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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 25 February 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 2/17-22] be agreed.

Today's Second Stage follows yesterday's approval of the Supply resolutions by the Assembly for the expenditure plans of Departments and other public bodies, as detailed in the 2019-2020 spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) and the 2021 Vote on Account. As Members will be aware, accelerated passage of the Bill is necessary in order to ensure Royal Assent prior to the end of March. Were the Bill not to proceed by accelerated passage and receive Assembly approval before the end of the financial year, Departments and other public bodies may have legislative difficulty in accessing cash. That would threaten the delivery of public services, not just for the closing weeks of the current financial year but for the early months of the 2020-21 financial year.

I am very grateful to the Finance Committee for confirming that, in line with Standing Order 42, the Bill can proceed under accelerated passage. I thank the Committee for its work in agreeing to accelerated passage. We all recognise that the situation this year has been far from satisfactory, given that the 2019-2020 Budget was set by the Secretary of State rather than the Executive and that the devolved institutions have been restored so close to the end of the financial year.

In the normal course of events, the Committee would have been heavily involved in the setting of the 2019-2020 Budget right from its inception, with the Main Estimates, which would have been debated in the Assembly before the summer, providing the statutory authority for

expenditure against the Executive's Budget through each of the in-year monitoring rounds and up to the finalisation and publication of the SSEs and the introduction of the Budget Bill. That programme of work has not been possible in the 2019-2020 year, with the unsatisfactory situation of a Budget being set by the Secretary of State and the Main Estimates being approved in Westminster. The work of the Finance Committee in that respect is vital, and I am glad that a programme of work can now be put in place for the incoming 2020-21 financial year.

Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate should be confined to the general principles of the Bill, and I shall endeavour to keep to that direction. The main purpose of the Bill is to authorise the cash and use of resource on services based on the Executive's final spending plans for 2019-2020 for Departments and other public bodies as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2019-2020. The Bill also provides authorisation for the cash and use of resources in the early months of the 2021 financial year as a Vote on Account, pending the Assembly's consideration of the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill in June.

Copies of the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today, and the 2019-2020 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2021 Vote on Account were laid in the Assembly on 19 February.

The Bill will authorise a further £17,519,166,000 from the Consolidated Fund and the further use of resources totalling £21,022,321,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2020. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of each schedule. These amounts supersede the amounts that were previously authorised in Westminster through the Main Estimates.

The Bill also sets for the current financial year a limit for each Department on the use of accruing resources. Accruing resources are current and capital receipts totalling £3,213,458,000. The accruing resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of schedule 2.

The total resources and accruing resources now provided in the Bill bring the total for use by Departments in 2019-2020 to over £24 billion. In addition, the Bill will authorise the issue of a further £7,962,895,000 from the Consolidated Fund and the further use of resources totalling £9,054,440,000 by Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 3 and 4 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2021. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of schedules 3 and 4.

This is the Vote on Account and, as I explained, does not constitute the setting of a Budget for 2020-21. It is merely to allow Departments to continue to operate and provide services in the early months of that year, pending consideration of the Executive's Budget for that year through the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill in June.

While the vast majority of expenditure by all Departments is done on the authority of the statutory powers provided through legislation passed by the Assembly, there are occasionally some — usually small — functions that may from time to time be done on the sole authority of the Budget Act. When a Department is making use of the sole authority of the Budget Act, it will highlight this fact by placing a note with a black box symbol in the corresponding Estimate.

Given that the Main Estimate for 2021 will not be available until June, I want to make the Assembly aware that the Department for Communities is making preparations to extend the existing welfare mitigation schemes. Until Royal Assent is received for the Welfare Supplementary Payments (Loss of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit) Bill and until the Welfare Supplementary Payment Extension Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 have been approved by a resolution of the Assembly, the Department seeks approval to incur spend under the sole authority of the Budget Bill at an estimated cost of £7 million until 31 May 2020.

These amounts of resource include not only the departmental expenditure limits (DEL) on which our Budget process mainly focuses but the departmental demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME). Clause 5 provides for the

temporary borrowing by my Department of £3,981,448,000. This is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 4 for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I must stress that clause 5 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power, but it enables my Department to run an effective and efficient cash management regime and ensure minimum drawdown of the block grant on a daily basis, which is important when contemplating the daily borrowing by Departments.

The legislation is required for every public service. Whether a schoolteacher or a nurse, the building of a road or the training required for gaining a job, all public services need the legislation to operate in the financial year. It is crucial legislation that underpins public services.

I am happy to deal with any points of principle or detail of the Budget Bill that Members may wish to raise.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister. The Second Stage of the Budget Bill having been moved, in accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limits on the debate.

Mr Frew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): The Chair is not able to make it this morning, which is an unfortunate development. I will stand in on his behalf, as any good Deputy Chair would. I have his back. However, I beg forgiveness from the Chamber. It is not very often that I am dictionary-correct when I speak, and I feel that I will be susceptible to error today having just read the speech before me. Please bear with me and give me that wee bit of latitude.

As we have heard, the Budget Bill provides statutory authority for expenditure as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2019-2020. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows Departments to incur expenditure and use resources in the early part of 2020-21, until the Main Estimates are voted on by the Assembly in June. Standing Order 42(2) states that accelerated passage may be granted for a Budget Bill, provided that the Committee for Finance is satisfied that it has been appropriately consulted:

"on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill".

At the Committee meeting on 19 February, departmental officials provided oral evidence

and answered questions on the Budget Bill, including on issues relating to a number of Departments. As the Chairperson pointed out in yesterday's Supply resolution debate, the scale of the changes resulting from the normal reallocations through monitoring rounds combined with the in-year technical changes will have, in some cases, resulted in significant differences between the opening and closing resource and capital allocations of Departments.

The Committee also noted the Minister's written statement to the Assembly highlighting late changes of £18 million of resource arising from Barnett consequential changes that the Executive agreed to allocate for 2019-2020. For capital, there is a corresponding reduction of some £52 million. That required the Executive to agree to manage this in 2020-2021 since our capital spend is fully committed for this year. During oral evidence, the Committee noted that headroom of £18 million was already factored into the Estimates and, therefore, no change to the spring Supplementary Estimates was necessary. However, perhaps more notable was the late notification of the Barnett consequential changes from Her Majesty's Treasury. Officials stated that they were not able to recollect a later time in the financial year when Treasury made changes of such magnitude.

The Committee welcomes the limited engagement with the Department on these issues. However, as the Chairperson mentioned yesterday, in the absence of a functioning Assembly, the level of consultation with the Committee on the public expenditure proposals was far from what the Committee would expect during a conventional Budget cycle. The Committee deliberated on the matter for a considerable time before coming to an agreement to grant accelerated passage to the Budget Bill under the requirements set out in Standing Order 42(2). The Committee took into account the level of consultation that it would expect during a normal Budget cycle; the constraints imposed by the prevailing circumstances; and the adverse impact of withholding authority from Departments to incur the spend on the additional resources that had been granted in-year. Every Committee member who was present expressed dissatisfaction with the process, but, in the end, the Committee came to the conclusion that it could only agree to confirm that the Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, taking full account of the prevailing circumstances and without prejudice to the detailed level of consultation that the Committee will expect on future Budget Bills.

In considering future financial scrutiny, the Committee questioned departmental officials about exploring the process and timescales for forthcoming Budgets. It welcomed their commitment and assurances that views from the Assembly will be sought as early as practicable and that there will be regular and meaningful engagement with Statutory Committees. In particular, the Committee welcomed officials' acknowledgement of the leading role of the Finance Committee in producing a coordinated report reflecting the considerations of all Statutory Committees.

Over the coming weeks, once the timing of the Budget and Main Estimates is known, the Committee will consider its approach to coordinating Budget scrutiny across Committees in a standard, coherent manner that will help to facilitate Committees in fulfilling their statutory role and responsibilities for Budget scrutiny.

We will, of course, ensure that the relevant Committees are consulted on our intended approach in the early stages of its development.

10.45 am

The Committee also received assurances from officials on the in-year monitoring process, and I am happy to report that the formal practice of departmental bids will be reintroduced to ensure greater transparency in future Budget scrutiny. That will be reflected in the in-year monitoring guidance, which is anticipated to be published by the Department of Finance early in the new financial year.

That leads me on to one aspect of work that will help to support the Assembly's approach to financial scrutiny, which is very much needed in this place. At a time when we are aiming to deliver much-needed reform to our public services, it is absolutely right that, as an Assembly, we look to reform how we undertake our scrutiny, particularly when it comes to public expenditure. We need to move to a more inclusive and collaborative approach that will reform how the Executive and the Assembly interact when the Budget is being developed and scrutinised. We must ensure that the budgetary process becomes meaningful and embraces the role that the Assembly can and should play in influencing and contributing to how public money is spent. We must change the cultural behaviours and attitudes and reform our processes in the same way in which we ask others to accept reforms.

One specific area in bringing about this much-needed reform is through the memorandum of understanding between the Assembly and the Executive. Members from all parties who served on the former Finance and Personnel Committee highlighted that issue over a number of years and budgetary cycles. The aim of the memorandum is to provide solutions to many of the difficulties and flaws in the budgetary process and to establish a framework for improved cooperation between the Executive and the Assembly on budgetary matters. It would also facilitate Members and Committees in fulfilling their scrutiny and advisory functions, which, in turn, will assist in overseeing the effective and efficient delivery of the Executive's strategic priorities. In addition, the memorandum will support the Executive in their role in managing public expenditure and will help maintain and enhance good working relationships between Departments and their Committees. Indeed, a draft memorandum of understanding was jointly prepared by Assembly and DOF officials during the 2011 mandate.

If implemented, the memorandum of understanding would help to address those fundamental weaknesses in our financial and budgetary process. In particular, it would help the Assembly to give conscientious consideration to budgetary proposals, and it would influence draft Budgets at the formative stages and key decisions in advance of future Budgets being agreed by the Executive. That is what open, transparent, meaningful consultation is all about. Predecessors referenced the memorandum on a number of occasions, yet this is a significant body of work on which, to date, agreement has not been reached.

Recent events have emphasised the need for greater oversight and scrutiny of public expenditure. I therefore encourage the Executive and the Assembly to achieve an agreed process for budgetary scrutiny as a matter of urgency. In this regard, it would be helpful if the Minister in his winding-up speech today would provide a commitment to the House that work will resume to finalise and agree the memorandum of understanding between the Assembly and the Executive. In supporting a memorandum and other reforms, we, as an Assembly, also need to ensure that, in conducting our business, these institutions adapt and align to further demonstrate that devolution is working effectively and efficiently and that we can play our part in fulfilling the commitments arising from the agreements that we have made.

In the meantime, on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motion. There ends my contribution as Deputy Chairperson of the Finance Committee. It was very important to place the Committee's wishes and thought processes on the record in Hansard.

I will now speak as the DUP's finance spokesperson. That will allow me that wee bit more freedom to say what I wish. I will not, as far as possible, rehearse what I said yesterday. I want to demonstrate the frustrations that I, as a Bench-Bench MLA, feel daily, not just in this new age of the Assembly but in my 10 years as an MLA, and to explain my experiences of scrutiny and effecting real change.

We have sometimes heard Ministers in this place talk the talk, but have we really seen them walk the walk? If we are to have a truly collective Executive, they have to be truly collective, not only in the decisions that are made but in the responsibilities that they have. That is quite difficult when we have a five-party Executive and can lead to dangers. I make this point about the memorandum of understanding. We have a five-party Executive and an Assembly made up mostly of MLAs from those five parties, with very few Members not belonging to them, so it is incumbent on us, in our job and in our role, to make sure that scrutiny happens. That is why it is incumbent on me to ask all the tough questions and raise all the tough issues that we face now and in the future and also to bring up and display my disgruntlement when something goes wrong.

I give the Finance Minister the same commitment today that I gave him when we first met in Committee: I will work alongside him to try to work out the best path forward for this country and its people, in order to make lives better. One question that we should all ask — Ministers, Committee Chairs, Deputy Chairs and Back-Bench MLAs — about every decision that we take is this: is that the effect, is that the impact or is it the other way round? I know that there are some really tough decisions to be made by the Executive and then by us in the House. That those decisions are difficult does not mean that they should not be made. I am sick and tired of cans being kicked down the road. I am sick and tired of us having the power in this place that a regional Assembly should have and then not availing ourselves of those powers to the best of our abilities to bring tangible and true benefits to the people of Northern Ireland.

Although there are a lot of figures with a lot of zeros in a Budget, when those are stripped away, a Budget comes down to the basics of

how spending and saving works in a household. Let us try not to complicate things too much, because, ultimately, this comes down to the fiscal management of funding for our people. I raise that point because we need to get back to basics. Look at the torment that our Civil Service has gone through. I commend it for the way in which it held this place up as a country over the past three years. I also commend the permanent secretaries for making the decisions that they had to make, when they knew, fine rightly, that it was not their place to do so. Of course, the input from the NIO and the Secretary of State was not ideal and really should not have happened. When we consider all that, we really need to get back to basics. Look at the traumatic situation that most of our systems, Departments and arm's-length bodies have been placed in over funding and over how they should move forward. One way in which we can fix that is through Budget Bills. Again I have a lot of sympathy for the Minister, even today, because a lot of the stuff in the Bill has already happened; he had no say on decisions that were made. Then, of course, there is the Vote on Account, which is 45% of our Budget spend for the next financial term. That is very important. I made the point yesterday that the Assembly, as a corporate body, has not had the time to scrutinise the detail and bids of all the Departments. That is fundamentally important. Again, it picks up on the point that the Chair was going to make, and which I made, about the memorandum of understanding.

I will go in to some detail around some of the worries that I have, which have been raised with me lately at both constituency and regional level. Public-sector pay is one. I know that a 1% pay rise equates to about £8 million. I hope that I am right; this is recorded in Hansard. That is hard-earned money going back into the hands of hard-working people, who then spend money in the economy. They are taxed on it, so that actually helps the system. Money, and the spending of it, makes the world go round, so it is very important that public-sector pay gets to an appropriate and comparable level. If you do not, market forces come in to play; people will move away and do not engage with the Civil Service, and it will not recruit. That is going to be a massive issue in the future. We already know that we have an ageing workforce in our Civil Service. That really needs to be addressed. One way of addressing that is through apprenticeship schemes for all areas of our Civil Service, especially our skills. I ask the Minister to consider greatly how we can reform the recruitment process in the Civil Service to ensure that the skills are there, the people are there and the pay is there for the appropriate level of skill in our Civil Service.

I had a meeting last week with a developer in my constituency who told me that, even though he has planning permission for apartments, which are badly needed in the area in which he is going to build, he cannot get a connection for sewerage. That is another massive issue that the Assembly really has not dealt with at any time. Just because we cannot see the pipes underneath our ground does not mean that they are not breaking down, that they are not becoming older and decrepit and that they are able to do the function that we ask them to do. There has to be massive investment in our water and sewerage systems. The point that I made yesterday was that just placing more money into NI Water's hands, or just raising more capital and revenue through water charges, simply will not cut it; basically, you are flushing money down the drain. We need to reform the system that operates and spends that money every day. We have never grappled with that, but we need to because, ultimately, the problem is not going to go away; it is only going to get worse. Just because we cannot see the pipes underneath the ground does not mean that they are not there and that the problem is not there.

Look at Health. I had a meeting with the Northern Trust only last week. My colleague Pam Cameron was also at the meeting. We saw very clearly the impact and the positive effect of the supply money that the DUP was able to get from the Government. The way the money is being spent in the Northern Trust is very good; it has helped with things like healthcare and waiting lists. However, that money is limited; it is going to come to an end. It is very important that we identify the schemes put in place by the confidence-and-supply money that have worked well and that we try to make sure that those are funded continually, right until we solve the problems in our health system.

11.00 am

Again, we need to look at our health system and the reforms that need to take place, because — and this was raised yesterday by my colleague Christopher Stalford, in relation to 50% of our budget going to health — if we continue to do the things that we are doing, that percentage will only increase. If it only increases without any reform, we are going to struggle everywhere, not just in health but in every Department. We are going to jam the fiscal system to the point where it cannot operate.

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

Housing is another massive issue that we must face. Are we building enough houses? Absolutely not. Are we looking after the current stock that we have? Absolutely not. Look at how many times cycle schemes and other schemes for improving houses, such as window schemes and roofing schemes, have been delayed. How many times have we, as MLAs, been given a commitment that a scheme is going to happen in June, yet it is still to start by June of the next year? That needs to be resolved, and it is purely down to finance.

Reform is also needed in housing. We need to give the Housing Executive the tools that it requires to function appropriately; the debt issue, which is massive, needs to be resolved; and the way our housing associations work and how they can build houses needs to be reformed. The problems all pile on top of each other. We cannot have a policy to build 20,000 new homes, which is a lovely target and policy, when we do not have the sewerage system in place to accommodate that build. That is why we need a collective Executive that can take a panoramic view when making a decision, which the Assembly and the Committees can scrutinise properly.

Look at our infrastructure. We hear the Minister shouting all the time when she is here about the potholes and the street lights, and she is absolutely right. We need to ensure that our streets are safe, that our roads are traffic-worthy and that our cars are roadworthy with regard to the MOT system. We must ensure that the street lights are on because, if they are not, it impacts greatly on elderly folk. There is absolutely no doubt about it; if we want to get elderly folk out and about and more active, street lighting is a massive issue for them.

I could list a lot of things that are going wrong with the place, and I realise and admit that I am not giving many solutions. It is the responsibility of this Assembly to consider solutions at Committee level and help the Executive to achieve the goals that we need them to set. I give a commitment to the Finance Minister to work with him in the Committee. I hope that the Committee, as a collective, will do this too — support him when there are tough decisions to be made and not play politics, as we have done in the past, with decisions that need to be made. Ultimately, if we do not make decisions, our people and our families are going to end up having worse lives. That is basically the point.

I look forward to seeing the Budget Bill passed, I look forward to seeing the spring Estimates,

and I look forward to the new Budget that the Minister will table once he has received information and a drawdown from the Exchequer when it launches its Budget on 11 March. The Minister made a decision yesterday about delaying that process. That process is the right one to have, and a Budget Bill should be brought forward after we find out from the Exchequer what we are getting. He talked about the end of March, and he has a very fine window of time in which to bring it, because there are all sorts of regulatory and mechanical fixtures at play. So, he is probably left with only the last Monday and Tuesday of March to bring it. Again, we need that as quickly as possible.

I also look forward to the day when the new process starts, and it should start very soon — no later than April, the start of the new financial year — where we are working on a Budget for the next year. It will be very important to bring that information to the Finance Committee as soon as possible, so that we can inject our thought processes and other Committees can inject their thought processes into that mix, so that, when a draft Budget is formed and launched to the Committee in September, hopefully, before it goes out to consultation, there will be a Budget that is nearly there, is fit for purpose and has all the requirements that we need moving forward. The public would then have their say in the public consultation, which should be meaningful. In itself, the process of this regional Assembly going out to consultation on a Budget is unique and, I believe, quite healthy. That would take place and inform the Budget, so that what we have in December and January is something that is fit for purpose and robust, with everybody having been injected into that psyche and that mindset to produce a Budget that helps our people moving forward.

I say all that in hope, because I must put on record again that the previous Sinn Féin Finance Minister failed to bring forward a draft Budget in September. All the Committees were screaming for that Budget, and it did not come in September. It did not come in October or November or December or January. That left this place and the Civil Service in a very bad place, and I hope never, ever to return to a place like that again.

The other point I will make is this.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened to him yesterday, and I hear him saying the same thing today, which will probably be the case with a lot of Members. The Member referred to the fact that no Budget Bill was brought forward, but he failed to explain why. I heard him and his colleague yesterday

refer to RHI as a "botched boiler scheme". Given the fact that there were allegations leading to corruption at the heart of government and the fact that public money was under such scrutiny by the public and other Committee members, will the Member perhaps elaborate on why the Budget Bill could not be brought forward, please?

Mr Frew: That is quite extraordinary. I thank the Member for her contribution and interjection, but to now suggest that the Sinn Féin Finance Minister did not bring forward a Budget in September because of RHI is quite incredulous. That is the first I have heard that, and I must say that I am confused. The party opposite me is in denial.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to move back to the principles of the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Frew: Yes, I will. The Budget Bill is very clear. It is facts and figures, and we need to make sure —.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I am glad that he is not playing politics on the issue, as he said that we should not do that. I cannot help but concur with most of what the Member said yesterday and has repeated today, but I cannot help feeling like Bobby Ewing having woken up to find the past 10 years have been a dream, with the DUP bearing no responsibility whatsoever for anything that has happened or has not happened during that time.

Coming back to the point: the Member says that we hope to be in a better position next year and have a draft Budget by September for the following year and that that is how it will be fit for purpose. Will the Member agree that, for the Budget to be really fit for purpose, we should be seeing a draft Budget in September for the next two or three years and we should be moving to multi-year budgeting? Will he agree that, when we are doing a yearly Budget cycle, there is no way that it can ever be truly fit for purpose?

Mr Frew: The Member makes an excellent contribution on that point. We want to get to a place where we have multi-year Budgets. It is the only way to go in this place, and it will allow flexibility, I am sure, in the way that we spend money. There is a pressure when we do not have money, but there is also a pressure when we have too much money in a Department and it cannot be spent on time and has to go into the monitoring rounds. The more that we have flexibility and the more that we have foresight, it

is a very good thing. I commend the Member for making that point.

I also look forward to the day when the SDLP votes for a Budget in this place, given that it had no real responsibility for it before.

Mr Durkan: We look forward to one that is fit for purpose.

Mr Frew: I will give way to the Member again if he wants to come in. There is no problem there.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind Members to come back to the principles of the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Buckley: As a Back-Bench Member, I find that there is nothing more frustrating than watching how, at the end of a Budget cycle, Departments — in particular, the Department for Infrastructure — bid for money and roll out that use of finite resource on schemes that are not priority issues, whether at a constituency or regional level. Does the Member concur with that?

Mr Frew: The Member makes a very good point. We have to get back to basics. All MLAs have a wish list as long as their arm, and we would all love to have it funded, but we cannot fund everything. The Budget Bill makes it clear that we cannot fund everything. We can all demand that our wish lists be put on a Budget line, and we can all have red lines turning into Budget lines, but it will not help our people. It will not help our people when our services are struggling, our health service is crumbling, and the infrastructure below our feet is crumbling. We really need to get back to basics and prioritise what we spend our money on.

The point that I wanted to make before I was interrupted by all those interventions — I thank Members for the interventions, and welcome them, because that is how we get the most out of our debates — is that we have had a draft Programme for Government for the last three years. It was agreed in draft form by the Executive, and not once have I seen a Budget Bill refer to the priorities of that Programme for Government.

The Programme for Government will work only if it is populated with cash. Budgets will work in tandem with the Programme for Government only if it is overlapped and overlaid. I do not see that happening. I do not see where you can relate and attribute money in the Budget Bill to

the draft Programme for Government. The Executive may well produce a new draft Programme for Government. That is all well and good, and, hopefully, it will not be much different from the goals, outputs and indicators that were set out in the previous one. However, until we have money alongside a Budget line going to each outcome, I do not see how the two can walk down the path together. I ask the Minister to consider not only how we finance the Programme for Government but how we scrutinise it. If money goes to goals that the Programme for Government has set, which the Executive agree to, how do we ensure that those goals are being financed appropriately? That needs to happen. It does not matter whether we agree with some of the outcomes in the Programme for Government. They will be agreed, and we will have to move forward in that way. We can always complain and debate, but unless we have money on the lines going to each of those goals, they will just not happen.

My plea today is to get back to basics. Let us fix the things that need to be fixed. We all know what they are. Let us have the political will and the courage to make those things right and to reform them. Some of these systems have been in place for decades, and they need to change. They are not fit for purpose. That will take funding, which, if it goes to the right places to make the necessary reforms, will not only make savings for our people but make their lives better. That is where we need to be. Surely that is where the Assembly and the Executive, which make the decisions, need to be.

I applaud the Minister for bringing the Bill forward, and I congratulate his staff. I am sure that the civil servants in the Department of Finance have had it tough over the last three years. In fact, I know that they have had it tough. I commend them for their speed in getting this all in place as soon as the Assembly was up and running. Of course, the Departments were not just faced with the policies that they had to devise for this place but have had to answer all the ministerial questions from MLAs and all that. They have had to ramp up very quickly in the last month, for which I commend them. It is important that they get up to speed as quickly as possible. I wish them all the best in the two-pronged approach — in fact, the three-pronged approach — in the next financial year not only in producing a Budget very soon after the Chancellor's Budget but in making the conditions right for a draft Budget in September, which the Finance Committee will then be able to scrutinise and go to consultation on.

11.15 am

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I will speak, first, as Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. As Members will be aware, the Department for the Economy has a key role in driving forward prosperity, improving skills and ensuring that people can meet the challenges of new industries and jobs that may not yet exist. The Committee has had a number of briefings on the Department's budget, and members have now got to grips with the funding that is available to the Department in the next financial year and the pressures that, as yet, have not been funded. A LeasCheann Comhairle, you, the Minister and other Members will be glad to hear that I do not intend simply to regurgitate the highlights of the Economy Department's budget. Instead, I want to speak about vision. I want to share how its budget is a key ingredient in making a better and more sustainable future for all.

The Department for the Economy's remit, like that of other Departments, is wide and subject to a range of demands. It extends to further and higher education, skills, careers, energy, tourism and workers' rights. The Department will, of course, be a key player in the management of Brexit. Many of the plans in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document depend on the Economy Department for their development and realisation. It, therefore, seems obvious that funding for the Department should be prioritised. The Committee heard with concern about the scale of unfunded inescapable and high-priority pressures — some £110 million — that the Department will carry into the new financial year. Of course, other Departments carry even bigger pressures, and we must continue to invest in health and education, which are close to people's hearts. The Committee does not disagree with that.

However, in a context of limited resources, funds must be targeted where they do most good and provide the most benefit. The Department for the Economy will produce strategies for industry, tourism, energy, careers, skills and a host of other areas, which will help to develop and expand our economy. The Department's budget was reduced by £46.2 million in 2016-17 and £30.3 million in 2017-18. It flatlined in 2018-19 and 2019-2020. Pressures that require funding include further education, EU exit preparation, city deals, energy and those that are linked to upskilling to make the economy more productive, competitive and sustainable. In New Decade, New Approach, the Executive highlight their plans to invest for the future, improve

productivity, seek new trading opportunities post the EU exit and develop a regionally balanced economy with opportunities for all. There is also a promise to ensure that there is the right mix of skills for a thriving economy. Delivery of those will require a properly funded Department for the Economy.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document also highlights that the Executive will prioritise the economic potential offered by the various city deals. Additionally, there are plans to bring more events here, like the Open championship, to boost tourism, as well as plans to develop an enhanced approach to careers advice, the curriculum, training and apprenticeships. All of that must be properly funded. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document also highlights that a priority for the forthcoming PFG will be:

"creating good jobs and protecting workers' rights."

Funding will be required for that, too. On the proposed expansion of student numbers at Ulster University's Magee campus, the 'New Decade, New Approach' document states:

"The Executive will bring forward proposals for the development and expansion of the UU campus at Magee College, including the necessary increase in maximum student numbers to realise the 10,000 student campus target and a Graduate Entry Medical School."

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document also makes commitments to tackle climate change. Those will fall to the Economy Department, as will action on workers' rights. That amounts to quite an agenda of work for a Department that goes into the new financial year with a substantial funding gap. The Committee supports the ambition of the Economy Minister and the Executive more widely. However, it will be the Committee's job to ensure that there is delivery on the commitments made. Members are up for that job, and the Committee looks forward to working with the Minister on the delivery of this worthy agenda on the back of a good budget outcome for the Department.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on the economy and climate action. I will continue on the theme of a vision for the future. The economy and climate action are two priority areas that need coordinated investment to drive economic growth and productivity while reducing carbon emissions. However, we are faced with the consequences

of a decade of Tory austerity. We are also in the midst of dealing with, and we will undoubtedly have to continue to deal with for many years to come, the entirely negative consequences of an unwanted and unnecessary Brexit. People here voted to reject Brexit, a rejection that has been reiterated on a number of occasions since June 2016.

Last week saw the start of the negative outworkings of Brexit, with immigration proposals that show once again that the British Government have no regard for our economy or unique circumstances. They completely ignored the opinions and views of business leaders here, who engaged constructively and in good faith, and they have proposed instead a system that is a threat to many sectors of our economy, including the hospitality, agri-food, care and tourism sectors. For our part, as a party, we will continue to stand up for the best interests of Ireland, North and South, and make the case for our economy, businesses and communities.

The type of budgetary pressures that I outlined for the Department for the Economy, are, of course, reflected across the Executive. The British and Irish Governments produced the 'New Decade, New Approach' document following several months of negotiations for which the watchwords were "credible" and "sustainable". Time and again, Sinn Féin and other parties outlined that to be credible and sustainable the institutions required proper financing. The immediate rolling back on the costed and negotiated budgetary commitments in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document by the British Government represents incredible bad faith and hinders the Executive's ability to deliver effective and high-quality public services. I have no doubt that the Finance Minister will continue to impress upon the British Government and Treasury the urgent need for them to fulfil their financial obligations.

We need a new economic strategy that promotes good jobs and ensures regional balance while decarbonising our economy and addressing long-term low productivity. Low productivity is a fundamental cause of this region's economic underperformance, and it must be tackled head-on. That means investing in skills on a regionally balanced basis, supporting entrepreneurship, addressing the structural barriers that discourage women from reaching their economic potential and directing resources on the basis of objective need. It means upholding workers' rights and protections and putting an end to casualisation practices, including precarious work and zero-hour contracts. We need to value and empower the most important element of our economy,

which is our people, and ensure that our young people have opportunities to aspire to.

It means investing in infrastructure to address the decades of regional imbalance and ensure the connectedness of our rural communities. A green new deal is a Programme for Government commitment in New Decade, New Approach. It must be at the core of the economic strategy to help effectively tackle the climate emergency through a just transition to a net zero carbon society. Promoting green skills development, including the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce, must be a priority. We need a new energy strategy that enables the transition to a net zero carbon society with obligations and incentives that must include support for retrofitting and, importantly, is based on the principles of a just transition and does not punish those who are least able to afford it.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with her about the energy strategy; it is very important. Is she concerned, as I am, with the current investigation by the Utility Regulator on the independence and governance of SONI and how that organisation has been stripped of capacity and leadership, which could well undermine any energy strategy going forward? We actually really need to fix SONI in order to get the most out of any energy strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before the Member responds, let me say that I am not quite sure how that relates to the Budget Bill. The Member can respond to this as she sees fit.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention, and we will, of course, await the Utility Regulator's response on that.

The new economic strategy, along with tackling the climate emergency and mitigating the impact of Brexit, requires targeted investment. However, while we continue to lack the fiscal powers to effectively balance our own budget, we continue to be constrained in our ability to invest adequately and most effectively. I welcome the Finance Minister's commitment to set up a commission to explore the devolution of fiscal powers. We also need to see greater cooperation across the island of Ireland to strengthen our closely interlinked and interdependent economy and to make best use of our public services in both jurisdictions. We need to urgently facilitate the discussion on our constitutional future. It is certainly my clear view that a new, agreed Ireland is the best context within which to grow our economy and develop our society, ending unnecessary duplication

and planning to deliver public services in education, further and higher —

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. A couple of times in her contribution she mentioned the need for legislation and forward thinking to tackle the climate emergency. I have yet to hear her mention public transport, namely Translink. Does she not see a direct contradiction in the Assembly a couple of weeks ago declaring a climate emergency yet organisations such as Translink being on the brink of collapse?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. I did say that we need to invest in infrastructure as well. It is important that we do that in a regionally balanced way and in a way that supports addressing net-zero carbon targets.

As I was saying, we need to end unnecessary duplication. We need to plan in order to deliver our public services in education, further and higher education, health, housing and everything else across the island, ensuring better regional balance.

Of course, a united Ireland also offers us a pathway back to the European Union and a solution to many of the problems presented in the near and longer term by Brexit. Tackling the climate emergency effectively requires a holistic, all-Ireland approach, because the environment recognises no borders. We have the opportunity to rebalance and reshape our economy on the basis of a fair and just transition, with full fiscal autonomy and sovereignty to plan a fully-integrated all-Ireland economy and society. We should take it.

I support the Minister's motion to give our Departments the ability to spend in advance of a new Budget next month.

Mr McGrath: I spoke yesterday on the Supplementary Estimates in my capacity as Chair of the Executive Office Committee. I mentioned the importance of issues such as the historical institutional abuse payments to victims, payments to victims and survivors of the Troubles, the need to prepare this place for the way forward in the light of Brexit, and how we fund our offices that will sell Northern Ireland and promote it.

Those are key financial asks for the Executive Office, and they must be given due consideration. I hope that the Budget under consideration reflects those needs and priorities.

However, I want to speak about how this Budget will impact on the residents of South Down and to illustrate some of the multitude of needs felt most acutely by the people of my constituency. I welcome the fact that, nearly four years after being elected an MLA, I have the opportunity to participate in a Budget debate on behalf of the people of South Down, whom I represent.

A quick look at the Budget Bill as it stands shows that the request is for a spend of about £8 billion from the Consolidated Fund, use of resources of £9 billion and some borrowing of in and around £4 billion. Given the amounts of money that we are talking about, I have some concern that the process here is so quick and short that the scrutiny that we can give to the Bill is minimal. Circumstances have led us here, but this is a massive public spend, and we are not getting the opportunity to scrutinise it properly and have a good, proper discussion about priorities.

With the Vote on Account, where 45% of a Department's budget is given approval, there is a fear that we fall into the trap of simply doing what was done last year. By the time the Budget is set, half of the money is spent, and, as a result, we then cannot set many priorities. I echo the remarks of my colleague from Foyle Mark Durkan about how we need to look forward and deliver two- and three-year Budgets, whereby real change can be effected, because there will not be massive changes made midway through the process.

Budgets feed through to community groups. I remember a community group being given six months' worth of funding and then being told at the end of that time that its funding was being halved. That meant that there was very little money left for it to continue for the rest of that year. That was a predicament. Money had to be found for the group. Those are some of the problems that we have with short-term Budgets. We are constantly voting for just 45% of our money, after a very quick debate that does not allow for proper scrutiny.

11.30 am

We are all too aware of the budget cuts that have left our public services and staff in terrible financial hardship. I would like to put names and faces to those who have been affected and those who could benefit from the Budget having a positive impact. We cannot really say anything about the fact that these institutions were felled for three and a half years. That has left portfolios abandoned, vital projects shelved and, most shamefully, public trust in elected

officials decimated. Now is the time to prove that these institutions can work and that they will deliver for the public.

Nowhere is that illustrated more clearly than in our health service. Almost as soon as the institutions were restored, the Health Minister found himself having to address the issue of pay parity and staffing levels for our healthcare workers. We know that those front-line members of staff go over and beyond the call of duty on a daily basis, and their work was repaid by an abuse of their basic rights as staff by previous Health Ministers. Pay parity was achieved, but we can do more. Community-led initiatives and service providers are blazing the trail with new and innovative means of picking up the pieces following the cuts. I think of the great work that is being done, on a smaller scale, in the ADHD Hub in Newcastle, in my South Down constituency. The hub offers a haven for children and families affected by ADHD. It offers a place of welcome and understanding and a place where those living with ADHD can develop their skills and find their talents, which they may not have considered before. Its work has been publicised far and wide, as far as America. People ask why they cannot have that type of provision and why they do not have such a space in their town. However, the hub suffers due to a lack of funding. In spite of that, it powers on with its work and fundraises where it can. It makes me think that the Budget should reflect that type of work and the funding should get right down to ground level to support such initiatives in delivering the work that they do.

I think also of hospital services such as the Downe Hospital. It was a result of community activism and political will with leadership and cohesion of effort and shows what we can achieve. The SDLP has stood shoulder to shoulder with them as part of that process. Five years ago, tens of thousands of people — activists — took to the street to speak with one voice to save the Downe from budget cuts. That point was heard and adhered to, but today the Downe continues to suffer as a result of a lack of investment. I would like to see the Budget being able to reflect some of the priorities that people are asking for in that hospital. There is a need for investment in a 24-hour accident and emergency department and in the provision of a permanent MRI scanner. Those services cannot be provided because of the lack of funding and because of the difficult funding mechanism that the Budget will continue with. That is why we would like to see a change to it.

Teams in our Ambulance Service work tirelessly in their work, but the service needs

investment. I would like to see the Budget reflecting the priority that the community places on ambulance services. Category A calls are supposed to be responded to within eight minutes. That is grand if you live in a city, but I live in a rural constituency where sometimes people have to wait for 75 minutes for a response to a category A call. That has resulted in the death of constituents. It is a direct result of the funding mechanisms that have been put in place. We need to see changes for that, going forward, and I would like to see the Budget take that as a priority and reflect that.

Education is another area that has suffered as a result of the Budgets that we have had in the past. We now have an opportunity, in this Budget, to address that. The Education Minister has, once again, found the issue of teachers' pay on his desk. This has not been previously —

Ms Dillon: I appreciate the Member taking the intervention. On that point, I am glad that the Member across the way, my colleague on the Justice Committee, has finally come to the realisation of the need to fund our public servants, because, in the previous Executive, the Education Minister would not give the teachers even a 1% pay rise because they had the nerve to say that it was not enough. Going forward, we need to ensure that that same Education Minister addresses teachers' pay, because it is a massive issue. Those people give a lot of goodwill. They work, as you said about the health workers, over and above their hours and go way beyond what is expected of them, and it is time that they were paid for that.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for her intervention. I suppose that there is a two-pronged approach to that. Obviously, if we had more money, we would be able to address those issues, and that would be good, proper and right. However, it is also about how we manage our money — that is the challenge that the Finance Minister is dealing with — and how that money is rolled out and invested. If we do not invest in the workforce, it will be a difficult area to manage. Teachers have clearly articulated their needs, and it is important that we address them.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. The point is well made that we must invest in our people, but we should also stop spending money on antiquated services and systems that cost us money. Education is one example, given that there are so many sectors to pay for. We should get to the point where we have the

money at hand in order to invest in our people in that regard.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. Again, as part of NDNA, we looked at that, and most of the parties agreed that there needs to be some sort of restructuring that can properly be funded by the Department and that Budgets such as this better reflect the needs on the ground. When we have all-party support for something, it should quickly become a priority because it is likely to be achieved. Those discussions have taken place as part of the talks process, and they should be delivered as quickly as possible.

When we look at how the Budgets and monitoring round funding have been used, we see that monitoring rounds use money on a very short-term basis because they are not part of a proper Budget. I know that, in my area, in South Down, incredible early years work is being done by Knockevin Special School. It is the result of another community-driven initiative and is an illustration of what can be achieved when people work together. There has been a recent announcement of £10 million of additional money for special education needs. However, that money is not going into providing additional spaces in classrooms, which is actually one of the things that would deal best with the needs out there. I am sure that every MLA has people coming into their constituency office, saying that their children need to be in a special school but the places are not available for them. We need a Budget that reflects that and provides extra places. I fear that we are using the monitoring rounds to put a sticking plaster on a problem, rather than using the Budgets to find a proper, thought-out and well-resourced way of dealing with the issues. Certainly, in education and special needs education, the issue of additional places comes up again and again. I would like to see the Budget being able to provide additional places, where that is possible.

There are other initiatives that the Budget could reflect that would help our schools as well. In my constituency, Teconnaught Cross Community Pre School is currently based in an old building. It spends an average of £200 per month on heating alone, and that is not sustainable. The budget currently allocated to the school just about covers the wages and the daily running costs. With an increased budget, the school could diversify and install renewable means of heating such as solar panels. Why do we not consider incentivising such renewable measures for schools? Where better to get children to learn about green thinking and sustainable energy than in the classroom and in

their school. I think that the Budget should reflect ways of helping schools to reduce their bills and to make better use of their budgets in the classroom for the pupil, rather than on heating old buildings, on which literally hundreds and hundreds of pounds are spent every month.

We have to look at the Budget going forward and then think about the past decisions that have been taken but have never materialised. I know, for example, that Our Lady and St Patrick Primary School in Downpatrick was formed after two primary schools were brought together into one old building, with the promise that the other site would be cleared for a new build. That was nearly 10 years ago, and they still wait. Their school is now in an old convent girls' school building that was previously the old boys' secondary school in the town. We do not just hand-me-down clothes in our area; we do hand-me-down school buildings. The promise was there for an additional building, but it has never materialised, and here we go into another Budget, potentially —.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

Ms S Bradley: May I add to that list St Louis Grammar School in South Down, which has exactly the same problem?

Mr McGrath: Again, that is a recurring theme that we want Budgets to reflect. Unfortunately, however, we are not getting the opportunity or the scrutiny to be able to discuss those types of initiative. I hope that future Budget processes will allow us to address them.

Infrastructure was a particular casualty of the failings of these institutions three and a half years ago and, indeed, the actions of previous Ministers, some of whom stand beside potholes and uneven road surfaces now for photos, yet they were the very ones who slashed the budget to repair them. That, certainly, is a lesson in the Stormont irony that the public often miss because of the spin process.

On assuming her post as Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon has been faced with another abandoned portfolio and the result of it. She has had to address the ramifications of shelved projects, a crisis in MOT centres, a public transport system in dire straits, slashed budgets for street lights and pothole repairs and much more. She has responded most ably to all of that with a very limited and finite budget. However, were a radically larger infrastructure

budget to be allocated, there would be far better days ahead for us all.

Given that the current UK Prime Minister recently announced HS2, which will cost upwards of £89 billion, it is only just and fair that the North receives its fair share under Barnett consequential. That could be used to radically transform our society. Of course, it could be used to ensure that our response to street lights and potholes is not just the patch jobs that we all see but one that gives people effective and energy-efficient street lighting and roads that can be driven over without breaking suspension springs or getting a flat tyre. That will resonate particularly with the residents of Saul Road in Downpatrick, given the amount of damage that is done to cars there.

Radical infrastructure investment can go much further and can act as a catalyst for much more. Investing in the infrastructure of South Down, in key targeted areas such as Downpatrick, would allow the product of St Patrick to be taken seriously and developed. Investing in the jewel of the tourism crown that is Newcastle would allow the tourist and hospitality sector to flourish and show the people of the North that our hospitality sector extends far beyond Belfast and Portrush — which is, of course, to mean no offence to either of those places. Investing in the connecting areas, such as Drumaness, Loughinisland, Spa, Castlewellan, Leitrim and Kilcoo, will allow people to enjoy all of the natural sites and landscapes that go with them. I want to see investment and budgets for additional picnic areas where seats are available for families to enjoy everything around them. It all boils down to investment in our infrastructure. If we invest in people, we can provide jobs and security.

We also have key maritime infrastructural projects that need to be reflected in this Budget and future Budgets. The harbours at the fishing ports of Kilkeel and Ardglass in South Down have reached their capacity, and, without further government investment, they will stall and their development will be prevented. The concern is that people will go elsewhere if they cannot see scope for development in the existing provision. It is critical that the harbour in Ardglass is deepened and that there are more mooring spaces for boats. Currently, some of the boats are stuck in the harbour when the tide goes out. Some boats are tethered together as there are no more spaces available, which means that fishermen have the additional peril of having to climb over boats to land their catch. That practice is a health and safety risk that would not be acceptable in any other place, so why should it be acceptable

here? I hope that the Budget, in the year ahead, will provide funding that will reflect the needs that there are.

11.45 am

Investing in our natural environment, such as the new build at Our Lady and St Patrick's, is no longer optional. For the sake of current and future generations, we must invest in this, and invest substantially. Will we see this reflected in the Budget in the months ahead?

Also — I am coming near the end — there is climate change, which is an undeniable and irrefutable fact, although some would question that. With rising sea levels, there is coastal erosion. These matters need to concern each of us so that our natural landscape can be enjoyed by all, with houses also protected. I hope that, in the Budget lines that are being established, there will be finance to address those concerns.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened intently to the many projects that the Member outlined as being in need of investment. Does he agree with the sentiment of my colleague Mr Frew that, in light of the current budgetary conditions, it is essential that we prioritise issues of national and regional concern?

Mr McGrath: Yes, indeed — absolutely — but one leads to the other. If we constantly do regional, those who pay their rates and taxes and who live in constituencies need to have their say. I am probably asking for a little indulgence and latitude on the basis that this is the first time that I have had an opportunity to raise issues on behalf of constituents in four years, so there is quite a lot that I am referring to for this one Budget.

It would be wrong of me if I did not speak about one regional issue: youth services. It is critical to invest in the Youth Service. It provides opportunities for young people who would otherwise not get to participate in structured activities or educational outcomes. For many who get involved in those projects, it is an opportunity to shine. It can create a different outcome and direction for them in their lives. In the Education budget, I would like consideration to be given at all times to the Youth Service and additional resources. We need to be able to help our young people.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I declare an interest as a member of the Scout Association. Does the Member agree that

it is important that, when we discuss the issue that he just raised, there is a joined-up-ness between the Education Authority and the Department — indeed, across government and local government — and that the Youth Service works closely with the national state uniformed organisations to ensure that there is no duplication and wastage?

Mr McGrath: The 'Priorities for Youth' document, which was produced seven or eight years ago, contains that type of direction: that there should not be duplication. In fact, where the voluntary service is doing the delivery, it should be given priority. That should be enshrined. Of course, the voluntary sector needs to be funded, and the Budget needs to reflect that. It is important that youth services are funded as needed.

As I stated, the Budget for the period ahead is 45% of last year's Budget. I want to end where I started: if we do not have a new approach to the Budget and the Budget process, we will simply come in here and get a few hours to look at the spend of £20 billion and all the priorities for the year ahead. I certainly hope that, once the Budget process is concluded, we can move quickly into the new process and all have our say. We can give our lists, as I have done, in Committees and other places, but we must certainly do what we can for people out there. They want us in here fighting on their behalf for services in their community and the Budget that reflects those.

Mr Nesbitt: As a member of the Committee for the Executive Office, I intend to focus my remarks largely on that part of the Budget Bill. It is a Budget Bill that, I understand, the Ulster Unionist Party will support, albeit with reservations, which I will leave to my party leader to expand on later.

As was said, this is day two of our deliberations on matters budgetary. At the risk of turning this into a rather dull rugby match where the two full backs pump the ball backwards and forwards, I want to return to the Minister's remarks in his concluding address last night, because they are pertinent to the Budget Bill. The Minister seemed to take exception to my references to the cost of the North/South Ministerial Council. In fact, he seemed to suggest that when unionism has nothing else to say, we simply pick on North/South cooperation. The Minister has picked on the wrong unionist here. I do not expect him to hang on my every word, particularly those uttered outside the Chamber, but I assure him that I am well on record as supporting North/South cooperation.

In fact, before I entered politics, I had the pleasure of working closely with the late, great Sir George Quigley, the man who came up with the idea of an eastern seaboard North/South economic corridor. I often heard him tell a story, which may have been apocryphal, about a man from this jurisdiction who manufactured medical bandages. He spent half his life on the road trying to sell them. He went to Scotland, England, Wales and continental Europe. His life was tortured as he looked for sales opportunities. One day, Sir George asked him how he fared in the Republic of Ireland. His surprising response was that he had never crossed the border. With Sir George's encouragement, he did, and he did so well in the Republic that he was able to spend nights at home, put the suitcase back in the attic and buy himself a new car. That is the sort of work that I support from InterTradelreland, and it has a lot more to do to spread cooperation. Two modern areas on which I support North/South cooperation are the coronavirus and climate emergency. Let me make it clear to the Minister: I support spending on the North/South Ministerial Council, but I just regret that it has not been fully functional because these institutions were not functional over the last three years.

The Minister also wanted to highlight the negative impact of Tory austerity on our budgets and, consequently, our economy. That is fair enough. He has made that point before, and his party makes it at every opportunity. I will just balance that by saying that, in my lifetime, the acts of greatest austerity that most impacted on our economy were IRA bombs. I declare an interest that, on 25 January 1973, the IRA blew up A Nesbitt and Co Ltd. A Nesbitt was my paternal grandfather, Alfred, who set up a linen business in the centre of Belfast and then handed it over to his two sons, my father and my uncle Jack. For the first 15 years of my life, I was expected to go on to become the third-generation Nesbitt to run that business. However, like David versus Goliath, that little incendiary bomb took on the many, many tons of linen bails and won quite easily. Maybe, Tyson Fury-like, it was no contest. If the Minister does not like my politics and does not like me being here in the Chamber, he knows who to speak to. On a more positive note, the Minister agreed with me that we should switch from a dependency culture to a prosperity agenda. I hope that we can use this Budget to do that, and I will return to that theme in a moment.

I set these two principles against the Budget: is there enough money, and is the money being used to deliver what we expect it to achieve? Is

there enough money for the Executive Office? The answer appears to be no, going by our last briefing from TEO officials. The baseline is £55.047 million, but this adds a pressure of £4.974 million. In other words, the officials believe that the budget is about 9% short. You will agree that 9% is a serious figure, but it only scratches the surface of the problems. The problems are the historical institutional abuse inquiry, the victims' pension and EU future relations.

As the officials made clear, it is impossible to know how much money we need to budget for the historical institutional abuse inquiry and redress. I believe that it is between £25 million and £60 million for the next financial year, but we cannot nail it down because there are too many variables. We do not know, for example, how many victims remain. We do not know how many will come forward. We do not know how many will be able to provide sufficient proof to enable them to enter the redress scheme. Finally, we do not know how much money the redress panel will award them. Those are the four variables that officials informed us of last week, but I will add this as a very important fifth: we do not know how much money we will be able to recover from the bodies that ran the institutions in which the abuse occurred.

I have heard a commitment from various Ministers and officials that they will pursue these bodies and say, "You must contribute to the redress, but we will go up front, as an Executive and an Assembly, in providing the money to redress and then, at a later stage, try to recoup it". I suggest to the Minister that we do it rather differently. We know who the bodies are. Why not ask them to now deposit a refundable sum of money that we can draw upon, and, if that sum exceeds their liabilities, when it is all done and dusted, we will return the balance? Why should our population suffer because we are dipping into our own coffers before trying to recoup money from these bodies when we should, in my opinion, be approaching them directly in advance and building a pool of money from which we will take justified sums? As I say, if there is a surplus at the end, we will hand it back because it will be a refundable deposit.

The second issue is the victims' pension, and, once again, there are variables. We do not know how many people will come forward, and, therefore, costs for the next financial year are estimated at between £25 million and £60 million. That is beyond the baseline, so suddenly we are adding up a very significant sum of money. The Executive Office has a baseline of £55 million, but it has further

pressures of £120 million, so it actually needs about £175 million. How does the Minister intend to deal with that very tricky situation?

Ms Dillon: Thank you. I appreciate you giving way. Will you not agree with me that the victims' pension legislation was brought forward by the British Government, that the guidelines were given by the British Government and that the British Government should, therefore, fund it? They expect the Executive to fund it and the Executive to implement it even though they had absolutely no say in how the legislation was arrived at.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her intervention, and I applaud her work in trying to secure the pension for the victims. I know that she and others among the five main parties and, indeed, the Green Party all worked collaboratively in trying to agree a system. When she says that this was brought forward without any input from the Members of the Assembly, I disagree. I think we did some very good work, although I acknowledge that the final legislation was passed in Westminster. Should we ask Westminster to contribute? Absolutely.

I have huge concerns about how we go forward, and I think the Minister spoke yesterday about going back to Treasury with a begging bowl. We should go to Treasury whenever we have a special case, and, when it comes to legacy issues, we obviously have a special case that does not apply in Scotland, Wales or any of the English regions. We really need to be very careful going forward because, with the rise of English nationalism, they are looking at us much more closely, and, 26 years on from the ceasefires, I think that they are increasingly asking this question: why is Northern Ireland a special case?

I remind the Member that I was involved in the Stormont House talks. I will never forget the night before the then Prime Minister David Cameron was coming over. The five party leaders were called into a meeting by the then First Minister and deputy First Minister, Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness. We were given the shopping list of asks that was being presented to the Prime Minister the next morning, and we were all asked to address at least one of the issues. I picked mental health because that is an area that I campaign on, and it is also, of course, a legacy issue. In that document, I saw an ask for childcare, and I was concerned because, first of all, we had £12 million largely unspent and ring-fenced in our budgets for childcare, and, secondly, I did not see how that made us a special case. The

Prime Minister came, and, sight unseen, he went through the document, and the first thing he lit on was childcare. He asked this question: "Why have you got childcare needs that we do not have in inner London, Birmingham or Glasgow?" Nobody could answer the question because we do not.

We have the same childcare needs as inner London, Birmingham and Glasgow. Once again, we need to be careful, when we ask for additional moneys from Treasury, that we make a case that distinguishes us from any other region and country of the United Kingdom.

12.00 noon

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that we are really only a basket-case economy? We keep adding to the burden of our financial pressures by putting into budget lines wish lists, deadlines, red lines and other things that we all would like to fund without looking at historical spend and at functions and systems that are antiquated and not fit for purpose. That is what makes us a basket case.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am reluctant to agree that we are a basket case, because I am looking for hope. We need to look to the future, however.

The Budget will allocate money Department by Department: in other words, in silos. We have agreed previously that we are coming out of our silos and moving to an outcomes-based accountability form of government, which means cross-cutting. Simply put, previously, when we had educational underachievement, we looked to the Minister of Education and said, "That is your problem". We now recognise that healthier children do better in school, so we say to the Minister of Health, "It is your problem as well". We know that children in better housing are likely to do better in school, so we say to the Minister for Communities, "It is your problem too, so the three of you should get in the room and start working on it". It means cooperating on budgets, and that is where Steven Agnew's Children's Services Co-operation Act, which he brought in as a private Member, is so valuable.

A third issue that I want to mention relates to the Executive Office budget. To a certain extent, it takes us from the question of whether we have enough money to that of whether we use it properly. I refer to a budget for EU future relations. I quote the Executive Office's aim on

future relations, as presented to the Committee last week:

"TEO aims to ensure that the UK Government's negotiation strategy for leaving the EU is aware of, and informed by, a full understanding of the NI issues and implications at every stage."

We are looking at a border down the Irish Sea, so I think that we can conclude that the aim has been a catastrophic failure to date. The aim is not just to ensure that the UK Government are "aware of" our particular needs but to ensure that their strategy is "informed by" them. A border down the Irish Sea does not reflect the UK Government being informed in their strategy.

The points-based immigration system that the Home Office introduced last Tuesday does us no favours, not just over low-skilled labour. We have heard from Hospitality Ulster and the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium that the minimum wage of £25,600 is disastrous for us. No doubt the fishing industry and the agri-food sector would say the same. There is also now an issue with skilled labour. It turns out that there is a shortage occupations list. In other words, there is a list of occupations for which, the Government believe, there are insufficient numbers of appropriately qualified people to take the jobs. That applies in a number of sectors. Last week, I discovered that, although there is a UK-wide shortage occupations list, Scotland has a dedicated, Scotland-only shortage occupations list. Northern Ireland does not. Why not? It turns out that the points-based system that the Home Office brought in last week is based largely on a report from a group called the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). As early as May 2019, the MAC recommended that Wales and Northern Ireland draw up their own shortage occupation lists, but it appears that we have not. Once again, Northern Ireland appears to be the most affected region of the UK from Brexit but the least prepared. I acknowledge that it is not about giving the budget to our future relations division as much as it is about how it uses the money.

I agree with the Minister, and he agreed with me yesterday when I said that we needed a prosperity agenda. We need to use the Budget to best effect. Let us stop the begging-bowl culture of dependency with the Treasury. I think that the Minister acknowledged yesterday that those days are gone. People have read Sam McBride's book 'Burned' and understand that we took the attitude that non-block grant money and annually managed expenditure was free

money and we should fill our boots. We cannot do that any more; we will not be allowed to. This Budget is even more important than those in previous years, because the purse strings are being tightened. Let us have a prosperity agenda. We should use the money not just to make sure that our citizens have a few more quid in their back pocket, important as that is. Prosperity also means that they have a great sense of mental health and well-being, they wake up feeling good about themselves and with a sense of purpose in their lives and they go to bed with a sense of achievement after a day's work.

As I said to Mr Frew, it is important not just that we look at the budgets per Department but that we cooperate across Departments in a cross-cutting manner. To do that, we need a form of political maturity that we may not have seen over the last number of years. It is a maturity that says, "Once the votes are cast, we're no longer political opponents. Whether we like it or not, we're political partners". For the first time in five years, you have five parties in the Executive. What I expect, what my party expects and, I think, what the people out there expect is that, when those Ministers sit round that table and one says, "I've got a problem" and articulates it, a Minister from another party across the table might say, "Well, have you thought of this?", and the Minister with the problem says, "My word, that's a great idea. I wish I had thought of that. Let's do it". I am not sure that that was the case in previous Executives, and I would love to see it in the two years that remain to us.

We need common purpose. We need to make Northern Ireland work. I have never understood why the Minister's party has chosen to describe Northern Ireland as a "failed statelet". As the Minister is probably aware, the first rule of marketing is that, whatever you are trying to sell, make it easy to buy. If we are going to have a referendum — a border poll — in the Republic, what is attractive about saying to people down there, "We want you to put your hand in your pocket to the tune of, say, €2,000 per person per annum to buy a failed statelet"? That is not very attractive to me. Let us work to make Northern Ireland work, to make it a more attractive place.

The Budget will go with a draft Programme for Government that is based on outcomes; there is outcomes-based accountability. That idea was invented by a man called Mark Friedman, who wrote a book entitled 'Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough'. Mr Friedman came to this Building before devolution collapsed and addressed the Committee for the Executive

Office. He told us about how outcomes-based accountability government works. One of the colleagues whom he brought with him was a retired politician from Canada. She talked about her provincial Government at one point having to impose austerity measures, including a 10% cut across the board for every agency in the criminal justice system. She said that those agencies — the police, the court service, the youth service and probation — all sat around a table and decided that a 10% haircut across the board was not the best way to do business, so they went back to the provincial Government and said, "OK, cut the amount that you want to cut, but don't make it 10% per organisation. Don't cut that organisation at all. We'll take 15%. They'll take 17%. You get the same saving, but, we reckon, we'll deliver a better service than a simple 10% across the board". That is what they did, and they delivered a better service. That is my test for the Budget, the Assembly and the Executive: are we mature enough to say, on occasions, "Cut me a bit more, because the greater good will be served by not cutting him or her"? That is a big challenge, but, if we rise to it, we will deliver.

Alfred Nesbitt and Company Limited finished a long time ago, but my father kept a few bits and pieces at home that survived the fire. In my office upstairs, I have a blank invoice, and it reads:

"A Nesbitt & Co Limited, Linen Manufacturers".

Underneath that line, my grandfather had something printed that proves that he was a curmudgeonly old Victorian. It said:

"Deduction of odd pence not allowed".

Maybe that is the problem here politically. Maybe we need to deduct the odd political penny between our parties; maybe a little spirit of generosity will go a long way.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister and the Finance Committee's Deputy Chair for their contributions. I speak as the Alliance Party's finance spokesperson. I wish to comment on general expenditure issues relating to the Bill, but, before that, there are important governance issues that need to be addressed.

There has been limited time to scrutinise the Bill, but Alliance will support the Bill and the accelerated passage due to the realities that we face following the restoration of the Assembly just over six weeks ago. However, we seek ministerial assurance that the granting of

accelerated passage will not set a precedent. A statement from the Minister about how the lateness in approaching all of these matters will affect the setting of the regional rate and the dispatch of rates bills would also be useful, alongside a pledge that we will not again be in the same position, leaving it to the last minute to strike a regional rate and post out bills.

As the Budget Bill we are debating today states, a Budget (No. 2) Bill for the full 2020-21 financial year will be done by the Assembly in June on the basis of a Budget position agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive, so, today, we are largely looking back rather than forward. One aspect of our budgeting that has been commented on by others is the fact that we are again dealing with short-term, one-year budgeting and the problems, the missed opportunities and the silo departmental working that that involves. I ask the Minister for assurances on when multi-year budgeting will arrive, what planning work will be necessary to deliver it and how effective consultation and engagement will occur to ensure that multi-annual budgets are shaped by the needs of communities, people and businesses. I make those comments in the context of the Budget Bill that we are debating today and the lack of opportunity for effective consultation and engagement. The move towards multi-year budgeting is something that all of us would want to support, but we want to make sure that that is the way that communities can be engaged with and their views ascertained.

In considering the matters in front of us and looking back on the expenditure that has occurred for which legislative authority is being sought, there are many issues that we could touch on. Yesterday and today, we have witnessed discussion on a wide and varied range of topics. The "sins of the last Executive", if I can quote the Finance Minister, were often recalled yesterday and have been recalled again today. There are many sins, not just from the last Executive but from many before. It is not true that there are only some sinners in the Chamber; there are sinners on both sides of the House. As Mr Storey might agree, there are many sinners throughout the Chamber.

RHI, Red Sky, Research Services Ireland and the social investment fund: the list is long and becomes even longer when you consider the many Audit Office reports and PAC inquiries. Many of the scandals have been investigated, and one is the subject of a public inquiry. The need to learn lessons from each to ensure that the mistakes are not repeated is something that the public rightly demand. People are understandably angered when the mistakes of

the past are repeated. The independent fiscal council detailed in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, which was understandably pushed for by the UK Government and Treasury, will play an important role, but it is no substitute for leadership by MLAs. We can have all the oversight mechanisms that we want, but, unless the Assembly, the Executive and Ministers are prepared to deal with difficult decisions, we are just sailing ahead, taking on water and going towards the rocks.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I am happy to talk about sinners and the remedy for sin, but I will maybe leave that to another day in the House.

Will the Member accept that, although we can make decisions in this House, we need to answer the question of when we are going to have the public inquiry on the back of the Audit Office report? I referred to that matter yesterday. How many times do we have to repeat it? It makes the RHI look like a small piece. It is a figure of £700 million, not as a result of the mistakes that politicians made but something more fundamental. Kieran Donnelly has made it clear. Are we going to ignore that? Are we going to continue to go over the same old mantra and the same old stuff that we hear in this House day in, day out? It is action we need; it has to be right across the piece; and, maybe, on 13 March, Judge Coghlin will give us the eye-opener that will be about not only the political problems but the institutional problems.

12.15 pm

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. Obviously, it is for Ministers to take action on the establishment of inquiries. I note that some Ministers have been reluctant to do that in relation to some very serious issues such as illegal dumps. I think that it is important that all Members, especially those on the PAC, fulfil their role of providing that scrutiny.

The reality is that the luxury of dodging difficult decisions is now firmly gone. If there is anything that the last financial year should have taught us, it is of the price being paid by not taking decisions and how that affects services, workers, the public and businesses. Failing to take decisions affects everyone. Frankly, it is a dereliction of duty. We cannot legitimately go to the UK Treasury looking for more money when we are not willing to look in our own backyard and sort out the scandals in our midst.

RHI, Red Sky and others are indeed scandals, but, arguably, the biggest scandal that we have always faced is the cost of division. Tackling the cost of division is by far the most significant, long-term financial challenge facing this Executive and this Budget. Estimated previously to be up to nearly £1 billion a year, in the context of the current financial circumstances, we find ourselves in the position where the imperative to act is not just moral or ethical but financially unavoidable. Either we fail to act and shamefully see public services collapse or we pick up the courage and prove to the public and Her Majesty's Treasury that we are at last willing to take the difficult decisions to transform lives, attract investment and ensure that spend is focused on objective need rather than to maintain age-old sectarian divisions. That is the challenge of this Budget, and that is the challenge of this Assembly within this mandate.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Storey: Will the Member call St Mary's College a sectarian project?

Mr Muir: No, I will not, but my point is about tackling the cost of division and the reflection of our history. We need to make sure that we are building a future that is a shared future. It is about taking those difficult decisions. We have a very, very divided society, and we have to be able to challenge that and to transform that. There are lots of different projects that have either been avoided or been pushed back upon, and we need to be able to take action on that.

The costs of division are many but are perhaps broken down into four categories: direct costs, such as policing of disturbances; indirect costs, such as providing duplicate goods, facilities and services for separate sections of the community, either implicitly or explicitly; hidden costs, such as the pressures on the housing sector from demographic imbalances; and the opportunity costs of lost inward investment and tourism. I welcome the Finance Minister's recent statement in the form of a written response detailing:

"The New Decade, New Approach document acknowledges the significant challenge that arises in seeking to tackle the financial burden associated with delivering public services in a divided society. As set out in the document, I would expect that, in developing new policies and, over time, in reviewing existing ones, the

Executive will take steps to eliminate all such costs. In the first instance it will be for individual Ministers to ensure that the services they provide are appropriate and cost effective."

I welcome that statement, but we need more; much, much more. A programme of ambitious actions and resulting savings is one way, I hope, that Executive Ministers could proceed. As the Member outlined, I feel that, for example, the Minister for the Economy needs to bring forward plans for a single teacher training college. We cannot keep avoiding those issues. Let us see the Minister of Education ensure that the independent review of education provision gets cracking and delivers prompt and ambitious recommendations that everyone in this Chamber is willing to act upon. The additional costs of our education system can no longer be afforded. Similarly, shared housing should be the norm going forward.

I did not join the Assembly to see things trundle along as they have done in the last financial year and as part of the budgeting process. I joined to change things, to achieve a new Northern Ireland where we can live, work and socialise together, devoid of the old divisions carved out in the past and in which we live in the present.

Many young people cannot understand why we continue to pour in thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds to sustain a divided society when change is possible. It is up to us to ensure that the financial year ahead is different and that the one that is about to pass is not repeated. We cannot afford to allow that to happen.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): My first remarks will be made in respect of the Justice Committee, and I will then move on to speak in my role as an MLA for Lagan Valley.

The Committee has not yet had an opportunity to undertake detailed scrutiny of the Department's budget, but we received an overview briefing on its budget position. That included key budget allocations for 2019-2020 and details of the pressures and challenges that the Department expects to face in the next financial year. We have also received overview briefings from departmental agencies and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. It is in that context that I wish to comment.

In respect of the 2019-2020 Budget, the Committee understands that the Department of Justice was provided with funding to cover a

range of pressures in 2019-2020. That included £32 million towards employer pension contributions — an issue that applied across other aspects of public service — and £11.3 million for pressures, including legacy inquest proposals. The Police Service received allocations in the region of £42 million in-year for issues such as tackling paramilitarism, additional Brexit funding and injury on duty.

The additional funding for injury on duty was reallocated internally from other easements in the Department of Justice's budget. The Department also surrendered approximately £3 million in the last monitoring round, primarily from compensation services and other end-of-year easements. Taking all that into consideration, the Department has advised that it is on target to remain within budget for the remainder of this financial year.

Moving into the next financial year, the Department informed the Committee that it faces pressures in the region of £67.3 million to stand still. Correspondence from the Minister to the Committee appears to suggest that that amount represents the minimum level of financial pressures facing the Department's budget. The Police Service alone has cited pressures in excess of £53 million. That relates to pay pressures, injury on duty, estate maintenance backlog and essential provision of body armour and helmets.

The Minister has advised that a number of the pressures facing the Department — for example, legacy-related costs — are too significant to fund from its own budget, and resources for those will be sought from the centre. Those figures have, therefore, been removed from the £67.3 million pressures quoted to the Committee.

Leaving aside those issues for which funding will be sought from the centre, the anticipated pressures equate to 6% of the Department's opening budget position for 2019-2020. This will obviously be very challenging, and it is difficult to see how pressures of this level can be absorbed without impacting on delivery.

The development of the Executive's Programme for Government will provide an opportunity for the Department to clearly set out its priorities. The Committee fully intends to make sure that resources are aligned to achieve maximum impact and better outcomes for the public. Invaluable work on the pilot substance misuse court, the development of a mental health court and case progression officers to address the causes of offending and to ensure cases progress more quickly through

the justice system are welcome initiatives, but funding will be required to sustain them. Funding for the substance misuse court originally came from the Department of Finance's cross-cutting programme, but the Department of Justice has now taken on responsibility for financing that project.

In addition, the 'New Decade, New Approach' document includes a range of commitments for the Department of Justice, which, at this early stage, have not yet been fully costed and for which additional funding is as yet unclear. The Committee has been informed, for example, that the annual cost of 600 police officers, once recruited and trained, is £40 million, but there may also be associated costs of more staff to support the additional officers and capital requirements for additional fleet vehicles. The Minister advised that she will be able to commit to take forward the New Decade, New Approach commitments only when the Department of Justice has received sufficient funding to manage its existing inescapable pressures.

The Department is likely also to face additional funding requirements that relate to our exit from the European Union. It is essential that all available Brexit-related funding be drawn down so that the Department and its bodies will not be expected to provide funding from its normal budget.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the cost of providing the separated regime in Northern Ireland's prisons, which is estimated to be in the region of £2 million a year. The burden falls on the Department of Justice, but it is the Secretary of State who makes decisions on the separated regime. For that reason, the Committee has written to the Secretary of State to request that the cost be transferred to the Northern Ireland Office.

The Minister of Justice confirmed that in addition to further briefings on the 2020-21 budget, which will take place over the coming months, her Department will engage with the Committee regularly throughout the year. As a minimum, that will happen in line with in-year monitoring schedules, but there will also be engagement on any other specific issues that the Committee wishes to discuss. The Committee looks forward to more detailed engagement with the Department of Justice on those matters. I have no doubt that the Committee will interrogate them. I have no doubt that the Minister of Finance and his Department will, as they engage in bilaterals, also interrogate departmental bids. I am sure that all Departments make bids in a properly

costed fashion, but it is always good to have a fresh look at those. I am sure that the Department of Finance will do that, as will Committee members, to ensure that the figures stack up.

I will make some broader points now. In doing so, I remove myself from speaking in my official role as Chairman of the Committee lest some of my subsequent points be controversial and not necessarily reflective of the Committee's views. It is important that we look at a wide spectrum of issues that face the justice system. Legacy is one, and it is cited in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Initial costs for that were £150 million, which, I think, nobody regards as being anywhere close to what, ultimately, will be necessary. Leaving aside what, ultimately, will come out of the legislative processes, it is vital that, when it comes to the financing of all that, it does not fall to the Executive and Department of Justice to fund it. These are cases that need to be made and that relate to the past. Until we deal with the past, it will continue to insert toxic poison into our future. It needs to be addressed, but the cost should not be to the detriment of the present.

I want to raise some governance and audit issues that have been mentioned by many. I do not intend to rehearse them, because we can be in danger of navel-gazing and trying to score points. My party can do that against Sinn Féin and other parties. They can do it against my party, and so that cycle would continue. The public expects us to try to deliver for them in the here and now, and to move on from that. I will just say that the RHI report has not yet been published. I have noted a lot of commentary from Members opposite, including the Minister whose Department commissioned the inquiry. I am surprised by the level of the Minister's commentary, given that the report has not yet been published and its findings have not yet been made public by the judge. Yes, there is the court of public opinion, and journalists have commented widely on it, but Members would do well to wait until we get the independent final report. We certainly believe, as our leader says, that there are lessons to be learned from it. We will also have to look at it with regard to other people and parties, not just the current Minister, who, I know, sat on the former Minister for the Economy when this was being handled. I would be surprised — not that I know — if he has not had to give evidence to the inquiry, yet he has gone on to make comments about it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member is straying into the territory of doing what he criticises others for doing. Maybe he

could make his remarks in the context of the Budget Bill.

Mr Givan: I will certainly do that. It is important that we await the outcome of the inquiry. There will be governance issues in how the Budget will be taken forward.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Let me just conclude the point. Then, I will be happy to give way.

The report will also reveal issues that my colleague for North Antrim mentioned, which relate to capacity and competence in the Civil Service. It is right that we await the findings, because it will have implications. Advice that current Ministers receive may well come from some of the very officials who could be named in the report, and the findings might be against them. We would do well to await the report's final publication. I give way to Mr Frew.

12.30 pm

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He will know that a Budget is very important for running Northern Ireland and for this place. The fact is that we did not have a Budget from the previous Sinn Féin Minister, and the excuse used today was RHI. How does the Member find that explanation? Is it not the truth that the reason we did not have a Budget from the last Sinn Féin Minister is because it would have been riddled with Tory austerity and that party could not face bringing a Budget because of the pressure that People Before Profit were bringing to them in their heartlands?

Mr Givan: I welcome that this Minister is bringing forward a Budget. I note that the previous Minister is not here. I met him in a ministerial role that I had, and he indicated to me that he would be around for a very long time and that it would be very important to have a very good working relationship with him because he was going to have a big future when it came to the government of this place. I note that he is not here to take that forward and that he did not bring forward a Budget.

I will raise some issues from the Lagan Valley constituency. I will touch on three themes that relate to the Budget. One is education, something that is very important to all of us here. I serve on the board of governors of three schools: Pond Park Primary School; Ballymacash Primary School; and Laurelhill Community College. When it comes to looking at the budget for the future, we can see that

pressures are faced not just in those schools but, as Members will know from their own constituency, exist on the budgets for all our schools, so there is a need for greater resource through the capital and current funding that is provided to our education system. When the Education Minister makes the case, as I have no doubt he will, to the Finance Minister, he will say that there is a need for additional resourcing.

The common funding formula is a very complicated formula with multiple layers that award funding to particular schools. The age-weighted pupil unit needs to be increased across the board, and the other factors attract additional funding. As an example, the principal of Maghaberry Primary School, a school in my constituency, has spoken at length at various public forums about the funding issues facing that school. The school has fewer than 10% of its pupils with an entitlement to free school meals, and when it comes to providing the budget that is needed, it is wholly inadequate, yet it is at full capacity. Here we have a school that meets the need of the local community, meets the criteria for what the Department says is necessary for a sustainable school in the future, yet the budget is not meeting the need, and that is something that needs to be addressed.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. For many years we have had the view that the use of free school meals is a blunt instrument that actually creates other inequalities. In fact, it discriminates against those schools whereby now they find themselves in the position that, even though their numbers, as you outlined, are in a strong position, the funding is not reflective of that. So numbers no longer guarantee that you will have the financial resources. I certainly will await the outcome of a review that I understand the Minister of Education is doing. I hope that one of the issues coming out of that review will be addressing the imbalance that there is in the use of free school meals as a blunt instrument to deal with how you fund our schools.

Mr Givan: The Member makes a valuable contribution. I know that, from his previous role in education, he knows more about this issue than I do. The issue with free school meals has a read-across not just for the Budget, but in being a criterion that is used in the referral of children for psychological assessments. If you need to be assessed for special educational need, class is no discriminator, yet it is when it comes to the allocation of assessments. Maghaberry Primary School is allowed to put forward only one pupil because it has fewer

than 10% of its pupils with an entitlement to free school meals. The school is in a part of the constituency that is not regarded, like other parts of this Province, as being a particularly affluent area, yet the system that is in place is not meeting the need. We need more resources put into education as a whole. We then need to ensure that the way in which those resources are divided up is fair and equitable. I make the case to the Finance Minister that the funding of education should be a priority.

In terms of capital, many schools require basic maintenance to be carried out, yet there is not the funding available to meet that need. We need to put in more money to build new schools. In my constituency, Dromore High School needs a new building for 1,000 pupils, and enrolment in its catchment area continues to grow. The capital for that needs to be made available to the Department of Education.

Special educational need presents a huge problem for the Department of Education. In Lagan Valley, the number of pupils who have a statement of special educational need now sits at 1,109. In 2015-16, it was 946. The number is therefore increasing, and that creates additional pressure, because the school has to provide the necessary funding for classroom assistants. In Lagan Valley alone, just short of 4,000 children are on the special educational needs register. All require individual educational plans, and resources have to be provided for those who meet that need in schools, but there is not the funding available.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Yes. I will give way.

Ms Armstrong: Given the special educational needs pressures in his constituency and mine, does the Member agree that it is fundamental that we have a root-and-branch reform of education urgently to make sure that those children are provided with the best possible education to meet their needs?

Mr Givan: I do. Reform cuts across many of our public services. Doing things in the way in which we have done them in the past is not going to free up the amounts of money that we need for the future. Those who require special educational need assistance must have that need met. There is a legal obligation that assessment should be carried out within 26 weeks. Currently, 2,108 children are being assessed for a statement of special educational need. Of those, 944 have waited longer than 26 weeks — that is 45%. There are valid

exceptions that justify why some have to wait longer, but within the 944 who are waiting longer than 26 weeks, over 50% do not have the exceptional circumstances that justify the wait. Those children are being failed because there is not the resource on the psychological side of the Education Authority to meet their needs. When they do not have their needs identified, interventions cannot then be made. The difficulties that the children encounter then need to be addressed later in life, if they are addressed, and with that comes additional cost. All of the evidence shows that early intervention is a better outcome both for the individual and for public resources, because the need is met earlier.

Another funding issue that I want to touch on concerns a sporting infrastructure capital scheme that I would like to see developed. The £36 million subregional stadia programme goes back to a 2011 Executive commitment by the Executive. That programme is additional to the regional stadia programme, which dealt with the three main sporting stadiums. The Minister will hopefully be able to roll out the subregional stadia programme. However, we need to see a new programme developed, where, at grassroots level, sporting clubs can get the capital that they need to provide the facilities that are increasingly in demand.

I will give one example. The Minister was able to visit Ballymacash Rangers Football Club, which has developed a sports academy. The first phase of the project, costing approximately £450,000, is nearing completion. A number of phases need to be rolled out beyond that, but in order to do that, we need to have a capital fund available. I would like to see, within the Department for Communities, a scheme developed for small capital programmes of that nature. It is important that the way that it is devised and the criteria which are used are looked at. There are a number of recommendations that could be considered, one of which is partnering with local authorities to try to incentivise the sharing of the capital schemes. Tying in the sports bodies so that they have to make a contribution as well is something that I would like to see take place, but also community partnership. Many of us face requests from constituents. They say, "We need this facility". They make an approach to central government —

Mr McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way in a moment. They make requests to local authorities. Often, the question is, "Where do you get the funding from?". The example that I cited, Ballymacash,

developed a community investment scheme. They raised £112,000 through the local community, which is in a working-class estate in a loyalist area of Lisburn, buying into the model through a shares-type scheme. They raised £112,000. Very few community groups will ever come forward with that type of model, and we should be trying to incentivise it. When I look at the Budget for future provisions, I would like to see a scheme that incentivises that.

Mr McCann: Does the Member agree that added to that are the serious problems that have arisen for many local clubs by the IFA's demand that they have to improve facilities or face going out of the league? Part of what he is talking about needs to be fitted into whatever provision is made.

Mr Givan: I agree entirely with the Member. New standards are having to be met to get access to particular leagues and, if you do not meet them, you are not able to take part. When those new barriers are being created, albeit some of them for justifiable reasons, we need to have support. The sporting bodies have a responsibility themselves. Some of them have a significant amount of funding coming in, and they need to be designing schemes as well, but that partnership approach between central government, sporting bodies and local authorities would help take us to another space with regard to the kind of community infrastructure that exists. When we look at addressing things like —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will in just a moment. When we look at addressing things around well-being, mental health and community cohesion, all of us can show examples in our constituencies where these organisations provide a purpose for people. If we want to try to give people a motivation and an aspiration, we need to have the infrastructure in place within those communities to do it. That is why we need a scheme like this that can try and do more than what we have been doing so far.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I very much agree with the comments that have been made about the moneys for sports grounds and intermediate league standards and so on, but equally I agree with the comment that the Member made a short time ago about moneys and a joined-up approach across government and local government. However, when the edict comes from UEFA to the Irish Football Association, and it passes that on to clubs, the association

must also make some provision. Indeed, it should provide finance, as happens on the mainland with the English FA. These clubs cannot be expected to fund this on their own. I have raised this issue on many occasions with Belfast City Council, and will do so again on Friday, because councils simply do not have the money to meet the obligations that are being set down in an arbitrary way by UEFA.

Mr Givan: The Member is absolutely right. It needs to get down to that grassroots level, not just dealing with the bigger sporting clubs within whatever sporting fraternity they are operating in.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will, but I am not going to take any more interventions because I realise I have probably been speaking for longer than I had anticipated.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He raises a very good issue with regard to youth football clubs which maybe cater for nine to 12 teams, with hundreds of children involved, as opposed to a football team with a squad of 15 to 20 players. There is a massive difference. Youth football needs to be supported. I commend Lisburn for its youth set-up. My two sons played right throughout youth football and played many a time in the Lisburn leagues on a Saturday morning.

Mr Givan: As did I, back in the day, Mr Deputy Speaker. Again, the Member makes a very important point.

12.45 pm

The final point that I want to raise relates to infrastructure development and the capital requirements, not just on the resource side. I want to speak about my experience of the procurement process and the time that it takes to deliver schemes. In my constituency, I highlight, in my constituency, the need to increase the car-parking facility at Moira train station. The Executive and the Assembly rightly want to encourage the use of public transport, yet, if you go to use Moira train station, you have to park way up the public road, towards the main street. How will we encourage more people to get on our trains if we do not have basic park-and-ride facilities? Capital resource needs to be given to that kind of development, but we also need to look at the delivery of it. The situation at Moira train station has gone on for years. Development junctions in my constituency should have been delivered many

years ago. One of them, in the Ballymacash area — there is a planning issue associated with the Lisburn and Dunmurry 1 (LD1) development area — still has not been delivered, and that is creating problems. It is not just about finance but about the systems in place for the delivery of the finance that ultimately gets allocated to it.

In conclusion, I make one final point in respect of the Brexit issue, which some Members have touched on. When we look at that issue, we see that it is important that we do not have the barriers North/South. We do not want to have barriers on a North/South basis, but neither do we want east-west barriers. When it comes to demands that may be made around infrastructure requirements to do with checks and so on, I do not believe that the Executive should be responsible for funding that. The Assembly voted unanimously against what has ultimately transpired when it comes to Brexit, so we should not pick up the financial implications of any of that. It is important that the Finance Minister makes the case to Treasury, if he is not already doing so, that any east-west issues should not fall on this place to deal with. That includes not just public services but the private sector. Any regulations that may require checks and regulatory burden should not have a financial impact on either the public or the private sector. I welcome the commitments made by the First Minister and by the deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill. When they were in Cardiff, Michelle O'Neill said that we do not want any barriers to trade in our local economy, and that was in an east-west context.

My final point on that is that the Member of Parliament for South Down seems to be making some contradictory remarks in respect of the implementation of the Ireland protocol.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I venture that we should restrict our comments to the Bill. I have given you fair latitude, but we have to restrict our comments to the context of the Budget Bill that is before us, please.

Mr Givan: The Speaker's Chair has been very generous to all Members, and we appreciate that, Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Well, that is it [*Laughter.*]

Mr Givan: It is important that we as an Executive and an Assembly have a unified approach when it comes to trying to have that unfettered access in an east-west relationship. If there were any barriers, that would have

implications for the public purse in respect of trade. We should take forward that approach. With that, I conclude.

Mr McGuigan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity today as vice Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the Committee's views. I understand the similarities between the debate today and the one yesterday, and the Committee Chair does too. Whilst he thought that it was important that the views of the Committee were read into Hansard, he thought that, today, they should be read in with a south Derry accent.

The Committee received an oral briefing from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on the 2019-2020 Budget on 13 February 2020. It was clear from that briefing that preparation — [*Interruption.*] I hope that that is not the Chair ringing to give off to me. It was clear from the briefing that preparation for Brexit was and remains a priority for the Department, with £13.9 million of additional money from the 2019-2020 Budget and £312.4 million being allocated for a no-deal Brexit scenario, as well as staff salaries. Brexit has added immense pressure on the Department, so much so that the number of staff required to deal with it is set to rise to 454, alongside staff costs of £23.6 million in 2020-21, if DAERA's Budget requests are successful. A large number of those posts will require staff specialism that currently does not exist in the Department.

The largest cost in the Department from 2019-2020 remains salaries and wages of £125 million, with only £46.6 million allocated to programmes, and I will elaborate on that later. The Department has three non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) — the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, the Loughs Agency and the Livestock and Meat Commission — which require £34.5 million to fund. The Committee heard some detail around the £46.6 million allocated to programmes, the largest of which is around £18.9 million for TB compensation, with a further £8.8 million spent on fees for private vets who carry out the tuberculosis testing. Alongside that, there is a considerable sum spent on testing for TB by in-house vets.

Members noted that the biggest NDPB is the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, with the largest budget totalling £32.4 million. The issue of royalty income from the institute raised a concern specifically about the collection of those royalties and how that has been problematic for the institute in the past. The

Committee recognised that that matter is now subject to legal proceedings, and we wait with interest to see how it unfolds.

The Committee was somewhat concerned to hear that there had been reduced requirements in the January monitoring round, with £12 million of resource, £1.6 million of resource depreciation impairment and £4 million in capital being surrendered. Clarification from officials revealed that the £12 million of resource was a combination of money from no-deal preparations, reduced requirement for TB compensation and a number of one-off easements. There was also a sum of £0.9 million of additional generated income from Forest Service and the regulatory aspect of the NI Environment Agency, which was over and above what had been forecast.

Another area on which Brexit will have an impact and on which the Committee will be focused is the Department's budget and replacement funding. That will be a challenge for the Department, particularly in relation to CAP funding, which is currently worth £293 million in the North. While the Committee was pleased to hear that funding had been secured for this year from the British Treasury, we are concerned about what will happen in following years. EU replacement funding will come directly from the British Treasury, but questions remain over how much we will get as a percentage share and whether it will be ring-fenced. In addition to that, there are questions about the prosperity fund and its role in replacing rural development funding.

The replacement of the animal and public health information system (APHIS) is a serious area of concern for the Committee. That system allows farmers to register cattle movements and other matters and is a vital component in ensuring compliance with animal health and traceability measures. It has great importance in our international agri-food trade. In 2016, the Department commenced a project with the aim of introducing a new system known as the NI food animal information system (NIFAIS). There was an expected completion date of 2018, but, because of major concerns with the contractor, including a high level of software defects, the deadline was missed. To date, it has cost £10.9 million. The Department has requested a further £2.3 million in its capital bids for the 2020-21 Budget, and the Committee will continue to watch with interest how that situation unfolds. We have requested further information and expect to be kept up to date on progress as time allows.

The Committee realises that many rural areas and communities have poor internet connectivity due to unreliable and slow broadband. That is an unacceptable situation that is particularly concerning when the Department is encouraging farmers to complete forms online, use the APHIS system and reduce paperwork. Effective access to broadband can also help with issues such as rural isolation, which has a knock-on impact on physical and mental health. We consider the Department's allocation of funding to Project Stratum and rural broadband as vital for our rural communities and look forward to hearing about its progress.

From an environmental perspective, the illegal dump at Mobuoy is a major threat to the environment, producing hazardous contamination in the area and beyond. Tackling the problem has been ongoing for some time, and many Members will be aware of that. The Department has submitted a bid for £0.9 million for the Mobuoy remediation project, and the Committee will, no doubt, revisit the issue.

The Committee values the opportunity to scrutinise the Department's planned expenditure and delivery of associated projects. I look forward to hearing from the Department as it continues to update the Committee on all aspects of budgetary information to assist in undertaking that scrutiny. Environmental protection and the climate emergency will be important work in Committee. We hope for funding to address those issues, particularly an independent environmental protection agency and a climate Act, as detailed in the recent new deal, the name of which I forget.

I thank the officials in the Finance Department and the Minister for preparing the Budget and the legislation and the officials in the AERA Committee for preparing the remarks that I have made today.

In my personal capacity, given some of the commentary today and yesterday in the Budget debate, I got involved in elected politics to try to make positive change, to help the most vulnerable in society in a positive way and to protect and enhance our public services. It is impossible to make any comments on last year's Budget, this year's Budget or, indeed, future Budgets without talking about 10 years of Tory austerity in the North and its impact on our public services, particularly health, education and transport. As an elected representative for over 20 years to this and other institutions, I have to say that it has been noticeable, particularly over those 10 years, the negative impact that those budgets have had on the

most vulnerable. I have noticed that as an elected representative. Unfortunately, the people who notice it more and are most impacted on by this policy are those coming to my constituency office who are on long waiting lists, unable to get care packages for their loved ones and struggling to feed or clothe their families, not to mention the lack of investment in our schools, as many Members have pointed out, and the impact that that has on the education of our children. There are also clear problems in our infrastructure and roads, there is a need for increased active travel, and there is the vital need of climate emergency and investment against climate change.

That is the impact of 10 years of Tory austerity and, I suppose, 100 years of partition. I noticed, in yesterday's debate and again today, a false sense of smug satisfaction about the state of the UK economy and how good it is. There was no mention of the impact on our public services here, on our vulnerable and on our working class.

Ms Dillon: Does the Member agree that that just proves the point that this was British Tory policy and nothing to do with not having the money to invest here?

Mr McGuigan: I agree, and I will mention that later. I was saying that the silence in relation to that, perhaps from some Members opposite, was because of their embarrassment at having in previous years supported austerity budgets in the North and propped up a Tory government and at their relationship that allowed that to happen.

The mark of any great economy, if you want to talk about it in those terms, or any Government or institution of power has to be measured by how it uses its wealth and treats its citizens. We talked endlessly yesterday and again today about choices or mature decisions. Cutting public services, which adds people to a waiting list, keeps people on trolleys in hospitals, damages our education, diminishes transport, impacts on our climate, increases food banks et cetera is not a hard or mature decision: it is a bad decision. They are bad decisions for us, they are bad decisions for the people whom we represent, and they are wrong. Tory austerity may be the choice of that political party, but it should not be ours.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Order. Sorry to interrupt you in full flow. The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item

of business when we return will be Question Time. The debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill will resume at 3.30 pm, when the Member will resume his contribution.

Mr McGuigan: I had only 30 seconds left.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I did not know that [*Laughter.*]

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Member to ask the first question, I must inform the House that oral question 12 and topical question 5 have been withdrawn.

Fiscal Balance

1. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the fiscal balance between revenue raised and public expenditure in each of the last three years. (AQO 178/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated the net fiscal balance to be £9.7 billion in both 2016-17 and 2017-18 and £9.4 billion in 2018-19. However, about £3 billion of that relates to so-called non-identifiable spending. That is made up of things like British Government debt repayment and military forces, which are not specific to this region. There is also an accounting adjustment of over £3 billion that is attributed to the North. Setting that aside, that leaves a gap of £3.3 billion between the revenue that is raised locally and expenditure that is clearly identified as benefiting citizens here.

Mr Givan: The figure of £9.7 billion and the most recent one of £9.4 billion as being benefits that Northern Ireland has as being part of the United Kingdom — they show the wealth that that great Union brings to this place — are of significant value. The figures would equate to the budgets of the Departments of Health, Education, Justice and Communities combined if we did not receive the support that we do from the Treasury. Given that the debt that exists for the Irish Government is the third highest in the world per capita at over €200 billion, given the crises in health and housing that led to his party getting the election success that it did and given the research that the University of Liverpool carried out that shows that support for Irish unity is only 29%, is it not time that Sinn Féin got off the issue of a border poll and moved to making this place work for the benefit of all our people, with this country remaining within the United Kingdom?

Mr Murphy: I congratulate the Member for managing to ignore the answer that I gave him and go on with whatever he intended to say. It is a skill in itself.

The ONS says that public spending that directly benefits citizens here is £21.8 billion, while the taxes raised here are £18.5 billion. That, for me, is the immediate gap of £3.3 billion that needs to be bridged, and that is why £9 billion is not the reality in cash terms. ONS adds in that a share of that money is spent by London on things like defence and British Government debt, and then it makes a complex accounting system to make the books balance overall. That is not spending that the Executive or most of our citizens would ever see. While I know that he wants to cling to the larger figure, it is actually just an accountancy process. As ONS, which provides that £9 billion figure, says, the difference between what is spent directly for citizens here and the taxes raised is £3.3 billion.

Mr O'Toole: On a related topic, the Minister has talked a little bit in the past about the creation of an independent fiscal commission a little bit along the lines of what they have in Scotland. There are a range of views and depictions of public spending in Northern Ireland and its position relative to the United Kingdom Exchequer. Does the Minister agree that an independent fiscal commission with proper statutory underpinnings and economic forecasting powers will be able to give some clarity to the fiscal position of Northern Ireland in the long term?

Mr Murphy: I thank him for his question. There are two propositions at play here. One is a fiscal council that provides the type of service that he outlined, and it is important, because one of the issues we have dealt with here for some time is the fact that there is no clarity around taxes that are raised here and no clarity on some of the bigger corporations that do a lot of their business here but actually declare their tax returns in London. Of course, we need to ensure that we are spending well and that we are forecasting. It appears to me that quite a lot of the information provided or available to the Executive and to Departments is limited in their understanding of what our tax returns might be in terms of spending forecasts. Any organisation that can assist us in that would be of benefit. There is a commitment under New Decade, New Approach, as there was under previous agreements, to establish a fiscal council. There is no real meat on the bones of that as yet, but we intend to bring forward propositions on it.

I know that the Member has asked about this before, but we also intend to bring forward a proposition for a fiscal commission that can look at the tax-raising and tax-varying powers that might be available to us.

Mr McCann: Does the Minister agree that the Member for Lagan Valley has focused on outdated opinion polls that completely distort the opinions of people throughout this country and that the vast majority of opinion polls now point in the other direction, not only to a border poll but to Irish unity? *[Laughter.]* Does the Minister agree that there is a need to improve data on public finances in the North?

Mr Murphy: Yes. That follows on from my previous response on the creation of a fiscal council. As a former Chair of the Economy Committee, I was aware that, when setting its economic policy, the Department for the Economy did not have access to all the data that you would think it would require, such as data on projections and data to understand the taxes produced in its jurisdiction. There is insufficient data available, and we need to look at ways of strengthening our access so that we can find accurate data. That is a job for the Executive.

On your first point, there is an old adage that goes, "First, they ignore you, then they laugh at you". I think that they are in the second phase, as they are laughing at you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: Whereas the Minister's creative accounting may be exceeded only by the creative fiction of Mr McCann, will the Minister detail why, in response to Mr Givan, he compared the figure of tax raised with the £21 billion resource spending, instead of comparing it with the figure that is in the ONS document of £28 billion of public-sector expenditure? Of course, that is the gap that he cannot explain and can never fill, and neither can the country that he aspires to be part of.

Mr Murphy: Given our exchange yesterday, I prepared a further explanation. That is another accountancy exercise that puts a cost of depreciation against our capital assets. What I have referred to is money that is available for people here to spend, as opposed to taxes that were raised here. The gap is £3.3 billion. Those are ONS figures. You cannot accept one part of them and then dispute the other. The ONS was very clear in its figures. The additional money that you referred to is made up of things such as assessing and costing depreciation against our assets.

Lone Pensioner Allowance

2. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the rate of uptake of the lone pensioner allowance. (AQO 179/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Uptake of the lone pensioner allowance scheme has increased annually since its introduction in 2008, with £6.99 million being awarded during the 2018-19 rating year. The scheme is jointly administered by Land and Property Services (LPS) and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

During 2018-19, LPS provided support to 29,841 lone pensioners who own and occupy their own home. That is an increase of 48% on the 2009-2010 position. LPS regularly attends outreach events such as the Pensioners Parliament and Young at Heart, at which LPS staff take time to explain the relief to citizens who may be eligible to apply.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for his answer, but 29,000 out of our population, given our number of senior citizens, is not significant. Does the Minister find that acceptable? Does he think that more can be done? What will he do to promote the scheme?

Mr Murphy: We should bear in mind that it is not a means-tested scheme, so it applies to all pensioners. Some may be aware of it but consider that they do not necessarily need to access it.

The scheme was introduced in 2008. LPS has issued leaflets with rates bills and placed 'Help paying your rates' booklets in libraries and GP surgeries. It has also issued posters for display in a range of public places, including all LPS and Housing Executive offices, and provided online help through nirect web pages and the Housing Executive website. It has also engaged in partnership working with the voluntary and community sectors and collaborated with other Departments, such as on the Department for Communities' Make the Call scheme. LPS also communicates through departmental social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter and attends claimant stakeholder events. There has been a range of measures undertaken.

If the Member is aware of any deficiencies and thinks that improvements can be made or that there are areas that LPS is not reaching that might yield more people who are entitled to the benefit, I and, I am sure, LPS will be more than happy to hear from her.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for schooling some Members on the finances of the North. I look forward to discussing on other occasions the finances of a united Ireland, but, for today, will the Minister introduce rates relief for rural ATMs?

Mr Murphy: There was a scheme until very recently that provided rate relief for rural ATMs. I think that that requires further legislation to continue it. It is certainly something that I will consider, but we are trying to consider wider rates schemes in their entirety because, clearly, there is enormous pressure on certain sectors as a consequence of rates, and we are trying to ensure that we have the fairest possible system. Everything will be in the melting pot in that discussion, including further legislation to extend rate relief to rural ATMs.

Mr Nesbitt: If I heard the Minister correctly, he said that LPS's outreach includes going to the Pensioners Parliament. As I understand it, the Pensioners Parliament no longer exists because of a lack of funds. Would the Minister of Finance like to fund a revival?

Mr Murphy: You cannot blame LPS for funding the Pensioners Parliament. To be quite honest, I am not sure how it was funded, but I would be more than interested. I had some engagement with it in my constituency a number of years back; it was a very worthy thing. If you want to be pinned to your collar with questions about a whole range of social policy areas, the Pensioners Parliament is the place to go, I can tell you. I am disappointed to hear that it has been discontinued. I would be more than supportive of somebody bringing forward a proposition to reinstate it.

Ministerial Code

3. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any changes to the ministerial code since it was established. (AQO 180/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The recent work to revise the text of the ministerial code has been led by the Department of Finance with political parties as part of the political talks process in the transparency, accountability and governance working group. The latest revisions will detail the accountability of Ministers to the Assembly; strengthen declaration-of-interests requirements; set out that Ministers are responsible for the management, conduct and discipline of their special advisers; and make clear the need for the recording of ministerial meetings and decisions.

Mr Allister: The Minister did not indicate when this ministerial code might come into operation, but I am really more interested in how robust it will be. For example, if a Minister, after a paramilitary killing in his constituency, described the innocent victim as a "criminal" to take the heat off the organisation that carried out the murder, and if he then vacillated between denying having said that and, ultimately, apologising for the hurt caused but never withdrawing the words that the victim was a "criminal", would such a Minister be caught and accountable under the ministerial code that this Minister is bringing forward?

Mr Murphy: The codes are with other Ministers for consideration. I expect to bring them forward fairly soon. One of the recommendations is for commissioners who will make recommendations on the behaviour of Ministers.

In relation to the matter that he outlined, he is incorrect in, first, his description of what took place and, secondly, the motivation of what was said at the time.

Mr McGrath: Although I appreciate and understand that the RHI report is not something that is the direct responsibility of the Minister as it is being carried out by the inquiry, what preparations is the Department making to update the House on his Department's interpretation of the report and future actions as a result of it?

Mr Murphy: The New Decade, New Approach agreement contains a range of proposals. I am not sure whether the Member was on the working group, but, largely, the codes that have been brought forward since restoration are the product of the engagement over the course of last year, particularly last summer, when the five political parties that were to make up the Executive were involved. The agreement that flowed from that contained a range of proposals to make government better, including changes to the ministerial code. It also contains a commitment to further reform to take account of the RHI inquiry, including considering whether any additional changes to the ministerial code are needed following the publication of the report to further rebuild public confidence.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give a clearer indication of the timescale for when he expects to produce the revised Civil Service code?

2.15 pm

Mr Murphy: The revised Civil Service code is, of course, the third part of the work. We have already taken forward the guidance and code in relation to special advisers. The ministerial code is with other Executive colleagues for their consideration, and I expect that to come through an Executive process in the near future. The Civil Service code will follow on from that. It is my intention to get that work done as quickly as we can in the Department, because, although the report into RHI will come in the middle of next month, there was a clear understanding among all of the parties who were involved in those working groups last summer to get these things done in the Assembly and get them out as quickly as we can and subject them, if necessary, to further review and further action as a consequence of what the inquiry might recommend. Certainly, I intend to get that work done as quickly as possible.

Shared Prosperity Fund

4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the replacement of EU structural funds by the UK shared prosperity fund. (AQO 181/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The shared prosperity fund is being developed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in Whitehall. Despite repeated requests from officials, the pace of development has been very slow, and we still know very little about the design of the fund. I understand that the quantum of the fund and arrangements for its delivery will not be finalised until the spending review, the timing of which has not yet been announced.

I have just written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, setting out our position on the replacement of EU funding. That letter broadly states that we want full replacement of our current spending power and that we want the administration arrangements to be as simple as possible and in line with our devolved responsibilities.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that it appears that the UK Government will attempt to centralise the priority setting and the administration of the shared prosperity fund, what representations has the Minister made to the Westminster Government to frame and shape the fund to suit people here?

Mr Murphy: I touched on that in my answer, but I agree that we have to be very vigilant not

only on shaping the amount that is involved — though there is a commitment from the British Government to ensure that the full amount remains available to us — but also on ensuring, as per our devolved role, that we have a responsibility for administering, distributing, setting priorities and setting the programmes for the fund, and we want it to be as simple as possible.

I have written, not only myself but also in collaboration with the Finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales, to the Treasury to make sure that we have a combined view on this. Dates are being kicked around at the moment, but I hope at some stage next week to be over with the other two Finance Ministers to meet the Treasury and raise those issues, because none of the devolved areas are satisfied with what appears to be shaping up, even though very little detail or remit has been put on the idea of a prosperity fund. We want to ensure that the replacement of the EU funds come in full to us and that we have an ability to shape those programmes and deliver them.

Ms Kimmins: What is the Minister's thinking on the objectives of the new EU Peace Plus programme, which has been put in place to build on the incredible work of the Peace and INTERREG programmes?

Mr Murphy: I have engaged with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) on what is shaping up with Peace Plus. Of course, one of the big challenges that Brexit throws up, besides all the political challenges and the challenges to trade east-west and North/South, is the loss of European funding, given how important that has been to us for many, many years. How many projects have been funded by European funding and how many sectors rely on it to keep afloat?

Proposals are being developed, and engagement is ongoing with Europe. I welcome that there is a commitment to Peace Plus from Europe, Dublin, ourselves and the British Government. I want to see that develop fully and make sure that we continue to access the funds that we are entitled to through the programme, and I want to make sure that we use them as best as we can to offset the damage that will be caused by the loss of funds in a range of other areas. Of course, that is part of the answer to the substantive question; we continue to engage with Treasury in relation to the replacement of those funds.

Victims' Payment Scheme

5. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Finance what engagement his Department has had with Her Majesty's Treasury regarding the Troubles-related victims' payment scheme. (AQO 182/17-22)

Mr Murphy: On 31 January 2020, the Secretary of State brought forward regulations to establish a scheme of payments for individuals injured in the Troubles, with a go live date of the end of May 2020. Decisions will be made by the judicially-led victims' payment board. Payments can be up to £10,000 per annum for life and can be inherited by a nominee. The Executive Office is currently refining costs for the first year, which could be up to £60 million, as well as assessing the costs of subsequent ongoing annual payments. The subject of victims' payments was included in the New Decade, New Approach negotiations with the British Government via the Secretary of State. Under the statement of funding policy, those are costs that should be borne by the British Government, and I will continue to press for them to be met by the Treasury. My recent meeting with Rishi Sunak was constructive, and I hope to engage further with the Treasury in due course.

Mr Chambers: Thank you for that, Minister. Can you give a commitment that there will be no undue delay in commencing payments to the victims?

Mr Murphy: The responsibility for processing this falls to the Executive Office, so it is not my responsibility. I am trying to deal with the finances of it. Looking at it, I have to say that it is very challenging to see that a judicial-led process will be in place and delivering funding by the end of May, but that is the date that has been set, and I do not doubt that the Executive Office will try to meet that demand.

Of primary interest to me is the fact that this was led by the British Government. They established the legislation and led the policy, and, under the statement of funding policy, they should meet the costs, even if it is a matter of transferring the finances to the Executive Office to deliver the payments. The costs should be met by the British Government because they were the lead on it. That has been my primary focus, but I sincerely hope that there is no delay. Victims have been waiting for a very long time on this, but the date of the end of May, I think, is a very challenging date to meet in anybody's book.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Finance Minister's commitment that it is, in fact, the responsibility of the British Government. Can he tell the House whether he has made representation to the British Government on behalf of those who were injured by terrorist organisations where the likes of Libya funded those terrorist organisations? Does he support the British Government's call for those people to be gone after to put some money into the pot for victims?

Mr Murphy: I have not been involved in that type of discussion at all. I know that similar arguments have been made in relation to the old South African regime and the support that it provided to people, which caused enormous damage to victims here as well. It is not something that I have been involved in; it is more a political matter. If the British Government want to pursue other countries for a contribution, that is very much a matter for them. Our interest is that, as per the statement of funding policy, the British Government led on this. They devised the legislation and brought it through, and they should meet the costs.

Ms Dillon: I raised this in this morning's debate, and you will have heard that the British Government do need to bear the responsibility for the cost of this. It is their legislation. It is legislation that ignored much of the advice given to them by the Victims' Commissioner and all of the other victims' groups and responses and consultations. Can you confirm whether you think that the British Government will be forthcoming with this money and whether you have had any discussions with them on additional moneys in relation to the other legacy mechanisms, given that there is an acknowledgement that £150 million will not touch it?

Mr Murphy: We will continue to raise these matters with the British Government, and I am meeting the Treasury on Thursday in relation to EU funding and then the following week along with the Scottish and Welsh Ministers. We have only estimates for this scheme at the moment, and those are in relation to physical injury that was caused. We have no estimates in relation to the mental injury that was caused during the Troubles. If this scheme is not properly funded by Westminster, that will have a long-term impact on our local Budget, as it would normally take the form of an annual payment and it can be inherited in certain circumstances. Therefore, it has not just a significant but a long-term impact.

On the other legacy mechanisms, there was, of course, an agreement to put in an additional £100 million, I think, as part of New Decade, New Approach. We have yet to see that materialise, and even that, according to the estimates of what the legacy mechanisms cost, still falls short. Therefore, there are ongoing discussions to be had with the Government on that.

Dormant Account Fund

6. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Finance what protections are in place for people with UK bank and building society accounts that meet the criteria for the dormant account fund. (AQO 183/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A dormant account is one where there has been no customer-initiated activity for at least 15 years. Under the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008, banks and building societies transfer the remaining unclaimed assets to a central reclaim fund. Under the Act, customers still retain the right to reclaim their money and can do that by contacting the reclaim fund directly.

A comprehensive reuniting exercise of dormant account holders and their assets was launched by banks and building societies some 10 years ago. That has helped to minimise subsequent reclaims.

Mrs Barton: Since the publicity on the dormant accounts, how many customer account holders have come out of the woodwork to lay claim to them?

Mr Murphy: I apologise; I do not have that. Dormant accounts are done centrally in Britain for all the regions. As I said, there had been quite a promotion to ensure that people could claim their entitlement if they somehow missed and the finances in their dormant account were seized against their wishes. I have been told that it has been minimised. I do not have the numbers for that. I will endeavour to get them and send them to the Member. We will eventually get our share of the dormant accounts, and then we will attempt to distribute that to very worthy causes.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Minister give us some assurance that the dormant accounts will be used for the sustainability of social enterprises?

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance directed the National Lottery Community Fund to establish a dormant account scheme here in

September 2019 under three key themes: capacity building; resilience; and sustainability. As required by the dormant accounts Act, the lottery has consulted stakeholders as to how a fund could be used here. The outcome of the consultation will inform the basis of a strategic plan that will be laid in the Assembly, preferably by the end of this financial year. That will outline how those broad themes that were agreed will be met in the practice of distributing that money here.

Reval2020: Public Houses and Hotels

7. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the receipts and expenditure formula used in Reval2020 to calculate the net annual value of public houses and hotels and the resulting rateable values. (AQO 184/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The receipts and expenditure method of valuation of non-domestic rating used by Land and Property Services is the established approach agreed between professional valuation bodies and government valuation bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and also here. All business rates are based on rental value. However, if evidence of a rent is not available, different approaches are needed to determine the rental value. Anyone wanting to rent a pub or hotel will want to know how it is trading. That is why valuers call for accounts and turnover.

Increased values for some pubs and hotels are a result of improved turnovers between 2013 and 2018. If ratepayers believe that LPS has got any values wrong, there is a straightforward process to produce the evidence. Unfortunately, the response rate for pubs and hotels to provide information for revaluation has been poor. Following Reval2020, 40% of pubs will see no change or a decrease in their valuation.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his response, especially because he spoke about it ad nauseam at his previous Question Time. So many of our local pubs are community hubs in our towns and villages, and I have been lobbied about the possibility that some of them may have to close. Will the Minister ensure that communication is kept open, with the possibility of appeals or whatever that might be between his Department and the pubs that act as community hubs?

Mr Murphy: I get that. I live in a village that once had seven pubs and very little else. That was because our neighbouring village of

Bessbrook did not have any for religious reasons, which was much to the benefit of Camlough. *[Laughter.]* I get that businesses are struggling and that we need to make sure that the rating system is fair. I met, as part of a broader delegation, Hospitality Ulster and the Hotels Federation, and it was made very clear to them that people can challenge and appeal a valuation, but we are trying to encourage an uptake in this attempt to provide accounts and turnover as a way of proving whether people were doing better business or not. In the history of our businesses, people do not necessarily like sharing that information with government, but it is a way of challenging if people are making an assessment based on a false assumption. In this exercise, and going into the future, I want to get a complete assessment of all rates and get the fairest possible system so that people can see how assessments are arrived at, and they can also see what the money is being spent on from the rates gathered.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will drink to that.

Ms Armstrong: As highlighted by Ms Bradley and acknowledged by the Minister, a number of rural pubs are community hubs, so is there any leeway? Has rural proofing been considered in Reval2020 because some of my local pubs, which are necessary for tourism in the area, are facing hardship, which may lead to potential closure?

2.30 pm

Mr Murphy: The revaluation is based on rentable value, and that takes account of pubs in the middle of the city centre. They, of course, have a much higher rentable value than those in rural communities. It takes account of turnover as well. If the turnover is provided, perhaps it will show that a rural pub has quieter times than a busy urban pub. Those things are taken into account. I am not sure that a formal rural-proofing exercise was done, given that it is a fairly straightforward valuation exercise that takes account of the size of a property and its rental value. People have been lobbied extensively. We have all been lobbied on the issue. My job is to try to find the fairest possible system. Where people feel that the valuation is incorrect, that they get the wrong bill or that the bill is way and above what they should pay, there are opportunities to challenge and appeal that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I apologise. I know that a Member was looking to get in on

that subject. Unfortunately, the time has gone, and we must move on to topical questions.

PSNI: Funding

T1. Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance, given that he has made much of the £600 million shortfall in public finances, whether he will assure the House that, following the Budget settlement, he agrees that key to addressing the challenges that we face in Northern Ireland is adequate resourcing for the Police Service of Northern Ireland so that it can go after with all vigour and all rigour those who are criminals, those who have inflicted murder on our communities and those who have been responsible for some of the most heinous crimes, including the murder of Paul Quinn. (AQT 141/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Any resource bids for the broad justice area, including the Police Service and whatever it considers it requires to carry out its duties, are made through the Department of Justice. I had a discussion with the Minister of Justice, as I did with all Ministers, in the run-up to trying to set a Budget for the Executive in the coming weeks. Clearly, I am aware of what their pressures are. I am also aware that New Decade, New Approach has committed to, I think, an additional 600 police officers. The challenge will be finding and recruiting those officers — getting them in, training them and getting them out on the streets where they are very much needed.

In line with all Departments — the Department of Justice is no different — I will try to meet, as best I can, within the limited resources available, the bids that all Departments declare as very high priorities or inescapable pressures.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for that, but will he give a specific assurance that the Barnett consequentials, particularly those that came as a result of the announcement by the Prime Minister of additional police officers in the United Kingdom, will not be taken and used by the Department of Finance in any way other than what they were designated for specifically? He has responsibility for that, not the Department of Justice.

Mr Murphy: Having previously occupied the position of Minister of Finance, the Member will know that Barnett consequentials are not ring-fenced in that fashion. If the Executive decide to keep those Barnett consequentials for the provision of additional policing, that is an Executive decision, and I am quite happy to

abide by that. It is clearly a matter for the Executive to decide how to spend them.

Brexit: Funding Losses

T2. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the funding that will be lost as a result of Brexit. (AQT 142/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The funding at risk includes CAP, which totalled €2.3 billion over the last seven years; the European social fund, which was €210 million over the same period; the investment for growth and jobs programme, which was €313 million; and access to loans from the European Investment Bank.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his response. I am sure that I do not need to tell him about the importance of the various EU funding streams right across society: the community and voluntary sector; agriculture and rural development; and, importantly, research and innovation funding to boost economic development. I am sure that, like me, he is concerned about the loss of access to that funding. What will he do to try to continue to access those funds, and what replacement funding will he seek?

Mr Murphy: As I said in answer to a previous question, I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Alongside that, I had a discussion with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. We will be meeting jointly with the Treasury, I think, hopefully, at the tail end of next week. Our position is that we want all EU funding to be fully replaced. The commitment that has been given by the British Government is that we will not lose out on that. Unfortunately, we know very little as yet about the shared prosperity fund that has been developed by the British Government to replace EU funding. The quantum of that funding is not expected to be finalised until the spending review, the timing of which has not yet been announced. Our approach is that we want the full quantum and the ability to administer and set the programmes in conjunction with the EU, which was previously the case with EU funding.

Victims' Pension Costs

T3. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Finance how much he expects the victims' payment to cost. (AQT 143/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The cost estimates are high-level at present, but the Executive Office advises that the costs in 2021 amount to between £25

million and £60 million. The assumed cost total of £109 million is over the three years from 2021 to 2022-23. Again, those are estimates. I think the initial estimate is based on a number of people who were physically injured as a consequence of the conflict, not people who perhaps received other damage as a consequence of the conflict, so it is very much a guesstimate at this moment in time.

Ms Sheerin: What is the Minister's view on where this funding should come from?

Mr Murphy: I base my view on this on the statement of funding policy, which applies to our finances and the finances in Scotland and Wales, which are devolved areas. That makes it clear that the body whose decision leads to the additional cost will meet that cost. The decision to provide this was made by the British Government, and, under that policy, the rules state very clearly that they meet that cost. It was legislated that the decision maker on the policy was the British Government, and, therefore, in my view, it is the British Government's responsibility to fund the victims' payment scheme.

Social Enterprise

T4. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans to support social enterprise. (AQT 144/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I had the great pleasure of engaging with the social enterprise sector last night at City Hall in the social enterprise cafe that is there. We discussed plans in a number of round-table discussions with the sector last night. Plans include social value legislation so that social enterprises can compete for government contracts on a level playing field using the dormant accounts fund to support social enterprise and create sustainability. We have been doing some work with the Department for Communities on community asset transfer, and we will continue to see where we can work not just in the Department of Finance but cross-departmentally to assist the social enterprise sector, which performs such a valuable role.

Mr Lynch: How does the Minister intend to improve the community asset transfer policy, which he mentioned in his answer?

Mr Murphy: As I said, we have met the Communities Minister and both permanent secretaries on that and a range of other issues, but, certainly, community asset transfer was on

that agenda. We are working on a range of improvements to make it easier to identify assets and then to transfer them. We are also considering how social enterprise can be supported to manage assets over the long term.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Topical question 5 in the name of Mr David Hilditch has been withdrawn, so I call Ms Gemma Dolan.

Translation Hub: Update

T6. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the translation hub. (AQT 146/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, the translation hub, along with the Irish language legislation and other legislation relating to cultural issues, was part of the discussions that led up to the New Decade, New Approach agreement. A responsibility has been provided to the Department of Finance to deliver the translation hub within the three-month period identified in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, and that is the work that we will be undertaking. I met Conradh na Gaeilge recently to discuss best practice for the operation of translation hubs. We will be inputting that information and discussion into the Department's work to get this done within the time frame outlined.

Ms Dolan: Can the Minister also update us on the commitment in the New Decade, New Approach deal that births, marriages and deaths can be registered in Irish?

Mr Murphy: That is another area of work that we have been tasked with undertaking. I have asked my officials to begin work on this, and I hope to be in a position very shortly to update the Assembly on progress on it.

Skills Deficit: Senior Civil Servants

T7. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance, given that he will be aware of a number of critical reports on the capital build project skills deficit among senior civil servants, whether he has had any discussions about this and what action he intends to take to address the issue. (AQT 147/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am aware of the Audit Office report on capital projects, which is critical to delivery. We always have lessons to learn when an Audit Office report comes out. As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I am aware of the work that goes into its reports.

The Procurement Board, which I chair, will meet on 1 April, and I intend to have the Audit Office report discussed at the meeting, after which I will direct the Procurement Board to commence a review of the role of procurement in delivering major capital projects, because that is the responsibility of my Department. Other Departments are involved in a range of issues, but procurement has a key role to play. I want to ensure that the Department of Finance plays its role.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister elaborate on whether the Strategic Investment Board has a role to play in the delivery of capital projects, given the underspend that there has been to date?

Mr Murphy: The Strategic Investment Board will provide advice to all Departments. It has key experience of doing that. Where we find a skills deficit such as that which you outlined, and if the Audit Office report clearly identifies a skills deficit as one of the failings, we should address it. Skills can be supplemented in part through those that exist on the Strategic Investment Board, but, for others, we may need to look outside. We will try to ensure that we can recruit people with those skills. My Department has already been in discussion with the Strategic Investment Board, and I am sure that other Departments that are criticised over capital projects will be in touch with it as well, because it is a source of advice for everyone.

NDNA: Financial Commitments

T8. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance, given that openness and transparency are key to the remit of the Department of Finance and that the Executive parties have consistently stated that the British Government have reneged on the spending arrangements promised to them to get them involved in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, to detail exactly what the financial commitments were, particularly as the lack of transparency is somewhat concerning. (AQT 148/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is no lack of transparency around what the commitments were. Rather, the lack of transparency is around the British Government meeting the cost of those commitments. In the Second Stage debate earlier, Members talked about wish lists. Bear in mind that all five parties on the Executive came to the process together, through a structured piece of work done with senior civil servants in the Department of Finance and senior officials in the NIO. Together we came up with a list that, we were told, was certainly achievable.

The British Government were reluctant to provide figures, and they then abruptly called an end to the negotiation. That has caused uncertainty. Since I have come into post, I have done an exercise costing the proposals that they committed to. It is their document. I intend to engage with the Treasury this week again about securing the necessary finance to meet the commitments made.

Mr Carroll: It is concerning that there are commitments in New Decade, New Approach that have not been adequately budgeted for. There is talk of funding gaps of several hundreds of millions of pounds. Will the Minister commit to doing all that he can to ensure that the British Government live up to their commitments?

Mr Murphy: That is what I have been doing, and that is why the exercise was undertaken in the first instance. We were told by the NIO that the negotiation was over. We were told, "That is your money, and that is it." We did not accept that. I undertook an exercise to cost the commitments made across the Departments. Some of them were for cross-departmental work, so it took some time to get the costs together. I went over and engaged with Treasury on that basis. It was a fairly positive engagement. I intend to go back this week to continue that discussion and to have discussions in Whitehall generally. I have certainly not given up on pursuing that finance, and I am glad that I have the support of all my Executive colleagues in doing so. I hope that we will have something to show for it.

We delivered politically through the commitments that the five parties made under New Decade, New Approach. We could not now simply approach that agreement politically and say, "We signed up to it, but we did not mean any of it", so the British Government cannot disengage financially from the commitments that they made.

Contaminated Blood Scandal

T9. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Finance whether the money he allocated for the people who have been affected by the contaminated blood scandal is being spent in the way that was intended. (AQT 149/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member knows, we allocated £1 million as part of the monitoring round for people affected by the contaminated blood scandal. It has been an ongoing, tragic issue for many of the families involved. It was essential, at the first available opportunity, that

we demonstrated support for them. The Department of Health has received the money and allocated £600,000 of the £1 million. The Health Minister has assured me that he intends to use the full £1 million.

2.45 pm

Mr Sheehan: Is the Minister aware of how many people in the North have been affected by this scandal?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, a quick response, please.

Mr Murphy: There are figures, and, in consultation with my colleague the Health Minister, I will try to get them to you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance. We move now to questions to the Minister of Health. Topical questions 8, 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Health

Cancer Strategy: Update

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health for an update on a new cancer strategy and implementation plan. (AQO 208/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your indulgence, I may ask for an extra minute on this one.

The New Decade, New Approach agreement gave a commitment that the Executive would produce a new cancer strategy by the end of December 2020, and I intend to see that commitment delivered. However, my Department began developing the new strategy in June last year, using a co-production approach from the outset to maximise the patient's voice. The strategy will focus on fewer people getting preventable cancers, more people surviving for longer after diagnosis and improving the experience of care for cancer patients.

Development of the strategy is overseen by a steering group, membership of which was drawn from a wide range of sectoral stakeholders from across Northern Ireland, including the voluntary sector, those with lived experience, clinicians and subject experts. The steering group is co-chaired by the Chief Nursing Officer and a lived-experience representative. The steering group is supported

by seven themed subgroups, each led by a sectoral expert and co-chaired by a lived-experience representative.

The development of the cancer strategy is being taken forward in three phases. Phase 1 looked at the current services, with each subgroup providing an overview of how and where services are currently delivered. Subgroups also developed an aspirational statement of what an optimised service would look like. Phase 2 involved those subgroups using the outputs of phase 1 to identify a gap analysis that provides an indication of what is required to achieve a high-performing cancer service. Phase 3 commenced this month and will see subgroups begin the development of options and recommendations for actions. Taken together, those three phases will form the basis for the new draft 10-year cancer strategy, and a fully costed implementation plan will be developed following the approval of the recommendations.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his response. When the Department announced that it was going to produce a new cancer strategy, it referred to looking at best practices in neighbouring jurisdictions and focused particularly on NHS England, which established an independent cancer task force. While I appreciate that the work of the review body is ongoing — the Minister has given us a breakdown of that — is the Department still minded to go in the direction of travel of a cancer task force?

Mr Swann: Through our work on the strategy and the three phases, one of the main directions we have taken is co-production, to make sure that the lived-experience individuals have an input. In regard to a task force, we will look at that as we develop the cancer strategy and see if there is a need for that at this point in time to make sure that we have a consistent approach across the whole of the UK, and also with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Buckley: In relation to implementation plans, the Minister and the House will be aware of the worldwide concerns there are about coronavirus. Breaking news just out is that pupils of Banbridge Academy have been sent home amid fears following a school trip to Italy. Will the Minister give an urgent update to the House?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I know it is straying slightly from the original question, but I am prepared to update.

We are in a fast-moving situation, and the case definition regarding areas at risk has recently changed with regard to Italy. Updated guidance will be issued to healthcare professionals later today, but, in the meantime, if anyone has concerns, they should check the Public Health Agency's website, which will direct them to the most updated guidance.

Schools were issued guidance on 17 February, and that will now be updated to reflect what is happening today. It is, of course, up to the principal of any school to decide whether they believe that they should close their school. Based on the latest information, I believe that it is unlikely, at this stage, that any school will have to close if it follows the latest guidance. Our officials are working with the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority to make sure that all schools in Northern Ireland that have had pupils on skiing trips in parts of Italy, whether in affected areas or not, are given the most up-to-date guidance.

Mr Muir: Minister, you may have seen the Cancer Research UK report today concerning smoking prevalence projections for all nations of the UK. In that, regrettably, it states that it does not feel that Northern Ireland will achieve smoke-free status until the late 2040s. Will the Minister please outline what he plans to do to get that back on track to achieve the target of 2035?

Mr Swann: In regard to how we prevent smoking and de-escalate the numbers taking up smoking, as a direction of travel, work has to be done in the education of our young people. How we get back on track is one of the things that the cancer strategy and the groups involved will need to look at, as well as looking at the causes. We need to look at how we address and challenge preventable cancers to make sure that we do not get to that stage, and smoking cessation is one of those actions.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I look forward to further developments on your cancer strategy. Can you confirm whether patients in Northern Ireland now have the same access to cancer drugs as those across the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her supplementary. On 12 September 2018, my Department announced that the promising new medicines that have been available to patients in the rest of the UK will now be available to patients in Northern Ireland. What that means in practice is that all those new medicines that have entered the reformed cancer drugs fund since 2016 will be available for patients in

Northern Ireland. This new approach will ensure that drugs approved by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) for use through the cancer drugs fund in England will now be considered in line with existing arrangements for Northern Ireland endorsement of NICE recommendations. Accordingly, patients here will have the same access to cancer drugs as their counterparts in other UK regions.

Ms S Bradley: Minister, for clarification, can you confirm that, given the process that you described at the end of your answer, you anticipate there being a cancer strategy? If so, what is the timeline for that being rolled out and delivered?

Mr Swann: I can confirm that, as I think I already did in the first part of my answer. 'New Decade, New Approach' states that the Executive should deliver a cancer strategy by December 2020, and that is what we are, and I am, committed to doing. We have taken forward that work through co-production, and that is what the lived-experience individuals expect from us as elected representatives. The recommendations that come from that will set our timeline from then on. I will have to ensure that there is relevant funding there at that point in time.

Mental Health Street Triage Project

2. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans regarding the further roll-out of the mental health street triage project. (AQO 209/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Current indications that we have are that the multi-agency triage team's programme is working very effectively in Belfast and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust areas. An evaluation report is expected in March that will inform the future development of the service. Wider roll-out will be dependent on additional funding being made available and commitment from delivery partners. Options for a wider roll-out include moving from the existing two-day operation to a seven-day-a-week operation and an extension to the other three health and social care trust areas.

Ms Flynn: I thank Minister Swann for his response. Given the positive cross-agency working thus far between the PSNI and health and social care staff, not just in the example of the street triage but the pilot schemes in the custody suites, will the Minister elaborate on any discussions that his Department has had

with the PSNI to ensure the continued roll-out of those important projects?

Mr Swann: The work that we do in the custody suites is equally valuable, because the people who go into them do not always need to see a custody officer. Sometimes, a health professional who can interact with a person at that point of detention can prevent a lot of things going an awful lot worse. I have committed to working with my ministerial colleague in Justice to make sure that that programme is enhanced. Again, that will depend on where funding falls. At this minute in time, the PSNI would like us to pick up the entire cost of that facility and provision. It is working and is something that we need to develop across the Executive.

Mr Dunne: Can the Minister advise us on the progress of the new Executive group on mental health and assure the House of the Department's commitment to addressing the real problem that we have in Northern Ireland in relation to mental health, especially among young people?

Mr Swann: The Member does not have to question me or my Department about our commitment to addressing mental health issues in Northern Ireland, especially among young people. The Executive working group that we have established is due to meet in the next couple of weeks. One thing that sends out a strong signal from the House is the willingness of all my ministerial colleagues to engage in addressing mental health issues in Northern Ireland. As one of my predecessors said, every Minister is a Health Minister; in fact, at this minute in time, every Minister is a mental health Minister as well. There is so much that can be done on mental health across each Department, should be it early interventions in education, the provision of free green spaces by the Department of Agriculture or the structures that can be provided by the Department for Infrastructure that could prevent an individual going in a certain direction. The Member does not have to question that commitment, because I am assured that I have cross-Executive support for it and I will not be found wanting.

Mr Carroll: Given that mental health is, obviously, a priority for the Minister, will he do all that he can to ensure that mental health groups that struggle to stay open, such as Compass Counselling on the Shankill, will be supported to stay open?

Mr Swann: I acknowledge the support that the Member has given to Compass Counselling, and I am aware that there is a rally on Saturday to support that group. Health and Social Care organisations work closely with many organisations to provide services in the community, and all such services are funded in line with public procurement policy. I hope that he can appreciate that it is not possible to provide funding to organisations that are outside that framework.

I am aware that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is due to hold a tendering exercise to produce counselling services in the coming financial year. Compass Counselling, like other organisations, will be invited to submit a tender to provide those services. I suggest that the directors of Compass Counselling should engage with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and I am sure that the Member will be able to support them in any bid that they make. I am aware of the work that they do, and I am aware of the support that the Member has given them.

Ms Dillon: Given the conversations that we have had today about the Budget, will the Minister confirm that, where pilot schemes are being run with ministerial colleagues, he will look at how those schemes will be funded, at the point of implementation, in future? Those pilot schemes are excellent, but are we wasting money running them when we have no plans for funding them, going forward?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for making a very valid point. Since taking up office, I have heard from areas across the health and social care system that pilot schemes start to do very good work but continued funding is not always there and not always guaranteed. Along with the Finance Minister, working with a one-year Budget is the challenge that we have as an Executive. Often, when we do that, we create pilot schemes to test out good project. However, were we to get to a stage where we had three- or four-year concurrent budgeting, we could give those organisations and those parts of the health service that buy in and invest a lot of time, energy, effort and manpower in what we classify as "pilots" so that they can do them for a short space of time a lot more certainty about what they do. It would also allow us as a Department and our health service time to transform and use those pilots as part of our transformation project so that we can bring about the changes that we want to see in our health and social care service.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Philip McGuigan is not in his place, but, if we all crack on — it was a grouped question at question 12 — we might get to Mr Durkan.

3.00 pm

Muckamore Abbey Hospital: Patients

4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Health whether the departmental action plan for the resettlement of patients from Muckamore Abbey Hospital has been completed. (AQO 211/17-22)

Mr Swann: Work to complete the resettlement of patients remaining in Muckamore Abbey Hospital is ongoing. As of 17 February 2020, there were 53 patients in the hospital, which includes two patients transitioning to new places of residence. Twelve of the remaining patients are there from the priority target list for resettlement. The priority list was defined by the Bamford review as patients who had been resident in hospital for at least a year as of 1 April 2007. That is a reduction of 223 from an original cohort of 235 patients identified by Bamford at that point in the review.

Although much progress has been made on completing the resettlement programme, I have made clear my commitment to continuing to reduce lengthy hospital admissions by supporting people to live sustainably in local communities, in line with the vision set by Bamford's 'Equal Lives' report and, more recently, the Bengoa review. To deliver on that, a regional learning disability operational delivery group, chaired by the Health and Social Care Board and reporting to the Muckamore departmental assurance group, has been established to coordinate a regional approach to the resettlement of the inpatient population at Muckamore. While resettlement is an important issue, the welfare of the patient is paramount, and that will mean that one size may not always fit all.

Mr Sheehan: The Minister will be aware that, at the start of last year, the Department announced a plan to have all patients in Muckamore resettled by the end of last year. I have spoken to many people in the learning disability sector who tell me that that was a totally unrealistic proposition. The Department was told that and ignored it. I hope that the Minister has the requisite funding to ensure that as many patients as possible can be resettled in the community. For many patients who have been institutionalised for a long time, that will require bespoke support services in the

community and, in many instances, bespoke accommodation. Has funding been secured for a plan like that?

Mr Swann: Going back to the Member's point about the timeline, I think it was unacceptable and probably unachievable. As we have seen and as I said, the welfare of the patient is paramount, so, when we look at resettlement opportunities, we have to make sure that they are fit for purpose and that not only the patient but the family is supported.

With regard to funding, we are looking at how we go forward in a holistic approach to resettlement across the entirety of Northern Ireland. We have to give the patients in Muckamore the fullest support that we can, in the House and as a Department, to make sure that any who avail themselves of resettlement and are eligible for resettlement are fully supported and go to places that are fit for their purpose.

Mr Gildernew: I have a follow-up question to Pat Sheehan's. Will the Minister acknowledge that working with families closely and in good time can prevent inappropriate admissions, from which many of the long-stay residents of Muckamore have come? Will he also commit to look at the trust's budgeting in terms of learning disability underspend, where moneys that have been allocated to help parents and carers to support people at home have been underspent to the tune of millions of pounds, and ensure that that will not happen in future?

Mr Swann: The Chair makes a valid point. It is about how we support the families and patients who are there to our full potential, to make sure that any facility or place that they go to for resettlement is fit for purpose and provides that engagement with the family. With regard to the resettlement progress and process, I think that the trust is already working on how it engages with families and parents. I have now met families twice with regard to Muckamore. The resettlement issue has been raised, and we have been looking into it very seriously.

I will look at the underspend. I was not aware of that exact budget line until the Chair raised it, but I will look at that and get back to the Member.

Mrs Cameron: None of us wants anybody to have a Muckamore Abbey Hospital postcode; that is unacceptable. However, we have to be conscious, especially given the number of individuals who are left in Muckamore and have not been resettled, that that will be because

their cases are very complex. I ask the Minister to assure the House that much care is taken in assessing individuals' suitability to be resettled in the community and that such assessment is absolutely correct before resettlement is attempted. It is highly distressing when it does not work out and individuals end up returning to Muckamore Abbey.

Mr Swann: The Deputy Chair's point is well made. That is why that work on resettlement is vital. It is about how we engage more with the families. If a family says to professionals sitting around a table that their loved one is not ready to be resettled, that input has to be listened to and actioned. I have been given some assurance on that, given the unsuccessful level of resettlement from Muckamore in the past. It is a live issue, and we are aware of it. The trust team and the leadership team who are now in place on Muckamore are working to make sure that any resettlement, as I said, is fit for purpose. One size will not fit all. At the heart of this, the welfare of the patient is paramount.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister provide an update on the establishment of a public inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital?

Mr Swann: I have made it clear that patients and families have a right to answers on what went so appallingly wrong at Muckamore. Clearly, I have a decision to make in establishing the best process to provide those answers. My decision has to be an informed one, so I am carefully considering detailed advice from my officials on what we know about what happened at Muckamore and on the options, going forward. Of course, any decision that I take will be informed by the views of the people who use the services at Muckamore and their families. I have already visited the hospital to meet patients, families, carers and staff so that I could hear from them as early as possible. I recently met Action for Muckamore. It is important to note that any process that is put in place to provide the answers that we need will have to take cognisance of the major PSNI investigation that is ongoing.

Health Trusts: Car Parking

5. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Health how he plans to provide free car parking for health trust workers. (AQO 212/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's policy aims to ensure the effective provision of car parking across the health estate for patients, visitors and staff. Decisions on how the policy is applied is for each health and social care trust to

determine. In that regard, charging is an important mechanism on sites where space is limited to control demand and ensure that there are sufficient spaces for patients and visitors. Charging also helps to cover the cost of the provision and maintenance of car parks, including the associated security costs. I recognise that charging for car parking on our hospital and other healthcare sites is a difficult and emotive issue. However, if charging were to stop, the associated costs would need to be met from elsewhere in the health budget, and that would reduce the amount available to me to fund patient care.

Mr Harvey: In Scotland and Wales, they do not pay for hospital parking; in England, concessions are offered to staff and patients. Can we be assured that car-parking facilities across the health trusts will be accessible for staff and patients and that capacity will be considered, particularly in upgrades or new facilities? Patients and visitors who travel to hospitals from many parts of Northern Ireland often endure long delays and queues while waiting for a parking space. Parking at hospitals should be a simple exercise, not a stressful one, with our goal being to make life easier for everyone.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. It is well made, and I do not think it is anything that has not been raised with any MLA. As I said, the policy set by the Department is then applied by each health and social care trust as it sees fit, so the criteria for car parking vary from site to site and can be more stringently applied in some restricted areas where there is difficulty in parking or a lack of parking spaces. The process is intended to help trusts balance the interests of patients, the public and staff and apply the agreed criteria as fairly and as equally as possible.

The Member may have an interest in the Ulster Hospital. I know that plans are in place to construct a new 149-space car park adjacent to the new acute services block at the Ulster Hospital, and that facility will provide accessible car parking for patients and visitors attending the ED and wards. The new car park will be operational prior to the opening of the acute services block.

Mr G Kelly: I listened to the Minister's answer, and, while he agrees that there are variations in different areas and in different hospitals, will he, as a Minister, do anything or, at least, enquire into how you bring the variations down so that, if we cannot do away with the charge, there is a fair price for everyone who uses the car parks?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. There are trusts and areas that provide free car parking, so I suppose that his direction of travel, if I were to go that way, would see car parking charges across all health facilities. If that is what he is suggesting, I will raise it with trusts, but, at this minute in time, it is up to them how they interpret the Department's policy on car parking charges.

Mr O'Toole: We drive far too much in Northern Ireland. There will clearly be patients who will need to use transportation to get to hospitals and nurses and medical staff who work irregular shifts and are often exhausted and finish at odd times. Notwithstanding those groups, what is the Department doing to incentivise either administrative staff in hospitals or families who are visiting to, where possible, not use their cars to get to hospitals but to use public transport or their feet?

Mr Swann: In regard to encouraging patients and visitors to use public transport, I am happy to have the conversation with the Member's party colleague in Infrastructure to see how we can increase and support public transport, should it be buses or trains, to the facilities in the health and social care trusts that are accessible. He mentioned walking to hospital. Often, many people who need to go to hospital are not fit to walk there, so that is why they need to use cars, but, again, for those who are visiting, I would encourage a healthy lifestyle at any point. Encouraging the use of public transport is something that I will definitely take up with my ministerial colleague.

Mr Chambers: I suspect that, ideally, the Minister would prefer all our health facilities to have sufficient space to allow visitors and staff to park for free, but, unfortunately, for some, the space is so limited that it is just not an option. Can the Minister give us a flavour of how much income is raised by car parking charges?

Mr Swann: Our 2018-19 figures, which are the last full ones available, show that car parks raised £7.5 million. The cost of running those car parks was £8.8 million. Those figures show that the cost of car parking is not being fully recovered across all trusts, and, as a result, my Department has been engaged with trusts over the last year to ensure that the money required to run car parks is recovered from their use so that additional funding can be made available to fund patient services.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We have literally 30 seconds left, so it will need to be a 15-second question and a 15-second answer.

Ms Armstrong: If the Minister is committed to the health and well-being of people, will he ensure that all new trust buildings and other Department of Health buildings are accessible by buses, with roads wide enough for bus lanes? Otherwise, public transport will be unable to come to hospitals.

3.15 pm

Mr Swann: I will take into consideration the need for them to be accessible by public transport when considering any new hospital designs. How is that for a commitment?
[Laughter.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Excellent. Well done.

We now move on to topical questions to the Minister of Health.

Rural GP Practices: Capital Spending

T1. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the priorities in his capital spending plans for rural GP practices. (AQT 151/17-22)

Mr Swann: We have a number of areas that we can see are clearly struggling, not just to attract rural GPs but to maintain them in facilities that are fit for purpose for the service that they deliver. We have done a detailed piece of work on that. If the Member is happy for me to do so, I can write to her with a more detailed breakdown of the areas that we will invest in and where we can do that.

Ms Dolan: Will the Minister communicate with the Health and Social Care Board and the Western Trust to request an update on the plans for the health centres in Carrickmore and Lisnaskea?

Mr Swann: Certainly. I know that the business case for Lisnaskea is well developed. We should be ready to proceed very soon, once we get agreement on the site. I cannot recall the information on the other one off the top of my head, but, again, I commit to writing to the Member with the details of her request.

Nurses

T2. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Health, in the light of the chronic shortage in the number of nurses and the lengthy process needed to train

new nurses, whether he will consider a financial incentive to get nurses whose registration has lapsed back into the system and into our hospital wards in a fraction of the time that it takes to train new staff. (AQT 152/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am not sure whether the Member is aware, but we commissioned a very detailed report on nursing and midwifery, which was done by Sir Richard Barnett. He has come forward with a number of recommendations on how we can support our nurses and midwives in the profession; on how we can make sure that the skills shortage is maintained at current levels; and on how we can get to a place where we can fill the 2,700 nursing vacancies. I am not sure whether one of those recommendations is a financial incentive, but, if not, I will look at that. I cannot give the Member a guarantee here and now, but it is definitely a valid suggestion that we will consider.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he accept that new approaches are needed to deal with the shortage of nurses in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: As I said to the Member, that is something that we are well aware of. We need to retain the nursing staff that we have but also ensure that nursing is an attractive profession for people to go into. That is why we have the Executive commitment in New Decade, New Approach to deliver 900 additional places over the next three years, on top of our 1,025 training places. Delivering those additional places will go some way to filling the gap, but it will not address the current shortage.

How we re-engage nurses who have stepped out of the profession is a very valid question to raise. It ties in with the very welcome announcement by some of our health unions yesterday that they have suspended industrial action on the back of the work that the Department of Health and the Executive have been able to do to support our nurses on pay parity and by our indicating that we are working towards having safe staffing. That applies to our Health and Social Care staff in all sectors, not just the nurses, and gives a clear indication of how much we value our nurses — our nurses especially — and the rest of the health professionals in our trusts.

Crisis Intervention Services: Londonderry

T3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Health to outline what his Department is doing to ensure that much-needed funding for mental

health support is provided to crisis intervention services in Londonderry, given that he will know that the Foyle constituency has suffered the devastating loss of far too many young people and people of all ages and will agree that one life lost is one too many. (AQT 153/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member's comments included a line that I have used and which I believe: one life lost to suicide is one too many. In regards to the specifics of the crisis intervention services in Londonderry, I recently approved a £27,000 transformation slippage allowance to the Derry community crisis intervention service to allow bridge funding until the end of March. A multi-agency meeting led by Derry City and Strabane District Council will be required to consider funding options for 2020-21. The Department is committed in the Protect Life 2 suicide prevention strategy to providing:

"timely, accessible de-escalation services for those in emotional crisis or despair."

This and a range of other actions in the strategy will be dependent on additional funding being made available. Following the evaluation of the Derry community crisis intervention service, the Belfast crisis de-escalation service and the multi-agency triage teams, we will work further to do that. A wide range of suicide prevention and emotional health and well-being services are currently provided in the area, and the Lifeline 24/7 helpline is available for anyone who is in distress or despair.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his response. I welcome the funding, and I am sure that he will join me in paying tribute to all the organisations that do fantastic work in the area of mental health and suicide. Does the Minister agree that, although the short-term funding that tides us over until March is welcome, we need to look at a long-term sustainable model to ensure that the tragedies that we have seen over the past number of days and weeks are brought down and that we get to a point where there is no suicide in our society?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point that was raised earlier in regards to funding: If I had a three- or four-year surety of budget, the valuable and recognised work that is being done by the voluntary and community sector, supported by the Department and other funding streams, could continue with surety. When it comes to how we challenge mental health and the prevention of suicide, it is about how we join up the dots in Northern Ireland to bring together the voluntary and community sector, work in partnership with the Health and Social Care

Trusts, and support families and individuals at that point in time. That is a vital piece of work that our voluntary and community sector does to prevent suicide.

Nursing Posts for £11 million

T4. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health how many new nurses would £11 million per annum employ, given that he will be aware that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister wish to spend £11 million of resources each year on Irish language and related provision. (AQT 154/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Off the top of my head — these figures will need to be verified — I think that a band 5 nurse is paid a salary in the region of £25,000, moving up to £40,000. If my maths is correct, that is 275 per year, but, again, that needs to be verified. I did maths at school and liked it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That was excellent; well done. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I congratulate the Minister on his maths, on the presumption that he is right. *[Laughter.]* Is it not a very perverse reflection on priorities if, in the straitened circumstances in which our present Budget exists, particularly in his Department, we were to take £11 million of such scarce resources and, each year, squander it on unnecessary matters while a Department like his goes short? If that situation comes about and his Executive colleagues persist with that squander, will he remain a member of that Executive?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for congratulating me on my maths. In regards to whether I will remain a member of the Executive, the Ulster Unionist Party is there by right under d'Hondt, so we will stay there to maintain our place. If at any point, we have to consider withdrawing, we will do that as a party. That will not be my decision; it will be one for the party.

In regard to funding for the Department of Health, I have already made it clear that we need £661 million to maintain where we are and to implement the other commitments in New Decade, New Approach. I have been working with Executive colleagues to ensure that we get that funding. In regard to funding our health service, I say to the Member, as I would to any Member, that I do not think that a Health Minister has ever stood in this place and said that they had enough money. Any money that is

coming towards my Department will be fully welcomed and utilised.

Graduate Entry Medical School: Magee Campus

T5. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Health to confirm that capital and resource funding are in place for the graduate entry medical school at Magee and to state when we can expect his official sign-off. (AQT 155/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. If she indulges me, I will try to find a recent update. Just before coming down here, we had an update from Minister Robin Walker from the Northern Ireland Office, who gave us clarification on the breakdown of revenue and capital. As I have such big files, I am unable to find that update, but I will supply it to the Member once I have it.

There are two business cases for a medical school at Magee. There is one that sits with Ulster University that my Department helped to formulate, and there is second one on the number of medical training places, which is sitting with my Department and is due to come to me shortly. The issue is how we get those two business cases to the same place at the same point in time. It is an Executive decision because the graduate medical school at Magee has cross influence with the Department of Health, the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his answer and the continued support that he provided for the project when he was the leader of his party. I invite the Minister to Derry to meet with the stakeholders involved.

Mr Swann: I welcome the Member's invitation. If she can find a space in my diary, I will be more than glad to come up and visit Londonderry.

Community Pharmacy: Funding Shortfall

T6. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health when he will address the shortfall in funding for community pharmacy services as identified in the 'Cost of Service Investigation for Community Pharmacy in Northern Ireland' report, which, although published in 2017, referred to 2011, which is some nine years ago. (AQT 156/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member may be aware that, as of last night, Community Pharmacy NI has, unfortunately, decided to take industrial action. It is very disappointing for me that those contractors have voted to take industrial action at this time, particularly whilst discussions with their representatives were ongoing. I am due to meet Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland in the coming weeks, which means that the timing of today's announcement is regrettable because I would have liked to have had more engagement. The threat of industrial action is likely to cause unnecessary anxiety to some patients, and I want to reassure them and Community Pharmacy NI that the Department will be fully engaged in working with them to make sure that we get a resolution so that, hopefully, the industrial action does not happen.

Mr Frew: The Minister alluded to the point that I am going to make, namely that 98% of the community pharmacy contractors in attendance voted for industrial action. That shows you the measure and strength of frustration within the industry. The Minister must realise that frustration and try all he can to resolve the issue speedily.

Mr Swann: Again, the Member's point is well made. When I came into office, we were under the same stress and duress with our health unions. Working together with the board, departmental officials and Community Pharmacy NI, I would like to see the issue resolved before any action is necessary. That will involve engagement by everyone, which, I believe, there is a willingness to do, because nobody wants to go to a stage where they are taking industrial action because community pharmacy provides essential and valuable services to our community.

3.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McGrath, you have 20 seconds, so it will be one question and one answer.

Diabetic Retinopathy Service: Downe Hospital

T7. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health, given that he will know that early detection of diabetic retinopathy is critical to mitigate the impact of the condition, whether he will consider the Downe Hospital, which would be an ideal location for such provision, for an early detection service, particularly because, at a meeting last week, the Downe community health committee agreed that it would like to

arrange for a delegation to meet with him. (AQT 157/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I will certainly take up the invitation to meet them, again when we can fit it in. The diabetic eye-screening programme in the Downpatrick area is currently a mobile service provided by screeners and graders employed by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. The service visits individual GP practices, which host the screening. Any screening that is delivered on the Downe Hospital site is carried out in association with the on-site GP practice, rather than as the local trust delivering the service. That model remains in place, with screening continuing to be carried out on the site in recent months. A project led by the Public Health Agency is being established to take forward the implementation of recommendations on the future delivery, based on the findings from a public consultation that was carried out in 2019.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is the 'Down Recorder' sorted for Thursday. *[Laughter.]* I ask Members to take their ease, while there is a change at the Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 2/17-22] be agreed. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Speaker: The next Member I want to call is Jonathan Buckley. As this is Jonathan's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption. However, please note that, if you say anything provocative, you may well invoke an interruption from somebody else. *[Laughter.]* Good luck in your maiden speech.

Mr Buckley: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is, indeed, some relief that, after many years, I can finally say the words: in this my maiden speech to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I wish, with your indulgence, to begin by following the honourable tradition of paying tribute to my predecessor and friend, Mr Sydney Anderson. Sydney was a long-standing and highly esteemed servant to this House and to the people of Upper Bann. He provided me with my first opportunity in politics, and it is with the same unwavering determination that he demonstrated that I want to continue to represent the people of Upper Bann. He was a friend to many, always considered and thoughtful in his approach, and I take this opportunity to wish him and his family every blessing for the future. I also place on record my thanks to my party and, indeed, my party colleagues for placing in me the trust to represent the people in the Assembly. It is indeed an honour to sit on these Benches with my colleagues.

In March 2017, the people of Upper Bann entrusted me with representing them in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and for that I say thank you. I am deeply indebted to the great people of my constituency for enabling me to carry out this role on their behalf. I want to assure them that I will continue to serve with diligence and humility. Upper Bann has a very special place in my heart, as it is the constituency that I was born, raised and educated in. From the banks of the Bann in County Down to the apple trees of the orchard

county, Upper Bann is a place I very proudly call home. I am humbled to represent its needs, hopes and ambitions here in this Chamber. To the people of Upper Bann, I make the commitment that everything I do in this place, as their elected representative, will be focused on the best interests of that great constituency and its people.

While I am extremely honoured to stand before you today, I do so in far from ideal circumstances. We gather in the Chamber to debate a Budget Bill after over 1,000 days of silence. In that time, I, like many others here, have done my utmost to represent my constituents, but let us be very clear that, during the time of absence, our most basic mechanisms for representing as legislators were stripped away, including what we are discussing today — the Budget Bill — as supposed stewards and defenders of the public finances.

As a young, unashamed unionist, I believe that it is totally unacceptable that Stormont lay barren for three years. The devastating effects of its inactivity are glaringly obvious in this debate and, sadly, have grave implications on the Budget Bill presented by the Minister.

In my constituency of Upper Bann, I am often left in awe at the state of disrepair of some of our rural roads and the time it is taking to address the problems. I read recently with considerable interest that the combined depth of every pothole in Northern Ireland is nearly eight times the depth of the English Channel. That is a shocking statistic. In many of our constituencies, our constituents no longer travel on the left-hand side of the road; they travel on what is left of the road.

I welcome the fact that the Finance Minister released extra money to address some of those issues, though, sadly, we must accept that a piecemeal approach will not suffice. There must be long-term strategic funding for our road network and regional infrastructure to restore faith in the bemused taxpayer. I have witnessed the aftershocks of no devolved government in Upper Bann through the overwhelming strain on our public health workers at Craigavon Area Hospital. The staff are often faced with overcrowded wards, which makes their environment extremely testing, and the problem is compounded by staff shortages, as was mentioned earlier.

Some of my constituents have sadly described it in recent times as resembling a war zone, with patients lining the corridors, some elderly, not even being afforded the basic courtesy of a

pillow. I emphasise the fact that each and every constituent to whom we talk places no blame at the foot of health workers. They pay tribute to them and how they have worked in such difficult circumstances, but I cannot but come to the conclusion that in many ways the system is broken. It is in much need of reform, which will require tough and mature political decision-making for the House.

I listened with considerable interest to the Finance Minister yesterday with initial disbelief as he became the custodian and defender of apparent lost money in the confidence and supply arrangement. I was filled with great emotion as I listened to the Finance Minister vow to go on a personal crusade throughout Whitehall to retrieve earmarked instalments, wrestling from the Exchequer what is rightfully ours in true Robin Hood-like fashion.

I know that the Minister is late to the game on this one, but I welcome the fact that, after three years of bemoaning the £1 billion secured by this party through confidence and supply, finally, although belatedly, Sinn Féin has realised that additional money for health, education and infrastructure at a time when these institutions were held to ransom was only a good thing.

Constituents ask simple questions, such as why their surgery has been delayed for over two years and why their children have to bring their own books to school. I remember talking to someone from a local primary school, which was even rationing soap to its pupils. What a sad reality of where this place got to. How did the House answer them? Sadly, with silence.

Some in the political class in Northern Ireland can only hang their heads in shame. It was a time of embarrassment for us all. In short, we failed people. It is now essential that we get back to basics and regain the trust of the electorate. These institutions must embrace reform, and that will require universal support in the House. There is absolutely no doubt that people in this country have suffered because of the length of time that it has taken to restore Government and bring back political oversight and budgetary responsibility.

I want to turn our attention to mental health and suicide in Northern Ireland. I speak as someone, I am sure, like many in the House, who has been affected and seen at first hand the impact of suicide on a community. I was a 15-year-old pupil at Craigavon Senior High School when I first encountered the word "suicide". Sadly, three young men in my school year, all with much to live for, took their life

within one month. To this day, I think of their families and the pain that they endured at the time. Fourteen years on, it was with great sadness that I read the most recent statistics on suicide rates across the United Kingdom, which were released by the Samaritans. To our collective shame, the rate in Northern Ireland vastly exceeds rates in the rest of the United Kingdom. For every 100,000 men in Northern Ireland, 28 will die from suicide, compared with 15 men in England. Despite the disturbing suicide rate in this country, it continues to grow year-on-year. Per capita, Northern Ireland spends less than half the amount spent in England to support people who suffer with mental health issues.

I commit in the House to help to fight the destructive blight of suicide, which has caused unimaginable suffering across the Province. It is a vice that can be broken, but we need to act now. I welcome the seriousness with which the House and Executive have taken the issue of mental health and its sad consequences, though, in reality, much more can be done. I implore the Minister to continue his approach of additional cross-departmental budgetary allocations to facilitate the care and attention required to change lives. The issue transcends party politics. It cannot be good enough, whether you are from a unionist, nationalist or other persuasion, that people — citizens among us — feel that the only route left to them is suicide.

All the issues that I have raised have a common thread. I urge the Minister to pay particular attention to this point. In a climate of budgetary concern for Northern Ireland, these are all issues of universal importance. We have to get real and be prepared to make difficult decisions, prioritising the issues that matter to ordinary people in Northern Ireland. The pie can be cut into only so many parts.

In the House, we bear responsibility for the Budget and how it can be allocated most effectively to meet people's needs. In doing so, we are required to work together towards the common purpose of a better future. The framework for good governance requires cohesion and cooperation. We will achieve nothing by employing the same divisive agendas in a hostile environment. There is no doubt that the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union is a polarising matter and one that divides the House immensely. Many in the House passionately oppose the direction that the United Kingdom has taken, particularly in relation to the Brexit Bill, but that is the reality that we all must face. In a spirit of unity and collaboration, we must work together

to ensure that Northern Ireland leaves on the best possible terms. Opposing barriers to trade with our largest market, we must strive to lay the economic foundations on which the economy and people here can flourish. We can do so only collectively. I have no doubt that that will impact on future Budgets in the House.

3.45 pm

When you take the time to talk to broader international opinion about Brexit and Northern Ireland, yes, those people understand the concerns that we have from a nationalist or republican perspective and, indeed, from a unionist perspective, but they are somewhat bewildered by the constant pessimism that comes from the elected classes in Northern Ireland. Yes, we have challenging situations ahead, but we must look on Brexit through the lens of opportunity, and let us use the assets and resources that we have, be that our geographical location or, indeed, our greatest asset of all: our people.

Taking all that into consideration, I wish to conclude by saying that the people of this country deserve two things: healing and hope; healing from our fraught and fractured past and a deep hope for our future. When the pens of historians scribe the days in which we live in Northern Ireland, will the pages read of despair and disbelief? Potentially. However, I believe we stand here today with the potential in this room to ensure that the story reads of a country filled with hope and anticipation. From Portrush to Portadown, from Larne to Lisnaskea there is hope, but only — this is key — if the Assembly functions not on sectarian or narrow party political lines but — I truly believe there is hope for this — as an Assembly in which Members debate and legislate for a Budget with the interests of the working family, the local businessman and woman, the farmer, the graduate, the nurse and the nursery school student in mind. It is to those people that the Assembly has the unrestricted ability to bring hope, but it cannot be the case that the good news story from these institutions is that government exists. It must begin to deliver for people. The era of the sound bite is over. Our people simply will not put up with it, and that is what I meant when I talked about the disbelief when the Assembly, rightly, looked to climate change and declared a climate emergency. That stands in stark contrast to the state of our public transport in this country. We must be practical; we must be real.

In closing, let me say that we celebrate the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021. I trust the message will be one of healing and hope.

As the youngest unionist Member, I plead with Members to make this new approach work. In this new Assembly, I challenge each Member to lay aside our differences and work for the betterment of the people we have let down over the past three years of inactivity. I urge every Member to join me in my commitment to humbly serve and deliver for the people of this country, because that is simply what they deserve from every MLA.

Ms Mullan: I will speak as our party's education spokesperson. We are discussing the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, which will allow finances to flow to our vital public services while providing the space for the Minister of Finance to seek further resources and work with the Executive and Assembly to finalise the Budget for the incoming year. That said, it cannot be ignored that, for close to a decade, public services here have been under attack from Tory Governments in London. Our children and education system have borne the brunt of the Conservative Party's crusade of cuts. That relentless austerity agenda has stripped well over £200 million from the education budget over the last 10 years. If we look at the last five years, we will see that the situation speaks for itself. The number of schools in deficit has risen from 217 to 442. In addition, the number of schools in surplus has fallen from 817 to 562. Members are well aware of the real impact that budget cuts have on school communities. The Minister of Finance and the Executive have indicated that they intend to move towards multi-annual Budgets, and I welcome that. However, education, teachers and pupils cannot wait. The work of properly resourcing and reforming our education system has to begin now. As the Chair of the Education Committee highlighted, despite the Department receiving funding from in-year monitoring of £90 million, it is expected that the Education Authority will still have a £20 million overspend.

I acknowledge the work of the permanent secretary and officials in the Department of Education over the past three years in bidding for extra funding to stop further cuts and to secure a budget for transformation. It is vital that the transformation project happens and that we show leadership on issues such as area planning. Our education system cannot plan, prepare or function properly if constantly constrained by austerity. We have all heard about teachers having to buy essential items because their school's budget has been stretched too thin: that is unacceptable.

As other Members have said, special educational need is a particular area that has been starved of resources and investment. The

Education Authority has consistently exceeded its budget for it. That highlights the shortage of funding going to special educational needs provision, and the Budget should resource it.

Commitments arising from the 'New Decade, New Approach' document will add further pressure to the education system unless accompanied by the associated resources. I commend the work of the Finance Minister in engaging with the British Government to try to get them to live up to their obligations. The Department of Education faces pressures of over £400 million in the coming financial year. The position is stark. With those pressures in mind, there is an onus on Departments to facilitate greater collaboration and cooperation. Over the past number of weeks, the Education Committee has received briefings on that work, but we need to see greater evidence, alongside cross-departmental financial investments.

I welcome the Minister's update that Departments should and will be encouraged to share the costs of achieving common outcomes. The Programme for Government and New Decade, New Approach commit the Executive and the Assembly to delivering services and resources based on objective need and to tackling regional disparities. In the Budget, I urge the Executive to be imaginative and rigorous in their determination to ensure that places such as Derry benefit and develop as of right. To do that, we need meaningful, time-bound targets on job creation and Derry to be connected to Belfast, Dublin and further afield. As a catalyst and as a sign of intent from the Executive, we need 10,000 graduate students in Derry.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for enduring a long couple of days, including Question Time today and yesterday's debate. Yesterday, we discussed the 2019-2020 Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account; today, we discuss the Budget Bill, which gives legal effect to those Estimates and the Vote on Account.

The name of the Bill is liable to be misunderstood. Contrary to what it says on the face of the Bill, it is not a Budget. It is not a list of financial priorities or commitments. The Executive have not yet decided what their full-year priorities are, nor do we know the outworkings of either the UK Budget on 11 March or the spending review plan for later this year or, indeed, the second Budget that is provisionally due to happen this autumn. This is legislation to give permission for money that has already been spent in the financial year that is just finishing and to ensure continuity in the first few months of the new financial year.

However, the Bill is symbolically as well as legally important. Civil servants have been exposed to significant political and legal risk over the past three years by effectively having to roll over budgets, with only the most scant oversight from the Northern Ireland Office and MPs in Westminster. Woody Allen said:

"90% of success in life is simply turning up."

For three years, the Northern Ireland Assembly was not even doing that.

The Finance Committee agreed to accelerated passage for the Bill but with clear reservations about the level of scrutiny to which the retrospective spending or authorising has been subjected. The Deputy Chair of the Committee spoke about that earlier, but we are where we are. I congratulate the vice Chair for stepping into the breach this morning at short notice to give the relevant permissions on behalf of the Committee.

Rather than focusing on specific spending priorities, which, I know, is in vogue today, as my party's finance spokesperson, I want to use the debate to give a broader focus of Northern Ireland's finances and the challenges that lie ahead in setting a Budget that aligns with the Programme for Government and delivers on outcomes that citizens care about. I also want to address some bigger questions about fiscal oversight and fiscal sustainability.

First, it is worth saying that devolved budget processes in this place are quite strange. They are an odd mix of conventions that have been borrowed from Westminster and specific legal obligations on the Minister that come from the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This year, the budget process is even odder. Today, for example, we are authorising spending for a Budget that was never submitted to the Assembly in the first place, let alone debated. As well as being asked to retrospectively approve a Budget that was cobbled together or copied and pasted by civil servants in the absence of elected officials — I say that with due respect to the civil servants who had to do that — we have a public spending context that has been confused by multiple, sometimes contradictory, communications to the public on budgets and public spending. I do not say that to make a party political point; I say it almost to say to people, on behalf of the Assembly, that the way in which public spending works in Northern Ireland is weird and confusing because of the succession of agreements and commitments that have come along at different times. It can get fairly bewildering for the public.

The supply and confidence arrangements that were agreed between the DUP and the then Conservative Government two and a half years ago created an expectation of a surge of additional spending; in fact — this is not a criticism of the party opposite — most of the resource was consumed by current spending pressures, especially in health. We have heard today about the level of pressure in the Department of Health. Since then, we have had continuity budgets passed at Westminster in the cut-and-paste way I described, in the political circumstances, and we have had some new Barnett consequentials from assorted UK Government announcements; indeed, we have had negative Barnett consequentials, as we have discussed with the Finance Minister, over the past week or two. We also, of course, had the 'New Decade, New Approach' document earlier this year. That deal involved a long list of potential Executive priorities that parties here signed up to, along with unquantified financial commitments from the UK Government. When the Northern Ireland Office finally agreed a package of support with the Treasury, it was self-evidently a long way from addressing current spending pressures in Northern Ireland public services, let alone providing adequate funding for the priorities listed in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. That experience was a stark illustration of one of the major challenges that we face in this place in the budget process: cynicism. There is an ingrained and pernicious cynicism in Westminster and Whitehall about Northern Ireland and its approach to spending. Some of that is understandable, but some of it is not. I will go on to discuss both.

In the Assembly, we have to be honest with ourselves. Whatever the outcome of the RHI inquiry in a couple of weeks, some of the cynicism is justified. We know that large amounts of public money were wasted; we know that there was a cavalier attitude to spending. People thought that AME — annually managed expenditure — for RHI should be maxed out like a credit card without a limit; otherwise it would be "lost to Northern Ireland". I was intrigued and possibly slightly gratified to hear what colleagues from the DUP said. A little like the policeman in 'Casablanca', they were, "Shocked, shocked" at the idea of public money being wasted, but I am glad to hear of their new-found commitment to the cause of fiscal rectitude.

We should pause and think for a moment about why we spend public money. As the finance spokesperson for a centre-left social democratic party, I want to see a large and active state that spends resources to improve people's lives,

but, in truth, money in RHI was burned to no good end. Our roads need upgraded, our rail and bus network is in a funding crisis and the health service is buckling, but we chose to spend tens if not hundreds of millions on heating poultry sheds. We need to be honest about the scepticism that this place must overcome in agreeing and setting a Budget — scepticism from the public who elected us and, unfortunately, from politicians and officials in London who have an uncomfortably large amount of power over the resources that are available to the Executive. Just in parenthesis, we have to be honest with ourselves too about the changing politics in Westminster and the fact that Boris Johnson has been elected by an English nationalist vote, essentially. They do not feel the same way about spending on other parts of what some people describe as the "precious Union" as, perhaps, their predecessors did, and we have to be honest with ourselves about that.

Whatever the excesses of RHI mismanagement, they pale in comparison with the cynicism of the current UK Government, all of which is relevant to the spending predicament that we find ourselves in.

4.00 pm

Others have mentioned the appalling new immigration proposals announced last week that almost look like they were specifically designed to harm the Northern Ireland economy. On Sunday, we saw a cynical briefing to the effect that UK Ministers were trying to find ways to undermine or circumvent the Ireland protocol that they signed in a legally binding international treaty just a few months ago. Even if that newspaper briefing was a stunt to influence the EU negotiations — I note that, in the past couple of hours, the EU council has just signed off its official mandate for the trade talks — it shows a real contempt for the people of this place. In the past few weeks, we have also seen the UK Prime Minister speculate about building a bridge between Scotland and Ireland. Like many authoritarian narcissists, he has a fondness for monuments to himself and a weakness for making promises that, he knows, he will not keep. Members already know about his broken promises. We also know where money genuinely needs to be spent, especially on things like infrastructure delivery. What all of that highlights is the extent of UK Government cynicism in relation to Northern Ireland.

We have to note at this point, as colleagues in the Assembly Chamber have done, that we are

living with and recovering from the effects of a decade of austerity. That has had a real, serious, measurable impact on public services in Northern Ireland, and we are still recovering from it in a sense.

What does all that mean for the Budget; not the Budget Bill that we are debating today but the Budget that the Minister will bring forward in the weeks ahead? It means that, as the Executive develop a Budget and the Assembly scrutinises it, we need to be mindful of the perception of these institutions in Northern Ireland and further afield. In the Finance Committee, we are working to improve scrutiny processes, and we have heard commitments from the Department on how it intends to improve transparency and rigour in the Budget process. That includes the forever-delayed promise of a fiscal council for Northern Ireland that was first mooted more than a decade ago. If we are to give our citizens a clearer sense of how and where the Executive choose to spend money, we should welcome a genuinely robust and independent fiscal watchdog. We should insist that it also has economic forecasting powers, much as the Office for Budget Responsibility in London does, because fiscal scrutiny is only part of the picture. I agree with the Finance Minister that an independent fiscal commission, along the lines of the one in Scotland, should be considered. The commission should look at the long-term profile of Northern Ireland's public spending, along with its economic prospects. Whatever your constitutional perspective, it is no one's interest that we do so little long-term economic and fiscal planning in this place and are forced constantly to submit to the whims and, sometimes, cynicism of individual Ministers and officials in London, and I speak, in truth, as a former official from London.

Let me just make the point in parenthesis — I say this with respect to some of the colleagues opposite — that it is a fairly dismal constitutional argument that Northern Ireland must always be in permanent deficit to London. That cannot be, I am sure, the strongest argument that they can come up with about our current constitutional position.

I hope that the Budget that the Executive develop in the weeks ahead will help to address the real and urgent needs being faced by our public services, as well as properly directing capital spending in what is still one of the most unproductive parts of these islands and, indeed, western Europe. This is just another point in parenthesis, to repeat something that we talked about yesterday: despite the pressure that we are under and despite the real consensus that there is on the need to focus capital spending,

we are still handing back capital money this year. We know that the Treasury has come back to us in the last few weeks with a negative Barnett consequential that will lower the baseline for capital spending next year. It has to be a real focus for civil servants to ensure that we get capital money spent in order to make our economy more productive and to deliver infrastructure and other capital projects.

I hope that we start to put in place the foundations of a more serious and coherent approach to budgeting in a way that is more joined up with Executive priorities. Multi-year budgets should be a part of that. It will be a big ask, and it is a lot to deliver. Other Members have talked about the importance of multi-year Budgets, and I agree with them. We as an Assembly need to scrutinise much more robustly, whatever the demands of a five-party coalition. We face real cynicism among citizens about our ability to spend money properly on the things that matter to them. If we do not get this right, they will rightly judge us as a Potemkin parliament, rather than a real Assembly doing real government.

Dr Aiken: Mr Speaker, I start with an apology for not being in my place this morning. I thank my able deputy, Paul Frew, for stepping in at short notice and for making the statement on the Budget Bill today. I also echo the fine words of my fellow member of the Committee. I promise you, Mr Speaker, that we have not coordinated our remarks, but many of mine will be very similar in what we are trying to say and what we are going to do.

As we have seen in recent days, there is considerable disquiet in Northern Ireland about the extent of our funding crisis. All of us, as MLAs, owe the people an apology for our collective failure to tackle the problems that have been developing not just over the last couple of years but over the last decade; indeed, the failure to make critical decisions on education, health, infrastructure, housing, the economy and more have demonstrated the failings of our fragmented and, I am afraid, stagnated decision-making process. While there is, perhaps, a justifiable belief in some quarters that Northern Ireland has been overly subjected to the vagaries of austerity and shortfalls in commitments, we have to understand that, in our public finances, our Administration have grossly mismanaged the moneys — in some cases, beyond negligence. They are resources that are provided by our taxes and those of our companies and businesses through our payments of rates and VAT here and across all of our great nation. The fact that some of it is in the form of

annually managed expenditure or AME does not mean that it is free cash, despite what some parties may think. A fundamental question has to be this: do we get value for money from our public moneys? Do we effectively manage that money? Clearly, in the words of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on major infrastructure projects, we do not:

"While accepting that project delivery problems are not unique to Northern Ireland, it is disappointing that, in the 11 high-profile projects considered in this report, costs and timescales envisaged at the outset of projects were not achieved. Even flagship projects identified as the Northern Ireland Executive's highest priority and with funding secured over a longer period have suffered time delays and/or cost overruns."

Indeed, we have even managed to spend close on £80 million on the A5 and not one square metre of tarmac has been laid. That is nothing short of a disgrace.

Now, we are considering the Budget Bill that we, as MLAs, have been asked to pass; reluctantly, I ask them to do so. However, we should do that on the basis of a Programme for Government that has been properly assessed and tested for affordability. Since the Stormont House Agreement, the Ulster Unionist Party has called for a fiscal council, probably so-called because some parties could not accept that we must, indeed, have an office for budget responsibility as in other regions of these islands. Such a council would independently report on the affordability and value for money that our public moneys provide. We must demonstrate that there is accountability and responsibility for all of our expenditure.

We are entering a period where no political parties can shirk their responsibilities. Can we really afford £28 million for an office of identity or whatever when the roofs of our schools leak and our public transport system is about to go bust? Are we really going to spend £150 million-plus on investigating the past, while struggling to recruit and retain 7,500 police officers that we need now? How much more will we allocate and spend on extortionate university cost overruns, when one of our biggest exports is our children, who would rather go to a university across in Great Britain, while we still manage to pay vice-chancellors nearly £250,000 a year in salaries? As to the free money that some seem to be wedded to, when we have access to £100 million-plus of financial transactions capital, we cannot even spend it.

As politicians, we have collectively failed the people of Northern Ireland. We now have the option to start putting that right. The blank chequebook is no more, and the Finance Minister's party, if it ever gets into power in the Irish Republic, will discover that. Fiscal accountability and responsible spending must be the new normal. We must put an end to pet projects and actually deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. Per head of population across all these islands — north, south, east or west — we have the highest government spending. Can we really say that we have the best healthcare, education, public transport, universities or even roads? Are our social housing, our mental health provision, our support to our armed forces veterans even adequate? The answer to all these points, I am afraid, is a categorical "No". We need to change. We need to change our culture of dependency and, at long last, to make the right decisions for all our people.

As I have outlined, while we reluctantly agree to the Budget, we must now with urgency, if we are to move to effective future multi-year budgeting, introduce more than a sense of realism into our fiscal management. We must also, again with proper weighting and the rest of it and a degree of urgency, change the culture of inefficiency, lack of accountability and responsibility and, frankly, profligate waste. We will continue to press for good public services, but we must change from constantly asking to be bailed out by the rest of our nation. We should be setting a priority for restoring Northern Ireland to the path of prosperity rather than dependency. As MLAs, we now have a major task ahead of us, and a future responsibility for a realistic Programme for Government will be an appropriate starting point.

Mrs Cameron: I will make some brief remarks on the Department of Health as DUP Committee lead and as a member of the Health Committee.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document, which is essentially the manifesto of the House, makes it clear that health is a priority in this mandate. That is entirely appropriate, given the waiting list crisis and the pressing challenges that we find ourselves facing. However, like any manifesto, New Decade, New Approach requires money to deliver its objectives. Last week, the Minister outlined his needs in the media. That was £661 million to meet the objectives of New Decade, New Approach and to maintain current services. That was the headline, but we need to delve beneath the headline and explore how we can do things better, how money can be better spent and how

each pound can and must do more. The Minister also needs to be brave and explore what changes can be made to assist us to meet the demands of a growing and ever-ageing population, which is a good thing, of course, the challenges around growing levels of obesity and the health challenges that all those issues pose.

When it comes to funding health, my party will not be found wanting. However, as well as investing money, we as a legislature, Executive and Committee must pursue the long-awaited reform of our health service that is so badly needed, to allow us to transform health and social care in Northern Ireland. How long will we talk about it without enacting the change required to transform services? It has become clear that the reform that has started, thanks to the confidence and supply moneys, needs a surge of investment in order to effect the changes so desperately needed for our health service to survive. Delay causes decay, and that needs to be addressed with urgency before the decline is terminal.

I want to mention some specifics in relation to the health budget, the first of which is pay for health workers. We all heard on the doorstep and from speaking to nurses and other healthcare staff the frustration on lack of pay parity and agreed that the matter needed to be addressed. Our nurses, in particular, do an incredible job and deserve to be rewarded with an appropriate level of pay. It is more than appropriate that nurses are appreciated, and we need to make that right.

We also look at New Decade, New Approach and the commitment to deliver three cycles of IVF to people looking to start a family. That was debated at length last week, and, as a House, we rightly reaffirmed that commitment. The money must be provided in the Budget and moves made by the Minister to address it as a matter of urgency, given that, for some, the clock is ticking loudly. I, for one, do not underestimate the challenge in delivering on this commitment alone, given the issues around capacity. I cannot let the subject go without referring to the agreed amendment on the recent motion that called for early intervention through an education programme to raise awareness and protect fertility. That is the type of intervention that should result in less reliance on IVF treatment in the years to come.

4.15 pm

We must ensure that the contaminated blood victims' hopes for proper recognition and compensation are delivered on. The Chair and I

have met groups who are retraumatised daily by having to lobby for something that should not have to be asked for in the first place. I know that the Minister wishes to deliver for those victims, and it is right that the House supports him in doing so. Compensation cannot give those individuals back their full health and strength, but it can help to ease the everyday struggles that receiving contaminated blood means for their lives and those of their families. I am pleased that the victims of contaminated blood are now in receipt of some of the compensation payment that is due to them. I urge the Minister to ensure that the entirety of the £1 million allocation makes its way directly and swiftly to those who suffer horrendously through no fault of their own and to ensure that provision is made for the future.

We must also focus on the mental health crisis that faces our community in Northern Ireland. We have heard how, for many, mental illness starts in teenage years and becomes a lifelong struggle. Mental health, just like our physical health, needs to be taken care of. I am glad that we, as a society, talk more about our mental health. We all have good and bad mental health at stages throughout life, for many reasons. Many in our constituencies are in need of help. The Executive must resource that aspect of healthcare in a manner that reflects the growing severity of the situation that we face.

As Chair of the all-party group on autism, let me also make clear the need for substantial investment in caring for those with ASD. Let us prioritise the acceleration of the diagnosis process. Let us put in place the necessary support, whether that is behavioural, dietary or speech and language therapy. With the rate of autism rising in Northern Ireland and many children being diagnosed, it is our duty to provide the interventions that can make life better for those with a diagnosis and their families.

Our key priority must be an effective front-line health service that meets the needs of all those who call on it. I share the public frustration with waiting times in our A&E departments; for long-awaited and much-needed surgical procedures; to see the local GP; and in many more aspects of our NHS. Much can be done to address those issues, whether that is additional funding to train more doctors and nurses; use of the private sector to address some of the totally unacceptable elective care waiting lists; or the roll-out of pilot projects such as the one funded in the Northern Trust recently, whereby GPs, rather than visiting their own patients in a nursing or residential home, see all those who need attention there on the same visit. That

programme reduced needless admissions to hospital and the demand on ambulance services. It is the type of programme, piloted through confidence and supply money, that is in immediate need of continued funding across Northern Ireland to ensure that we start to meaningfully tackle the ever-increasing demands on services in a common-sense and compassionate way.

I have not even touched on the value and necessity of pharmacy in Northern Ireland and the huge role that pharmacists' expertise has in preventing unnecessary, expensive hospital admissions, and we must not forget the role of physiotherapists. We have so much talent to call on in 2020 but only if the issues are given the priority in the Budget that they merit. It is vital that the appropriate moneys are invested in the use of technology and artificial intelligence. I certainly look forward to hearing more from the departmental officials soon about the new encompass programme and what it will mean for streamlining the health service in Northern Ireland. I trust that it will bring different technological systems together and, in turn, aid the Department's planning and management. It is time to embrace artificial intelligence and ask what potential it has to improve our health service. We must prioritise prevention.

Developing next-generation healthcare by implementing Bengoa and investing in new services, GPs and health staff, tackling waiting lists, embracing AI and new technology and prioritising prevention should be our manifesto for health. We must bring about a new future for mental health services by boosting prevention, leading on trauma and increasing investment to transform services. Let this be the Executive who start to turn the tide on all those issues, to turn the corner and see the real and meaningful improvement that we need. That is the challenge: the reward is a healthier, happier population. I finish by wishing Minister Swann well in office.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Fáiltim roimh an Bhille ón Aire, agus ba mhaith liom ráiteas gairid a dhéanamh ar an Bhille. I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Bill. I want to say a few words, like everyone else.

Yesterday's debate was interesting, and, actually, today's debate has been interesting. It might not be as interesting for the Minister because he has had to endure this and a Question Time. Even though there have been disagreements in the Chamber about the way certain things have happened, everybody has taken into consideration not being here for three years and the way in which money was spent or

even not spent during that period. We all know that the process is about gathering up the Supplementary Estimates and Supply resolution. We will have the Budget Bill in the future, and we will probably have the same debate again, if we are honest, maybe with some tweaks.

I want to make the point that we are not just saying that we need to look at fiscal flexibilities or even fiscal autonomy in raising our moneys. We are not just saying it from an ideological point of view; we are saying it because we do not have enough money in the grant. We are at the mercy of a Tory Budget and Tory austerity, whether you call it "Conservatism", "Tories" or whatever or maybe something else that would not be recorded in Hansard. Either way, we all have problems with the way money needs to be spent and targeted towards those who need it most, and that is sometimes where the twain do not meet. I remember, when I was in DCAL, giving money to Health and Education. I cut my budget to do that because it was the right thing to do. When you ask the Finance Minister to be brave, those are the sorts of things that we need to look at, regardless of who is in the Department. We need to prioritise the services that all our citizens rely on, and the money that we need to supply those services is very important.

I also want to make the point that it is worrying that, when you look at the whole budgeting process or even the lack of it — that is what we meant when we talked about the lack of transparency — you see that, while the British Government have made commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', they certainly have not been as forthcoming about who will pay for them. Those are commitments that all the parties who were involved in the discussions and negotiations raised as very important. A lot of us, regardless of what priority we give to them, will certainly be able to see something that, we all felt, citizens and constituents needed to see a difference in. More importantly, the British Government need to invest — along with the Irish Government but more so the British Government — due to the consequences of the legacy of the past and all that that brings. We will all come at these debates on money and budgets from a different position, and we all may have different ideas about what needs to be priority one, two, three or four.

I listened to Andrew blame us all for the cost of division. There was no mention of the British Government or anybody else's role, for that matter, but I accept his point. I live in north Belfast. I do not want to see interfaces there for

evermore. I am one of the people who stood on interfaces to make sure that kids did not go in jail and ended up in the Mater A&E. I want them gone, but I also want consultation with the residents first rather than some grandiose statements, because they are the people and the community and they need to be consulted. Do I want to see them gone? Absolutely. I am with you on that. I am also with you on sharing services in education as long as parents are consulted. We go through primary education and maybe go to a post-primary school and even to third-level education. The first time I met somebody from the opposite side of Belfast, never mind somebody of another religion, was the first time I put my foot in university. That is the experience for a lot of people of my age.

We need to take all this in the round. If we have made commitments, which we have, to take the big issues on, we also need to work out at what stage we take them on. That is part of political discourse. There will be some legislation — the Budget Bill is no exception — that will be done through the accelerated passage process. That is the last option for anyone. It is the last resort rather than the first option. We all got to read the Budget in our Committees, and, if you had more time, you could say more things, but, essentially, we were all given the opportunity to raise our concerns. I am not saying this just because she is my colleague, but, even in the short time that we have been here and with the small bits of money that we have — more is needed — Deirdre Hargey has been able to make decisions on bedroom tax and her intention to set that pathway out. She has also talked about protecting people who are very vulnerable and about the need to consider how we look at housing. Yes, it will take loads of money and new ways —.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly.

Mr Storey: The Member knows about this, because she and I have had the discussion. When will the party opposite, along with their colleagues in the SDLP, recognise that the Housing Executive's current structure is not fit for purpose? I want good housing in your constituency just as I want it in mine, but report after report has stated that there needs to be a change in the way in which the Housing Executive borrows money. When will we get to a point beyond the rhetoric and make a decision similar to what the Minister has done with the bedroom tax? That was the right thing to do, but, remember, it has had consequences

for the block grant, out of which we run this part of the United Kingdom.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is right: we have had the discussion before. We have had some rows as well, but the good thing is that we were still talking afterwards. That is politics. It is good politics.

We will not agree on a lot of things, but one thing that I agree with you on is that all citizens need good services, and housing is one such service. The Housing Executive emerged from the fact that there was discrimination in councils, and the model has been there for a long time. Is the Housing Executive delivering housing in the way in which it was intended to? No, it is not. The reason that it is not is that it is only in 'New Decade, New Approach' that there has been an agreement to exclude it from paying corporation tax and to get rid of the historical debt that came to the Housing Executive from local government. We need to look at its vires to build houses and do better, but we also need to look at other systems and structures that are fit for purpose in the 21st century. I imagine that we will have the same conversation with Deirdre Hargey and officials from DFC. I am not neuralgic about that; what I am passionate about is that, regardless of who people are, it is about need not creed, and it should never have been that way. It was what it was, but we are now moving forward.

I doubt that your constituency needs more houses than mine does, but, if it did, I would support them being built, and that is the way in which we need to continue. Your constituency has needs, but there are needs in all our constituencies. For example, there may be a need for more family homes in my constituency and for more homes for older people and those with disabilities elsewhere. We need to scope out what the need is and try to deliver on it. There are those who do not have a roof over their head or an address of their own, and there are homes in which three or four generations live under one roof. That is humiliating. Kids grow up with mental health problems that they never had before. There is no privacy. There is no space to grow, to make mistakes, to listen to music or to have a shower: all that stuff. I see it in my constituency — I see it in my family — so this is not just politic rhetoric. Who would want that? No one wants it, but we need to look at ways in which we can raise money to add to the block grant to try to begin to deliver to meet the need.

At the minute, there are 36,000 people on the housing waiting list, 26,500 of whom are in

housing stress. Who wants that on their watch? None of us does. It is a five-party Executive, and we do not want that, but we also need to look at other ways of dealing with it. For example, yesterday, you or someone else described the sums of financial transactions capital that were sent back as "eye-watering". I have complete confidence that that will not happen again. Of the 16 categories, five belong to DFC, covering housing for people with disabilities, empty homes and other things that we have all called for in previous debates in this mandate, the previous mandate and the one before that. Other things will take not a pile of money, just the political will. We need those responsible to get cracking, and that is one of the things that we need to look at.

We also need to look at procurement, particularly if we are buying in. For example, we have all spoken to different sectors, particularly in the past couple of years. The construction sector will tell us that it is good to go and just needs the projects, but the projects in the construction sector do not have apprenticeships.

They need to have the apprenticeships in order to get the social clauses, in order to build houses, and so on and so forth. Can it be fixed? It absolutely can.

4.30 pm

The way in which New Decade, New Approach laid out co-design and participation will be pivotal, particularly in the next Budget process, for not just us as elected representatives, but for people involved in the community and voluntary sector. No disrespect to any of the big community and voluntary sector groups, but I would like to see the smaller groups having the ability to get involved in the process as well. Often enough, the big community and voluntary sector groups do a great job, but they do not always speak on behalf of the smaller groups that we all know. To be quite honest, there is nothing empowering about somebody sending you a message on WhatsApp about a meeting that you were not at or, worse still, that you did not even know about.

We need to have fiscal powers and the ability to raise our own funds for planning. Matthew spoke about the Scottish model and commissioning. There is good practice on this island and across these islands, and we need to gather all those up. It will not be for the next Budget process and it might not be for the one after that, but it will certainly be for the next mandate. I would like us, collectively, to — it

was mentioned yesterday, and it has certainly been mentioned today — look at the processes and try to bed down roots for those coming behind us, irrespective of who takes the Departments, to make sure that we do not have another report from Kieran Donnelly, as nice a man as he is, that talks about, as you referred to earlier, the eye-watering sum of £700 million. The RHI report will come out, and lessons will be learned. I hope that you are wrong, Mervyn, that some of the officials who may be implicated in that are obviously going to work elsewhere, but I do not want to make any comment on any of that stuff. I will respect the decision. What we all know is that substantial sums of public money, going from millions to tens of millions to hundreds of millions, have potentially literally gone up the chimney. Who wants that? No one does.

We want to make sure that, whatever Budget process comes forward, as you did when you were the Minister, and as we will do in our Committees, we will be reading. If there is anything that we have learned from RHI, it is that everybody will read their papers and then some, and reading them again and then some. That affects us all. It was certainly in the middle of a crisis that caused us all sorts of problems.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the fact that the Member and I are having this conversation, because it seems that she is always looking across at me on these issues. Maybe we will involve the rest of the Members. She made reference to reading papers. I am not trying to be clever or facetious, but we discovered today that Casement Park requires an additional £33 million. That is eye-watering. Who was not reading their papers when the original business case came into your Department and your successor's Department? I have been where the Finance Minister is and where Minister Hargey is; it is very difficult and challenging to read every paper that comes across your desk. However, when you have a paper now that says that there is £33 million of a deficit, are we not all collectively responsible for taking our eye off the ball on many of these issues?

Mr Speaker: Could I just make a wee point by way of intervention? This is becoming a very interesting conversation [*Laughter*] but we are somewhat straying off the subject of the Budget on the Order Paper today.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assure you, a Cheann Comhairle, that I will stick to the Budget. I am afraid to look at Mervyn in case he thinks that there are any notions. [*Laughter.*] Let me say for the record that there absolutely are not. I am looking at him because I actually listened to him yesterday and today, but I am going to look at you now, a Cheann Comhairle, and I am going to talk about the Budget.

The Member has given me an opportunity to talk about Casement Park, and he is probably going to kick himself for doing so. Nelson McCausland approved the original business case, and I lifted it and took it. I brought Casement Park to planning, but it failed planning on traffic management. Since then, like the A5 and other big projects, lots of zeros are ticking up, but not a sod has been cut. That is not good enough on my watch or anybody else's watch. It needs to be delivered, because it was part of a stadia development programme at a cost of £110 million which the previous Executive signed up to and which we have all carried forward since. The subregional programme needs to be consulted on, as does the next one and the one after that. The point is this: are there lessons to be learned? There absolutely are. That is the point that I made earlier about budgeting.

We were talking about the Estimates yesterday and the Supply resolution, we are going through this debate today and we will probably have the same, if not similar, debates when the Budget comes forward. However, if you were to lift the conclusions from RHI whenever they come, the different audit reports that have come through Kieran Donnelly's office and some of the lessons that we have learned from our own Departments, we could save hundreds of millions of pounds. If we make a commitment to do that, that is fine. I will finish on this —.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I heard subregional stadia mentioned, and, as a member of the Communities Committee, along with the Member, I understand the great need to implement the subregional stadia funding. Does the Member believe that the available funding is adequate to deliver on the demand that is there?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not the Minister for sport now, but does sport need more money? Yes it does. Do grassroots sports, which keep people healthy and, at times, keep people alive — literally at times — need more money? Yes, they do. Do we need to reduce obesity, heart problems and circulation problems? Do we need to increase participation, inclusion and all those things that sport brings? Yes, absolutely.

I am not going to say any more than that, because I am conscious that Conor and Deirdre are responsible, along with Executive colleagues, for bringing that forward. I appreciate the Member's intervention.

I will finish on this. The next serious conversation needs to be about raising our own money and what we can do across the island. In terms of the Barnett consequentials that came forward, and we hear that there was a reduction in some this week, we are not getting some of the consequentials invested in England, and we need to look at that. The issue for us is deciding what to do with the money that we have in a period of Tory austerity, which looks like it will last for a long time. We have a particularly emboldened British Prime Minister who has a vote on the back of an increasing sense of British nationalism. Those who have less are going to get less, and those who have more are going to get more, and none of us in this House want that. I appreciate the Minister bringing the Bill forward, and I look forward to the Budget debate.

Mr Speaker: I call John Blair. I have every confidence, Mr Blair, that you will stick to the Budget discussion. There are 16 Members yet to speak.

Mr Blair: Mr Speaker, thank you. I promise you that I will do my best to stick to those guidelines. I cannot promise to match in quality or duration the previous exchange across the Chamber, but I will do my best to stick to the guidelines that you have outlined.

It is opportune that I am following Carál Ní Chuilín because I was going to refer, in the speech that I prepared, to my experience of working as a civil servant when she was a Minister. I worked in Inland Fisheries when Carál was my Minister, and I am therefore poacher turned gamekeeper in every respect. I know also from that experience that ministerial drive and support of staff in the community can make a real difference to people's lives. Carál touched on it during her speech, and I am going to come to it in a moment.

Like a number of Members, some of whom spoke today and yesterday, I am relatively new to the Assembly and to our budgetary process. I, like others, am learning from this, and I am contributing to the debate as the Alliance agriculture, environment and rural affairs spokesperson. I will probably touch as well on some of the role that I play as a member of the Policing Board, on which I serve on behalf of this Assembly and my party. I hope as well to address some new approaches to ensuring that

Departments work, as referred to a moment ago, in close liaison with communities wherever possible.

The Chair and Deputy Chair of the AERA Committee have already spoken, so I will try to avoid repetition as far as I can, but I will address some of the challenges that the Executive and the Finance Minister face that have been referred to in previous debates. As I said, I will try to keep that brief.

Current challenges, both domestic-political and global-environmental, are forcing an agenda for DAERA and its officials, and us as public representatives, like we have seldom seen in recent times. The Finance Minister and other Ministers will be aware that that brings an expectation of financial provision and political responsibility to properly address issues that are really with us, such as the pressures that EU exit could bring to our vital agri-food sector, family farms and our rural communities. The Department of Finance will, I hope, be prepared for changes in budget requirements as that rolls out and will, I hope, make provision for contingencies in that regard also, because this is an ever-evolving situation and there is still a great degree of uncertainty around the processes involved.

There is also growing awareness, of course, of the climate crisis, which has been referred to in the debate a number of times. There is a growing demand that we react to it with action and not words. It is now realistically expected that environmentalism be embedded at every level of government in planning and delivery and that necessary investment is made to change approach in the apparatus in government and departmental infrastructure, so that our collective carbon emissions are reducing towards, hopefully, elimination. There is the need, as well as the commitment in agreements reached, to have, in Northern Ireland, an environmental protection agency, working to safeguard quality of life and our natural habitat. There will, of course, be provision needed for the necessary transition from current arrangements around the environment to that new agency. There has been mention of an environmental office as well, and I expect that the Minister will have to make provision for transition from the current NIEA arrangements. It is an agency that will, ultimately, deal with issues as important as the air that we breathe and the water that we drink.

Proper and justified tribute has been paid during the debate to the work done by civil servants during the absence of an Assembly, and I wish to fully associate myself with the

remarks made and do so genuinely. I have to say, looking at the DAERA budget and accounts in the context of the issues that I have just raised, quite frankly, the fact that some Departments are failing to spend tens of millions of pounds begs some questions. I am not seeking that it be done retrospectively, but, hopefully, in the days, months and years ahead, with a joined-up and collaborative approach at Executive level, we will move forward through the remainder of this mandate ensuring that resources are fully utilised to meet the issues that I, and other Members, have raised.

The New Decade, New Approach agreement contains specific reference to the principles of co-design and co-production, and that brings me to the points that I raised about departmental interaction with communities. Co-design and co-production are a key part of that. I put it to the Minister that there are few areas where this is more ready to go than on environmental and countryside projects and groups that are already working, particularly, though not exclusively, in rural areas. There is, if we pursue this engagement and get it right, an opportunity to harness expertise and commitment in a meaningful, positive and productive way.

I make the suggestion of community linkages not to secure efficiencies or to seek ad hoc casual support, but so that we can share a depth of knowledge that is already there, often linked to local support agencies, such as councils, but all too often not connected to central government in its thinking and delivery. In putting that forward, I refer again to the work that was done, with my experience in DCAL, where that interaction with communities could make real differences to those who are the most vulnerable in our society, such as people suffering from mental health problems and the homeless. It can help with other health projects across the country, for example cancer projects. That is simply one business area of one Department tying in with other government agencies in an interdepartmental fashion to deliver to those most in need of it on the ground.

There is scope to try to extend that across Departments and government. Hopefully, the Minister will indicate whether his Department can lead in that coordination and cooperation across Departments to build that mutual working arrangement, trust and respect.

4.45 pm

I said at the start that I will touch on policing. I attended a meeting here at lunchtime with Members who are also members of the Policing Board, and we looked at the policing plan for the years ahead. I am sure that the Minister of Finance will be well aware of the demands made there and commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, where we will have to examine very closely changing crime rates and crime types, crime trends, cybercrime, human trafficking, corporate crime and, of course, the need for adjustments for the outworkings of the policing of Brexit.

It has been said many times over the years that policing cannot be done by the police alone. Without repeating everything that we just said on another issue, that is another clear requirement for more joined-up government, more collaboration, more working with external agencies, and working to extend good projects that are already in place on health triage systems with the police, where first responders work with local policing teams to ensure that those most in stress and most in need are treated with priority when they most need it. It also has the effect of ensuring that we minimise situations where up to a dozen police officers are engaged in A&E departments across one area on a typical weekend night. I am sure that you will agree, Mr Speaker, that that is not a good use of police resources.

What I am really addressing is the readiness to meet those changing demands. I hope that the Finance Minister will refer to that because we are doing so in the context of expectation around the increased visibility of police and a commitment to maximise, where possible, neighbourhood policing.

I hope that those commitments in NDNA can be met and will extend beyond collaborative departmental working to ensure that Departments work as closely as possible with other agencies to ensure safer communities and cleaner, more environmentally friendly communities.

Mr Storey: I am sure that Members will be delighted to know that I am going to make another contribution today and cause all sorts of trouble, but that is not the reason why I come to the Chamber. As the Speaker knows, I try to engage in a way that is meaningful to Members because it is very easy for us to come here and to think that we are not part of the process. We play a vital role not only in the Chamber but in Committees. That needs to be conveyed to our colleagues in the Executive because, on some occasions, what is discussed here fails to be conveyed in a way that we get outcomes when

it comes to Executive decisions. Maybe the debates today and yesterday will help to send a message to the Executive that things need to be done differently.

I will comment on what we need to do regarding what I call a "priority financial framework". Yesterday and today, we have had, "We need, we need, we need" and "We have to have". The list goes on. We all have them in our constituencies, and I could give the same list for mine, but in this Budget process and previous processes, I think that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party referred earlier to a fiscal council. I call it a priority financial framework. We need a system that reflects the priorities of the people whom we claim to represent. I heard in the House today, yesterday and in previous times, "But the people in my constituency require", but when it comes to listing those priorities in any opinion poll, what comes out top will be health. Of course, health has the largest percentage of the Budget. What comes out second is education. Those are the beginnings of a priority financial framework. My party, the parties opposite, all the parties here and those who do not have a party all claim to have the most important issue of the day, but if it costs a huge amount, we need to have a serious rethink.

Let me move on to another issue. The Members opposite need to be reminded of it. It is British austerity. That austerity was an awful thing. It was introduced, yet again, by those bad Tories — those bad politicians in London. Who implemented it in Northern Ireland for 10 years? What happened between 2007 and the contrived collapse of the institutions in 2016? There were Sinn Féin Ministers — Ministers of the Crown. If austerity was such an issue, and if it was being imposed on us in such an impossible and terrible way, why did they not bring down the institutions before 2016? They were quite happy to operate the institutions and implement austerity.

Of course, we then had the double standards of those who were in the Executive and not in the Executive. Parties like the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party wanted the luxury of the ministerial portfolio but also the ability to say, "Oh no, we did not make that decision. We were able to vote against that. Our hands are clean. We would never do that". What happened to a five-party mandatory coalition? It went out the window when it did not suit them. When will we all get real? There are contradictions in my position on many occasions, but at least I have enough honesty as a sinner saved by grace, as mentioned earlier, to admit when there are things that we

did not get right and then to try collectively to fix them.

Housing is an issue close to my heart. I want to see the people of Northern Ireland, whether they are in Ballymena or Ballymurphy, Coleraine or Coalisland, Ballymoney or —.

Mr Dunne: Bangor. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Storey: We had better not forget Bangor.

Mr Chambers: North Down.

Mr Storey: North Down.

Mr Dunne: That will do.

Mr Storey: As I said at the Dispatch Box when I was Minister, I want to see the people of Northern Ireland have good quality homes, not just houses. If we transform the housing stock — the 87,000 houses owned by the Housing Executive, those owned by housing associations, those in co-ownership and those in the private-rented sector — but particularly social housing through the stock that is in public ownership, we transform those communities. The Member for North Belfast has good examples from her constituency of quality homes in the private sector, quality homes provided by housing associations and quality Housing Executive stock. The problem is that we are not doing building enough homes. We are not unlocking the potential of the construction industry, which wants to build new houses. I ask Members this, through the Chair, of course: does anyone know when the Housing Executive last built a new home? It has been years — over 20 years — since the Housing Executive built, because it cannot build houses. We have left it to housing associations. We have left it to others, and the deficit is shocking. I encourage the Minister to ensure that housing is prioritised in any future budgetary process.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. When he talks about housing, he also talks about education and health, because, as has been proven time after time, if young people live in good, affordable accommodation, it helps them greatly and benefits their education and health. Everything is tied up with housing. That is why budgetary processes should not be in silos any more.

Mr Storey: I accept what the Member says. The difficulty is how we translate that into working together collaboratively in a way that

enables other Assembly Members and I to tell our constituents that the outcome has delivered for them. The housing that I saw in parts of my constituency, in Ballymena, and in my colleague's constituency, was shameful. What I saw in West Belfast was shameful. People should not have to live in those conditions. When we change the housing environment, we change the opportunities in health, education, community cohesion and well-being for all our citizens. I urge the Minister and his party to genuinely grasp the issue of a new model for housing in Northern Ireland. Let us not have this — we will use 10 as a simple number — 10 houses for the Prods and 10 houses for the Roman Catholics. That is a shameful way to distribute housing.

The Member referred to discrimination, and that is the reason why the Housing Executive was established. There are some people in the House who seem to forget that discrimination worked against working-class Protestants as well. It seems as though all the ills were done against one community. I had a grandfather who did not own his own property, who did not have a vote, who did not have a conacre and who did not have all those other things. The difference with my grandfather was that he never justified taking up arms or using violent means to try to change the situation. I think that is the difference that some people in the House need to remember.

Mr G Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member state clearly, then, that he and his party are for objective need when it comes to building houses? In there lies the difficulty that we have had in equality in housing for years.

Mr Storey: I think that the Member will also accept that it is about how we then come to determine what objective need is. The Member for Foyle can wave her hands as though this is not an issue, but this affects her constituency as well, and it is a problem. The issue is how we can have an honest discussion about objective need. I will not stand in the way of meeting the needs of anyone in any part of this country of Northern Ireland, provided that we are doing it in a way that is fair to everybody else.

We see that in how we distribute welfare reform. There was an inherent imbalance. Working families are discriminated against because there are some people who believe that their needs are greater than others. That is not fair; that is not an equitable society. I am of the view that we need a process that deals with objective need, but we need to agree on how

we determine what that objective need is and how we are going to agree the process for it.

Let me come to another area on the Budget. I would love to see progress being made in the Department for Communities on Supporting People. Supporting People has been ring-fenced for a number of years, but there has never been an uplift. It has struggled. We see organisations like the Simon Community that really are placed in a very difficult place to deliver in many of our constituencies with a reduced budget but an evergrowing demand for their services. That was something that I, unfortunately, was not able to achieve in my time, and I would love to think that others could collectively achieve an uplift in the resource spend for Supporting People.

The Member for North Belfast also made reference to one of the problems that the system faces with planning. That is an area where we have to draw certain lines. Changes in planning should not allow everybody to build where they want to build at all costs. They need to be brought about in the planning system to allow for quicker and more expeditious planning decisions so that they do not contribute to the problems that we have seen in some of the major projects involving capital expenditure. I see in my constituency the slow burn or slow process for getting decisions made, and that can create difficulties for a variety of reasons, so changes in that would be helpful.

I turn, Mr Speaker, to issues in the Department of Justice.

I am a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. My colleague Mr Blair referred to some of the issues that emanate from policing in Northern Ireland. Again, this falls into the category of understanding some of the challenges. My colleague the Chair of the Justice Committee referred to the challenges earlier. There is a £32 million pressure on pensions, an £11 million one on legacy issues, and a £42 million one on Brexit, injury-while-on-duty and tackling paramilitarism. Coupled with a £54 million funding pressure for the PSNI, those pressures come with a considerably heavy price tag.

5.00 pm

I read the following comment recently in one of the reports from the police to the Policing Board:

"The reality is that the PSNI is at the point where absorbing material financial

pressures or budget cuts directly impacts on front-line services, which affects the service's ability to keep people safe. They continue to erode the service's ability to prevent harm, protect our communities and detect offences and offenders."

That is the challenge for us.

That brings me back to the point about having a priority financial framework. Surely policing is a priority for us all. When we are in need, it is one of the first organisations that we will have recourse to, but the demand placed on the police to become ever more efficient and to be able to do more of what is required of them increases daily.

Some Members have a particular interest in tackling domestic violence. They have been advocates for the changes that are needed to address the issue. Sadly, domestic violence is an ever-increasing problem in our society, and the police need to be given all the resources possible to address it and many other issues.

I will conclude by raising a number of other issues. The Chief Constable has already made a request for funding for 600 new full-time officers. It is vital that the merits of that business case be recognised. Similarly, it is unacceptable that some of Northern Ireland's most skilled and experienced detectives — those who are seen as global leaders in counterterrorism — are housed in some 180 Portakabins throughout the police estate. The Chief Constable has a particular concern, because it is not all about the individual. It is also about the environment in which the individual operates. It begs the question of what message is being sent to those interested in a career in policing. We have heard a lot of debate in recent days on its importance. I trust that it is a matter that will still be of importance to Members.

The Gillen review report has made clear recommendations to the Department of Justice, the PSNI, the Public Prosecution Service, the Courts and Tribunals Service and other agencies about the need for transformation. If there is one report that the House needs to take seriously, it is that. We need to find all the resource at our disposal to ensure that its recommendations are implemented and that those who are exposed to the most vile and horrendous forms of abuse are given every possible protection.

A lot of what I raised requires cross-departmental help and assistance. No one Minister can address all the concerns. Some of

us are sceptical as to whether the Assembly will survive and wonder when we will have the next contrived problem that allows people to walk out the door.

If there is a genuine willingness to make these institutions work, they will work only when we have in place the proper financial framework that recognises that we cannot do it all. We cannot continue going to Whitehall with a begging bowl and looking for more. We genuinely need to trim our sails in certain ways that will mean we get the best possible outcome for the people whom we claim we are here to represent.

Mr Catney: I am glad to be in the Chamber discussing issues that matter to our people — all our people — collectively. It took me more than 1,000 days to get the chance to make my maiden speech, so I warmly welcome the fact that we are finally here making decisions and standing up for people.

I want us to try to focus on the present; I do not want to look back. We have a past and we have a future. Instead of using one eye for looking back and one eye for looking forward, let us use both our eyes for the here and now and make where we live better. This is my home; I want it to be better. Every day of my life, I tried, as a self-employed man, to give employment for Northern Ireland and make it a better place that we can all live in and share.

As Members have clearly articulated, our public services and public servants are under intolerable pressure. They are at breaking point, and, in many cases, they are already broken. The pressures facing health, education, housing and our welfare system have reached crisis point. We must do better and deliver for our people across our community. I use that very strong word "community" because I do not see two; I see only one. I see us all together on this. If we want to build this, we have to do it together. If you are lifting a heavy load and we share that heavy load, it surely makes the weight much lighter.

We have been failed by stalemate and stagnation for far too long. The pressure on our public services is felt acutely in my own constituency of Lagan Valley, where our schools are at breaking point, people are waiting too long for medical appointments, and young families are struggling to get their first decent job or homes of their own. This Budget, and everything we do in the Chamber, needs to be about unlocking the potential of our people right across our community. We have a wealth of talent across Northern Ireland, with some of

the most creative and courageous people in our midst. We must create an atmosphere in which they can thrive and are not forced abroad for decent jobs. I myself have had to go out to two girls; they went to China. It is a big loss in families when they go. I have one living in Munich now, and even that is a loss. Now, you are not just saying goodbye to your children; you are saying goodbye to their husbands and your children's children.

I want to briefly add some thoughts as the SDLP business and innovation spokesman. As a former businessman, as I said earlier, I understand the issues that our businesses, particularly our SMEs, face and the complexities of issues that are at hand. I am sorry to keep going on about unfair rates, but I genuinely believe that they are unfair. If we want to try to grow our tourism industry, we need to look at those who are at the coalface and trying to grow it. I have spoken to the Minister, and I hope that he tries to take that on board or tries to unleash that potential or address the fear that is there. The SDLP will work to ensure that our entrepreneurs are not priced off the local high street by unfair rates.

Businesses require certainty in order to thrive. As SDLP business and enterprise spokesman, I want to use my experience to help shape an agenda that ensures businesses have some degree of certainty — an agenda that creates an environment that lets our entrepreneurs pursue their hopes for their businesses and for their communities. For too long, there has been a lack of both central and local government support for those trying to create jobs. The SDLP will endeavour to help SMEs get the level of support that they need from government to thrive, with expert advice and guidance, and to ensure that they get paid on time and in full for the services and products that they provide to local government.

We must have our eyes wide open to the scale of the challenges ahead. Delivering a strong, regionally balanced economy that works for everyone, with high-quality public services, will not be easy. However, I believe that, with some political will and a lot of hard work, we can get together to deliver better for everyone.

Mr Speaker, I wish to personally thank you and all the Members of the House for your kind words on the death of my mother and on the death of my nephew; it meant a lot to us. I just want to put on record my thanks to all who visited me or came up to me on the Floor or around the Building and to you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words. Thank you all.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Catney.

Mr Robinson: My contribution is mainly based on the budget problems in my constituency. Minister, while every constituency has many budgetary needs, I believe that my constituency of East Londonderry sometimes tends to be overlooked. East Londonderry has a large tourist element to its economy, so easy and safe travel is essential throughout all parts of the constituency. Minister Mallon has made it clear that she needs more finances to tackle the infrastructure problems. Those include the Ballykelly bypass in my constituency, which is long overdue, and the Gortcorbies climbing lane between Limavady and Coleraine, which you are well aware of, Minister, and for which I have lobbied for many years.

In all the years that I have been an elected representative, I have never known our street lighting to be in such a dire state. Somewhere in the region of 12,000 to 14,000 street lights are out throughout Northern Ireland. In my home town of Limavady, we will soon need torches and candles to get around. Infrastructure certainly needs finance to address those health and safety issues.

On education, numerous schools need long-overdue repairs carried out to ageing buildings, so the Education Minister needs resources to progress those projects. One project in my constituency is a school that has never had a gym, and it has been raising that issue for a decade. Our education system is our children's future, and we must try to give our young people the best opportunities for the rest of their life.

Magilligan prison in my constituency has long been promised a rebuild, and the former Justice Minister Claire Sugden knows how long I have lobbied for that project to become a reality. Again, it is long overdue.

I also want to highlight the many difficulties that surround the provision of housing, to which Mr Storey alluded recently. In my constituency, we have hundreds of people on waiting lists who require homes, but no homes are being built to address the chronic waiting lists in my constituency. We also have problems with repairs and adaptations to Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties. I will be meeting your colleague in a few weeks to discuss those urgent issues.

Minister, all we need is for you to acquire the necessary finances to cure many of our ills. I appreciate that that is a near-impossible task, but I urge you, where possible, to make the

level of budget available to all Ministers to address the issues that I mentioned, in an attempt to begin addressing the very real needs in Northern Ireland and, in particular, in my constituency.

5.15 pm

Mr Chambers: It is one thing to have a wish list of perceived must-have projects and services but entirely another matter to find the budget to deliver them. Part 1 of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document majored on the challenging issues facing our health service. Those challenges are not just faced by patients on a long waiting list for treatment but involve the mental and physical health of our dedicated NHS staff, at all levels, who struggle daily to cope with working conditions that are overcome only because of their loyalty, dedication and willingness to go the extra mile and work the extra unpaid hours to provide compassionate patient care. It is easy to forget that they work in a high-pressure, life-and-death environment. The dependency on their goodwill is not sustainable and neither can it be justified.

The 'New Decade' document has been widely quoted as being fully supported by the five main parties in the House. The Ulster Unionist Party does not support many parts of the document. Our well-documented concerns are around issues such as legacy and Irish language legislation, which is in no way softened by money being spent on Ulster Scots.

I sat in a room in Stormont House alongside party colleagues on a Thursday evening in January, having been called in at short notice, reading a copy of the document as the Secretary of State appeared outside announcing it to the media. That was hardly a satisfactory way to bring people on board. The NIO official in the room even tried to take the partially read copies from us just prior to the press conference commencing outside.

Our subsequent decision to take a Ministry was not an indication, nor should it be considered as such, of support for all that is contained in the document. It was however, a commitment to work for the well-being of our population. The Ministry taken by my party colleague, Robin Swann, was considered to be the most challenging and difficult portfolio to claim. It is significant that, despite its importance, others who could have taken it were happy to bypass it during the selection process.

The Health Ministry wish list was not written by Robin Swann, but, rather, it represents the health priorities of the DUP and Sinn Féin, who

were the main authors of the 'New Decade' document. Minister Swann will now endeavour to deliver all the elements of the wish list.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank Mr Chambers for giving way. His contribution is enlightening in many ways. Is he telling us that, during the three years of on/off negotiations between the parties, the NIO and the British and Irish Governments, the Ulster Unionist Party never once raised the issue of health or asked for that to be funded? That is what I am taking from his words today: that, over that period, health was never mentioned by the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr Chambers: Well, certainly, my understanding is that we had plenty to say, but we did not see very much of it in the document when it was produced.

Anyway, Minister Swann will now endeavour to deliver all the elements of the wish list, and there have been promising noises of full support from around the House to help him to deliver the targets that were set in the 'New Decade' document. The Minister has been frank and honest about what he needs to meet the targets. He has already settled long-standing wages issues in the health service that, in themselves, presented huge and immediate challenges. I acknowledge that that was achieved with cooperation from the Minister's Executive colleagues. If we are to transform our health service and reduce or, indeed, eliminate unacceptable waiting lists, that attitude of common purpose must continue.

The Bengoa report will challenge us all. Are we prepared to accept the re-profiling or downgrading of our local hospital? Will we demonstrate the leadership that is required to transform healthcare to make it sustainable going forward, or will we all retreat to our silos? Minister Swann has said that he needs £492 million to stand still. That includes £170 million to meet the pay parity that has already been agreed. He requires an additional £169 million to meet points in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Will we find all this money delivered in our new Budget, or are we happy just to talk the talk? Are we prepared to just shrug our shoulders and tut-tut about lengthy accident and emergency waits for treatment for our citizens, with perhaps family members lying for hours, running into days in some cases, on trolleys parked in busy corridors?

While our health and social care staff have worked tirelessly over the past year, the frustrating reality is that for nine months — indeed, for many months before — our health service was largely leaderless. There was no

clearer indication of that than the unprecedented decision of our nurses to go on strike. Had the Assembly not been mothballed for three years, relationships would likely never have been allowed to deteriorate to such poor levels.

Despite that absence of political accountability, our health service continued to function but with ever-increasing pressures. We are now at a stage where simply managing decline should not be the preferred outcome. As the Health Minister has repeatedly said over recent weeks, the ability to start cutting the shameful waiting lists will depend heavily on the budget received by his Department next month.

We need to be much more ambitious than just managing decline. We need to start moving people off waiting lists but to do that will require money. To get to a more sustainable position, we will need sustained additional investment over future years to deal with backlogs. While the Vote on Account is crucial to keep the service ticking along until the Main Estimates later in the year, our health service — or, indeed, the health of our citizens — does not have the luxury of time. Key spending decisions need to be taken and taken now. It cannot afford to wait until later in the year. That is why I hope that the Executive and the House will continue to collectively support the Minister in taking decisions immediately for the next year.

I pose this question: are we serious about health reform? Imminent and current Budget decisions will give an indication of whether the House is content merely to play with words around the health of our citizens or whether we are truly sincere about putting our money where our mouth is and bringing about meaningful transformation of what is still the best and most professional "free at the point of delivery" health service in the world.

Ms Armstrong: We are back just a matter of weeks, and although we are settling into the Assembly processes, that does not mean that we should ignore the necessity to ask questions and demand better. As confirmed by my colleague Andrew Muir, we need to hear more from the Finance Minister about how the Budget process is going to change. We cannot continue as if nothing has happened. There are considerable lessons that we have to learn about how we spend public money, and there has to be a difference between Budget by occasional reallocation in the hope of covering existing services on the one hand and a carefully considered and planned Budget that really transforms society on the other.

We need to be absolutely clear at this point. We do not know what extra money may come forward, but we do know the cost of continuing to deliver services through systems that are yet to be transformed.

The Minister stated yesterday, at his press conference held during Question Time, that we are £600 million short of what Ministers define that they need. It is unclear exactly what has been and will be sought by the Finance Minister from the Treasury in London, whether any revenue-raising measures have been seriously considered, or whether there will be serious changes to ensure that we save money, not least on the cost of division.

If we are to accomplish everything in New Decade, New Approach, we are entitled to ask the Finance Minister: where are the practical proposals to enable us to fund all of it? Ultimately, I have considerable sympathy with Paul Frew and my Strangford colleague Mike Nesbitt's comments that we cannot contemplate significant revenue raising until we have made all the savings that we can. This means ensuring not only that we stop handing money back to the Treasury at the end of the financial year but that all Ministers ensure that their Department and arm's-length bodies are operating as efficiently as possible; that we move forward the reform of public services, not least in health and education; and that, at last, we take proactive measures to seriously tackle division and end the duplication of expenditure by providing services on a one-for-you-and-one-for-me basis.

The Executive Office's share of the overall devolved Budget is very small, yet it alone shoulders some of the challenges ahead. For example, the cost of long overdue compensation to victims of the Troubles and to victims of historical institutional abuse will run to over £0.5 billion. Managing this must be an urgent priority for us all, given that victims have already been further victimised by political gridlock. This raises the obvious question of where the money is coming from.

The cost of the Irish language and Ulster-Scots/Ulster-British commissioners will apparently run to nearly £29 million, almost three times the total cost of the current cross-border bodies. Where does this figure come from? Does it represent the most efficient method of delivery on the requirements outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach'?

We have also heard about another social investment fund. We have concerns about how the last social investment fund was run, not

least the fact that money ended up with groups that were represented on steering committees. Any future fund must be dependent on clearer value for money and avoid obvious clashes of interest. It is a basic principle of public funding that allocations must be made on the basis of the evidence. In other words, they must be fair and they must be perceived to be fair.

In those three cases, do we know whether money will be allocated from London or Belfast, how the total budget has been worked out and whether spending really represents good value for money? That is before we come to the earlier question about how we make serious savings and whether we need to contemplate revenue raising. It is time for an open and honest discussion. Our overall plan cannot be just to rely on monitoring rounds and some shuffling at the end of the financial year. Just doing things the way that we have always done them and hoping to paper over the cracks as we approach the end of March is exactly what has left us with a transport system that cannot continue to provide public transport; a Housing Executive that is threatening to divest itself of 43,000 homes; a segregated school system that cannot afford to pay teachers and our children being taught in dilapidated buildings; a sewerage system that is at capacity, meaning that areas in my constituency —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Yes, certainly.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member agree that our ultimate vision should be a single education system for all of Northern Ireland that encompasses the myriad identities, cultures and difference here rather than continuing with five separate education sectors, some of which are more favoured than others?

Ms Armstrong: I could not agree more. It is about time that all our children were educated together under one roof. After all, it is about education. It is not about what adults want. I am glad to see you coming over to the integrated education side, Christopher.

Mr Stalford: Ah, but that is one of the favoured sectors.

Ms Armstrong: Love it.

As I was saying, our sewerage system is at capacity, meaning that areas in my constituency and in many of your constituencies are being refused any development and that there is a stay on building much-needed

homes. We have a health system with vast and intolerable waiting times. I have hearing problems, and I waited on lists for 85 weeks to have a first hearing test. That is the type of simple thing that makes a difference to people's lives. I got hearing aids, and they have changed my life, but waiting for 85 weeks? Honestly.

We have warned for decades that without proper reform and changing the way that we think and do things, this would be the outcome. It is taking far too long to deliver the transformation that this society needs. It is time to get serious about the need to do things more efficiently, not least by embracing reform, tackling division and ensuring that public money is spent accountably and transparently. There is a challenge to the whole Executive. Are you spending our money efficiently? Are you procuring the right services that will take us forward into this new decade? Will there be a new approach? We are about to find out whether we are really serious about making meaningful changes to how we do things in this place and, ultimately, to the society that we are here to represent. We need a bit of a spring rebirth in this place: a lot less of the silo mentality and a lot more working together.

5.30 pm

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

The cross-departmental Programme for Government has the opportunity to see budgets shared to deliver real change in a shared society. Minister, if you can get us more money from London, that will be very welcome and we will spend it. Minister, I also ask you to ensure that the hard discussions now take place on how our Budget will deliver a sustainable, shared and inclusive society where, instead of investing in the total cost of segregation and division projects, we create an effective, economic and societal path towards our new decade.

Ms S Bradley: Like the Member who spoke previously, I was waiting and not expecting to be called in this order, but I appreciate the opportunity to speak.

I rise as the SDLP spokesperson for health, and, like others, I put on record my concern that the Committee did not really have much time to scrutinise the Budget at the level that should be expected during this process. The high-level overview briefing supplied to us by the Department of Health provided indications on the pressures that the Department faces. At the

outset and in the absence of the desired level of scrutiny, I seek an assurance from the Minister of Finance that sufficient flexibility and contingency funding exists in the Budget and that consideration has been given to ensuring that swift access to funding could be drawn down by the Department of Health and others to manage the ongoing and ever-changing assessment of the threat posed by the coronavirus.

Fiscal authority, council and frameworks — many names are given — all have been rightly aired today, and we look forward to seeing how we can build an effective and efficient budgetary process going forward, but there is an immediate onus on all of us. We need to recognise what leverage is within our gift. We need to embrace the responsibilities that rest upon us all to plan for this place better. Being here is a late but good start, and so, for now, we can mostly make only retrospective commentary on the Bill. But remember this: bad Budgets cost lives. That is not just evidenced in the health budget, but across Departments such as Infrastructure, where we are reliant on a safe network of roads.

In this maze of navigating the aftermath of a broken Government and the backward-looking budgetary system, there is a real danger that we could lose focus of our ultimate destination, which is to make life better for everybody outside the House. Like many Members, I cannot help but see today's business in the context of prioritising what goes forward. I no longer want to have parents, carers, children and adults with autism to have to fight for every service they need or to have any vulnerable person to have to add to their misfortunes by finding the fight in them to present their case to get the services that they need. This is a real opportunity for us to share views on how to effect change via expenditure to reach those front-line services.

The SDLP very much wanted to see a junior Minister for mental health, and I appreciate that that has moved into a working group. I have concerns that, looking through the budgetary process, it is really difficult to follow through and see what level of expenditure is being issued across Departments on this, sadly, ever-increasing problem in society. We need to make sure that somebody somewhere is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of our expenditure and resource that is directed towards mental health.

We also need to obtain, as the Minister, rightly, said at the outset, a fair wage for our health workers. We reached out to nurses, and I

welcome that, but that is only a section of our Health and Social Care. I welcome that the Department briefed us on its early efforts to reduce waiting lists and times and to engage with the transformation agenda, but let us be clear about this: plans to proceed with any budgeted transition without directly addressing pressures that exist on such front-line services are set for inefficiencies if not failure.

Any proposal is only as strong as its weakest link, and Community Pharmacy has articulated strongly that its contribution is beyond compromised; it is broken. Last night, it reluctantly arrived at a consensus to take industrial action on contractual and patient safety issues. Morale in the sector is reportedly at an all-time low. The social value of community pharmacies across our communities should never be underestimated or undervalued. Not only do their professionals safely dispense medicines and treatment but they take significant pressures off our GP services by providing critical front-line services. They add richly to our social fabric by making up for the increasing lack of human contact that sadly exists across our society. They speak to the loneliness agenda, something that we have been late in picking up on. I welcome the Minister of Health's commitment to engage with Community Pharmacy, as articulated earlier in the House, ahead of any such industrial action being required.

The issue of budgeting in this place is, without doubt, a challenge. Of course, we have to address the immediate pressures that are flagged up across Departments and ensure the safe delivery of public services, but we need to find room to make this part of Ireland a choice venue to do business. We need to find ambition. Our revenue-raising options are relatively limited and too often ask for additional contributions from individuals and businesses that already make generous contributions to our public purse. Our Budgets of the past have created a working poor. We lean heavily on individuals and small businesses that simply have no margin for making further financial contributions.

I am a Member for South Down, and our dependency on small local traders and the agriculture and fishing industries is well understood. What is less acknowledged is the untapped potential that exists in South Down to increase our tourism offering. Strategic investment in key economic driver projects such as the Narrow Water bridge has the potential to draw on a tourism footfall that we see within eyeshot across the lough in Carlingford. Such projects give us the opportunity to build on who

contributes to our public purse. We must understand constituency profiles and the room for real growth. That may vary from area to area, but, as the home of the Mourne mountains, the South Down potential is clear.

In an effort to see real savings and the rationalisation of services, so that we do not duplicate services across Departments, I urge one thing: we remain mindful of rural areas that do not have ease of access to public services. As we take forward any proposals, we must use that benchmark at all times.

Mr Lynch: You will be happy to learn that I will be brief, and I will refer to the Budget maybe once or twice.

For the past hour, I have been listening to the debate in the Chamber. All Members have talked about pressures, how the Budget is a challenge, how schools are under pressure and how there is a lack of funding. All of those statements are true. For any Minister to deliver a Budget in the North of Ireland is difficult, but it is much more difficult, as, I think, Matthew said, after 10 years of austerity. As many Members across the Chamber have said over the past couple of days, that has had a major impact on our public services. Tory cuts to the block grant and that party's austerity policies are the direct cause of what our —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lynch: — schools, roads, health system and many other public services are now experiencing. I am happy to give way.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member recognise that there was a world economic decline in 2008? Less money was available to all Governments, except, of course, in Venezuela, which went bust. Does he recognise that it is important that Governments act prudently to protect the long-term interests of the public?

Mr Lynch: I thank the Member for his intervention. When the Tories came to power in, I think, 2011, they cut — it was a policy — £1 billion off the block grant. That was the reality that we found ourselves in. We cannot deny that.

I will speak as my party's spokesperson on transport. At a time when we should be encouraging people to use all types of public transport throughout the system, making public transport services more affordable and investing in sustainable transport, our public transport network is fighting tooth and nail to

maintain its current services. That is one of the best examples of the failure of austerity. Since 2015-16, Translink has been depending on its reserves to maintain its services. Over the past number of years, community transport funding has been cut by over 37%. That is a valuable service that addresses social isolation and provides equal access to services. In my constituency, community transport is a vital service for rural dwellers. It is clear that we have been facing funding cuts year in, year out to services that are vital to the people of the North. All of that is a direct by-product of British financial policy. The fact that austerity puts most services at risk shows a disregard for the most vulnerable in our society.

With the Tories in power for probably the foreseeable future, there will be an absence of public funding growth, and we will be further disadvantaged. The British Government have a responsibility to provide sufficient funding for public services, but I do not believe that Governments in London will ever have the interest of citizens in this part of Ireland in their thinking. There were audible gasps from the opposite Benches yesterday when my colleague Martina Anderson mentioned the benefits of Irish unity. We should initiate an informed debate on the economic merits of an all-Ireland and end the dependency on a diminishing block grant. I wish the Minister well in seeking funding for the meantime when he goes over to London.

Mr Beggs: In commenting on the Budget Bill, I too express my concern at the current Budget process. The Budget Bill is one of the key legislative approvals for the expenditure of our public funds. During the past three years, Ministers have not been in place to manage consultation on the various budgets and how public money has been spent in Northern Ireland. We also need to recognise that, during the past decade, even when Ministers were in place, there has been inadequate consultation and meaningful engagement with the public so that government expenditure represents public priorities rather than any individual political party's priority.

The Budget Bill regularises public expenditure for 2019-2020 and authorises 45% of that expenditure to be given to each Department until a detailed breakdown of expenditure of the 2020-21 Budget is approved later in the year. Given that legislative authorisation to fund public bodies and pay staff must be in place before the beginning of April, we have little choice but to approve the Bill, despite recognising that there are many flaws in the process. The public should have been engaged

in the detailed outworking of the Budget. What, actually, do some of the high-level figures represent? I highlight to Members that, when I first came to the Assembly, the Budget processes did not start in January or February, because that is the last time that a Budget could be approved here. A Bill would literally have been presented in January or February — very, very late on — but the public would have been engaged from October onwards.

That is what has happened in Scotland and other devolved regions. There would then be a couple of months of real engagement with the public, and the public would have a better understanding of what the Budget meant. Then, the public could lobby all politicians so that their priorities would be recognised rather than those of political parties or politicians.

5.45 pm

I draw the Minister's attention to a report of the Finance and Personnel Committee dated 18 January 2012, which said that there was:

"a lack of transparency and read-across between the Budgets, Estimates and Accounts, which has caused frustration for Assembly Members and committees. The Committee has long called for a settled and effective budget process which affords sufficient time for meaningful engagement with Assembly Members, committees and the wider public."

In that paper, the Committee set out 15 initial recommendations for discussion related to key issues and concerns. The Minister was Chair of that Committee, and it is sad that, since then, Ministers have not, as far as I am aware, addressed the concerns that were raised.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

It is important that there is a healthy Budget process. It is important for democracy that the community is engaged in the Budget process. One of the most meaningful decisions that any Assembly makes is how its money will be spent and how it will be raised. It is vital that there is proper and detailed engagement with the public. From discussions that I had prior to the return of devolution, I understood that the Department of Finance had developed an online tool — some sort of app — that would make it possible to more meaningfully engage the public. From having spoken to contacts, I was expecting that to be initiated prior to Christmas, but we have not heard anything.

The public has not been engaged in this issue, but I hope that, in the future, it will be.

It is important that, when we discuss the Vote on Account and the Budget Bill, we plan carefully. Several Members have talked about austerity — it was mentioned by the previous Member — and the size of the Northern Ireland block grant. We all wish we had greater funds and flexibility, but we cannot live in dreamland. We can lobby for our funds, but, ultimately, the Government decide, and we are given provision to determine how to spend, as are all the other devolved regions. We also have some limited choices as to how we can raise funds locally. There has to be responsible government here and recognition of a pressure not just to spend money but to spend money wisely.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member very much for giving way. Reflecting on his previous remark, he seems to be somewhat resigned to the idea that Northern Ireland will just get a lump of money from London in perpetuity and lump it and that the idea of raising its own revenue or thinking differently about prioritising is dreamland. Is that the position: that we should just forget about raising our own revenue or thinking differently about how we raise or spend money?

Mr Beggs: The converse is the truth. I am just highlighting that the Assembly has never really looked at other fresh ways of managing our public expenditure or how our public bodies might be entitled to raise money. Housing is an obvious example. At present, the Housing Executive is almost treated as a public body within the Department; it is funded from the public purse and is limited in what it can spend. The housing associations that are dependent on public funds have also been included in public expenditure; in other words, that limits what they can do, and there is a need to create greater freedom for those organisations. For instance, they might become entitled to the financial transaction funds, which were recently returned to the Treasury, rather than the people of Northern Ireland benefiting from them. The insistence in the past that they would operate as they were, almost within the Department and entirely reliant on public funds and with restrictions, has limited what is available.

We need to think of fresh ways of maximising how capital can be attracted, so that we improve our housing stock going forward, and it is not about selling off Housing Executive houses to the private sector. What about the idea of creating a mutual organisation, letting tenants, through housing associations, run their areas by being able to draw in additional funds

and improve the housing stock? Again, there are limited funds available to the Executive and to each Minister, and the choices that they make in spending money elsewhere mean that money is not available for housing, because it is all under the limited capital funds that come to the Executive. We have to free up what is possible to draw in additional resources.

I will now concentrate my remarks on the Department for Infrastructure, the Committee for which I serve on, and will highlight three key areas that need urgent attention. Northern Ireland Water needs urgent investment. First, there is a real pressure on its resource funding — the annual expenditure — of some £7 million. That is largely a result of the rates revaluation process that the Finance Department recently completed. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland Water is a Go-co and has to follow public-sector requirements to an extent, but it also has to follow company law and cannot run for ever at a loss. That is a pressure, but of even more concern to me with Northern Ireland Water is the urgent need for many hundreds of millions of pounds to invest in capital infrastructure. Again, it does not appear that the funding coming from the normal sources through the Exchequer will allow all that is needed to be done here to be completed. At present, there are some 100 areas of Northern Ireland where new planning approvals are not being made because of inadequate sewerage infrastructure. In particular, the Larne water treatment works servicing the town of Larne and that immediate catchment area has been committed to its capacity, and new developments are being held back. That stops new homes being built and even stops businesses expanding. If there is an additional sewerage requirement, those businesses cannot expand unless they undertake significant individual treatment works for their premises, which is just not viable. That is also happening in 100 other locations in Northern Ireland. It is widespread, and it affects our economy. It is not good enough to say that we have a problem: what I want to hear from the Finance Minister is the options for a solution. That is what we need to hear. There is no point saying for ever and a day, "No, no, no". There are choices to be made, and I want to hear what he sees as the solution, because the capital has to be found so that the local economy is not held back.

I turn to transport infrastructure, particularly the road maintenance budget, which, I understand, is in the order of £75 million. That is approximately half of that which is recommended to maintain our road infrastructure in an efficient manner. When you

underinvest in road maintenance, road surfaces decline everywhere and potholes develop. That results in Roads Service having to carry out expensive, unplanned emergency pothole repairs. Workers travel to a specific site and carry out a small piece of work. The Ballyvernstown Road, which is a short distance from my home, has been in poor condition for about 10 years. It is a main route through the area and quite a busy road. In three different years, contractors have resurfaced part of the road. That has involved travel time and bringing all their equipment to the Ballyvernstown Road on three different occasions, and there is still a section that is in very poor condition. The surface is poor and disintegrating, and I suspect that the contractors will be back again next year. That is, at least, better than purely addressing potholes, but it is not a good way to deliver road maintenance. It is much better if they simply tarmac the road as it was needed in the first place.

I mentioned potholes. I understand that, between 2016 and 2019, some £1.7 million was spent on compensation to motorists. That is for motorists who can prove that potholes that were not fixed promptly damaged their car. There will be many other motorists who have damaged their car but may not have applied for compensation as they may not have been able to prove that the potholes were specifically responsible for the damage to their car. As a result of the poor surface on Browns Bay Road in my constituency, 115 cars have been damaged and compensation claimed, which is a remarkable number.

Over the past number of years, road maintenance has relied on in-year monitoring. It is good that additional moneys can go towards road maintenance through in-year monitoring, but it would be much better if it came in a planned process throughout the year, which would reduce the pressure on contractors. Recently, there have been almost daily announcements of road surfacing schemes, and some of the recent money that has been released is being spent.

We also have to recognise that the middle of winter is not the best time to tarmac surfaces. You do not get best value for money, and you get no length of time out of that new surface. It is difficult to get tarmac to last a long time if it is put down in wet and icy conditions. Icy conditions are probably a no-no, but, even in wet conditions, while I am sure that there are additives that improve the outcomes, it would be much better if it were done at warmer times of the year.

Contractors could employ their staff throughout the year. How do you suddenly put together a contract team in January when money has been released? That is very difficult. It is challenging, and contractors may have difficulty in putting those teams together at the last minute. There may not be the same level of competition. I suspect that it would be much more efficient to plan for the long term over a longer period and where there is no pressure or rush.

In recent Committee meetings, departmental officials have highlighted that the Executive have their flagship programmes. Essentially, we were advised that the capital fund has to be used for the flagship programmes, and then we will see what is left after that for other things. We need to reassess what we do with flagship programmes, especially when we do not have money to maintain the finished surfaces that we generate. We are out of kilter. More and more money is spent on flagship programmes, and inadequate funds have been spent on maintenance.

6.00 pm

I also want to raise a particular issue about the A5 with the Minister. In 2007, we were told that it would cost £650 million. The Republic of Ireland's Government had committed £400 million, so it was to cost the Northern Ireland Executive £250 million. I understand that the latest estimate for the A5, as of December 2019, is £1,139 million. However, only £75 million will come from the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, it will not cost the Executive £250 million; it will cost the Executive £1,059 million. That is over four times the original cost, and it is to come from our limited capital funds.

We have to bear in mind that the A5 is an important route that goes not only to Omagh and Londonderry, but to Donegal. It is for that reason that the Republic of Ireland's Government initially came forward with their generous offer to try to encourage its completion. However, if we commit all capital funds to this road, we will need to be very careful. I ask the Minister to undertake to engage with the Government of the Irish Republic when, eventually, they are in place, whether that be before or after another election, and require them, some of whom may be his colleagues — who knows? — to pay up that which they originally promised. The road will benefit the people of Donegal.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, on a map of Ireland

— specifically, the North — there is a clear black spot with regard to infrastructure? There has been a clear deficit, lack of investment and abandonment by the House for a long, long time. That has to be resolved. Building the A5 is a key step in doing that. That road is very dangerous. Since 2006, some 34 people have died on it — 34; 15 of those died in the last four years. The House needs to recognise the importance of that. I hope that the Member does as well.

Mr Beggs: I recognise the importance of investment in new roads throughout Northern Ireland. I have no difficulty acknowledging that hundreds of millions of pounds need to be spent to upgrade the A5. The point that I am making is this: can we afford the £1,059 million for it? If we are to commit that, over what period will we commit it? What sections should be prioritised? Have we reassessed it, given that it will now cost four times the amount that was originally committed? Does the original business case for a brand new dual carriageway the whole way still follow? Should the road be dualled and flyovers built over parts of the existing route? Is it really wise that the proposal is to bypass the new multimillion-pound roundabout at the end of the M1 at Ballygawley and build another one?

Mr McCrossan: We are talking about bypasses, and the Member will find that the north-west — the west, in particular — has been bypassed by this place for a long time. I want the Member to acknowledge that the reason for the exceedingly high cost of the A5 is a minority group known as the Alternative A5 Alliance. It has spent the past number of years derailing the project for its own self-interest. That has cost lives, and it has cost a huge amount to the taxpayer. Ultimately, it has led to significant increases in the cost of a vital infrastructure project that would develop the entire island.

Mr Beggs: I hope that the Member, and indeed others, support the idea that I have floated, which is that we should go back to the Republic of Ireland's Government to get the £400 million. If we do not, there may not be any money for a road safety scheme elsewhere in your constituency. Whenever maintenance is needed to re-tar a large section of another road, guess what? There may not be any money for it. I am saying that there needs to be balance. We need to look carefully at what is being planned and go back to the promises that were made and see that they are delivered so that the rest of the roads in Northern Ireland can be protected.

Road safety schemes throughout Northern Ireland need to continue to be provided, because you will find that, elsewhere, when all the money is in one area, road safety schemes have no budget. I am aware, for instance, that there were delays in introducing a 20 mph road-calming scheme with variable speeds during school time on the main A2 in my constituency. Other schools still face 40 mph speed limits outside their front door because there is no money to invest in variable message signs to reduce traffic when kids are going to and coming out of school.

We need to get balance in what we are doing. As I said, I have clearly indicated my support for hundreds of millions of pounds being spent. We need to be careful how we spend our money, and it is right to question how we spend our money. There is no point in just writing blank cheques. Circumstances have changed here, as I indicated, so what this Assembly originally committed £250 million to, it is now committing over £1 billion to. At the very least, we need to look at the time frame of how the money will be spent, if not at whether there needs to be an adjustment to what is being proposed.

When I indicated that we need to look carefully at how our money was being spent, that applies to the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, as well. I have been interested to find no reference to the Boris bridge in the briefing that I and my colleagues in the Infrastructure Committee had. Maybe it is not even going to land in Northern Ireland. I would have thought that, if it is going to land in Northern Ireland, it would get some reference at least in the Department. I fear that the Boris bridge to Scotland is an expensive design distraction.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Certainly.

Mr Muir: I welcome the Member's comments. Will he reflect and comment on the fact that his colleagues in Ards and North Down Borough Council voted contrary to that and voted in favour of the bridge?

Mr Beggs: I will make it clear that my view is that it is a distraction from Boris's border down the Irish Sea, which he created in the Brexit process. Millions of pounds of UK taxpayers' funding will be required to take this design process forward, yet the Department for Infrastructure has not even been engaged. There is no reference to it in the documents that we have seen to date as a Committee. Why do I describe it as a distraction? Look at the

Channel Tunnel, which cost billions of pounds. It has considerably higher levels of traffic flow than any road, bridge or tunnel across the North Channel would have. Several companies were involved in its development, but guess what? They went bust even with that greater flow of traffic and revenue capability.

Secondly, there is the small issue of Beaufort's Dyke. For those of you who are not aware of it, it is an 800 feet deep channel that causes major difficulties for bridge or tunnel building. I am not even sure if it is technically feasible to tunnel under it. On top of that, of course, there are the millions of tons of munitions that were dumped there, particularly after the Second World War. Weapons that were deemed to be out of date were just dumped there. That will cause a major structural problem for anybody who tries to do anything in that area.

I have also been fascinated with the images that someone has already been paid to develop to sell this idea. I saw that it was being proposed that the bridge would have two different railway lines, as well as road transport. I thought, wonderful idea. The slight problem is, of course, that there is a different railway gauge in Northern Ireland to that in Scotland. Another slight problem is that really, if you are going to invest lots of money —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to consider the fact that the Boris bridge has not featured since the Minister spoke at the outset. In a way, the Member is straying from the core Budget discussion. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Beggs: I will bring my comments back, Mr Speaker, to the debate. What we are approving is 45% of this year's funds for the Department for Infrastructure so that that Department and its Minister can spend until further detailed discussion occurs. I hope that no money is directed from that 45% towards the Boris bridge, because I would view that as wasteful. I hope that I have connected the two, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: You are doing rightly, but do not try my patience.

Mr Beggs: Public funds should not be used to create political distractions or wasted on fanciful bridges.

I move on to public transport. Since 2015, Translink has been required to maintain the existing public transport network, yet insufficient public subsidy has been supplied by government. As a result, Translink's reserves

have declined from some £56.7 million in 2015 to a projected £21.1 million by the end of March. If Translink continues at that level of funding while being required to maintain the current public transport networks, it has indicated that there will be a shortfall of £29 million in the next financial year. The moneys that are going into the Department for Infrastructure through the authorisation of this Budget will be insufficient if maintained at last year's level. There will be a crisis in our public transport network if Translink is unable to maintain the networks. If Ministers require the company to maintain them at the present level of funding, the company will go bust. That is just basic economics.

Translink is run by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, which is subject to company law. Company law requires the directors to act and take decisions responsibly. If Ministers insist that funding will continue at the current level and the existing network be maintained at that level, the company will not be able to do so. We will hit a crisis. The crisis will come fairly soon, possibly even before the Budget in June or July. I do not know what Translink's cash flow situation will be during the period. It may be suffering stress. Not only will it be losing funds but it will also have to build in potential redundancies, which will bring additional funding stresses. I do not want that to happen, and it would be irresponsible to let it happen. I have no doubt that it would be against the wishes of the Northern Ireland public and the Assembly. Only a few weeks ago, we passed a motion indicating that we should do everything that we can to prevent climate change. Public transport is one such way of minimising CO2 emissions and pollution in our cities, so it is vital that we have an efficient public transport system.

I now move on to our electricity infrastructure. We have a requirement to keep down the cost of electricity and to make full use of renewable energy, again following our commitment to fight climate change. I understand that, as well as improving the availability of renewable energy, a North/South interconnector could save Northern Ireland's electricity consumers some £20 million a year. Will the Executive ensure that we have the appropriate North/South infrastructure to support renewable energy in Northern Ireland and on the island of Ireland?

That is the challenge that Ministers face, and I hope that the Executive rise to that challenge.

6.15 pm

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He is quite right to raise energy as a massive problem that should be discussed within the Budget debate. He talks about a North/South interconnector, and whilst I am supportive of all interconnection because of the flexibility that it brings, it does not necessarily bring savings. There are a plethora of issues that come into that to build up the price and cost of energy to consumers. I am very worried about the capacity and leadership of SONI, and its independence and governance, at this time. Does the Member agree that we await with interest the Utility Regulator's review and investigation of this very important subject?

Mr Beggs: I agree that that is a key issue going forward, and I too look forward to that report. I also highlight the need for a level playing field throughout the island of Ireland — Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There should not be favoured areas for energy generation that could potentially work against companies in Northern Ireland. It is important that there is a fair and level playing field.

I turn now to health, bearing in mind that 45% of the health budget is put forward in this Budget Bill. It is important that we address resource pressures on the Health Department, but it is also important that we look at the unacceptable conditions that many of our health staff are working in. Capital investment could improve their ability to treat patients and improve services. Under Bengoa, we are to modernise our service. We need investment in our staff and facilities so that we can improve healthcare. We need to develop new services, and that will be difficult in some areas. On occasions, we will all have to travel further, but, if we are getting a higher quality of service, that is what we must do.

What areas will we choose to spend our funding on? There are choices when we spend our capital funds. There are even choices on where we spend it within health. There are choices when we commit huge amounts of capital to other schemes, as I mentioned earlier, because, when it is spent on other schemes, there is no money left to invest in health.

I want particularly to highlight the need for investment in primary healthcare, where Northern Ireland lags considerably behind best practice in Great Britain. I welcome the investment to date in our multidisciplinary teams — again, a number of Members have mentioned them — which support our GPs. This enables health issues to be addressed much earlier by physios, occupational therapists, community psychiatric nurses and

social workers; allows much assessment and treatment to occur away from our hospitals; and helps to address waiting lists by taking pressure away from consultants. It also helps patients by addressing conditions before they, perhaps, worsen and become much more significant.

I also want to highlight the need for investment in primary health facilities within my East Antrim constituency. We have no ED in the East Antrim constituency. We have no minor injuries unit within the East Antrim constituency. We do not have a modern health and care centre within the East Antrim constituency. Somehow, health capital investment has overlooked the East Antrim constituency. None has been made in Larne, Carrickfergus or Newtownabbey. We have aging health centres that require investment to help our GPs and primary healthcare providers improve the services and expand what they can do. I am thinking particularly of the Taylors Avenue health centre, which was built in the 1960s. It is crammed and out of date. In fact, the day centre on that site closed over a decade ago. I think the facility was built for less than a third of the population that presently exists there. Again, the Gloucester Avenue health centre in Larne is equally in need of investment, as is the Abbots Cross medical centre in Newtownabbey. We need modern health and care facilities in order to take the pressure away from our hospitals and to support our GPs and the new multidisciplinary teams that are emerging. We should be doing more away from our hospitals.

I also highlight to the Minister the fact that how we choose to spend money affects where we cannot spend it. If we fund pet projects, others will be left behind. I noticed recently a further bid for — I do not know the exact figure — £30 million or £40 million for Casement Park, which would take the public investment to, I understand, over £100 million. Again, if you spend money there, it will not be available for housing or healthcare.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I just want to finish my point. Rugby received £14.7 million in 2011 and built the new Kingspan Stadium. Football received £25 million for Windsor Park. I understand that some £36 million was committed to other stadia at that stage. At that time, Casement Park was allocated £61.4 million. I was always taught to cut your cloth according to your means. If the GAA has designed a stadium costing 50% more than the public funds that were allocated, is it not up to the GAA to fill the gap? *[Interruption.]* Is it not up to it to put forward some of its money? I understand that it has an income of

about €65 million each year *[Interruption]* so I would like to see it step forward to invest in such a facility.

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Beggs: Can it increase its contribution? The additional moneys should not automatically come from the public purse, because, as I said earlier, that will result in fewer houses being built and fewer health and care facilities being built. We have choices. It is curious that, in the design process, there was no regard to the cost.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Member for giving way. Do you not think that the reason why we are struggling to get housing built is the impact of austerity? I have been listening very carefully to you. You have been talking about how this has been a global crisis, but you have not referred to the fact that the recession has been the context of what you have been saying. We have the recession-rich, and we have an elite, for instance, in London. There are 80 billionaires in London — the most billionaires of any city in the world — whose wealth increases by £77 million per day. In justifying these cuts to the Budget here by saying that Ministers have to live within their means, I do not think that are you giving due regard to the fact that the reason why we are in this situation is that the Tory Administration have produced policies and programmes that have benefited the super-rich. Therefore, I ask the Member to be a little bit mindful of that.

The A5 is one of the projects you mentioned that you have problems with; now it is Casement Park. You know, people out there —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member end her intervention?

Ms Anderson: — might be forgiven for thinking that these projects within —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member —?

Ms Anderson: Sorry. That these projects within only particular areas —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member resume her seat?

Mr Beggs: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Those are interesting thoughts. Again, it is all austerity's fault. Listen, we have choices to make with the money that comes to us. If you

want to change the taxation measures in the United Kingdom, go to Westminster and vote for changes. Do not stand here and complain —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member make his remarks through the Chair?

Mr Beggs: — about taxation in the UK.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member make his remarks through the Chair? Thank you.

Mr Beggs: There is no point coming here to complain about the taxation measures in the United Kingdom, if you do not go there to try to change them. There is no point continuing to blame austerity. Let us remember the then Labour Treasury Minister who, after he lost the election, left a note in a bottom drawer for the incoming Minister, saying, "Sorry, no money left. They spent it all". There is a problem if you borrow, borrow and borrow, beyond even your annual running costs, and that is what was happening. Western society was spending money that it did not have. It is very difficult — it is not nice not being able to spend money on everything that you want to — but there are choices that can be made.

The Member's intervention was interesting. I did not criticise the £61.4 million for Casement Park; what I criticised was an additional bid for, I think, another £40 million. Why did the design not follow the brief to build whatever they wanted to build with the money that was available to them or to raise additional moneys privately through the organisation that wanted the stadium? I would have thought that that was a measured and reasonable point to make. If we spend another £30 million or £40 million of public funds on that particular stadium, it will result in fewer houses being built and less chance of healthcare centres being built in my constituency.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr McNulty: It is misleading for the Member to attribute the overspend to design issues with the GAA. It was purely down to delays as a result of the Assembly being down and other planning hold-ups. It was not purely a question of the design. It is also misleading to say that the money for Casement Park is capital funding. It is ring-fenced for infrastructure only and should not be confused with funds and pressures available for other services.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for his comment, but, sorry, when you build a new stadium, it is capital money. It may be ring-fenced capital money, but it is capital money. What we are talking about here is the bid for additional capital money. Mention was made of the 50%. We are talking about an eight-year period from when those figures were originally brought out. There has not been 50% inflation in that period, so something has gone badly wrong. If additional costs have been incurred because, perhaps, of a restriction on the site, those who designed it should have reduced the size accordingly to live within their means. They should not be coming back here simply for more money, because there is a cost to other public services if we commit more money to individual schemes.

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

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have been very generous; I have given way to numerous people. I wish to proceed a little bit.

I want to prioritise investment in health, and in primary healthcare in particular, in my constituency. I am also aware of huge pressures in Antrim Area Hospital, which has some of the highest bed occupancy rates of any of the health trusts in Northern Ireland. The managers there are very efficient and a bed hardly gets cold. They are very professional in making the best use of those beds, and that is good. What we must be clear about, however, is that, where there are not sufficient beds, a hospital reaches a point where it becomes inefficient. It needs to have some spare capacity so that it can react to the pressures that come to bear.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. On the subject of Casement Park, I remember the proposal being made to build a new stadium at the Maze. It was agreed between soccer, rugby and the GAA, but some politicians in here got themselves involved with a lobby. We could have had that brand new stadium sitting there without political interference. That is a fact. Windsor Park and the GAA had agreed to move out to the Maze. They are all victims of their own success. Money was spent on soccer and rugby and the GAA are entitled to the money for that plan as they see fit. Yes, the costs have risen, but that is not the fault of the GAA.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise Members to make their remarks through the Chair, please. OK?

Mr Beggs: As I said, I do not feel that the full cost of the additional moneys should fall upon the public purse.

If organisations have not controlled their expenditure and put in bids way above inflation, they have a responsibility to step up to the mark so that health and care centres can be built in my constituency and in your constituency, and houses can be built throughout Northern Ireland.

6.30 pm

I will go back to Antrim Hospital — I thought that you wanted to intervene on that — where there are huge pressures because it has an inadequate number of beds. Beds have closed at Whiteabbey Hospital, which puts additional pressures on Antrim Hospital. They have come up with innovative working methods to try to minimise the number of beds required so that they can continue to operate and to minimise trolley waits in A&E. Even with all that, the occupancy rate is so high that it is inefficient not to have some spare capacity to deal with peaks in A&E. Additional funding is needed at Antrim Hospital to deal with those pressures.

We need to continue to support modern facilities. I go back to my experience of ICATS at Ballymena Health and Care Centre. I had an old rugby injury in my shoulder, and I was able to be X-rayed and assessed by a physiotherapist. Regrettably, I had to wait about six months before I got treatment, but it certainly brought about improvement. All that happened without having to go to a consultant. We need those new health and care facilities and innovative working methods. We need to empower a wide range of healthcare staff to remove the bottlenecks. That is important, as there is a shortage of consultants. Continuing to rely on expensive locum doctors and locum nurses is not the way forward. We need to train more nurses, doctors and GPs, and we need a new GP training course and facilities for medical training in Londonderry. We have to commit to that in order to address the needs of our community.

I want to highlight the failure to adequately link the education capital budget and area plans. I hope that they will be linked in next year's Budget. I recently visited Carrickfergus Academy following the amalgamation of Carrickfergus College and Downshire School. It was in line with the area plan, and the governors went along with it and have amalgamated. However, this in turn has created huge pressures. The school's infrastructure is

not satisfactory. It needs investment urgently. In addition, the funding process for schools, once they amalgamate, creates problems. The Minister of Education needs to address that matter, and the Finance Minister should look at it as well. Mention was made of the need for a single education system. When we have brought schools together, the system has not worked. We need to make sure that, when schools amalgamate, it is seen to work. I hope that the Minister of Education, when he visits later this week, will see the need for that investment in order to improve education.

There is something fundamentally wrong with our education budgets. Even when schools are at full capacity and the classrooms are full, they cannot operate within budget. Perhaps that is because teachers are more experienced and happen to be at the top of their spine points. It is wrong that pupils should suffer and the school has no fat left to trim and no options.

It was mentioned that we should not operate in silos. There is a need for cross-departmental working and funding to address educational underachievement. Recently, the Education Minister, in answer to an Assembly question for written answer that I submitted to him, disclosed the breakdown of wards with less than 85% school attendance by post-primary pupils. I was shocked to find that a ward in my constituency had 43% of young people with less than 85% attendance at school — the worst in Northern Ireland — and that the figure for two neighbouring wards was 27%. That area has very weak community infrastructure. It is an area where cross-departmental working is needed to address the issue. The school, the parents and the community need to recognise the importance of education, so that our young people are not left behind. Young people who do not attend school may well leave without education and end up being deemed as not in education, training or employment. They may well struggle in future life. It is important that we intervene earlier and give everyone a better start.

There are huge challenges. My colleagues and I will endeavour to engage constructively to try to ensure that we make the best use of our limited funds. I hope that Ministers and the Executive are listening and will take constructive comments as they are meant. They are meant to try to improve the lot of everyone in our community.

Mr Durkan: Believe it or not, I have been called a bit sooner than expected, so I have not had an opportunity to finish my speech. I was a wee bit concerned about structure and content, but,

having heard the previous contributor, I will be all right [*Laughter.*] You will be all right.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way? [*Laughter.*]

Mr Durkan: We will be here all night.

Mr Beggs: I advise the Member that, if he occasionally mentions the 45% and the Vote on Account, he will be all right.

Mr Durkan: That will do as my mention.

I speak as the SDLP spokesperson on social justice. I have heard a lot over the past couple of days about the need for us here in the North or Northern Ireland to increase productivity and output and maximise our economic performance. That is extremely important, but we will never do that unless we address the real, fundamental inequalities in our society and meaningfully tackle poverty and its myriad associated issues and outcomes.

As a member of the Communities Committee, I recognise the massive transformative role that the Department for Communities and, of course, the Executive as a whole have to play. The magnitude of that Department's role is reflected in the legislative programme that has come from the Executive Office. We need to ensure that everyone here has a roof over their head. The right to shelter and heat is a basic requirement that is essential for our population's health and well-being and is integral to outcomes in education and employment. The rapid reclassification of our housing associations is essential to ensure that there is increased finance to build more social and affordable homes to meet a need that continues to spiral. Over the past couple of days, a few Members have mentioned the current problems of the Housing Executive and touched on potential solutions. We must allow the Housing Executive, which I will always defend dearly, to restructure. We must enable it to borrow and build, never mind realising the revenue required to ensure that its existing properties are up to modern standards.

Food bank usage across the North is evidence enough of the desperate situation that many of our constituents live in. It has undeniably got worse since the onset of universal credit and other elements of the cruel welfare reform agenda that the DUP and Sinn Féin accepted. We welcome the way that the mitigation package has cushioned the blow for many and that the current Minister, Deirdre Hargey, has moved swiftly to extend those mitigations,

particularly on bedroom tax, but we need to hear what else will be in the new mitigation package. We cannot be content with merely extending existing mitigations; we need to strengthen them to close the gaps in the safety net of social security that so many vulnerable people have fallen through.

What about the two-child rule? It is a hugely unpalatable, draconian and, in our view, completely unacceptable piece of legislation that came to pass after the design of our mitigation package. Will it be mitigated? How will it be mitigated? What will be the cost of that? Some people will raise an eyebrow at the cost of the mitigations. I have asked what were maybe rhetorical questions about the cost of mitigating the impact of the two-child rule, and I think that, conservatively, you are looking at £56 million a year. Another estimate would be closer to £80 million. That is on top of the £20-odd million for bedroom tax and other mitigations that needs to be paid. Some people will raise an eyebrow at the cost of the mitigations, but what will be the cost of not mitigating? It is incalculable. More poverty means more debt, more homelessness, more hopelessness and a bigger cost to health, mental and physical, to families and to society. What would be the cost to our local economy of taking that money out of people's pockets? They are people who spend their money in local shops and the local hairdresser and in pubs and taxis. Local businesses would clearly suffer as a result, and more jobs would inevitably be lost. How can we afford a mitigations package? How can we not?

The Department for Communities has an extremely broad remit, and the Minister has an awful lot of areas of responsibility, one of which is local government. Again, that has not been immune to the austerity agenda or to cuts. I have been in contact with the Minister and her Department recently about the rates support grant, which is a much-needed support mechanism for less affluent councils — the poorer areas, if you like. It is given to them for a reason, which is that they have a much lower rate base. It is to allow them to roll out the services that a local authority should be able to. I acknowledge that the Minister has recently met councils on the issue, but I now appeal to the Finance Minister to consider ring-fencing and protecting that grant, similar to the derating grant that every council can avail itself of and that is afforded statutory protection. I am hopeful that his response will be more positive than that of a predecessor of his, who told me that everyone had to feel a bit of pain, when I approached him about the same issue. It was not a party colleague, Minister Murphy.

That brings me to 'New Decade, New Approach'. We have heard plenty about it. There was a lot of positive stuff for a couple of days, and there has been a lot of less positive stuff for the last number of weeks as we try to get our heads round the plethora of promises and the suite of commitments that we have signed up to. We in the SDLP have signed up to them. We have made the decision to come into the Executive in good faith on the understanding that we can work with other parties in the Executive and outside the Executive to deliver on the things that matter so much to people. That is why they are in that document. A number of Members touched on this when talking about the importance of cross-departmental working, but part of that new approach is that we identify the things in that document not merely as ministerial commitments or priorities but as Executive commitments and priorities, and, therefore, it is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to meet those in this Budget cycle.

That will require a degree of prioritisation and tough decisions being made. However, Ministers cannot afford to sit around the Executive table and decide that none of them can afford to do anything in the document. That is why now might be a very good time for the Finance Minister and the Executive to look at an old approach that worked very well: the establishment of key Executive funds to deal with cross-cutting issues. Those were set up under the first Executive, and, around the time of suspension between 2003 and 2007, things got "re-departmentalised". I appreciate that there was a bit more money at the time, but Departments were basically top-sliced, so when there were projects that were so cross-cutting and ticked so many boxes, those were dealt with. Things often fall down when projects are so cross-cutting. Everyone has a degree of responsibility, so no one takes responsibility and passes the project on. I have said it before that Departments are always good at buying into things but not always so good at paying into things.

6.45 pm

If we can collectively identify the priorities that we believe are achievable in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document and approach them in the collegiate manner that the Minister of Finance himself referred to yesterday, good progress can be made on a lot of the issues. Furthermore, if and when some more money comes from the Treasury, be it in the guise of Barnett consequential or if Minister Murphy has some unprecedented and, if I dare say,

unexpected success in extricating it from the Treasury, that could go into a New Decade, New Approach fund. One of the pledges in New Decade, New Approach is to tackle mental health and to do more on suicide prevention. That is not the sole responsibility of Robin Swann. As I have mentioned before, I am heartened that the Executive have come out and said that they are committed to those pledges, but let us see that in action. Every Department has a role to play, and every Department should have a price to pay.

Another issue in the document is how we should tackle the climate emergency. Translink has been very much in the news over the past week or so, and it was to the fore in a number of Members' remarks over the past couple of days. It is ridiculous to hear some Members talk about it being the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' responsibility to tackle the climate crisis when, again, it is incumbent on all Departments to do so. It is hard to think of a better or more effective way in which to do that than to ensure that public transport is adequately funded. We should be looking at expanding not contracting services. The first thing that should be done in that regard is to look at the reinstatement of the fuel duty rebate that every public transport company across Britain can access but that Translink does not or cannot access. In that respect, the company is already starting at a lower point.

Another thing that is of huge importance to me — you will be relieved to hear that I will not major on it — is tackling the economic imbalance across the region. That cannot be overstated. I know that other Members have touched on the subject over the past couple of days, but, for my constituency, the real driver to that economic regeneration has to be the expansion of the university at Magee. That is about more than helping Derry and its surrounding areas. It is about improving outputs from Northern Ireland and outcomes for those in the North.

We do have a solid commitment — probably the only or the most solid commitment — in New Decade, New Approach around the medical school. That is brilliant, but it is still not enough. We need to go beyond that and meet the commitments that were made by previous Executives around the expansion, the lifting of the maximum student number (MaSN) cap and getting to 10,000 students. That would have a really transformative impact not just on the city and region, but for so many young people and families here who have to leave these shores to seek education elsewhere. The sad and undeniable reality is that the vast majority of

them do not come back here to live and contribute to our economy. They are the very outward-looking and forward-thinking people that we need here to drive us forward as a society as well as an economy.

One of the Members who spoke earlier quite rightly talked about the need to address public-sector pay issues. That is something that we cannot ignore. I am delighted that the Minister of Health, with the support of other Ministers, moved so quickly to address the pay parity issue, which should never have arisen in the first place, but there are other issues right across our public services and Civil Service. I think that Paul Frew chatted about the voluntary exit scheme (VES) earlier. If not, it must have been the one thing that you did not talk about. *[Laughter.]* It might have been Mr Beggs. When the voluntary exit scheme was proposed, a proposal of ours was that savings made through the VES — it was not a one-off saving; these savings are realised every year — should be ploughed in to pay restoration measures, like addressing some of the legacy or hangover issues of Agenda for Change, disparity in pay across old education and library boards, and issues around Civil Service pay, but, sadly, that fell on deaf ears. It is not too late to do something about it, because we are still, or should still, be seeing the savings from the VES.

I touched on the importance of mental health and suicide prevention, and I spoke about how every Department has a degree of responsibility for that. I think of a project in my constituency that has been proposed and designed. The proposers of it have been round a number of Departments, with Health and Infrastructure, obviously, being two of the main ones. It is called Our Future Foyle, and it could have a really transformative impact. You need to see the presentation to see just how impressive it is and how impactful it really could be. That will need funding from a number of different Departments. I would like to see that being looked at. It is not a pet project per se, but it ticks the boxes that I spoke about earlier. It is cross-cutting, and it would be a good example of the collegiate approach that is required, not just desired, if we are to do anything differently here — if there is going to be anything new about our approach in this new decade.

I will wrap it up there and possibly intervene with another couple of questions to Members coming after. Again, I emphasise the real need for that new approach. It has to be about how Ministers work together and Departments work together. We have always encouraged that, but

we have to go beyond encouragement; it is now something that we have to demand.

Miss Woods: I will speak very briefly this evening about the process that we are going through and the Budget Bill, because I believe that that is actually the subject that we are speaking about today. Budgeting is crucial for the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive. That is a given, but what we have here, after a three-year hiatus when there was no fully functioning Assembly, is a wholly inadequate process with no time for scrutiny. What really is our role here? Are we a scrutiny body that is not being offered the chance to do that? Instead, we are just discussing a process that has already been decided.

The Barnett consequentials were made unusually late, adversely impacting the Budget planning timetable. We have an unknown late Budget being announced in Westminster by the Chancellor, with potentially more cuts coming down the line, topped off with years of Tory austerity, risks of further recession and, of course, Brexit. We had the Vote on Account yesterday and will vote on this today, allocating 45% of budgets for Departments to continue their work, which, of course, is needed for financial planning and continuity of services. What we do not have is any detail, and that, we know, is where the devil lies.

We are doing more of the same, and this has happened before. We are in a new decade, but this does not seem to mean a new approach, and that is what we have been calling for. We do not have a Programme for Government published, and we were given a limited legislative programme with no costings attached. There is no clarity for funding on the commitments in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, and it needs to be asked, "How was this even agreed?". It was not costed, and there was clearly no funding agreed between the parties. How can anyone have signed up to this wish list without doing so? Is that an example of good governance or of doing things differently? I do not think so.

As the House debated, we are facing a climate emergency, but there is a complete lack of a mitigation budget. Where are the money and resources dedicated to an emergency that is cross-cutting and cross-departmental? It is not something that we can categorise totally into one Department or another; it needs overarching resources and legislation to drive forward what we need to do. We cannot deal with public transport, the future of infrastructure or air quality and our health issues without

dealing with our emissions and climate mitigations, but none of that is apparent here.

Yesterday, the Finance Minister responded to issues raised on the Floor over the timing of this, and he mentioned that scrutiny time would be available in the coming months as Committees got the opportunity to pore over the actual Budget before June. How can any great change occur premised on the Budget Bill as it stands today, in which no change and no allocations are detailed? We need to be much more ambitious for the society that we need and want, and, as I stated a few weeks ago in this Chamber, this is not a keep calm and carry on situation; this is not business as usual. Yet, we have no new fiscal approach; we have no green new deal; and we have nothing here about a just transition. Is this a fine example of government green-washing? This is more of the same, and it is something that we cannot continue to do.

Mr Allister: Yesterday, because I was so generous with interventions, I allowed myself to be led astray and did not get to finish the remarks that I wanted to make. I indicated that there were some matters that I might refer back to and, with your indulgence, I will.

I asked one question yesterday of the Minister — I think that I had it answered in previous Budget debates, but if I did, I have forgotten the answer — and I am genuinely interested to know the answer. Why is it that, in the vote for Supply, we only vote on resources? Why do we not vote on capital? In the forthcoming period, there will be capital expenditure. I am sure that there is a technical and perfectly logical explanation, but I would like to be reminded of what it is.

Some of the matters that I want to refer to touch upon the openness and transparency of the system, particularly some of the items that appear in the spring Supplementary Estimates booklet. The Minister referred this morning to the black-boxing of certain expenditure. He explained that, where there is no other already approved legislative authority for spend, one can, within these procedures, authorise that expenditure on the sole authority of the Budget Act, putting a little black box beside it to indicate that that is so. All that is entirely correct because it comes out of the 'Managing Public Money' document.

That 'Managing Public Money' document then circumscribes the circumstances in which you can do that. It is very clear, in the appendix to that, at paragraph 2.5.15, that:

"In certain limited circumstances departments may obtain authorisation for their planned expenditure by relying entirely on the authority of the Budget Act, rather than through specific empowering legislation."

It then says that the Assembly can do that subject to conditions, and the first condition is that the expenditure is no more than £1.5 million a year or is expected to last for no more than two years.

7.00 pm

Applying that test to some of the matters that have been black-boxed in the Estimates raises the questions that I have. If you turn to page 228 of the Supplementary Estimates and you begin to read about the Executive Office, you see that it says:

"under the sole authority of Part I of the Estimate and of the confirming Budget Act as follows:"

You read down a list that includes expenditure relating to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board of £434 million. 'Managing Public Money' is quite clear that the limit on black-boxed expenditure is £1.5 million. Here we have a colossal sum of £434 million black-boxed as approved under the sole authority of the Estimates.

I have two questions about that. Surely, that was authorised under the legislation passed in Westminster, and, therefore, it does not need to be black-boxed. If that is not correct, how can it be black-boxed over the limit that is in 'Managing Public Money' of £1.5 million? My second question about that is: why is it duplicated in the Department of Justice figures? When you go to the Department of Justice section, you see that it is black-boxed there as well, on page 199. There is Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service expenditure relating to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board of £434 million. Why is it black-boxed under two Departments, in both cases in excess of the limit? Is it not already provided for in legislation, in which case it would not need to be black-boxed?

The same arises in respect of victims and survivors' payments of £105 million. On page 228, it is black-boxed under TEO. On page 199, the exact same figure is black-boxed under the Department of Justice. Maybe there is an explanation and that is why I am asking, but

why are we being presented with documents that, on the face of it, have those contradictions and those irregularities, particularly in circumstances where these are documents that should be, as far as they can be, intelligible for the purposes of openness and transparency? I do ask that.

On a similar theme, I want to ask a question relating to the Department for the Economy, which, at page 59, has black-boxed almost £15 million for Northern Ireland Screen. However, when you flick back a page or two in the Estimates for the Department for the Economy, you discover that the very figure that has been black-boxed appears as a grant on page 49. If it is already in the detail of money under grants, why is it black-boxed on page 59? If there are answers to that, I would be delighted to have them but, looking at these things, it seems to me that there is a certain shoddiness, but maybe it is not; maybe it is, but I am surprised, subject to the explanation that is proffered as to how those matters arose and how they have appeared in that situation. That was the sort of stuff that I wanted to ask about yesterday. I look forward in this debate or subsequently to receiving an explanation about that.

In the overall context of the budgetary arrangements, where now stands the financial process reform, which the Department was taking forward for some years? Has that been implemented? Has it been abandoned? Is it still a work in progress? What exactly is the position with the financial process reform?

I want to comment, if I might, on the position going forward. We heard many references today to the need for prudence, sensibility, living within our means and the necessity to demonstrate to the public our probity in respect of handling public money. All those things are right and proper. In the same breath, we heard about the extreme pressures on various sectors: health, education and infrastructure. Outside the House yesterday, we heard the Minister talk about the fact that, for the future Budget, he is already £600 million short.

If that is the context in which the House is dealing with public finances, the Budget Bill and prudent expenditure, it leads me to ask the question: why, then, are some — indeed, why are the Executive — wanting to indulge themselves in various vanity projects? There is an example of one today. Since the First Minister and deputy First Minister want to spend £11 million annually on Irish language and associated concepts, I asked the Health Minister, whose mathematical skills maybe mean that he should be the Finance Minister,

what £11 million would buy for us in the health service in extra nurses. Wizard-like, he told us that £11 million a year equates to 275 extra nurses. Knowing of the need in health, knowing of the shortfall, knowing of the constant stream through our offices of people complaining about waiting lists, delays, not being able to get a bed, not being able to access the health service in the manner in which they ought, who of us, faced with that, could say to any of our constituents, "Well, in fact, it is more important to have Irish language or the nonsense of Ulster Scots than to have 275 extra nurses a year". Yet the Executive, First Minister and deputy First Minister are saying to the Northern Ireland community, "We want to take £11 million of scarce resources and not give it to the health service or schools. We want to put it into Irish language or Ulster-Scots identity projects. Suck it up. You may be short of nurses and other things, but this is so important that we are determined to do it". We talk about priorities. Is the House not headed in entirely the wrong direction when it comes to priorities? It is a colossal sum of money for that sort of project.

Let me refer Members to the fact that the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which does real work in the community and is essential to the whole process and workings of government, has an annual budget of just over £7 million. It has a staff of 106. In recent years, it has diminished its budget demand and staffing by tightening its belt. Here we are saying, "Never mind the Audit Office with its £7 million. Irish language and the rest of it needs £11 million. Never mind that the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Commissioner for Older People run on a fraction of £11 million. We are to ring-fence £11 million of resources for language issues". Really?

Then, we stand up in the House and empathise with our constituents about their real needs. We say how appalling it is that they do not have the health service that they deserve and how we will make sure that they do. At the same time, we talk about wanting to squander money like that. It is time that the House took a good look at itself when it comes to these issues.

Mr McHugh: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Certainly.

Mr McHugh: The Member refers to money being spent on the Irish language. It is a tirade that I listen to often. I remind the Member that the Irish language is not there in splendid isolation. It is the language of a community and

the language of this country. For many in the community involved in the Irish language — in fact, a continually growing number — it is also their first language, and they, too, have health issues. The language is ingrained in them and is part of what is important to them. Isolating those people from their language or pretending, for one second, that money being spent on the Irish language does not also address the educational needs and health issues of that very same community is, in itself, a fallacy.

Mr Allister: Let me deal with that. It is not as though the Irish language community has been starved of funding for all these years and, suddenly, we will spend £11 million on it. Sorry, but the Irish language community has been one of the most feted communities in Northern Ireland. It has its own education system where, unlike any other sector, you can form a primary school with 12 pupils, whereas primary schools in the controlled sector face closure. The Irish-medium sector has its own North/South body with executive powers. It is a sector that has had expenditure of over £200 million in recent years. No one need pretend that the Irish language sector is being neglected.

It has been feted beyond belief, and now we are going to pour — squander, rather — £11 million on some vanity nonsense about Ulster Scots and the Irish language and appoint endless commissioners and staff to enforce it on those who do not even want it.

7.15 pm

I am saying to the House, "You need to get your priorities right". I was about to say, "This House in particular needs to get its priorities right", because the House under the "New Deal, New Dreams" document is going to provide for interpretation services. We are going to squander I do not know how many hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of pounds, in the House to provide a service that no one needs. There is not a single Member who needs the English language interpreted so that they can understand it. There is not a Member who needs it interpreted into Ulster Scots — think of it — or into Irish, yet, as part of this vanity project, we are saying that the House shall have interpretation services, it shall have instant translation services and it will be provided with headsets to listen to those few Members who can speak Irish, with yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker, being a notable exception. We will not have to wear the headsets for very long with some Members, because once they get past the opening remarks, there will not be much to say.

Think of the folly. The absolute squandering folly of a House in which every one of the 90 Members — yes, I will say it — adequately speaks English.

A Member: Do not go too far.

Mr Allister: No, I will not go too far. Everyone adequately speaks English. Nonetheless, the House is going to have this nonsense expenditure, while, meantime, people cannot get a bed in our hospitals and kids cannot get their special needs assessment.

It is time we took a look at ourselves, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is time we got our priorities right. When a Minister comes to the House with a Budget that has its priorities right, then it will be a Budget deserving of support, but a Budget that anticipates that sort of foolhardy, unnecessary expenditure is not one that should recommend itself to the House.

Mr Carroll: Mr Deputy Speaker, yesterday I stood with workers at the Belfast courts who are striking because they cannot get the pay they deserve and because measures like redundancies have increased their workload substantially. For those who have not joined those workers on the picket lines, I can tell you that the level of mistrust that they have for politicians is massive. There is a frustration that has deepened as their struggle has gone on, and it is hard to imagine how the way that the Bill will probably be passed today will alleviate that mistrust one bit.

We have heard a lot about Tory austerity, and, indeed, I am an ardent opponent of the Tories in general and the austerity measures in particular from Westminster that have crippled communities like mine. There is an irony, however, Mr Deputy Speaker, to sitting in the Chamber and listening to the big parties talk about Tory austerity. The Civil Service workers who were on strike yesterday and again today are on picket lines because the Assembly has so far refused to pay them the wage that they deserve. Of course, a lump sum from Westminster would go some way towards solving that problem, but let us not forget about the parties in the Chamber that prioritised tax handouts for big corporations for a decade. This would have cost us £300 million per year from our block grant, and the big parties can readily envision £300 million for big business, but they cannot envision the money needed for the civil servants that they have been falling over themselves to thank over the last few days for running this place for the last three years.

Those same parties were so opposed to Tory austerity that they introduced welfare reforms on the Tories' behalf, decimating our welfare system and driving people to food banks and into poverty. They told us that there was no money to implement pay parity for health workers, but only after they signed up to PFI schemes in our health service and beyond to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. Lo and behold, when the nurses and health workers refused to give up the fight, the money that we were told was not there for pay was found pretty quickly in the Stormont coffers. No Westminster lump sum was necessary.

I labour the point because it is hypocritical at best for parties to condemn Tory austerity on the one hand while implementing it with the other. I mean austerity measures such as thousands of public-sector job losses. It might have been 20,000 public-sector job losses, but, thankfully, they did not get their wish.

These are the parties of RHI. We listen to the Finance Minister suggest that the Assembly is in need of some £600 million. It is quite glaring that almost that exact figure was burned as part of the RHI scandal: a scheme that they should have shut down but did not. The hundreds of millions of pounds squandered on the RHI is needed now more than ever for public services.

It is my view that the two big parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, supported the British Government's new deal primarily to avoid an election. In doing so, they signed up to a deal that secured no costed financial commitments from the British Government. We have heard that the British Government apparently rowed back on the financial promises that they made in negotiations. I ask the Finance Minister to take the opportunity when he comes back to the Dispatch Box to enlighten Members and the public on exactly what those financial promises were. That is the basic level of transparency that I have been calling for since the deal was agreed. His silence on that front leads us to believe that, in order to avoid an election, in which they would likely have lost seats, the two big parties missed a historic opportunity to tie down the British Government to serious commitments.

It is in that context that we are now faced with a continuation of the same old austerity processes, the same context of empty promises and little political will to deliver. All indications point to a continuation of that theme. Indeed, we listened to almost every Committee Chair in the Assembly speak about hard decisions, cuts and underfunding in the context of the Estimates and this Budget Bill. As I pointed out

yesterday, the detail of the Bill contains very concerning elements, such as £24 million in reductions, albeit retrospective, to the budget of DAERA, the Department with responsibility for the environment. At a time when we are addressing climate change — the biggest test of our generation — it is hard not to think, in advance of any new Budget, that the Assembly has already failed the test by approving those figures.

Other glaring reductions are to be written into legislation today, many as concerning as the £24 million from DAERA. Most concerning of all, just like the £24 million, there has been little or no scrutiny or oversight. Every corner of this Chamber seems to agree on that, so I cannot fathom how the Executive, who claim to be championing a new approach for a new decade, are happy to sign off on those figures when they have barely touched the oversight measures demanded by the Assembly. To have financial decisions rubber-stamped by MLAs without a shred of proper scrutiny demonstrates that the Assembly has also failed the test of accountability.

People Before Profit has no truck with such antics.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will not. Sorry. All the Executive parties had about seven hours to set out their stall, so I will set out mine without taking any interventions.

We will certainly not be beholden to any austerity Budget. People elected me to take a stand against that kind of behaviour, and that is what I intend to do. We believe that there is a different way forward: one based on taxing the very rich to pay for public services; one based on investing heavily in public services and that enforces proper minimum wages to kick-start our economy, rather than one that drops to its knees, pockets open for whatever multinational corporation is interested; and not an economy that relies on the whim of free-market forces.

We will not stop pushing and pressing to ensure that the Assembly does not make cuts that hurt the most vulnerable, but, if that happens, we will be in our communities organising against it, building people power and throwing our weight behind the trade unions defending workers. Not a week has gone by since the Executive got together without the leaking of a fresh quote about water charges, tuition fees, prescription fees or the sell-off of Housing Executive homes. New Decade, New Approach? It does not feel that way so far.

The five-party Executive, which makes up the majority of the Assembly, clearly needs a strong Opposition. People Before Profit is the socialist opposition in the Chamber. I was elected as a socialist voice, and I will continue to use my platform in that way. That means that, where we see positives, we will support and welcome them; where I can work with the big parties to make positive changes for my constituents, I will do so. I note, for example, fresh talk in the Chamber today about workers' rights. I hope to have the support of those who made comments about workers' rights to ensure that my trade union freedom Bill has a successful journey through the House. Where we get a sniff of harmful moves by the Executive, we will challenge it. We will interrogate those financial moves in particular that have a real impact on the lived experience of people here. We will not, therefore, offer our approval today. Instead, I will continue to scrutinise and hold the Executive to account in the period ahead.

Mr Wells: I never expected someday to be speaking from this part of the House. I am reminded of the famous line in the song:

*"Clowns to the left of me,
Jokers to the right,
Here I am, stuck in the middle with" —*

— Jim. *[Laughter.]* And I must say —.

Mr Allister: It could be worse.

Mr Wells: I suppose it could be worse. I am glad that there are so many here, because I hold the record in the House for the smallest turnout. Twenty years ago, I had a private Member's motion on the Ballynahinch bypass, to which a grand total of four MLAs turned up: the Speaker, who had to be there; the Minister, who had to be there; the late and much-missed P J Bradley, the wonderful Member for South Down; and myself. I asked myself how I would report that expenditure motion to the people of South Down through the local paper, and it came up with the line, "Mr Wells speaking to a hushed Assembly". It was hushed because there were only four people here.

We are the last chance saloon as far as the future of the Assembly is concerned. I am not talking about our political differences; I am not talking about a mandatory coalition. I am talking about the ability of the 90 people in the Chamber to prove that we are fit to run Northern Ireland plc. I am one of the very few, along with Mr Beggs — I cannot see any others — who were elected here in 1998. There are probably Members here who were not born in

1998 when the Assembly was established. We have had many false dawns; we have had many failures. Can anyone honestly say that the people of Northern Ireland are any further on in trusting us with their Budget, their expenditure and their services than they were 21 years ago? If you had an opinion poll out on the street, you might find that we are not popular.

About 15 years ago, I attended an Assembly roadshow that was chaired by Eamonn Mallie. All six South Down MLAs were present in Downpatrick. Throughout the night, people shouted, "You're wasters. You're useless. You're only in it for the money. You're no good in running our services". That went on all night. At the end of it, Eamonn Mallie asked, "How many people think that having an Assembly is a good thing?". Every hand in the room went up. Mr Mallie said, "Well, you've spent the entire night calling these people a bunch of wasters. Why do you think an Assembly is a good thing?". Somebody stood up and said, "They might be a bunch of wasters, but they're our wasters".

For a very long time, we have played upon the patience of our people, and there is not much evidence to show that we are good custodians of the money that is given to us either by our own taxpayers or by the Exchequer through the block grant in London. We are going to have to do something that we have not done in 21 years: we are going to have to start taking some difficult decisions in this House. We have not taken one, in my experience. Not only was I here from 1998, but I was here in 1982 in the old Assembly, and I did not see any difficult decisions taken there. There is only one survivor, and that is Mr Allister. We are the only ones who have survived all that time to have sat in both Assemblies.

Mr Durkan: You did not survive the DUP. *[Laughter.]*

7.30 pm

Mr Wells: That is true: neither of us survived the DUP. *[Laughter.]* Are we, as an Assembly, prepared to take the really difficult choices? I was aghast when Mr Swann took the portfolio of Health because I have been there, worn the T-shirt and have the scars on my back to show it. It is a very, very difficult post. I said to Robin, "You're mad. Your job is not difficult, it is impossible", and I will tell you why. During the first meeting of the Assembly, everybody stood up and said how prepared they were to support Robin Swann to make the very difficult

decisions to implement Bengoa. Does anybody know what Bengoa says? Does anybody know what Hayes says, Donaldson says or Compton says? What they all say is that we are spreading precious financial resources far too thinly over far too many buildings in Northern Ireland. Everybody agrees with that, but they also have the caveat, "I agree with that as long as it never affects my constituency". That is the problem.

We have some terribly difficult decisions to make. It will involve decisions that are the right decisions to make but which will be very unpopular with our constituents. The only way that we will be able to do that is if all 90 Members in the Assembly commit ourselves to putting through those difficult decisions and do not peel off to form "save our community hospital" or "save our community clinic" groups and start lobbying against those trying to make the right decisions. I will be very interested to see, given the fact that Minister Robin Swann, the Member for North Antrim, has asked for £660 million just to keep things on an even keel in Health, whether we will support him when he starts to make the really difficult decisions. I have my doubts.

We have a staffing crisis in Health at the moment. We are 7,000 staff short, including 2,400. That has emerged in the very short time since I was Minister. That issue really did not feature in 2015, and now it is a real crisis. Do we have the political strength and will in the House to say to our medical staff, "If we pour scarce resources into training you to be a doctor, a nurse or a physio, we expect you to stay for five years after you have trained in Northern Ireland"? That will be unpopular. We will get people lobbying us and saying, "I will lose votes amongst the nurses and the doctors". Our nursing problem is lying on Bondi Beach. It is in Vancouver; it is in London. Enough nurses are being trained in Northern Ireland to look after the needs of our community, but, sadly, many of them are being headhunted at trade fairs in the autumn. They go to the four corners of the world and do not come back. They marry the first Ukrainian coming down the street in Sydney, and that is it — they are gone. That is our difficulty. Do we have the political courage to say to those folk, "You're going to stay for five years or else you will pay back the large amount of money that it has cost us to train you"?

Do we have the political courage to change the model of the Housing Executive? It is interesting that the honourable Member for Londonderry Mr Durkan mentioned that earlier. He talked about adapting a new model for the

Housing Executive that is more akin to the housing associations, freeing the Housing Executive from the constraints of the public purse and giving it the power to borrow money — very cheaply at the minute, in the open markets — in the same way as some of the housing associations do. That will not be popular. Mr Carroll, no doubt, will be placarding this Building and saying that it is de facto privatisation, but it is perhaps the only way in which we can prevent a situation where we have to get rid of 43,000 Housing Executive properties. It is a model that has worked very well in the housing associations. Do we have the political will to do it?

Do we have the political will to take Northern Ireland Water? I think that I heard Mr Beggs speaking about this. Mr Beggs, your speech will read marvellously in the 'Antrim Times' next week; I know exactly where it is going. I know that, as I sit down, I will see it in the 'Down Recorder'. I will see it in the 'Londonderry Sentinel' next week. Of course, that is where all these speeches are going. This one is going to the 'Mourne Observer'; I have to say that.

The point is — Mr Beggs mentioned this point — do we have the political courage to change the model of Northern Ireland Water to the Hyder Welsh Water model? It is a not-for-profit company that, again, takes the funding off the balance sheet — in this case, it would be the Department for Infrastructure — and allows private funding to be used to provide a first-class water facility for three million people. At the time when that happened in Cardiff, there was uproar, and the Mr Carrolls of this world, again, were picketing and saying, "This is a disaster. This is the semi-privatisation of our water service". Now, nobody in Wales wants to go back to the old model. They have been freed to invest in upgrading the water and sewerage system to make certain that they no longer have the deficit that we have. They have been able to fund their water supply and sewerage system adequately.

Are we prepared, as an Assembly — this is an unpopular one — to introduce minimum unit pricing for alcohol? That is not popular — not popular at all. When I suggested that when I was Health Minister, there was uproar, because people said that they would lose votes in the social clubs, the pubs and various other places in Northern Ireland where intoxicating liquors are consumed. We know, however, that such an unpopular decision will save our health service, our judiciary and our social services a fortune, because of the impact of the abuse of alcohol in Northern Ireland. Again, it will take only 10 people from any constituency to lobby

their MLA and say that it will bring poverty to Cookstown, Castlederg or Ballycastle for us to be scared and to run from making a difficult decision. They have done it in Wales; why should we not do it in Northern Ireland?

We have just heard today that the honourable Member for Lagan Valley, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, has announced that he is giving £2 million to conservation and environmental charities to carry on good work. That is based on the 5p — or one shilling, as some of us would remember it — plastic bag tax. Could we be radical and increase that to 10p? We could, and double the amount of money available for that necessary work for environmental protection. Again, I have no doubt that the honourable Member for North Antrim Mr Allister, who led the charge against the first plastic bag tax, will be up in arms, saying that that is not acceptable, but really — 10p? Is that too much to ask to try to put our house in order?

More importantly, on the bigger figures, I asked the Minister of Justice how much we were paying out in legal aid to our top barristers in Northern Ireland. The average is £276,000 per barrister. When I asked that question, the top-earning barrister was paid £812,000 a year in legal aid. The lady concerned was not amused, and I am off her Christmas card list. She made the point to me, as did Mr Allister, that that was a spike in her income and that it was earned in an unusual year. I asked how much she got in the previous five years, and it was just over £800,000 a year. The people in the law library said to me, "We need this money to be incentivised to produce a top-class service for our clients". Frankly, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would be incentivised for a quarter of that. *[Laughter.]* Would £800,000 incentivise me? Once you get past a quarter of a million pounds, you are well incentivised to do anything. That is money that is being poured out of the Exchequer.

Mr Allister asked a very good question about whether £11 million equated to 275 nurses. What on earth could you get for the total legal aid bill of £26 million? How many nurses or teachers or Roads Service staff would that employ? It strikes me that there must be an upper ceiling on how much we are prepared to pay our top legal people. Remember: this is not their total income; they do not scrape by on £276,000 a year. They can also do some private work to supplement that meagre income. Really, given our situation at the moment, can we justify such vast amounts of money being poured into the coffers of such a small number of people? If we paid them only

an average of £150,000 a year, could we get a top-class service? I believe that we could. That is more than even the First Minister gets in Northern Ireland, and it is certainly a lot more than Ministers get.

Finally, I listened with interest to the honourable Member for Londonderry Mrs Anderson, who was pontificating yesterday about the benefits of this mythical united Ireland. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland want to go to heaven, but they do not want to die on Tuesday. They may have this mythical view of a united Ireland in the dim and distant future, and it would be nice to have it, but hang on. I have to get the children educated; I have to get my little business up and running; and I have to get my house built. Not now, thank you very much, but in some distant future. That is why, recently, only 29% of the people of Northern Ireland, after all the gloom and doom about Brexit and all the apparent success of Sinn Féin in the Irish Republic, are keen about a united Ireland.

I know that I am drifting slightly away from the 45% —.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Member for giving way. If he is so certain about that figure, why not put it to the people? Let the people decide what union we want to be a part of. Do we want to stay, as some from the unionist community argue, with Britain, or do we want to reunite Ireland and go back into the EU? If you are so absolutely confident in that position, let the people decide. It is great that, from yesterday, there have been a number of contributions in the House about the reunification of Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind Members that I have allowed a fair bit of latitude in the debate. It is great to hear the ingenuity of some Members and their craft at raising points, which I appreciate, but please could we stay within the constraints of the Budget Bill?

Mr Wells: Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am following the lead of the honourable Member for Foyle, who said that, if you keep mentioning 45%, you are absolutely home and dry. Let us talk about the impact on the 45% of a united Ireland. What the honourable Member for Foyle forgets to mention is that it is going to cost the Irish Republic —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, we are not debating the merits or demerits of a united Ireland this evening, Mr Wells, with the greatest respect. If we could come back to the actualities of the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Wells: I note that one of the other Deputy Speakers showed a great deal of leniency to the honourable Member for Londonderry Ms Anderson, who spoke on exactly this issue yesterday. It is unfortunate that a mere humble, obscure Back-Bencher like myself is being denied the opportunity to refute the honourable Member's suggestion that the Irish Republic can find €2,300 for every man, woman and child to subsidise a united Ireland when, meanwhile, the cost of the subsidy from the United Kingdom to Northern Ireland is £156 per person. Can they afford the £156 a lot more than the €2,300 from the Irish Republic?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I presume your point is made. Please move to the Budget Bill.

Mr Wells: Finally, may I suggest — these are all difficult decisions — that we introduce a development land tax? A lot of land is being banked. Developers have bought it and are not prepared to put housing on it. The honourable Member for Belfast West mentioned that there is a chronic housing shortage, and he is right. Should we introduce a tax that says, "If you are going to bank that land and keep it out of the development stream, we are going to tax you accordingly"?

Devolution came to Northern Ireland at a similar time as to Scotland and Wales. In those two parts of the United Kingdom, public perception of their Assemblies has risen dramatically. They have now bedded into the political system, and no one would dream of asking for those Assemblies to be prorogued. Could we honestly say that there is the same acceptance of this Assembly? Could we say that, when the election is held in two years' time in 2022, our public will have the confidence that we are good stewards of their finance?

If we cannot prove that after 23 years, this Assembly is in deep trouble, and we are most definitely in the last chance saloon. So, no pressure on the Minister of Finance but, if we get it wrong, I do not think that we will have a twelfth or thirteenth chance to get it wrong again. Therefore, we must start to take difficult decisions. We must start to grow up and mature as politicians and to say that being part of the United Kingdom and taking the block grant is simply not a matter of take, take, take. This knee-jerk reaction that we heard today — every Member stood up and said, "I am not here to raise local issues. I am not here to ask for more money", and then what do they do? They ask for more money.

We will have to take those difficult decisions, which will be unpopular, to show that we are mature enough so that when we next bid for extra resourcing from Westminster, we have a clear conscience to say, "We deserve it".

Mr McCrossan: Mr Wells seems to have had a new lease of life since he left the DUP Benches, and it suits him as well.

Members will be well aware that, in the wider public arena, the view of this place has been at an all-time low. Public confidence in this place is non-existent. People are hopeful that we can do something in the next few years to alleviate the considerable pressures in our public services, which have worsened in the absence of the institutions and the House, and the absence of parties working together to deal with the challenges.

Civil servants ran this place in the absence of the institutions for three years. In the absence of elected, accountable politicians, civil servants were told, "Step up. You fill the void. You take the decisions. You make the ship go on". In light of the circumstances and challenges that they faced, they did a fantastic job. Given the circumstances and challenges that they faced, against their wishes on many occasions, we should be thankful that we have a Civil Service that worked and continues to work so hard.

7.45 pm

That brings me to my point. Civil servants have been striking outside offices and places of work for their rightful entitlement to a pay increase that has been withheld from them for a number of years. The restoration of the House offered some hope to quite a number of public-sector workers, but the news of a £600 million shortfall will have dampened spirits. We have debates and discuss the absence of the institutions, but it is important that we recognise at all times the contribution of our Civil Service and its workers. Those are the people who, day and daily, keep the place running and keep our services running, and they have done so in very challenging times. I sincerely hope that the Minister will find a resolution very quickly to ensure that those hard-working people — our hard-working people — get what they are rightfully entitled to.

Yesterday, during the debate on the Vote on Account and Supplementary Estimates, I outlined the vast pressures facing our education system and the issues threatening the very future of our children. The very fact that the

education budget needs over £700 million by 2022 compared with this financial year paints a dark and depressing picture for all in the sector. Yesterday, I referred to the teachers' pay dispute, another sore that has rumbled on, leaving teachers without their rightful entitlement to a pay increase that they should have had long before now. As the delay continues, the bill increases. It does not make any sense. A remedy is certainly needed because it is damaging the morale of our teaching workforce, classroom assistants and principals in every school across Northern Ireland. I do not need to explain to Members that teachers, principals and classroom assistants are the bedrock of our education system. Our teachers lay an important foundation in the life of every child, helping children to build a future. They do a tremendous job despite being underpaid and facing significant pressures as the demand increases and challenges continue. I would like to thank, on the record, the many teachers who have gone through those tremendous challenges. They have been underpaid for the last number of years but have continued to step up, show leadership and put the interests of children first.

As other Members have articulated today and the Chair of the Education Committee did in yesterday's debate, special educational needs face crisis conditions. Vulnerable children and their families are being failed continually. Over the last three years, there has been a 20% increase in statemented children and a 19% increase in the number of non-statemented children who have been identified as having special educational needs attending mainstream schools. However, very little funding has been allocated to ensure that their educational needs are sufficiently met. We need to get this right. We need to ensure that our education budget is properly reflective of the needs of children with special educational needs. That brings me to another point. In the absence of the institutions, the Education Authority, with all of its horror stories, mishandled quite a number of documents in relation to vulnerable children with special educational needs. It was advised, according to a whistle-blower, to deliberately not date-stamp correspondence because it knew that it could not get the thing resolved in time. One principal said:

"In my opinion, the Education Authority is in complete meltdown, and I have never known such a crisis as this in my twelve years in post as a principal."

We have to decide what is fit for purpose in Northern Ireland, and, when it comes to

education, we certainly have to start asking questions about the Education Authority, the money that is spent, the money that is offered

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: — just a wee second — and how much of that money actually reaches schools, because the pressures are certainly continuing. I give way to the Member.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I share his concerns about the pressures that he mentioned. Will he agree with me that the damning indictment is that, for three years, institutions such as the Education Authority went about their business with absolutely zero political accountability?

Mr McCrossan: Absolutely. Given that it was founded only a few short years beforehand, it has certainly lacked the political leadership from here and direction on what was necessary to make it properly function. I know many people who work in the Education Authority who do a very good job, but the thing is not fit for purpose, and we need to call it out as we see it. Every principal and every teacher in every school that I have attended in West Tyrone and beyond has, when asked what the problems are in the school, pointed the first finger at the Education Authority. Serious questions need to be asked about the money that we put into it and about how it functions. I am sure that the Minister will do that.

Our mental health services in schools also need better investment now and moving forward into future Budgets. I referenced yesterday the fact that 25 critical incidents occurred in 2017 where the Education Authority was called into schools to deal with suicides, and it is my understanding that it handled them very well, given the circumstances. That is a shocking figure, and it clearly shows the impact that mental health and suicide rates have on young people and children.

In my constituency of West Tyrone, there are a number of budgetary issues that I want to raise that negatively and continually impact on my constituents on a daily basis. Regional imbalance, which is a big term in the House that has been spoken about by many Members who have walked before me and represented my constituency of West Tyrone and other constituencies west of the Bann, is a major sticking point for so many people in my constituency. Just look at the disparity between the east and the west of the Province.

I will come on to the infrastructure deficit again, because I feel very passionate about it, as many Members will know. We have high rates of unemployment and very high rates of social deprivation and poverty that collectively contribute to the mental health crisis that we are facing. While I fully recognise the great work our medical staff do in the Western Trust, they have not been supported by additional investment or provided with fit-for-purpose facilities, and they have not been provided with funding that reflects the reality of the Western Trust area. That is especially the case with primary care.

Mental health is a crisis that the new Executive must tackle. They should not talk about it, say how terrible it is and say, "We must put money into it", but meaningfully plan for, invest in and tackle it. A few short weeks ago, I visited a mental health facility at a hospital in Derry. I saw fantastic facilities, wonderful staff and a lot of very unwell people. I visited someone in that hospital who is very close to me, who was desperate for help, who reached out for help on many occasions, went to the GP, could not get seen by a community psychiatric nurse (CPN), could not be seen by a psychiatrist and could not receive counselling services.

That person had reached breaking point and asked to be admitted to that very nice facility with very hard-working staff. There was an issue, and that person who was desperate for counselling, help and assistance sat in the hospital for one week. She did not see a psychiatrist and was left sitting in a room looking out a window, with others around her. When I lifted the phone to the chief executive of the trust, the chief executive was rightly horrified. That person's condition worsened because she did not receive the intervention or the care that she needed. I was promised the sun, the moon and the stars and that the situation would be resolved, but I can assure you that, three weeks after that lady left the hospital, there has not been one call or follow-up or any referral to any form of mental health service. She is at breaking point.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will. I am told that there is no funding available for services. These are our people. These are our mothers, our fathers, our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our neighbours and our friends. That lady sat for one week in a hospital to which she had reached out for help, and she did not see any kind of doctor or psychiatrist. That is the issue with our system. They can pump money into things and think that it is a sticking plaster to

resolve some of the huge crises that we face. I know that person very well, and it hit me very hard to learn that she reached out and went into the system yet still did not receive any support. I will let the Member intervene.

Mr Butler: Thank you for allowing me to intervene. The Member spoke very well about the strike action that was reluctantly taken by care staff over pay. Does he agree that the predominant reason that the care staff went on strike was workforce planning and the stresses that they face trying to provide the care that his friend so sadly missed? Three years without government and the associated lack of direction, as well as decisions made by previous Health Ministers, compounded the problems that have led to the crisis that we face today.

Mr McCrossan: Absolutely. There is a lack of planning in the system. There is a lack of workforce planning. We have some of the greatest healthcare staff that you could ever ask for. They are some of the most hard-working, caring people, but they too need to be supported to do the job that they want to do in order to deliver for the people whom they care for. That is the issue with the system. It is not reflective of our medical staff, and it is certainly not reflective of the current Minister, who was brave enough to take on the brief and lead.

Another issue that the Assembly must face is the crisis that the rest of our health service faces: the 300,000 people on health service waiting lists. I hope that funding is secured as part of the New Decade, New Approach deal, as too many are suffering. All of us can relate to that. In our constituency offices, we see people suffering day and daily. For three years, people pleaded with me, as their representative, to do something to help them, but there simply was not the funding there to resolve the huge and deepening crisis with our waiting lists.

It is absolutely shocking and inhumane that over 5,000 people have died every year while waiting to receive some form of treatment. I got that figure from a response to a freedom of information request. To make that directly relevant to Members, that is our mothers, our fathers, our brothers and sisters, our neighbours and our friends. There are big issues in the health service that will require collective responsibility from the House to resolve.

I also want to discuss accessibility to healthcare, and I will take Strabane as an example. My fellow constituency Member Mr McHugh may back me up on this. Day and

daily, we are inundated with complaints about the lack of out-of-hours GP services in the Strabane area.

We are told that it has been stripped back due to budget cuts. That makes a bad situation much worse, because people end up going to A&E, which congests our A&E departments.

8.00 pm

Another request that the Minister kindly answered about Western Urgent Care revealed that only 24% of shifts were covered in the primary care unit of Strabane health centre in the last year. That means that 76% were left unattended, with no notice. People travel from Castlederg to go to the health centre in Strabane, hoping to be seen and to receive vital medical treatment for their child, who cannot speak for themselves, and to understand what is wrong, and they are told, "You'll have to go to Derry. We have no doctor here". That is all the result of the shortage in funding but also, more importantly, in my opinion, how we manage Western Urgent Care and others with the funding and resources that they are granted.

I want to comment on our infrastructure budget and deficit. Recent reports state that the combined depth of potholes here is eight times that of the English Channel. There is a stark figure for you: eight times that of the English Channel. We have seen millions of pounds wasted on claims due to damage to vehicles from potholes. We really need to get our infrastructure budget right. Again, that is not an easy task, given some of the tremendous pressures that exist in that Department. As has been mentioned by various Members today, a lot of the issues that will affect our economy are to do with infrastructure.

I want to see the full delivery — I will say it as clearly as I can — of the A5 western transport corridor scheme. I know that it was a commitment of previous Executives to see the delivery of the A5. I do not want to see a quarter of the A5. I do not want to drive on a nice road from Derry to Strabane, then struggle to get from Strabane to Omagh and then have another nice road from Omagh to Ballygawley; I want to see the full completion of that A5. In more recent weeks, a public inquiry has been ongoing in relation to the A5. I will attend that public inquiry next week and echo, as strongly as I do in the Chamber and to the Minister and officials, how important that road is for the north-west of the Province to increase connectivity, bring about investment and save countless lives.

I avoided the A5 this morning because it gets congested between Omagh and Strabane on the Omagh section. It takes me 45 minutes to get through Omagh if I hit it at the wrong time. I took an alternative route, and, in so doing, I ended up hitting black ice and going off the road. There is no option for people who live in West Tyrone. Luckily, I lived to tell the tale; I got the car pulled in — eventually. That is the reality for people travelling on that road. Regardless of which stretch, corner or section of the A5 that you go on, you literally take your life in your hands. The latest figures available, which are from 2014 to 2018, show that 18 lives have been lost — I said 15 earlier — on that road since 2014. Since 2006, 34 lives have been lost. Anybody who has had the pleasure of visiting the beautiful constituency of West Tyrone will have noticed that the infrastructure is absolutely disgraceful. It is non-existent. We have beautiful views, but we have very dangerous roads.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. When he is talking about the A5 and the infrastructure in the north-west of Ireland, I invite him to reflect on the potential for joining up the north-west with not just other parts of Northern Ireland but the rest of the island. Probably the best and fastest way to improve economic performance is through developing the all-island economy.

Mr McCrossan: It will be absolutely pivotal to the all-Ireland economy and to creating greater connectivity across the island.

I had friends over from England recently. They were looking at a map of the old rail system, and they said, "What's that big patch up there?". I said, "You're standing in it". They could not believe it. They said, "Does no one know you exist down here, or have they deliberately turned a blind eye?". That is something that I will leave you all to think about.

The A5 — I say this without any hesitation or doubt — is the most dangerous road on this island; in fact, I go further; it the most dangerous on these islands. People have lost their loved ones because of continued delays to the scheme. A minority group — a handful of self-interested people — have taken it on themselves to derail a project that is supported by the majority of people across the island. Unfortunately, to date, they have succeeded in continually derailing it. They make their excuses as to why they feel so strongly about it, but it is down to complete and utter self-interest. They have cost the taxpayer tens if not hundreds of millions with their continued petty objections that have put that project where it is today at a

cost that has put the House under significant pressure.

Mr Beggs rightly asked about the commitment of the Irish Government — some £400 million in previous times. I call on any Irish Government — particularly the future one, whoever that may be — to recommit that money to the infrastructure that will unite this island in the interests of our economy and the safety of our people. Removing that funding, which they have done twice, has put these institutions and the Department under financial pressure.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

Mr Buckley: I recognise what the Member has said in relation to the A5, but it would be remiss of me to not put on record my grave concerns in relation to the A1. Since 1998 — the Minister will be aware of this, because it goes through both of our constituencies — it has claimed over 60 lives.

Mr McCrossan: Absolutely. There is an issue with infrastructure across the entire Province. There was an old saying years ago that, if you went to Donegal, you needed to watch for potholes; in Donegal now, they are saying, "If you go to Strabane, you need to watch the potholes". There is a huge issue with the infrastructure of this place, and there is a desperate need for full and proper investment. I close off my remarks on the A5 by saying that it is important that the House is united in ensuring that we have proper infrastructure that links the entire Province and, more importantly, this island. It takes me two and a half hours to get here every day and two and a half hours to get back.

In terms of capital budget, I want to see the House do more to extend rail services. That is a discussion that we really need to get into. Yes, some say, "There's no money, Daniel. There's no point in discussing rail. We can't have a halt at the International Airport. We've no money". What is wrong with having a bit of ambition and a bit of vision for this place to properly connect the island and get some buy-in? Regardless of the political disagreements around the House, this place finds itself in a unique situation. We have the Assembly and these institutions and our budgets; we could have buy-in from the British Government, who are very keen to build bridges at £20 billion or more; and we have the Irish Government. We also had Europe. We had European funding that was key to this place. It was key to my constituency in Omagh,

when it was blown to bits and people were killed in the streets. We had a situation where we could attract funding from a wide range of places. The difficulty is that we are so focused in the House on taking chunks out of each other and finding reasons to not work with each other that we cannot see past our own agendas.

I also want to use the debate to raise issues concerning rural communities, especially those in West Tyrone. I start with some positive news on Project Stratum. I had an answer from the Minister, and I thank him for providing it. It will serve 10,000 homes in my constituency, which is a significant investment that has been a long time coming to address the deficit in broadband provision. I would be walking up the streets in West Tyrone, and one side of the street would have broadband and the other side would not. It is an unbelievable situation, but let us be honest about where rural communities are today. They have been stripped. Post offices have been closed. Rural banks are gone. Schools are closing. The heart has been ripped out of rural communities. I have a large rural constituency. You can see the damage that has been caused to rural communities by a lack of investment, a lack of responsibility from the Executive. People in rural communities feel neglected, and anyone who represents a rural community will argue the same point as I am making here and will continue to make. I sincerely hope, if I am in the House in 10 years' time, that I am not making the same arguments. We need to address the blatant inequality that exists in the west of the Province. For too long, eyes have been closed, mouths have been shut and no action has been taken. That needs to change, and there needs to be some meaningful investment in rural communities, particularly in mine of West Tyrone.

Members will be glad to hear that I am nearly done. Nothing epitomises the blatant inequality more than the recent floods that brought devastation right through the very heart of my constituency in 2017. The rain came and flooded houses, businesses, community facilities and farms and destroyed livelihoods. I put on record, because this is the only opportunity that I have had to do so, that the services provided by Roads Service and Rivers Agency were exceptional. They were there, supporting people on the ground. They were helping people throughout the constituency and in other areas that were impacted. When I went to knock on the door of the permanent secretary, he welcomed me in with open arms and said, "Daniel, have a seat", and we had cups of coffee and all the rest. First, he told me that they would look at the cost of the damage caused and would brief me and fellow Members

from the neighbouring constituency and others on the level of devastation. However, "Oh no. Hush, hush. Do not say anything. Sure it is way down there, not in Belfast. Who cares?". That is what people think. Well, it is not happening any more. If I have to jump up and down, shout and scream, people will hear the voices of the people of my constituency, and they will hear that they have been neglected and abandoned.

That was a crisis. There was no Minister in place because Members in this place could not agree with each other. There was no leadership in the Department to actually give some form of help to those farmers, who have spent tens of thousands restoring their land. Homeowners were out of their homes, and, thankfully, from Derry City and Strabane District Council and other councils, through the Department, there was £1,000 for homeowners, but there was very little for businesses. There was very little granted for the farms and the farmer. I stood and watched a grown man who had farmed for 40 years in tears in his field, and he asked, "Where is the funding?". I had asked the Finance Minister whether there had been any approach from the AERA Minister to grant any funding for farmers in the wake of the crisis that they are continually going through.

I will make a point for comparison. Unfortunately, Primark went on fire in Belfast city centre. It destroyed the city centre and caused all sorts of chaos, and it was a very regrettable situation. However, five or six hours after that happened, there was a statement of some sort released by the head of the Civil Service rounding up the Departments and saying, "We're going to do something about this. We're going to save Belfast". Straight away, much as I was absolutely horrified by the scenes in Belfast, I was going, "Where on earth was that when my constituency was under water, when I watched a woman who couldn't get into her house and the water was touching the ceiling of her kitchen?".

Where was the leadership then? I got excuses such as, "There is no Minister, Mr McCrossan. We have no money. We cannot grant it, Mr McCrossan". That is the issue. It is not all about Belfast. There needs to be proper budgeted funding for rural communities and for the west of the Province, and it needs to happen soon. People feel that they have been abandoned. People feel that it is discrimination, regardless of what community they are from. They are united in that feeling in my constituency.

I am hopeful that Minister Poots, who, I know, recognises the severity of the issue, will grant the funding, and I hope that the Finance

Minister will also support him in that. The imagery does not do it justice. I was in the water for days supporting those farmers, and I am sure that other Members did the same.

8.15 pm

Brexit is still a major threat to many farmers and businesses in West Tyrone, with many people left in a state of limbo, unable to plan for the future and afraid of how their livelihoods will be impacted. I urge each and every Member to come together and oppose any trade restrictions or tariffs that will not only impact rural communities but impact all 18 constituencies here, this entire island, our all-island economy. That needs to be a priority for the Executive.

I will finish with this point. We talk in the House about shortfalls, and it is very depressing, after having some hope that the Assembly was back, that we were going to resolve the teachers' issue, the nurses' issue, the Civil Service issue, the flooding issue. I even had visions of the A5 and driving on it. To hear the Finance Minister come out and say that there is a £600 million shortfall raises questions about how this place has been run for many years prior to its collapse and since.

When you consider the cost of corruption, the cost of scandal, the cost of complete and utter political ignorance, to take responsibility for the looseness, the recklessness and the abuse with which public funds have been mistreated in this place for years. I heard a Member across the House say, "The SDLP left the Executive. The Ulster Unionists walked out as well". We left that Executive because there was a big cake and it was cut down the middle, and, if we were lucky, we got the crumbs off the plate.

When it comes to funding and budgeting in the House, we need to be conscious of the fact that we are the worst possible example of how we spend and account for public money. I will list wastage of public funds, why we are in this Budget situation and why it could have been avoided. RHI: Mr Carroll rightly points out that we burned the shortfall as people stood silent, knowing full well that, in poultry sheds across this place, the heat was blazing and the money was burning. Red Sky: do not mention that; it is in the past; it is another blatant example of where money and public funds have been wasted and why we are in this situation. Research Services Ireland: that has not been mentioned in a while. NAMA.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just one moment, please. Will the Member come back to the contemporary situation, which is the Budget Bill over the last 12 months and the incoming Budget Bill, please?

Mr McCrossan: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am providing context as to why we find ourselves in this financial situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry; my advice is to continue in the context of the Budget Bill, please.

Mr McCrossan: Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for your patience. I am due to bring my speech to an end, but what I will say is: let us learn from the past. Let us learn from the failure of this place to properly account for public money so that we do not find ourselves in such deficits, and we do not find ourselves scratching now for £600 million to pay the people who kept this place going, kept our children educated, kept our people in care and safe. That is where the priority should be.

Mr McNulty: Four years an MLA — four years — and this is the first time that I have been able to debate a Budget Bill, even if it is a backwards Budget or, if you like, a retro-Budget. Why? It has been said that, for three years, the voice of the people has not been heard in this place as part of the Budget-making process. Now that we are all back doing what we are supposed to be doing, I want a Budget for this year and the years ahead that reflects the needs and priorities of the community. Public services are stretched in every direction. They need more financial capital and more physical and human resources, be that in doctors' surgeries; school classrooms; hospital wards; or road, rail or waste water infrastructure. Services need to be modernised, reformed and transformed. To do that, they need financial resources. Continuing to do what we have always done just will not cut it any more.

Future projects must strike a balance between doing what we must do, what we want to do and what we need to do strategically. We need to plan and build for the future. We need to build a society that cares for people from the cradle to the grave through its hospital services, childcare, education, training, job creation and care for the elderly. We need to build an infrastructure that supports modern life with affordable quality homes; sport, recreation and leisure facilities; road, rail and waste water infrastructure; and the broadband and telecommunications infrastructure to meet contemporary and future demands.

As I speak in the Chamber, three pupils from the North have self-isolated, and some schools, I believe, have been quarantined. As the world endeavours to cope with the coronavirus, we need to ensure that the region and island are prepared. We need to take all possible steps to prevent an outbreak here. If it does come, we need to deal with it. Yes, it could become a public health emergency, in that such an event could impact on every aspect of life, from schools to workplaces to public services and the general public. Is there money in the Budget to deal with a major public health emergency?

I want a number of key areas to be progressed in future budgetary processes. On infrastructure, I want a Budget that prioritises the provision of an hourly Enterprise service between Belfast and Dublin. This is a small island, yet if you live in Newry or south Armagh and work in Dublin, you struggle to get to Dublin by train in time for work each morning with a reasonable departure time and journey duration. It is the same from Newry to Belfast. I also want the A1 project to be completed without delay so that the safety issues are addressed and not one more life is lost. We need to focus spend on infrastructure projects that will grow the all-Ireland economy. It is in everyone's interests, whether nationalist or unionist, to grow the all-Ireland economy.

The green eco-warrior in me wants massive expansion of the rail network across the island, particularly in the North, as we seek to move people from their cars to public transport. Reopening the Armagh to Portadown rail link should also be explored. I also want to see the development of greenways that connect towns, cities and, more importantly, communities. I want an improved waste water infrastructure so that we can not only protect the environment and waterways but unlock the building of the new homes and properties that people and the economy need in order to flourish.

As a constituency representative, I want the east link and west link roads in Armagh to be developed. I want the southern relief road in Newry and the Narrow Water bridge project to be progressed and developed. I want the Executive to support important, exciting projects like a city park at the Albert Basin in Newry; a hotel in the old, historic jail in Armagh; and the completion of the new, exciting and innovative multisport and leisure village in Armagh city. As a Gael, I want the much-promised and discussed redevelopment of Casement Park to materialise at long last. Planning must be granted and money must follow. The redevelopment of Casement is about more than just the construction of a sports stadium. It is

about respecting a cultural and sporting tradition, investing in an area of social need, promoting sport, health and well-being, building a hub for community endeavour and creating an iconic beacon of hope in the heart of west Belfast. It is time to get Casement done.

To finish on a lighter note, I may need to give further consideration to the Budget in light of the confirmation I received today from the head of the marine and fisheries group that County Armagh does, indeed, have a coastline.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I thank those Members, including Committee Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons, who spoke — by my last count there were 29 — in the debate. It has been very useful to me, as a Finance Minister, to hear the views of the respective Committee members on the important financial and economic issues that face us as an Administration.

Many of the points raised were the specific remit of other Departments, so I will not assume to respond to matters of priority or policy on their behalf. I intend to note down the issues and respond to those that are relevant to the Bill or, indeed, to my own Department and responsibilities. I will now endeavour to respond to as many points as possible in the closing moments of the debate when they relate to the Budget Bill.

I remind Members that there will be an opportunity for a full debate on the 2021 Budget when it comes before the Assembly in March. Again, and I made this point yesterday, a number of Members perhaps misunderstood the purpose of the Vote on Account in particular and think that they are actually setting next year's Budget. I refer to, I think, Colin McGrath and Rachel Woods, who made that mistake, and to Gerry Carroll, who is more than entitled to hold everyone to account, and I look forward to seeing him hold everybody to account, but he is fighting the wrong battle on this one. This Bill is actually approving spend that has already happened, not spend that is yet to come. Let us have the fight on the right issues, and I will be more than happy to hear from him on those.

Members should not confuse the Vote on Account with the setting of the 2021 Budget. The Vote on Account document will always be a high-level document. It is simply the mechanism that allows Departments to incur expenditure for the incoming financial year in advance of the Main Estimates being brought forward following the setting of a Budget for that year, and that Budget and the Main Estimates will be debated in detail in the time ahead.

I will bring the Budget for 2021 to the House in late March, when there will be a full debate on those proposals. The detail of all the 2021 allocations in that Budget and the services they will be used to deliver will be in the 2021 Main Estimates, which I will bring to the Assembly in, I think, June this year. That will be the opportunity for all Members and Committees to fully consider and debate in the Assembly the detail of these spending proposals. We cannot take a time machine and go back to the start of this year when we were not here and be held to account for the spending propositions that lasted right up until 11 January this year. Only the Main Estimates will authorise these detailed expenditure plans, not the high-level Vote on Account, which we are looking at today.

A number of Members also commented on the level of consultation about the Budget Bill and the need for accelerated passage for it. I give my assurances that we will have proper consultation going forward. The Budget Bill, however, will always need to be taken through the Assembly by accelerated passage as it must always be written into the Executive's most up-to-date spending plans. The specific Standing Order was put in place to allow that.

The point is that, in a normal year, the Assembly would have been fully involved in all the financial decisions that have taken place in arriving at the public expenditure position for which the Budget Bill has been written, including the setting of the opening Budget prior to the start of the financial year and all the monitoring rounds that take place during the year and that result in the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Budget Bill. That, obviously, has not been possible this year as the Assembly was not sitting for the majority of the year, but it will be the case for future Budget Bills.

Mr Frew and others raised the financial process generally. Matthew O'Toole referred to it, as did Roy Beggs, who recalled my period as Chair of the Finance Committee, when we put a proposition to the Department about getting a more transparent and clear financial process that involves the Budget Bills and all the associated resolutions that go with them. There is the memorandum of understanding, and the Budget process between the Executive and the Assembly. I confirm that I have asked my officials to engage with the Committee, and I am supportive of anything that enhances transparency and scrutiny in the Budget process.

Any memorandum must be sufficiently flexible to work practically in the various circumstances

that impact on the Budget process. It is also important to state that it would be for the Executive, not just me, to agree a memorandum of understanding.

8.30 pm

Mr Muir raised multi-year budgeting and general engagement on the Budget and sought assurances that those processes would be followed. Our Budget process is restricted by the Budget envelope set by the British Treasury. It is anticipated that the spending review that will be announced later this year will set a multi-year Budget envelope. The Executive will look to set a multi-year Budget from 2021-22 and beyond, following the spending review, with an associated consultation process.

Other issues that were raised could be categorised as "departmental responsibilities", "constituency desires", if I could put it that way, and, for a few, "Somebody should do something about that". A few Members managed to argue for financial prudence and, in the next breath, go on to tell us about all the money that we should spend on projects that are dear to them. Nonetheless, that is understandable. This is the first chance in a number of years that Members have had to make comments in relation to their constituency and spending plans for it. I accept that, across the Six Counties, the local press will be busy over the next number of weeks with a variety of statements.

Mr Frew made the point that we could not ask for more money unless we could demonstrate that we are reforming. As a matter of fact, the core of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document is money to invest in the reform of the health, education and justice systems and in reform generally. Asking for finances to produce a better outcome is a legitimate exercise. You will not achieve that better outcome unless you invest in reform.

I enjoy the odd joust with Mike Nesbitt. He characterises it as us kicking the ball to one another from the full back position in rugby. He raised a number of issues. I took issue with him raising the North/South Ministerial Council because, although it was the only institution that he mentioned, a number of the institutions were in cold storage over the last three years. I accept his argument that he has been fully supportive of it, and I look forward to it getting up and working fully, because the benefits from it can be very important, particularly against the backdrop of Brexit and the protocol processes that need to be worked through. It will be invaluable also in securing the financial

commitments that the Irish Government made to certain projects here in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

Interestingly, the Member outlined his family history. As people were indulged in expanding in the Budget debate, I might be indulged in responding to them. My grandfather happened to be in jail in the Curragh in Kildare when the civil war ended. The first experience that he had of this state, which was formed in his absence, was an exclusion notice from the Home Secretary, Dawson Bates, that hangs on my wall here, up the stairs. He was not allowed to return home to his family, to his business or to his farm. My father's shop was the victim of an abandoned car bomb in Monaghan Street in Newry. It destroyed his business, which was paying to rear nine of us at the time. I do not think that I would have ended up in that business anyway, to be honest. However, it is remarkable that, even though our politics differ, we come from similar historical experiences. I take issue with his remark that I do not want him here and I do not want to hear his voice. I have known him for a long time. I respect very much what he has to say, and I would defend his right to be here and to have his voice heard in this institution or any future one, regardless of the constitutional situation. I wanted to make that clear to him.

Mr Nesbitt referred to the pressures on the Executive Office budget in relation to HIA and victims' redress. Obviously, the Executive Office leads on that. It faces a pressure that is beyond the normal budgetary ask. A number of other Members raised the issue of who pays. The final budget will be a matter for the Executive. Engaging with the bodies associated with institutional abuse to secure a contribution is the responsibility of the Executive Office. It is not a Department of Finance matter, but, as he said, those cases are all strong reasons why Westminster needs to step up. As yet, the NIO has not responded to the correspondence my officials sent to it about these matters last October. Very simply, the Treasury's statement on funding policy states that the body whose decision leads to the additional costs will meet that cost. That is in relation to the victims' issue as well.

I move on to some of the other matters raised. Paul Givan, who is no longer in the Chamber, raised the financial cost of Brexit. Money has already been allocated by the Treasury to various Departments here in relation to the financial cost of Brexit to date. That principle is established: additional costs that accrue to us are met by the Treasury. As I said in response to other issues relating to EU funding and the

continuation of EU funding — that might have been in Question Time; I have been here so long I am mixing up my sequences — the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers and I intend to meet the Treasury in the near future to press the case on all of that.

I welcome the maiden speech of Paul Givan's colleague Jonathan Buckley. He made an impassioned plea on a range of issues, including his constituency. We have always welcomed the confidence and supply money. We did not welcome the product that it came from, but any more money that comes for services here is welcome. We said that publicly and privately to the DUP at the time. The point I made yesterday is that the pickle we have got ourselves into in relation to the promised money that was suddenly cut off is due, in no small terms, to the behaviour of his colleagues in Westminster and the fact that, once that arrangement ended, they were quickly dropped by the British Government. That left a very abrupt spending headache, particularly in relation to the broadband issue, which has been out for contract, but also money in relation to mental health and deprivation. That is why I make no bones about continuing to pursue that issue.

I made the same point as Matthew O'Toole made — I am not sure if it was in this debate — about "Budget Bill" being a misnomer; it is actually a Bill to approve money that has already been spent. As I said in response to Roy Beggs and Paul Frew, I am happy to look at the processes in relation to that; I am happy to do work with the Committee. There is a body of work from a previous Committee, as Roy Beggs mentioned, that we did back in 2012 when we were trying to make the processes more understandable, more straightforward and more transparent. I am happy to continue that work.

The Member referred to capital being handed back. I think another Member made reference to that as well, but I am not certain who it was. I think it was Kellie Armstrong, actually, who referred to capital being handed back to the Treasury. We have not handed capital funding back to the Treasury. I think Members might be referring to the financial transactions capital, which has been available to us but we have not been able to access, largely due to the Housing Executive designation piece that was supposed to be done in Westminster during the year. The transactions capital was available to us on the back of that being done, but it did not happen because the legislative timetable at Westminster did not allow it. Consequently, that money had to be handed back. The Department

for Communities is adamant that it will bring forward that legislation very quickly. In the year ahead, we want to work with other Departments that have not been able to access that money, which is an important resource to us, if it can be accessed, to make sure that that is addressed properly.

I am skipping through some of the issues, but John Blair made a point in relation to the Executive and how they function across Departments. The Executive have had a number of away discussions, and I am impressed by the willingness and enthusiasm of Departments and Ministers to work together to get better outcomes. There is a recognition of the difficult financial circumstances we find ourselves in, and, even if we can get an improvement on that, we will still be in difficult and challenging financial circumstances. Of course, my argument is that the co-design and co-production principle that has been used to apply to health should apply across the board. That includes the Departments working together, but it also includes the Departments engaging with all of the sectors that we have responsibility for. All of the answers are not to be found in this institution or even in the Civil Service. The answers to many of the problems that we face are out there among the people working on the ground. If we can apply that principle in health, I would be a firm advocate of applying it across the board.

Mr Blair also asked about increased policing. That will be a consequence of a bid from the Department of Justice. I have met the Justice Minister, and I know that she is working through some of the issues in relation to it.

Mervyn Storey, who is no longer with us, referred to objective need. Of course, if we agreed on what is objective need, it would be subjective need, because we would have had to agree it between ourselves. We rely, instead, on NISRA and other people who provide statistics, so we do not need to debate objective need any more. The process is already there for doing that.

Pat Catney raised issues about procurement and prompt payment. Of course, I will chair the Procurement Board from here on, and we will raise some of those issues and look at how we can continue to improve on the way that procurement is done.

Sinéad Bradley raised issues about health budget flexibility to do with contingency funding for dealing with the coronavirus. The Department of Health's ambit is sufficiently flexible to cover any expenditure required to

deal with a coronavirus outbreak. There is funding provided at a UK level for coronavirus, and the Executive will receive their Barnett consequential of any funding that is needed.

Roy Beggs raised the issue of Casement Park, and, of course, others have answered him. The cost was as a consequence of a planning hold-up, and that pushed it up to an estimated £112 million. Increased costs are attributed to construction inflation as a result of delay and the necessary revision of the design of the stadium following a public consultation. Any request to increase the project budget will be considered by the Minister for Communities and the Executive. This is capital funding, so it cannot be used to fund resource issues as well. I am sure that the Member understands that.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for giving way. Given the principal reasons he has set out that might contribute to increased costs for the regional stadium funding for Casement Park, does that mean that the Minister and the Communities Minister are likely to consider increased funding for the subregional soccer stadia fund as well, given the undue delay that has incurred on that programme?

Mr Murphy: I am not sure; I do not know the detail. I know from the subregional stadia process that I have been following in my constituency that clubs have submitted and costed plans and have been in the process of awarding contracts, but they have been held up due to planning issues beyond their control, and that has pushed the timeline on and the price up. I do not whether that situation applies at the subregional funding level, but I am sure that the Department and the Minister for Communities will consider that matter in the time ahead.

Jim Allister asked a number of questions about the Bill under consideration. He asked why we do not vote on capital investment in the Budget and the corresponding Estimates. We do not vote on one-off capital investment when new assets are created because, instead, we vote on the annual depreciation costs, which reflect how those assets are used over a full economic life. To simply add the resource and capital figures together and arrive at a single larger figure would be to do a double-count and would be misleading. The Assembly votes the cash that is used to fund the capital investment, and that is included in the cash figures in the Budget Bill.

Mr Allister also asked, quite rightly, questions about the sole authority of the Budget Act being used for much more substantial costs than is normally the case in black-box issues. The total

expenditure that has been black-boxed in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2019-2020 comes to £1.114 billion. That is obviously a significant sum and is ahead of what is normally the case. Of that, £1.078 billion is for the creation of provisions in the Executive Office and the Department of Justice for future liabilities as a result of the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board, the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse and the victims' payment scheme. He referred to both those projects. A provision such as that must be recognised in the Department's accounts when there is a potential future liability but there is uncertainty about how much, if any, will end up being paid and about when the costs will materialise. Because there may be future liabilities for either TEO or DOJ or a combination of both, it is necessary for both Departments to be able to make provision for those potential future liabilities, so they are included in the sums. It may fall to one Department; it may fall to the other. It may fall to a combination of both, or it may fall to neither. The sums have to be included in order to give cover, if such a thing is required.

Although the enabling primary legislation for some of the schemes for historical abuse and other victims has been taken through Westminster, there are some further secondary powers that the Assembly must enact to switch those powers on.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I am sorry; I want to finish my point. The creation of that provision does not constitute payments being made; it is simply about Departments recognising that they may have future liability as a result of the commitments that have been made to the victims. Nor does it in any way predetermine where funding for that expenditure will come from when the time comes to make the payments. Of course, the Member understands that we continue to make the argument with the British Government and the NIO that they legislated for it and they own it, and, therefore, they should provide the funding, even if the payments come through TEO or the Department of Justice or a combination of both.

The Member is correct that the amount of expenditure that is being authorised on the sole authority of the Budget Bill is greater than would normally be the case. That is in large part because the Assembly has not been sitting and has not been in a position to pass legislation. I am confident that Ministers will now bring that legislation forward for the Assembly and that we will not be in this position in future.

I will give way to Mr Aiken.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for that. For Members' clarification: does that mean that, when we are looking at black boxes, we are double-accounting between two Departments?

Mr Murphy: It means, as I said, that there is no certainty yet as to whether either Department, a combination of both Departments or neither of them will pick up the tab, but they have to provide some legislative cover for the Estimates, should that be the case. It is simply a matter of providing cover if expenditure is required to happen. That is yet to be resolved, and there is further legislation to be passed here to switch on those powers, but the question of who is ultimately responsible for the funding has yet to be agreed. Should it fall, at the end of this process, that TEO accepts responsibility, then it needs cover. If it falls to the Department of Justice, it will need to do that. That does not mean that the expenditure is actually incurred, but it is covered in the Estimates.

Dr Aiken: Just for the sake of clarity: would it not be better if it was in one Department rather than two?

Mr Murphy: Further legislation has to happen, and we cannot ascertain where that might go. There are further conversations to be had with the British Government as to which Department may have responsibility. We need to bear in mind that there are two sets of issues here: the historical inquiries and the victims' payments. There is no certainty as to whether both or either would fall into either Department, so it is about providing a degree of cover for both or for any scenario that might flow from all of that.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. He has been generous with his time. I do not need the answer today, but are there other examples in the document that has been provided of where there is a double-accountancy issue? It could well be sprinkled across the document, or it may not be, apart from this one issue. Just for the House's clarification, it would be good to know that.

Mr Murphy: I know that, because of the nature of this and, as we discussed, the estimates that try to predict what the cost might be, this is substantially above and beyond what would normally appear in black-box-associated expenditure. *[Interruption.]* I am told that there are no other examples of that, and that it was done on legal advice in order to ensure that it could be covered. It might be best to get

officials to come to the Committee to have a specific engagement on that.

The overarching principle that we are dealing with here, in the Budget process that we are in, and given some of the issues that face us, is that we will be back here in five weeks' time. In the space of a couple of weeks, we are trying to regulate and get on top of a lot of issues that have transpired over the last number of years. That has to be done before the end of this financial year, and we have to make provision for next year, and that is the overarching context. A lot of the things that will emerge from this process, and which will emerge from other Departments, will be unusual in the normal circumstances. Obviously, the intention is to get back to more normal ways of doing things in the time ahead, but we have to give cover where that is required.

Jim Allister also asked about the review of financial process. The previous Executive agreed to progress a review of financial process, but, unfortunately, there was no time to update the Assembly because it crashed before that came through. My Department's officials have continued to progress that work and will engage with the Finance Committee in the coming weeks. I will be in a position to bring an update to the Executive and the House on that matter in due course, so the work carries on.

The Member made a point, which I noted but have not got a reply to, about the Department for the Economy and Northern Ireland Screen. I will ask officials to provide some written information for him on all of that. Daniel McCrossan asked about Civil Service pay. We recognise the job that civil servants and other public servants have done. That is why there is an attempt to ensure that pay issues in relation to all public servants are resolved as quickly and as satisfactorily as possible. There have been ongoing discussions about the Civil Service pay issue between my departmental officials and NIPSA, which represents a substantial number of civil servants. I hope that that will conclude in the very near future with an acceptable outcome for everybody.

I am sure that people would like to stay on and debate these issues for the rest of the night, but some of us have lives, so I will draw my remarks to a close. I have tried to respond to as many as possible of the relevant issues that were raised that relate specifically to the Bill. A number of other points — Members were entitled to make them — related to future spend, future Budgets and departmental issues.

I am sure that they will continue to raise those in their Committees. A number of points related to constituency issues, and I am sure that they will continue to raise those with the relevant Departments.

The debate was lively, many significant points were raised, and I am thankful to Members for that. It is imperative that this legislation continues its passage through the Assembly so that public services can be delivered without delay or interruption.

I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising spending on public services by Departments in 2019-2020 and into the early months of the 2020-21 financial year in the Vote on Account.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, it requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 42; Noes 3.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Flynn, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Toole.

UNIONIST:

Dr Aiken, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Swann.

OTHER:

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Ms Mullan.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister.

OTHER:

Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Carroll and Miss Woods.

Total Votes 45 Total Ayes 42 [93.3%]

Nationalist Votes 21 Nationalist Ayes 21 [100.0%]

Unionist Votes 18 Unionist Ayes 17 [94.4%]

Other Votes 6 Other Ayes 4 [66.7%]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 2/17-22] be agreed.

Adjourned at 9.08 pm.

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