member wishes to clarify what she said.

**4.30 pm**

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

**Mr Lunn:** Just a moment.

**Mrs Erskine:** You did not say that the first time. As I understood it, you said that the protesters would still be there. The protesters will move outside the safe access zone, but they will still be there.

**Mr Lunn:** I will give way to Mr Carroll.

**Mr Carroll:** Does the Member accept that the Bill, if passed, will allow anti-choice organisations, not that I am encouraging them, to protest outside Stormont, councils and

government buildings, and that the restriction is limited only to healthcare settings?

**Mr Lunn:** Yes. I am not for one minute trying to encourage those protesters, but it is a fact that the restriction applies only to designated areas outside designated premises.

All other avenues have been exhausted; this is the only way forward. We cannot rely on existing legislation. I do not see any point in suggesting, as Pam Cameron did, an amendment to tweak the existing harassment laws. In a way, that is what the Bill does.

It is a good day for women's reproductive rights. I thoroughly support the Bill, and I congratulate Ms Bailey once again. I have been involved in this issue for about 10 or 12 years now, but that is nothing compared with the amount of time during which Clare has been involved, including long before she was in the Chamber. The other day, we talked about the Brook advisory clinic and all the shenanigans around it. Most people here are too young to remember that, but it was effectively the same issue.

We are where we are. I hope that the Bill will pass; I am sure that it will now, judging by the tenor of the House. It will be another step. If we need to do more for women's rights, I hope that the next Assembly will do it, but for the time being, perhaps this is as far as we need to go.

As this is my last contribution and as a lot of other Members have done, I wish everybody well. I wish them well in the election, in that I hope that they achieve the vote that they deserve. That may not be the same as the vote that they think that they deserve. I look forward to the outcome of the election. I am glad to see that the Assembly, even in my time, has managed to pass some progressive legislation that just would not have happened 10 or 15 years ago. We are moving. We are doing OK.

I wish everybody well, including you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Speaker and the other Deputy Speaker.

**Ms Dillon:** Before my speech, a LeasCheann Comhairle, with your indulgence, I wish Trevor all the best for his future in whatever he chooses to do. I hope that he thinks that I deserve enough number-one votes to be elected for Mid Ulster.

I agree with much of what Trevor said and concur with much of his commentary on the issue. I want to make one specific point, which he also addressed, and that is on the issue of people's not being able to protest, have silent

prayer or say what they want to say. The notion is being put out there that that is being stopped, but it is not being stopped. To be very clear: people will still have the right to protest. We all defend the right to protest of any group or organisation, regardless of whether we agree with what they are protesting about. The issue is about where they protest and how that impacts on people and individuals, particularly, in this case, women who are going through some of the most vulnerable times of their life.

On many occasions, I have been clear and open in the Assembly that I am the mummy of one child. I waited a long time to have that child. She is the light of my life and the most important thing in my world. There are women out there, however, who, for whatever reason — I do not need to know what that reason is, any more than anybody else in society does; their reasons are theirs alone to know and understand — need to make decisions, with their family, about their life. They should never have to run the gauntlet while dealing with their decision. They should not be threatened, abused or shouted at when accessing a service that they badly need at that time in their life.

I commend Clare Bailey for the work that she has done and her perseverance in getting the Bill to this point. Well done. I commend all of the Members who support the Bill today. It is the right thing to do. As I have said previously, we have passed a lot of legislation in recent times around the protection of women and girls. This Bill is another piece of that jigsaw. It will genuinely protect women and girls, particularly at the most vulnerable time of their life. I hope that everyone who is elected to the new Assembly will have a very progressive and, even more importantly, compassionate attitude. Let us be compassionate and kind. Let us look after women and girls who are at the most vulnerable time of their entire life. Let us also be kind and compassionate to those who do not agree with the decisions that they have taken. However, they do not have the right to threaten and abuse women who have made a decision, for whatever reason they have made it.

**Mr Butler:** It seems strange to speak, probably for the last time in this mandate, on a topic on which I disagree with the Bill's sponsor. The terminology that has been used to describe us, with my being pro-life and the Member's being pro-choice, is not fair. We are debating the Final Stage of the Bill. I respect the fact that the Bill's sponsor has been working on it for some time, not just during this mandate but before it. I am also aware that the Health Committee carried out scrutiny of the Bill. However, the Health Committee did not perform its function to

its full and fair extent. It did not facilitate a fair hearing for some of the compassionate pro-life groups that genuinely and compassionately seek to care for people and offer practical help and counsel.

The Bill has certainly raised the debate on assembly and protest, as many Members have said. I would have expected at least to have seen a formal impact assessment, given that pregnancy and abortion are such important and much-debated matters. Perhaps the Member, at the end of the debate, will clarify what assessment will take place if the Bill is passed today.

If the Member will further indulge me, I seek clarity on an issue that has been distorted and misrepresented, and clarity and definition that will help to form the regulation behind the legislation, if it becomes statute. Clause 5(2) states that it is an offence for a person:

*"to do an act in a safe access zone with the intent of, or reckless as to whether it has the effect of—*

- (a) influencing a protected person, whether directly or indirectly,*
- (b) preventing or impeding access ... or*
- (c) causing harassment, alarm or distress to a protected person".*

Does the Member agree, for clarity in the interpretation of the Bill, that someone standing in personal prayer without approaching anyone entering or exiting a defined premises in the buffer zone is not causing the mischief that clause 5 intends to prevent and, therefore, that person is not guilty of that offence?

**Ms Bailey:** I thank Members, those who said that they support the Bill and those who are still raising issues, for their contributions. As has been mentioned, the Bill does not stop the right to protest. The Bill seeks to balance the right to protest with the right to healthcare, the right to health and the right to a private life. The current harassment laws have been brought up again. They have been repeatedly debated throughout the stages of the Bill. Current harassment laws are not sufficient to deal with what we are seeing. It has also been said that the Bill seeks to be — *[Interruption.]* I will tell you why. I see the Member. Current harassment laws require two incidents to happen to the same person before action can be taken. If an individual attends a clinic once, and one person approaches them, and then, when they leave, another person approaches them, it is not the same person targeting the same individual on two or more occasions, so no action can be taken.

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

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

**Ms Bailey:** No, I will not. We have been round the houses on this one.

**Mrs Erskine:** That is why —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** Order. The sponsor of the Bill has the Floor.

**Ms Bailey:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The law is there for anybody to go and read up on it. It is pretty straightforward and simple to understand. The Bill also seeks to be proactive about preventing harm from being done, and we have had that debate many times already.

I take the point that Mr Allister raised on the defence of reasonable excuse, but that defence will remain available to anyone, whether written explicitly in the Bill, if they ever need to use it.

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

**Ms Bailey:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** That is absolutely untrue, with respect. It is not in the Bill, and the way in which the Bill is written means that it is an absolute offence, so there is no defence now of reasonable excuse. The Member should be careful not to mislead the House. Her Bill is very clear. I know that she wanted to put it in, and she failed, as I failed, in that. We have the Bill as it is, and, in the Bill as it is, it is an absolute offence.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for that, but the enforcement clause allows an officer to direct a person to leave the safe access zone. People would therefore be made aware of their behaviours, and, if they were refusing, they would have no reasonable defence that they did not know that what they are doing is against the law, if the Bill passes. You said that the Bill is all about having someone else's views rammed down your throat. Women in Northern Ireland know all too well what it is like to live with that.

I say to the House that protests are taking place outside this Building right now: protests that cannot take place at the door of this Building. They are protests that are not even allowed to happen on the front steps of this Building. They are protests that have to happen on the apron outside, on the far side of the railings, probably about 100 metres away. Those protests are not silenced. We know that they are there, and we

know what they are aiming for. They are simply managed.

I thank Mr Butler for the points that he raised, because it gives me the opportunity to say, once again, that it is not, and never has been, my intention to criminalise anyone unnecessarily under the Bill. The offences outlined in it are narrow in scope, and, despite what has been said, it does not ban protest. It does not ban silent prayer. Rather, it regulates behaviour that targets women and attempts to stop them accessing lawfully available healthcare services and information. That is it.

I respect the points that have been raised from Committee scrutiny or evidence sessions, and I know that the Committee received hundreds of written submissions. I will refer to just one that I have read. It came from a compassionate group called Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice. The group's words might be useful for some to hear. It stated:

*"The right to hold religious, moral or ethical beliefs is fundamental and absolute. No one can force you to change your views on God or abortion or any other issue. But there is no such thing as an absolute right to religious "*

— or moral or ethical —

*"expression. At the point where our beliefs interact with the lives of other people we are bound as people of faith by two things: legal responsibilities not to interfere with the rights of others and the moral duty to love others and do no harm."*

I am also aware that the Minister, who, Mr Butler, is your party colleague, has also confirmed that he will produce a policy paper setting out how his Department intends to implement the requirements for safe access zones, including guidance to operators of health and social care premises. It could be about displaying clear and appropriate signage at protected premises. That is an important measure in achieving the appropriate balance of rights, and it recognises the role of operators in that.

On the impact assessment, if the Bill is implemented properly and proportionality, I know with certainty that women will cease to be targeted by those who are intent on their deliberate campaign of harassment and intimidation and that staff and services will be able function without fear.

**4.45 pm**

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for giving way. It is just a point of clarity with regard to the question and the manner in which I asked it. With particular regard to clause 5, an individual's prayer in the buffer zone will not constitute an offence in the interpretation of clause 5. Is that fair?

**Ms Bailey:** It is certainly not the intent within this Bill. Silent prayer cannot harm anyone. Silent prayer is silent prayer, so how does any other human being know what is going on?

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Member for giving way. I think there must be a difference between silent prayer where someone is on their knees indulging in silent prayer outside the door of the premises within the buffer zone, which is clearly designed to influence the person, as against someone who wants to have a silent prayer outside the City Hall half a mile away. There is a difference here. I am sure that God gets both messages, but there is a difference.

**Ms Bailey:** I thank the Member for that. It is worth noting that, comparatively, this Bill takes a light touch in respect of offences being committed, because the punishment for breaching safe access zones around the world, in almost all cases where they are operational, can result in imprisonment and wildly higher fines than what is being proposed in this Bill. That comes back to the intention behind the Bill: it is to ensure safe access to healthcare. The intervention proposed here goes only as far as necessary to meet that aim. It is not punitive in nature, and the strength of this Bill lies in the ability of the police to move people on from the zone, ensuring the sanctity of a safe space and a safe zone in making sure that those who need to access protected premises can do so without fear or intimidation. The efficacy of the Bill is achieved without being unnecessarily heavy-handed or putting significant additional pressures on any criminal justice system. I hope that we can move on from those debates.

This is absolutely a landmark moment for the Assembly. I have seen many Bills passed today that I am incredibly proud of. We are sending a very clear message to women that we see you, we hear you and we are not afraid to stand up for you in the face of bullies intent on imposing themselves where they are not wanted or invited. We have a long way to go to right the wrongs that women endure, not least the full commissioning of abortion services across Northern Ireland; but it is a start, and an important one that will make a real difference to

the lives of women and staff across a range of healthcare settings. They have been abused for simply doing their jobs.

I must acknowledge today that I can bring this Bill and that, in doing so, I stand on the shoulders of some pretty formidable female giants going back as far as 1991 and 1992, as Mr Lunn has already mentioned, when the Brook Advisory Clinic opened in Belfast. The protests outside it were so shocking to me that I made a point of barging my way through those protesters every lunchtime that I could, just to walk through the doors of that clinic and say thank you to the staff for what they were doing. While I did not know her at the time, I do now: I salute Mary Crawford for her bravery in the face of such resistance.

When I lived in a flat in the Holylands in University Street right opposite the doors of the Family Planning Association (FPA), I watched from my window the campaigners as they targeted women, hurling abuse and insults and blocking access. They were relentless. Members may be aware that the FPA is now Informing Choices NI, and I declare an interest as a board member with the organisation. While I did not know her at the time, I do now: I salute Audrey Simpson for her bravery in the face of such resistance.

Breda Hughes was the director of the Royal College of Midwives for 21 years, tirelessly campaigning for legal reforms that would protect her staff and provide the services that women needed — free, safe and legal — right here at home.

She is a woman whom I am so proud to know, and I salute her for her bravery in the face of such resistance.

I remember when Dawn Purvis was for so long a lone voice in the Chamber, speaking up for reproductive justice. Then Anna Lo, Steven Agnew, Trevor Lunn and a few others came in and took up the mantle. Dawn Purvis, along with Marie Stopes International, stepped up and brought nothing short of a revolution in reproductive healthcare services in Northern Ireland, simply by opening the doors of a clinic and offering a choice to women. That was in the face of such severe, hostile, targeted intimidation, yet she persevered. I knew Dawn at that time, and I will always salute her for her bravery in the face of such resistance.

Barrister Laura McMahon has been unwavering in her profession, seeking to ensure that our laws are human rights-compliant, going above

and beyond at every opportunity. I salute her for her bravery in the face of such resistance.

Those women — not the bullies; not the people waging the campaign of intimidation — have been targeted and arrested and have faced criminal sanctions for speaking out and stepping up.

To every activist and campaigner in the Alliance for Choice networks in Belfast and Derry who have changed the conversation and have educated, agitated and organised to break the stigma and end the shame, I say this: I am proud to be among you, not least Emma Campbell, Naomi Connor, Kelly O'Dowd and Danielle Roberts.

Supporting Women Newry, whom Ms Kimmins mentioned, have organised themselves to stand against the intimidation outside their hospital services, on their streets.

Every woman who has been called to bare her soul in public and speak about her deep and harrowing personal experiences has got us to this point by getting us to understand how our lack of action impacts them.

As for my staff team, of course, none of this would be possible without them. I know that I have put them through the wringer. They have gone above and beyond, and I am so proud of and thankful for them. I want to let every one of them and everyone who has stood firm for decades know that this Bill is their Bill, and I am just proud to be a small part of their story.

I hope that Members will support the passage of the Bill today. To those who have not supported it so far, I say this again: I urge you to reflect on your understanding of what it is and why it is and to do the right thing by voting in favour of the Bill passing today.

**Mr Clarke:** Not a chance.

**Ms Bailey:** Hardly surprising.

In the words of Margaret Mead:

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

I commend the Bill to the House.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

*Question put.*

**Some Members:** Aye.

**Some Members:** No.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing. As per Standing Order 112, Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

*Question put a second time.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 55; Noes 29.*

## **AYES**

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Miss Woods.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Miss Woods*

## **NOES**

*Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Erskine, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Rankin, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mrs Erskine*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill [NIA 35/17-22] do now pass.*

*[Applause.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs):** The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill has passed and stands referred to the Speaker. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## **Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill: Final Stage**

**Mr Chambers:** I beg to move

*That the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill [NIA 56/17-22] do now pass.*

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

**Mr Chambers:** It is my great pleasure to move the Final Stage of my private Member's Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill.

Even though the Bill was introduced just over two weeks ago, I feel that the House has given it the priority, scrutiny and attention to detail that it undoubtedly deserves. I will not rehearse the contents of the Bill. What I will do once again, however, is note that its overriding intention is to give effect to part 1 of recommendation 4 in the truth recovery design panel's report, namely:

*"The Truth Recovery Panel recommends immediate action by the Northern Ireland Executive, supported by the Northern Ireland Assembly, to create a statutory requirement on all relevant records holders to preserve and not destroy any information relating to Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries, Workhouses, adoption-related institutions and 'baby homes', and their policies and practices, including personal records. This requirement should extend to all State and non-State institutions and agencies, officials, representatives and professionals that serviced them."*

So many women, girls and children, who are now adults, were failed in those institutions. Some suffered appalling abuse, gut-wrenching neglect and the cruellest form of shameful coldness imaginable. Those institutions took so much from so many. Children were removed from parents, and some children were robbed of their true identity.

The very least they deserve now is truth, and key to that will be the protection and retention of records, not just for the inquiry and investigation but for all women and children involved, who absolutely deserve the right to know that what information exists will be protected.

I am very pleased that the House has shown such a collective will and a desire to allow this important Bill to pass in the short time available. I thank the House first for granting accelerated passage, and then for the helpful contributions made by all Members across all parties in the Chamber. In particular, I thank Ms Dillon for her constructive engagement at Consideration Stage and Ms Bradshaw for doing so at today's Further Consideration Stage. As I mentioned earlier, I feel that the Bill is all the stronger following the detailed consideration that it has received.

I also take the opportunity to once again thank the Speaker's Office for effectively setting all Standing Order requirements to the side, and I thank the Business Committee and the Whips for allocating the time necessary. I also thank the Minister and his Department, especially the officials Eilís McDaniel and Julie Stephenson. Without them, I simply would not have been able to produce the Bill, so it is important that their huge contribution be placed on the record.

On this, the final item of business before the current Assembly mandate ends, I am absolutely honoured and hugely privileged to move the Final Stage of my private Member's Bill. The Bill belongs to the tens of thousands of victims who want nothing more than the truth. I hope that the Bill helps bring the day of truth closer for those seeking it. Sadly, many have died without learning the truth about their early life. Hopefully, their families will now get the truth that their loved ones were denied, and I hope that they take some comfort from that. I commend the Bill to the House.

**Ms McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):** The Bill has been of particular interest to the Committee, and I thank the Bill sponsor for bringing the legislation to this point.

It has been a particularly uncertain time for victims and survivors of mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses. A key first step for those who are still experiencing the legacy of those institutions, for the groups that speak for them and for the truth recovery design panel has been the preservation of records. The First Minister and deputy First Minister stated that legislation would be put in place to ensure that

records would be protected, then there was no Executive to bring the legislation forward. Imagine the consternation among victims and survivors at the prospect of the legislation waiting for a new mandate. The Committee was contacted by people in despair who were fearful that these important documents would be imperilled. The answer lay in the introduction of this private Member's Bill. I cannot overemphasise the importance to victims and survivors of the Bill's becoming law.

I thank the Members who introduced helpful amendments. The circumstances and legacy of what happened to people in these institutions are broad and far-reaching. While others have been looking at the process by which babies were taken away from their birth mothers and given to others to bring up as their own, the Committee has been looking at what happened to them when they died. It has not been a comfortable journey, but it is one that needs to be embarked upon. The Committee has called for an independent investigation into this aspect of a very, very sorry episode in our history. The preservation of documents to inform such an investigation is essential. We cannot undo what has happened to people and to their loved ones in the past, but we can do our very best to support those who are still with us in any way that we can. Preserving documents to ensure that those who want to know the truth can find it is one part of that support. The Committee for the Executive Office supports the Bill.

I will make a few comments or observations on behalf of the SDLP.

I put on record my thanks to all the victim and survivor groups that have shown exceptional leadership. The Bill will support their fight for truth and justice by protecting documents that will give light and transparency to their identity.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I am glad that you are here to hear me say to you, in person, that you and your office have done tremendous work. Today is testament to that work and to your legacy. As you depart from the House, this evening, let today give you comfort and joy, because you have changed lives. You and your team have worked tremendously to get the private Members' Bills through. They are important to the whole of society. I thank you personally and wish you good health and well-being as you move on to a different part of your life. Thank you, and well done.

I commend the Bill to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member, very much, on a personal basis and for her contribution to this very important issue.

**Ms Dillon:** Usually, I am delighted to join meetings via Zoom, but, on this occasion, I would much prefer to be in the Chamber, because this is such an important issue. I am pleased, proud and privileged to speak on the final item of business on the final day of the Assembly mandate, particularly given the item that it is: the preservation of documentation for those who went through the institutions.

Again, I thank Alan Chambers, who brought the private Member's Bill forward, and all those who have worked so hard on it, including everyone in the Department who worked with the Minister — as has been said — and, as has been highlighted, your office, Mr Speaker, and the Business Committee. The work that was done there to ensure that the Bill was brought to the House today has been phenomenal. I assure you that, from my point of view and perspective, we offer great thanks for that, because we know what it means to the victims and survivors.

I was messaged about an hour ago by some of the victims and survivors who asked what was happening with the Bill and how it was going. I told them that we were about to agree the Final Stage, that I had no reason to believe that it would not go through and that that would mean that the Bill would become legislation. They were delighted. For those people, we can feel proud that, as an Assembly, all Members across the House worked together to ensure that we got the best Bill possible. When we talk about legislation, we say that there is no such thing as perfect legislation and that it can always be better, but we certainly did our best to make this legislation the best that it could be. We have done good work to deliver that.

As other Members outlined, our thoughts are with all the women and girls, and their children who are now adults, who went through the institutions. Each and every one of them deserves to know everything about their life: about where they came from, who they are, what happened to them and why it happened. Therefore, all the information that is included and all the documents that will be preserved as a result of the Bill are vital elements to each and every one of those individuals.

As the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office said, one of the difficult elements of this is those who died. That will be a very difficult thing for us to deal with going forward in the inquiry. We will hear details that nobody will want to have to deal with, but I am glad that we

are dealing with it. I am glad that we are doing something, today, that may possibly restore some of the faith that, I am sure, has been lost many, many times by those who went through those institutions in the state. I hope that they now have faith that we will do the right thing going forward, that the inquiry will deliver for them and their families and that they will get the proper redress and recognition that they deserve for everything that they went through as children and everything that they continue to go through as adults. Today is about them. I think about all the victims and survivors to whom this piece of legislation means so much.

While it is only one small part of the jigsaw, it is an important part, and it shows, on our behalf, that we really want to do the right thing for every one of them.

### 5.30 pm

I thank Alan Chambers for bringing the Bill to the House, and I thank all those who have supported it. I am delighted that this is the final thing that we will do in the Assembly mandate.

As the previous contributor said, a Cheann Comhairle, I wish you all the very best. Speaking not only as a party colleague but as somebody who has been in the Chamber over the past number of years, I think that you have done your job in a very fair manner, even if that meant telling me when I had said enough or had stepped out of line. That is what being a good Speaker is all about. We could not have asked for any better than you.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member, again on both counts.

**Mrs Cameron:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the Final Stage of the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party. I thank my Health Committee colleague Mr Alan Chambers for bringing his private Member's Bill forward. It plugs an important gap in legislation, and we all would have supported its provisions in the Adoption and Children Bill had they been within the scope of that Bill. This is a good use of the private Member's Bill process.

I fully support the Bill as amended at Further Consideration Stage earlier this afternoon. Again, I thank Ms Paula Bradshaw for her work with the officials to ensure that those amendments did not bring about any unintended consequences.

An incredible amount of legislation has been processed in the House over the past two years, and it is good that this is the last Bill to be passed in the mandate. I am pleased to have spoken my final words in the mandate on the Bill, which is important to the many individuals and their families who were so badly treated in the past.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I wish you all the best for the future, whatever it may hold for you.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for that.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I am delighted to speak on the Final Stage of the Bill. I congratulate the Bill sponsor on getting it through so quickly. I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the staff of the Speaker's Office for facilitating it.

Six years ago, Birth Mothers and their Children for Justice came to my office on University Street, and what they told me that day brought me to tears. I remember the words of Eunan Duffy, whom people will know as a fierce campaigner on the issue. He said to me, "Paula, we have knocked on a lot of doors, and we are now drowning in tea and sympathy". I am so delighted that Department of Health officials have worked with him and others over the years to get to the point at which we commissioned research. I pay tribute to Sean O'Connell from Queen's University for his sterling work, to the truth recovery design panel, which worked with Birth Mothers and to the truth recovery NI group.

This is an important Bill, but it is only the start of the journey towards delivering the recommendations in the truth recovery design panel's report. I look forward to, I hope, getting re-elected, and we can come back on the far side and push for redress, for the apology, for the inquiry and for everything else that is in the panel's report. We owe it to those people, and, as has been said today, many of them have passed away, and we have to get on with the work as soon as possible. It is a great day, and I thank the Minister, his officials and the Bill sponsor.

In closing, Mr Speaker, I wish you well for the future. We met each other years ago when I was a lowly community worker in south Belfast and you were an MLA for my constituency. I have always really enjoyed working with you, not least in recent months on the Business Committee. I wish you and your family all the best for the future.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for her kind remarks.

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I, too, am immensely grateful to my party colleague Alan Chambers, thanks to whose initiative and commitment the Assembly has been able to conclude the mandate with the passage of such important legislation through his private Member's Bill.

I also commend the Members who supported the Bill's progress in such a challenging time frame. In particular, I acknowledge the commitment of Linda Dillon and Paula Bradshaw, who listened to the needs and experiences of victims and survivors of the historical institutions and responded with constructive amendments. Those amendments widen the range of information that is protected by the Bill and that can therefore be made available to a forthcoming inquiry or investigation or to individuals who are seeking information about their or a family member's origins.

I say this to those victims and survivors and their family members: I know that no words can adequately convey the emotional and psychological hurt and distress that you have suffered, not only in the institutions where you or your relatives spent time but in the years since, during which many of you have been seeking the information that you need to understand your origins or the identity of a family member. I can only express the hope that the statutory protection provided by the legislation that we will pass today will offer you and your family some reassurance for the future.

The right to know who you are is a fundamental human right. That means having access to the life details that most of us have always known about ourselves: where and when you were born, who your family are, who cared for you as an infant, what happened to your mother and where you spent your early years. Those are just some of the unanswered questions that victims and survivors have had to live with and that are so important to an individual's sense of identity. The Bill presents an important step towards securing the answers that so many mothers, their sons and daughters and their wider family have been seeking for so many years.

The passage of the Bill, although significant, is just one step in the process. Much remains to be done to achieve the justice, accountability and truth that are so urgently needed. Given the collaboration and commitment shown by

Members across the House in progressing the Bill through the Assembly, I am confident that there will be continued cross-party support for achieving that outcome.

It is my hope and expectation that the statutory inquiry recommended by the truth recovery design panel will provide the answers that are so desperately needed. There are also powers in the Adoption and Children Bill, which the Assembly passed recently, to make regulations that will empower the Department of Health to strengthen and clarify provisions governing access to information about adoptions that took place prior to that legislation's commencement. Victims and survivors will play an important role in the process.

I have thanked the Bill sponsor, but I take the opportunity to also thank my Department's officials who engaged in this process with the Bill sponsor and with Members who proposed amendments. It was the same dedicated team of officials as brought forward the Adoption and Children Bill at the same time. I place on record their commitment to getting us to Final Stage today.

Mr Speaker, like others, I thank you for your support. I thank you and your office for facilitating our getting the Bill through so many stages as quickly as we have in the final days and weeks of the mandate. It means a lot to the people who are listening and seeking the surety of the preservation of information held across the institutions. As Ms Bradley said, when it comes to your legacy as Speaker, the Bill stands among the greatest testaments to you: you enabled us to bring the private Member's Bill through, and it was done in such a collaborative way by all parties in the House.

In addition, as Health Minister, I give my personal thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for the support that you have given me in the Chamber. I am probably the Minister who has been in the Chamber the most — possibly nearly as much as you at times. You have managed some challenging debates and legislation, and I thank you for your impartiality and for how you and your team have managed those.

It remains for me to thank once again my Assembly colleague Mr Chambers and other Members for their tenacity in securing this important legislation, to which I give my wholehearted support.

It is a privilege to do that as my final contribution as Health Minister in this Assembly mandate. It is fitting that this Bill is the final

piece of business in this mandate, because it will be life-changing and will give that surety. It would have been challenging for many of those listening, to whom Ms Dillon referred, if the legislation had not been delivered and was put off until another mandate or put on the long finger. It is right that we have this private Member's Bill, and it is also right that it was granted accelerated passage, which was supported by you, Mr Speaker, the offices and all parties across the House. I have great pleasure in endorsing the private Member's Bill.

**Mr Speaker:** Thanks very much, Minister, for all those comments. I call the Bill sponsor, Alan Chambers, to conclude the debate on the Final Stage.

**Mr Chambers:** I feel immensely privileged to have sponsored this private Member's Bill. We all may have made a little bit of history with the speed at which we have reached this point, without losing any degree of scrutiny. My wife, possibly with a little justification, accuses me of leaving a lot of things to the last minute. I think that she will understand, however, why the Bill that I have sponsored had to go to the very wire.

The public would have a better image of the House if they could see the spirit of goodwill that we have seen demonstrated over the last few weeks as we passed a lot of sound and good legislation that will help the people of Northern Ireland. I hope that that spirit of goodwill carries through into the new mandate.

Today is a good day for the Assembly, and it is a very good day for those seeking the truth. This legislation is the least that we, as a collective body, can give them.

On a personal level, Mr Speaker, I thank you for your service and leadership during this mandate. I wish you well going forward. I particularly thank you for all your help and cooperation. I would not be standing here this evening, and this Bill would not be going through, if it were not for your cooperation over the last two weeks. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the sponsor.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill [NIA 56/17-22] do now pass.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Final Stage of the Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill has passed. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker. Well done to everybody. *[Applause.]*

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget Bill: Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** Before the House adjourns, I wish to inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 became law today, 24 March 2022, and it is chapter 6.

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** In the spirit of goodwill, as referred to by Mr Chambers, I want to offer my best wishes to all those Members who are seeking re-election. I can only say, "Go forth and multiply". You will do very well.

I want to thank you all, as representatives of this society, for your very kind remarks, tremendous support and cooperation, hard work and dedication over the past couple of years during which I have known you in this role. I have known a number of you for quite a few years longer than that. I still hold everybody here in the best regard.

Thank you all very much for your kind remarks and, in particular, for your support and for your dedication to this role over the last number of years. Mr Chambers made the point that our community would be well served if people saw the goodwill that operates in here, with multi-party support for a whole raft of legislation that has been passed by the House in recent weeks and months. *[Applause.]* Thank you all very much. You are now free to go.

*Adjourned at 5.44 pm.*

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