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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 25 May 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Transport

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in light of the social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members present in the Chamber must do that by rising in their place as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during the statement or the question period immediately after.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the transport sector held via videoconference on Wednesday 5 May 2021. The meeting was chaired by Eamon Ryan, Minister for Transport in the South, and was attended by First Minister Arlene Foster and me. A number of issues were discussed at the meeting, including the latest EU funding position; New Decade, New Approach commitments; sustainable travel and transport; and our future work programme for the transport sector.

Ministers welcomed the continued cooperation between my Department and the Department of Transport on EU funding-related matters and the potential for significant funding opportunities for North/South cooperation in the transport sector. The Council noted the various commitments outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach', particularly in the area of

infrastructural investment. On the A5 western transport corridor, Ministers noted that both Governments remain committed to the A5 scheme. The Council noted that I, as Minister for Infrastructure, have fully considered all the recommendations made in the interim report from the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) in September 2020 and have now announced the next steps for the scheme. They include the preparation of a further addendum to the environmental statement for consultation in early autumn, leading to the reopening of the public inquiry early next year.

On high-speed rail connectivity, Ministers noted that both Departments have further developed draft terms of reference for a strategic review of the rail network on the island of Ireland that will take account of the need for balanced regional development, particularly in relation to connectivity with the north-west. The Council noted that the all-island strategic rail review was jointly launched by Minister Ryan and me on 7 April 2021 and that that work and the study will be overseen by a high-level steering group comprising representatives from both Departments as well as transport authorities from North and South.

The Council noted the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' on the Narrow Water bridge and agreed that Departments will consider next steps to progress the scheme.

Ministers noted that the review to explore potential government support for renewed air services between Belfast and Cork and Derry and Dublin is being led by the Department of Transport, working with the Department for the Economy and the Department for Transport in London.

The Council also noted the ongoing work on cross-border greenways.

The Council noted updates provided by the Department of Transport on a sustainable mobility policy review and by the Department for Infrastructure on transport decarbonisation policy development, including increasing

sustainable and active travel. Ministers noted that officials from both jurisdictions will continue to liaise on policy development on sustainable transport and travel. The Council agreed that a further update, including on opportunities for future collaboration, will be provided at the next meeting.

Ministers also noted the outcome of the review carried out by both Departments on the current NSMC transport sector work programme and agreed the revised transport work programme.

The Council considered a number of other issues, including the Safefood business plan and budget for 2021. Ministers approved the Safefood business plan for 2021 and the recommended budget provision for 2021.

In respect of the North/South language bodies, the Council also approved the 2020-22 corporate plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency and the 2021 business plans for both agencies. The Council recommended the budget provisions for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency for 2021 and noted the indicative budgets for both organisations for 2020-22, which will be subject to budgetary considerations by both Administrations. The Council appointed Regina Uí Chollatáin as chair of Foras na Gaeilge and Freda Nic Giolla Chatháin to its board. The Council also appointed Freddie Kettle as vice chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Allen McAdam, Lavinia Tilson and Karyn Devenney to its board.

In closing, I welcome these important formal NSMC meetings and will continue to work with my counterpart, Minister Ryan, as we continue to collaborate on many aspects of transport across the island in order to improve connectivity for all our citizens.

Mr Boylan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas ón Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. I am delighted that greenways were mentioned, but I am a wee bit disappointed that the Middletown to Smithborough greenway will not meet its 2021 target. In light of that, will the Minister undertake to work with the NSMC and others who are involved in the project in order to deliver it as soon as possible? She knows how important the project is for that area.

Ms Mallon: The Ulster canal greenway is one of the primary greenway routes in 'Exercise, Explore, Enjoy: A Strategic Plan for Greenways', which was published by my Department in 2016. As the Member will know, phase 2 of the Smithborough to Middletown project is under way. The greenway stops just

short of Middletown village, at Annagola bridge, where a footway link to the village is to be constructed by my Department. Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council has put forward a proposal to extend the greenway northwards, which would assist delivery of the next phase of greenway development to Caledon. I am keen that my officials work to support those efforts and all efforts across all council areas to expand our greenway connectivity across the North and across the island.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her commitment to North/South relationships and to this work, which is important for the economy and the environment.

You mentioned climate change targets, Minister. What further work do you envisage that there can be collaboration on to tackle the climate change crisis?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. We are working on projects that are all about tackling the climate emergency. Minister Eamon Ryan is passionate about the subject, and we are both ambitious about what we, as Ministers, can do. The all-island strategic rail review is an example of how we can work collaboratively to encourage people to get out of their private cars and use public transport. We have reviewed our work programme and added a new agenda item on sustainable travel and transport that will look at areas of collaboration and at encouraging the modal shifts that are required. A lot of work has been done, but it is important to review and update the work programme to reflect the changed environment of the climate emergency and the importance given to that so that we see much more positive and collaborative work that translates directly into climate action across the island.

Mr Stewart: The Minister's statement mentioned the New Decade, New Approach commitments on infrastructure investment, but several NDNA schemes are unfunded. Will the Minister acknowledge that, if she prioritises unfunded NDNA projects over road safety improvements, maintenance and resurfacing, it could come at the cost of increasing the number of potholes and compromising the safety of citizens?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We went through that in quite a lot of detail during yesterday's Question Time. The reality is that there is a significant shortfall in investment and in the funding that has been

allocated to my Department. My Department will carry out its statutory obligations. Once we have our budget, we have to take out the Executive flagships and our statutory requirements, which we are contractually obliged to do. It is true that that does not leave much flexibility to do anything else, but it is important that we recognise that 'New Decade, New Approach' is the agreement on which the institutions were restored. It is the basis on which I entered the Executive on behalf of the SDLP. There is therefore a responsibility on all Ministers to deliver on the commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. That is why I have been trying to work closely with the British Government to maximise funding and to ensure that they honour their commitments to turbocharging infrastructure, which they promised to the people of Northern Ireland in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I am also working with the Irish Government on the Taoiseach's Shared Island Fund so that we maximise opportunities to draw down funding and can deliver on the commitments that we have made to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am glad that the meeting finally went ahead.

The Minister's statement provides an update on sustainable travel and transport. As the Minister is aware, the Minister and the Government in the Republic of Ireland have committed to rebalancing their budgets towards public transport and active and sustainable travel; for example, 20% of the budget in the Republic of Ireland will go towards active travel: 10% to cycling and 10% to walking. Does the Minister intend to take a similar lead in Northern Ireland? I was concerned yesterday when the Minister outlined that she intends to deliver a similar level of £20 million investment in a blue-green fund in this financial year, yet she has a 29% increase in her capital budget, so that is a comparative cut for active travel. Will the Minister reverse that decision and rebalance the budget towards sustainable travel?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. In respect of sustainable travel and transport, we will continue to work on decarbonising our public transport network. That is important for improving air quality and reducing congestion. We will also work together to see how we can encourage more people to walk, cycle and wheel and to use those as their primary modes of travel in our towns and city centres.

As a member of the Infrastructure Committee, the Member will know that the spending that is required for the Executive flagship

commitments is ratcheting up. As I said to Mr Stewart, when you take out the statutory obligations and Executive commitments, there is not much flexibility in the budget to do everything that we would like to do. I gave a commitment that I will continue with the blue-green fund.

That is the first time that we have had an infrastructural blue-green fund, which is to act as a catalyst for change on climate action.

10.45 am

The Member will also know that we have invested £96 million in the purchase of zero-emission and low-emission buses to decarbonise our public transport fleet, which is an important part of climate action. He will also be aware that we invested £66 million in 21 new train carriages. We are engaging in a lot of different work, including work on the e-charging infrastructure, and all of this is about giving people much more attractive choices for sustainable travel and encouraging them to use our public transport system. We will continue to do that and maximise our ambition and delivery within the limited financial envelope that has been given to us.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. I, too, am glad to hear cross-border greenways being mentioned. Can the Minister advise whether the Carlingford lough greenway was discussed at the meeting, particularly the plans to link the greenway from Victoria lock in Newry to the border? That would significantly enhance what is already a fantastic greenway and would certainly improve safety for walkers and cyclists, who currently have to join the road again at Victoria lock to meet the greenway on down the road.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Our greenways are a pragmatic example of how we can improve people's lives by collaborating and maximising the opportunities for greenways. The Member will know that three greenways — the Ulster canal greenway, the north-west greenway and the Carlingford lough greenway — have been subject to INTERREG funding. Difficulties are emerging with timescales and funding pressures, but my officials are working closely with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) because we realise the importance of the delivery of the Carlingford lough greenway and all the greenways that have been mentioned. We will continue to work with the SEUPB to ensure that we get the required

additional funding to see those projects realised.

Ms Anderson: Minister, you mentioned air connectivity and sustainable travel in the statement, and TDs Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Darren O'Rourke and I recently met the City of Derry Airport board. As you know, Derry's airport services the entire north-west and further afield, and 40% of the passengers who use it come from Donegal, yet the operational cost of the airport is left to the ratepayers of Derry, with the Irish Government making no contribution at all. Was the operational cost and financial sustainability of City of Derry Airport discussed? Was the Derry/Dublin public service obligation discussed at the meeting?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She will know that I, as Minister for Infrastructure, have limited statutory powers in relation to our three main airports. That is set down in the Airports (Northern Ireland) Order 1994. My Department and I were able to provide support to airports, including to City of Derry Airport, during the pandemic. For expediency and logistical reasons, my Department facilitated the distribution of a £5.7 million support package of emergency funding, on behalf of the Executive, to Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport in spring 2020. The cost of that was shared between the Executive and the Department for Transport. Further to that, and following Executive support, my Department provided £1.23 million in additional support to City of Derry Airport, and that short-term support grant has helped that airport to remain operational during the pandemic.

The issue of air connectivity falls to the Department for the Economy. While we raised the issue in general, discussions are ongoing between the Department of Transport in the South, the Department for the Economy here and the Department for Transport in London on the wider air connectivity piece, so the Member may want to raise that issue directly with the Minister for the Economy. However, I assure the Member that I am very conscious of the continued impact on our airports, and, either this week or next week, I will meet representatives from City of Derry Airport with the Minister of Finance. I hope that the Minister for the Economy might join us in that meeting, given that the responsibilities fall across our three Departments.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is clearly evident that she has worked feverishly to advance North/South and

South/North opportunities. However, she has been obstructed by the DUP Ministers from taking forward important North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Can she advise on the impact of potential delays on crucial meetings and crucial all-island projects?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The North/South Ministerial Council meetings provide a very important platform for us all across the island, and for my Department in particular, to work pragmatically on issues that will deliver multiple benefits for our citizens. The climate crisis, for example, knows no borders. It affects all of us, and the solution therefore has to be that we all work together.

It has been hugely frustrating that a number of NSMC meetings that I had been due to attend, as either a lead or an accompanying Minister, have been deliberately obstructed. I have raised the matter with ministerial colleagues. The nature of our place means that our engagement can often be very difficult and uncomfortable. We still need to engage, however. Moreover, we have to engage North/South and east-west, because the people of this island, when they voted for the Good Friday Agreement, mandated us to do so. Thirdly, engagement is not only the right thing to do but our legal obligation under the ministerial code. As we enter a new week with a new dynamic, I therefore hope that people will reflect carefully on how we can heal division in our society, how we can and should work together in partnership across these islands and how we must fulfil our legal obligations as Ministers around the Executive table.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for her statement. In it, she said that Ministers noted that both Governments remain committed to the A5 scheme. The scheme will result in improved access to Donegal. Was there any discussion about whether the Republic of Ireland will reinstate the full £400 million roads grant that it offered towards the A5 and subsequently withdrew?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. We raised the A5 project and its important role in tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities and, of course, improving road safety. There are so many communities, particularly in rural parts west of the Bann, that can benefit from investment in the A5 project. I very much welcomed the Irish Government's reaffirmation in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) of their £75 million commitment to the A5, and I have had useful discussions with the Irish Minister for Transport,

Minister Ryan, and the Taoiseach about delivering on our shared commitments. The Taoiseach announced the Shared Island Fund, which is €500 million. He is keen to use that to deliver NDNA North/South infrastructure projects, of which the A5 is one. I will continue to have very constructive engagement with my counterparts to ensure that we maximise the opportunity to drive forward that important commitment and all the other NDNA commitments.

Mr McGuigan: I note that sustainable travel was discussed. Having a modern and reliable charge-point network is key to sustainable travel. I welcome the fact that the Department supported the INTERREG-funded FASTER project, which will install 73 charge points in Ireland and Scotland. Was the project discussed? Does the Minister have an idea of the number of charge points, of that 73, that will come to this island?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We did not get into the specifics of e-charging infrastructure. I want us to explore the issue further, now that we have added the new agenda item on sustainable and active travel, because we need the continued interoperability in our e-charging network across the island. We did, however, refer to the INTERREG funding as another example of collaborative working across the island and with Europe.

As the Member says, 73 rapid charging points are anticipated. Some will be in Scotland, but some will be in Northern Ireland, particularly in the border region. My Department is not the lead on that, but we are working closely with the FASTER project in SEUPB to see exactly where the charging points will be located and the final number that will come to the North. I will keep the Member updated, because I know that he has a keen interest in the matter.

Ms Sheerin: The Minister did not give a clear answer to Mrs Barton, who asked whether the Dublin Government will still part-fund the A5 scheme and noted how important that scheme is for the entire region west of the Bann. That region has lacked investment for decades. We can see how much frustration this final obstruction has caused residents in the north-west. Do you have a time frame of when we can expect it to be delivered?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The Member will know that the A5 project has been a very long time coming. It has been under the stewardship of a number of my predecessors. The first public inquiry was under

Minister Murphy, the second was under Minister Hazzard, and the third happened when the institutions had been brought down. We now have an interim report, which means that we have to move to a reconvened public inquiry. I understand the local frustrations about it.

My officials are working at pace to produce the required environmental addendum. We will go out to a mandatory six-week consultation period on that so that we can move it back to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) at the earliest opportunity. Of course, I have no control over the date that the PAC will determine for that hearing, but we will do everything that we can to expedite that. Once we get to that point, it will be for the Minister to decide on the next steps. I imagine that the construction of the project will be largely determined by the funding that is provided. My hope is that, where possible, it could move in parallel with different projects that are on my desk, but the progress of all those projects is largely dependent on the funding available once all the statutory processes are completed.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It appears that the DUP are not only boycotting North/South Ministerial Council meetings but boycotting holding to account Ministers who attend North/South Ministerial Council meetings. We have five DUP MLAs in the Chamber today, including the Chair of the scrutiny Committee. I am not aware of one of them asking you a question. Perhaps they would have been safer staying at home.

Minister, on your statement and North/South high-speed rail connectivity, as I have said to you before, it will be a lost opportunity if we have trains speeding from Belfast to Dublin or from Derry to Cork and the towns in between do not achieve any economic potential from that. Will the Minister ensure that high-speed rail connectivity is matched with local rail connectivity and bus connections in towns such as Lurgan, Portadown and Craigavon?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. On his initial remarks, we have a responsibility and a legal obligation to these institutions, whether that is in the Executive or in North/South and east-west bodies. We also have a duty to ensure that we have democratic accountability and scrutiny. Therefore, it is vital that I, as Minister, am held to account, that I am scrutinised and that all Members have the opportunity to ask me questions. I am disappointed at what appears to be a lack of engagement this morning, given the importance of the issues that we are discussing. These issues are not even politically controversial.

They are practical issues that would really make a difference to people's lives and to the constituents of all Members across the House.

On the rail issue in his constituency that the Member highlighted, he will be aware that preparation is being undertaken by my officials on the regional strategic transport plan, which will go out to consultation later this year. That plan is about investment in our road, rail and bus network in the North. I encourage the Member to respond to that consultation to ensure that the importance of rail connectivity to the Lurgan area is made very clear.

We are coming at the all-island strategic rail review with no preordained outcome. The terms of reference are such that we will examine existing rail links on the island to see if those can be improved. We will look at where we can provide new links and where those would be beneficial. We will also look at the role that freight can play in the decarbonisation of transportation of goods on the island. We will examine rail connectivity to our international gateways, be those the ports or airports. That examination will be data-led. I am very excited by the all-island strategic rail review. It is the first time that we have looked at our transport network on the island since partition, which is really important. By working together and making data-led investment decisions, we will really improve people's lives across the island.

11.00 am

When we look at Europe, we see that they are making huge advances in rail. They recognise the importance of rail; what it can do for the economy, what it does for the environment, and what it does for the regeneration of local communities. Therefore, I am excited by that piece of work.

Mr Beggs: In her statement, the Minister mentioned sustainable transport and transport decarbonisation policy development. The construction of dual carriageways has a hugely adverse impact on the local environment. Normally, they are built only when they will be used by at least 18,000 vehicles a day. Does the Minister accept that there is inconsistency in what she says, given that she plans for decarbonisation yet plans to build a dual carriageway on the A5 at Aughnacloy, which is used by fewer than 8,000 vehicles a day and is totally unjustifiable, and that, in fact, she is contributing to unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions by continuing to demand that dual carriageway when it is not justifiable for road development?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He has passionately expressed his view about the A5 to me previously, primarily during the Adjournment debate on the matter. The original scheme that was put forward through the North/South Ministerial Council in 2007 was for a dual carriageway from New Buildings to Aughnacloy. As the Member will know, the PAC has taken a different view and has said that there is an obligation on the Department, in its role as the statutory decision maker, to consider reasonable alternatives to the proposed scheme and, therefore, to examine matters such as the extent to which town bypasses and selected improvements to the existing A5 standard would meet or fail to meet the overall aim and objectives of the dual carriageway scheme, together with an assessment of their environmental effects. I have instructed officials to carry out and then publish that assessment for consultation in accordance with the PAC recommendations.

Mr Allister: If Mr Edwin Poots is as good as his word, that will have been one of the last North/South meetings until the Union-dismantling protocol is, itself, dismantled. As an enthusiast for the Belfast Agreement, the Minister must know that it is said to be built on the equilibrium of sustaining east-west relations and North/South relations. With the key east-west economic relations having been trashed by the protocol, surely the Minister is not ignorant as to why it is necessary, from a unionist perspective, to ensure that North/South relations do not continue as though that trashing of east-west relations had not occurred.

Ms Mallon: If east-west relations have been trashed, in the Member's analysis — I do not agree with it — the reality is that that is due to Brexit. We are in the current situation because the DUP mishandled Brexit at Westminster. I do not need to rehearse the arguments, because we all know that they are there. It does not matter how we try to spin that: it is there for all to see.

As a Minister, I do not have a pick-and-mix approach to my legal obligations. As Minister for Infrastructure, I have been proactive in my east-west engagement. I have had numerous meetings with colleagues in the Department for Transport and Robin Walker. I have had meetings with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I have had meetings with my counterparts in Scotland and Wales, because I recognise that we have shared challenges and that they are best overcome when we work together. I also do it because I am legally

obliged to fulfil my obligations when it comes to my interactions, North/South and east-west.

I understand that the DUP has new leadership, but, regardless of who the leader is, they have legal responsibilities. I am so concerned by that particular issue that I have sought legal advice from the Attorney General on it.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes questions on the statement. Please, take your ease for a moment or two.

Ms Anderson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, when the Justice Minister was in the Chamber, I had my name down for a question. I was actually on StarLeaf, in the audience, waiting to be brought into the spotlight.

There was obviously some kind of technical fault that resulted in my not being able to ask a question to the Justice Minister. It was about a crucial issue. In the summer, two of my constituents were nearly burnt in a van that was hijacked in Galliagh, and they have been put through a number of hurdles trying to get compensation. I wanted to raise that with the Justice Minister in the Chamber yesterday, and I hope that I get another opportunity to do so. I want to explain to Members that it was not my fault that I did not get to ask a question yesterday, but, rather, it was some kind of technical fault.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that. We are looking at the processes that occurred last evening. I will come back to you formally on that when we get to the bottom of the problem that was created.

Executive Committee Business

Budget 2021-22

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is a motion on the Budget 2021-22.

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

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-22 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information laid on 27 April 2021.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to four and a half hours for the debate. Your amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Murphy: I also beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "information" and insert:

"provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021."

Mr Speaker: Thank you. By convention, where a Member or Minister seeks to amend their own motion, they are invited to address both the motion and the amendment within the time allocated. The Minister will have 30 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and winding up. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes in which to speak. All other Members will have seven minutes.

Mr Murphy: At the outset of today's debate, I will address the amendment to the motion. Following Executive agreement to the final Budget of 2021-22 last month, I provided both a written and an oral statement to the House. At the time of my oral statement, Members were also provided with a detailed Budget document. That document was not officially laid at the time, resulting in the amendment to today's motion, which reflects the actual date when the Budget document was laid in the Assembly.

Members will know that I had hoped for early confirmation of a multi-year Budget. That would have provided Departments with greater certainty and facilitated the longer-term planning of services; instead, on 25 November, we were provided with a single-year Budget. I

discussed that with Rishi Sunak in London a couple of weeks ago, and he confirmed his intention to move to a multi-year Budget in the next spending review. I very much welcome that.

In summary, the Executive were provided with an increased capital envelope but a standstill budget in terms of resource spending. There was also a reduction in COVID funding. The Executive published their draft Budget on 18 December 2020 and initiated a short period of consultation that closed on 25 February 2021. The consultation revealed three consistent priorities: health, education and social and economic recovery from the pandemic. Despite the challenging financial position, those priorities are reflected in the Executive's final Budget. Health has been allocated nearly 50% of the resource budget and £430 million of additional COVID funding. That includes funding for Health and Social Care (HSC) workers and the roll-out of the hugely successful vaccination programme. A further £20 million has been allocated for safe staffing.

The Budget also prioritises funding for children and young people, given the huge impact that COVID has had on their well-being. Education has received 18% of the resource budget and £103 million of COVID funding. That includes childcare sector support and funding for the Engage programme, which helps to address the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on learning. A further £35 million has been allocated for teachers' pay.

On social and economic recovery, the Department for the Economy's recovery plan has been funded in full. The package of almost £300 million includes £145 million for the high street voucher scheme, which will act as a stimulus in our town centres and high streets. Funding has been provided for the Job Start programme, which will create opportunities for people aged 16 to 24 who are at risk of long-term unemployment.

Rates have been frozen for households and businesses at a cost of £230 million. The rates holiday for the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic has been extended for a further year.

I will now take Members through some of the detail. There have been four main changes since the draft Budget. Following the reassessment of all central items, £7.1 million was released and has now been allocated. Further funding of £411.9 million was announced as part of the Chancellor's Budget on 3 March. Of that, some £224 million was a consequence of additional health spending in

England. The £126.9 million of COVID funding that was held at draft Budget stage to allow time to assess the changing course of the pandemic and, consequently, the needs of the Departments has been allocated in the final Budget. In addition, following negotiation, Treasury agreed that funding for COVID-19 that was provided in late 2020-21 can be carried forward into 2021-22. That equates to £238 million resource, £75 million capital DEL and £14 million financial transactions capital (FTC). That is in addition to the normal Budget exchange scheme amounts that will be made available in the June monitoring exercise.

Although that funding was confirmed by Treasury, the Secretary of State did not write to confirm it. Therefore, legally, that funding cannot be included in the final Budget outcome. The Secretary of State has still not confirmed the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) and confidence-and-supply money. However, in order to allow Departments to plan effectively, the Executive agreed a number of allocations as part of the final Budget process. While those are not in the Budget outcome for each Department, they are shown separately in the Budget document and will be in the Main Estimates and reflected in departmental outcomes at June monitoring.

Those changes have enabled the Executive to make additional allocations as part of the final Budget process, including £35 million, as I said, for teachers' pay; £20 million for safe staffing in the health service; £12.3 million to recruit an additional 100 PSNI officers; £1.4 million to extend the Bright Start school-age grant scheme, which provides much-needed support in disadvantaged areas, rural communities and the schools estate, as well as the holiday grant scheme for disabled children; £0.9 million for the public service route from Derry to London; and £0.16 million for the translation hub. While we have used flexibilities to stretch our Budget as far as possible, the general picture remains the same on resource spending: it is a flat-cash settlement that, effectively, means reductions once increased costs and demands on services are taken into account. Ministerial colleagues will therefore need to prioritise their budgets.

The capital budget is much more positive, and that will help to stimulate economic activity as we move into the recovery phase. Between the draft Budget and the final Budget, the Executive have borrowed a further £30 million from the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) facility, bringing the total up to £170 million. The use of RRI will be monitored throughout the year. If it is not needed, it will not be drawn down.

The Executive allocated a record £722.5 million capital to the Department for Infrastructure. That is 40% of the total capital and an increase of £164 million or 29% on the previous year. Over £160 million has been provided for new social housing, which is an increase of over 11% on last year. A total of £111.9 million has been committed to deliver flagship projects. The Department of Health has been provided with £32.6 million for the mother and children's hospital and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's learning and development centre. The Department for Communities has £20 million to deliver the redevelopment of Casement Park stadium. The Department for Infrastructure has £6 million to deliver the A5 project.

11.15 am

Members will know that we have had some difficulty lending out financial transactions capital. Some £73.6 million of FTC is available this year, and it has been allocated in full in the final Budget: £38.8 million has gone to the Department for Communities for housing, and £34.7 million has gone to the Department for the Economy for business support loans. I commend those Departments for making use of that lending facility.

With a standstill Budget from Westminster, our public services will remain under pressure. However, the Executive have used their carry-over flexibility and borrowing capacity to increase investment in economic and social recovery. This is a Budget that, in difficult circumstances, progresses many of the NDNA commitments, and it will have a positive impact on workers and families.

I look forward to the debate, and I commend the Budget to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): Thank you very much indeed, Minister, for your remarks.

I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and for bringing the debate to the Assembly today, even though no notice of the debate was provided in his recent and regular correspondence with the Committee for Finance. Although Members will welcome enhanced scrutiny and greater transparency and even an extra opportunity to question the Minister a little today, I suspect that some of us may struggle to make remarks that differ significantly from those that we will make in the Supply resolution and Budget Bill debates that, I suspect, will take place in only two weeks'

time. I understand that this debate serves a different function from the others. However, there may be some merit in considering streamlining the process and removing any possible duplication, without, of course, truncating the Assembly's necessary and proper consideration of the Budget.

I know that the Minister is sincere in his desire to see enhanced Assembly scrutiny. I know also that, for that reason, he has established the interim fiscal council. On another day, the Committee may elect to bring to the House a debate of its own on that subject. Perhaps we might then determine the views of the House on how we can establish an independent fiscal council with the functionality, discretion, powers, independence, competence, credibility and engagement with the Assembly to facilitate improved understanding and ownership of the complexities of the Budget process. In the meantime, we might question the effectiveness of our existing approach, with its limited granularity, occasional evasions and obfuscations from Departments and, let us be frank, the impenetrable nature of much of the documentation that is provided to us.

For now, I turn to the subject matter of the motion, namely the spending programme for 2021-22. The documentation mentioned in the motion and laid on 19 May indicates a £13 billion resource budget and around £1.8 billion in capital. It is understood that the new resource baseline is, however, just under £12 billion. Members are aware that a further £687.4 million was to be allocated in in-year monitoring, plus the additional COVID resource allocation that was announced in a written statement last week.

Mr Speaker, I do not mind telling you that multiple spending rounds, though extremely welcome to the recipient Departments, are hard to track. The failure of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to sign off on those important allocations has also served to deny the Assembly certainty and clarity on those significant sums. The Department has advised that a similar situation applies to the £360 million of New Decade, New Approach and confidence-and-supply funding. I understand that, although that money is not yet confirmed, it is expected to be paid and thus appears in the Main Estimates as departmental headroom. Regrettably, the £19 million of payments to victims is also treated as headroom, rather than confirmed expenditure, in the Estimates. Perhaps the Minister, in his response, will address all those areas of uncertainty in the 2021-22 spending programme, particularly in respect of victims. Will he update the House on

the issues with the Secretary of State and indicate where the hold-up lies?

The Minister has been talking about top-slicing, but the alternative of top-slicing Departments to the tune of many tens of millions of pounds each would, quite frankly, be completely untenable.

With the other undetermined financial matters, can the Minister advise on the balance of the £200 million New Deal for Northern Ireland funding? It was understood that the UK Government were perhaps considering revising the governance arrangements for that. Will the Minister therefore advise whether he expects Departments to enjoy enhanced financial visibility in respect of related allocations from HM Treasury?

When the Minister last provided a statement, he indicated that he hoped that, if Departments kept to their spending commitments, there would be a limited loss of funding from the Northern Ireland block for 2020-21. Will the Minister confirm whether that is indeed the case?

After all that, it would be remiss of me not to commend the many measures brought forward by the Executive to manage the pandemic and boost the economy as we all recover from a significant community and national trauma. On behalf of the Committee, I record our appreciation of the multiple business support packages, including the rates holiday, the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) and the other retail, hospitality and tourism grants provided by the Minister's Department through Land and Property Services (LPS) and the Department for the Economy. I hope that those, coupled with the Job Start scheme, will make a real and measurable difference to hard-pressed businesses and families as lockdown ends and we hopefully confine it to history. However, the Committee and, indeed, the rest of the Assembly wait with keen interest to see how the high street voucher scheme and related schemes will be rolled out.

The subject of the debate is the 2021-22 Budget. However, we all know that coming round the corner is another challenging HM Treasury spending review. We all suspect that that may prove difficult for the Northern Ireland block. I ask the Minister whether the Department is preparing for that and urging other parts of the Executive to consider cost reductions and efficiency measures for 2022-23 that might reduce our cost base. I think particularly about the disposal of underutilised

office space and the hard charging of Departments for leasehold costs.

Although the Committee for Finance has not formally considered the motion, I think that I am correct in saying that, on balance, it would give it its cautious support.

I will say a few words in my capacity as the Ulster Unionist finance spokesman. Were it not for the additional in-year and carry-over of COVID funding, there is no doubt that the tone of the debate would be very different. The UK Government, directly through the job retention scheme and indirectly through additional allocations to the Northern Ireland Executive, have contributed in the region of £3.8 billion to our efforts to tackle the pandemic. That demonstrates clearly, once again, the benefits of Northern Ireland remaining a constituent nation of the United Kingdom.

It would be remiss of me not to revisit the Health budget. Our waiting times are atrocious; we heard more about them in the media this morning. There are many causes for the situation that we are in, but a decade of underinvestment and poor political leadership are the two key reasons that stick in my mind. People are coming to harm — real harm. I welcome the efforts of the Health Minister and congratulate him on how he has got the entire HSC family, including senior clinicians, breaking down old barriers and obstacles. However, making a lasting impact will require more than one year's breathing space. The entire Executive, backed by the Assembly, as it has said it would time and time again, need to realise that only so much can happen with single-year, non-recurrent funding. Our health workers bravely tackled the worst of the COVID pandemic, so let us now help them to tackle the waiting lists.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the final Budget on behalf of the Committee for Communities. The Committee received a written submission and briefing from officials on 20 May, and it realises that the Department is allocating its resources to protect key services. I reaffirm the Committee's commitment to work with the Minister and her Department within its budget allocation and on delivering her overarching strategy for 2020-25: building inclusive communities.

The Committee wishes to express its dissatisfaction with the overall Budget process, however. Some aspects were outside the Executive's control, but others were not. The

Budget process is also running somewhat late, and this debate is now out of line with the Committee's consideration of the Budget. I have to speak today before the Committee has had a chance to finalise its response to the Committee for Finance.

The Committee shares the Minister of Finance's hopes that this one-year Budget is indeed the bridge to a multi-year Budget. The Committee wishes to highlight the fact that the Department for Communities provides many life-changing support programmes and services that need the continuity of funding that one-year Budgets simply cannot provide. The Department's 2021-22 allocation is around £876 million of resource DEL, which, thankfully, is an increase on the £824 million in the draft Budget; almost £225 million of capital DEL, which is an increase of over £10 million on last year's allocation; and £38.8 million in financial transactions capital. The final Communities budget represents an over £55 million increase on the baseline draft Budget, which is mainly because of a number of COVID bids being met. That is still far from what is needed, but it goes some way towards easing the Committee's dismay at the draft Budget. The final Budget is still challenging, and there is absolutely no funding for the Department to take forward many NDNA commitments. The Department submitted resource bids of £301.6 million but was allocated only £109.6 million. That includes £48.2 million for existing welfare mitigations, while the remaining bids were for benefit delivery, new labour market interventions, homelessness and Supporting People. Thankfully, all those bids were met.

Over £132 million of resource bids were for COVID recovery, but only around half that total was met in the final Budget. At its meeting last Thursday, the Committee expressed concern that the resource bids that were not met covered key areas. Never mind a week being a long time in politics, Committee members were relieved to hear only one day later that the pressure had eased somewhat, when the Finance Minister confirmed additional funds for the Department of £50.3 million to address a range of COVID pressures, including £10 million to councils; £3 million to support council-managed community development and advice centres; £13 million to arts, culture and heritage; and £12 million to progress the Restart programme, which will support older people in returning to employment.

Last Thursday, the Committee queried the outcome of an efficiency exercise, and officials highlighted the fact that pressures have been addressed through £23.3 million of actions,

including not filling over 320 vacant posts. That is the reality on the ground, and it means added pressure on existing staff and new work not being done. The Committee has requested a breakdown of the posts but was pleased to hear that that did not impact on the recruitment of 900 universal credit staff, with 367 in post and another 158 at the pre-appointment check stage.

Before I highlight specific areas, I note that the Committee has continued to keep a watch on the progress of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The Committee has learnt that, of the £220 million Community Renewal Fund for pilot projects, there is only an £11 million allocation for Northern Ireland. That in no way seems sufficient for groups across all areas to run pilot projects.

The Committee has considered the resource allocations, including those for arm's-length bodies, and has noted that the Department has overcommitted by £2.5 million on the basis that it can be managed down in-year. As I have already said, the Committee is pleased that an additional £50.3 million has now been confirmed from COVID resources. The Committee was alarmed to hear, however, that the Department was having to rely on that exercise in the first place.

The Committee has engaged with the Department on numerous occasions on welfare delivery and on labour market interventions, particularly the Job Start scheme. Thankfully, the final Budget now meets the substantial bids of almost £27 million and £25 million respectively for labour market interventions and benefit delivery.

The Committee is aware that the Department's annually managed expenditure (AME) is outside the block grant.

Nevertheless, it remains concerned about the link between the success of labour market interventions and the level of AME spend interventions that are needed to get people back into work and off benefits. The budget for Supporting People is £73 million for 2021-22. The bid of almost £6 million for COVID pressures has been met as one of the confirmed in-year allocations. Unfortunately, the almost £6.5 million inflationary bid has not been met so, in real terms, the decrease for this vital programme continues.

11.30 am

I am running out of time so I will move on to New Decade, New Approach. The Department made bids totalling £130 million, and only the £42.8 million bid for existing welfare mitigations has been met. That has raised concern because there are other issues such as social strategies, language strategies and a very important sign language framework. When the Committee held its briefing with the deaf community, it showed that we really need to have that in place.

Finally, the Committee looks forward to engaging with the Department on the June monitoring round. However, although that is a substantial pot, we expect that much of it is already spoken for.

Mr McHugh: Ba mhaith liom fosta buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Budget for 2021-22. I commend the Minister of Finance for bringing forward the Budget in the most challenging of circumstances.

We all know the scale of the damage that the pandemic has inflicted on our society in both human and economic terms. Thousands of jobs have been lost in the last year, with many more workers uncertain if their jobs will survive when the furlough scheme ends. The number of people claiming universal credit has doubled since the start of the pandemic, and this will no doubt continue to rise in the months ahead. Tough but necessary restrictions were imposed on businesses, requiring them to close for long periods. Unfortunately, many will not be in a position to reopen now that the restrictions have been relaxed. We have seen an unprecedented level of Government support to those businesses and self-employed individuals who have been most affected by the pandemic, with over £3 billion spent on COVID support funding so far. This support has meant that bills could be paid and food put on the table, but we must also acknowledge the hardship felt by families who have been forced to get by on much-reduced incomes. We also saw huge levels of funding directed towards our hospitals and other health services. This was necessary to ensure that our healthcare staff had the resources to respond to the crisis and provide care to the many thousands of patients suffering from COVID and other illnesses. We owe them a debt of gratitude, and it is right that we acknowledge their contribution.

Thankfully, with the successful roll-out of the vaccine and the cooperation of the public, we are now in a much better place. I extend my best wishes to all those businesses that have

opened up in recent weeks. We must now move to the next phase of the fight against COVID, which is all about rebuilding and repairing the long-term economic damage left behind by the pandemic.

We face many challenges that we must quickly get to grips with. It is in that context that this Budget is so important. The Minister has described this Budget as a "standstill Budget". Although we have seen further COVID Barnett consequentials since the first draft was considered, it is disappointing that the British Government have not provided a funding envelope that would enable us to have the ambitious investment Budget that is needed to stimulate significant levels of growth.

It is also disappointing that we still do not have a multi-year Budget settlement to allow more strategic planning, despite a commitment to deliver this in New Decade, New Approach. In the case of Health in particular, I know, from listening to health professionals, that they require that for the development of the health service and so that they can address their ever-increasing waiting lists. In fact, only last week, one constituent had it confirmed that he could be waiting for up to six years for a hernia operation. It reminds me of when I see an advertisement in a supermarket that says, "Bananas: 2p for a pound", but there are no bananas. That seems to be very much the case in our health service now. While it is the case that it is free at the point of entry, it is not in a fit state to deliver the service that the public require and demand. It is central government that can step up to the plate and assist our Minister and the Executive to help to deliver the kind of service that we all hope for.

Despite the limited level of funding available, there is much to be positive about in the Budget, and I believe that it provides the basis for a fair economic recovery. I commend the Minister for securing £230 million of COVID support funding for rates relief, which will benefit thousands of our businesses. A 12-month rates holiday will provide some breathing space, particularly for the hospitality, retail, tourism, manufacturing and childcare sectors. Those sectors have been hit very hard by the pandemic, and we must do all that we can to help them to get back on their feet.

I also welcome the allocation of £275 million to the Department for the Economy for an economic recovery package, which will help to kick-start the recovery. Part of that includes £150 million for a high street voucher scheme, and I look forward, as do the public, to that being rolled out in the coming months.

Young people have been among the worst affected by the pandemic, with many losing their part-time jobs while struggling to pay for accommodation and student fees. I am therefore delighted to see that £20 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities for the Job Start scheme, which will assist our young people in getting back into work.

The Department for Infrastructure has been allocated £722 million of capital DEL, which is the biggest capital allocation in recent years. That substantial budget, along with an additional £170 million of reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, will provide an immediate boost to our construction industry and provide many jobs. We need to see the delivery of key flagship infrastructure projects, such as the A5, which is in my constituency, Casement Park in west Belfast, more social housing units and major repair works on rural roads.

Brexit is still a key concern going forward, with little or no detail to date on exactly how much of the EU structural funding will be replaced and to what extent our devolved Ministers will have the authority to access the replacement funding when it does arrive. I welcome the allocation of £35 million from the British Government to assist in the implementation of the protocol, which will minimise the worst effects of Brexit. Only today, the European Commission emphasised again that the problem is not the protocol; the problem is Brexit.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McHugh: I will finish my remarks on an optimistic note. Although it may take some time to recover from the pandemic, the path to recovery is laid before us. Tá mé an-sásta go bhfuil muid ag gabháil chun cinn céim ar chéim. I am very happy that we are going forward step by step.

Mr O'Toole: When we debate the Budget in the Assembly, be it via a Budget Bill or, as we have today, a Budget statement, I often pause to consider why we are here. We are supposed to be here to effect improvement in the lives of the people whom we represent. Whatever our differences on the constitution or other issues, we should be here to find constructive solutions to the problems that our citizens face.

Those problems include the fact that one in four — one in four — of our citizens is on a waiting list. Our waiting lists are the worst on these

islands and are among the worst in Europe. We should all be ashamed of that. Since we restarted here in January 2020, there have been multiple budgetary events. There have been two full Budget statements, both in draft and final form, and several Budget Bills and associated Supply resolutions. In none of them have we seen anything approaching a coherent plan to address the major crises facing our public services, most notably our waiting list crisis.

Given that we have spent most of the past year dealing with the pandemic, it was understandable that we did not have much of a coherent vision or strategy from the Minister last year, but it is now nearly summer 2021. Governments all over the world have managed to produce coherent plans to match finances to priorities. Why not us? People in Northern Ireland, especially people who have been languishing for years waiting for surgery, will ask why we cannot have a Government that produces plans to deal with our actual problems rather than simply getting mired in improvised allocations — I welcome allocations; we can all welcome allocations — short-termism and blame-shifting.

First, it is worth addressing a key point that the Minister has made and will no doubt make again, which is that London presented the Executive with a near standstill Budget, that there was limited room for manoeuvre for the Minister and that the failure to deliver a multi-year spending review limited the capacity to make multi-year allocations, including to the health service. I am in no doubt that the failure of the Treasury to provide a multi-year spending review has limited our options. I acknowledge that, but I come back to the point: why are we even here? What is the point in having a Finance Minister and an Executive when they will not offer a vision for how we might fund these crises in the future? Minister, the Treasury might provide the overall envelope, but it does not make the allocations, and it does not write this Budget.

This document could have provided a template multi-annual Budget and encouraged political debate on the trade-offs that we all face. The Sinn Féin manifesto in 2017 promised a billion pounds for the health service. Minister, what is the view on how we deliver that and why is it not set out, at least in draft, in this Budget? We could have had a debate today on the hard choices that we face in dealing with the big challenges of waiting lists, post-COVID recovery and a just transition to a lower-carbon future, but, apparently, that is not our job or the Minister's job. The money comes from London

and the bids for funding come from other Ministers.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way briefly.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with the points that he is outlining. Will he also agree that fundamental to that is us in this place taking on our responsibilities to deliver upon the commitments that we signed up to in Bengoa?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I do agree with that.

The job of the Finance Department and the Finance Minister is to set strategic direction and vision. I am afraid that there is none of that in this document.

Minister, one of the big economic questions facing all of us in this century is about the rise of automation and the jobs in which humans might be replaced by robots in the future. Judging by this Budget, we might want to explore whether we could simply allocate the Finance Minister's job to a robot that could move information between London and Belfast. I see that we already have a robotic lawnmower operating today at the front of the Stormont estate, so perhaps the robots are ready for a promotion. Perhaps, if 'Star Wars' comes back to film in Ireland, we can ask whether R2-D2 fancies a stint as Finance Minister. That is not to be flippant but simply to say that we are here for a reason: to take responsibility for improving our citizens' lives, rather than associating ourselves with allocations for the purposes of photo opportunities, then blaming the Treasury or other Ministers when problems arise.

I want to come to a couple of other critical points.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way very briefly.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member agree that this Budget from the Sinn Féin Finance Minister does very little to give comfort to families who are on their hands and knees on waiting lists to get operations to stop the pain that is besetting them day in and day out? This Budget does nothing to give them comfort.

Mr O'Toole: I agree that we should have seen more of a vision set out in this document.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr O'Toole: I want to come on to couple of other critical points before I finish. This Budget highlights the real shortfall in funding created by the EU exit. There is no clarity on the long-term funding loss created by Brexit. DAERA has confirmed in this document that £14.4 million in EU funding for direct farm payments has not been met by the UK Government, nor has £5.1 million for disease eradication.

For the Department for the Economy, the document makes clear that we need replacement EU funding of £5 million a year. We have heard already from the Chair of the Communities Committee about issues with the shared prosperity fund. Minister, we could have done with a single table setting out those challenges in this document. We could have had a chapter detailing the damage done by Brexit and how we are going to deal with it, including by taking advantage of our position vis-à-vis the protocol at the crossroads of two major markets. However, there is little sign of strategy or agency in this document.

Lastly, Minister, I am, of course, obliged to mention my habitual subject, the Sammy tax: £2.5 million a year to subsidise non-existent long haul flights in the midst of economic and waiting list crisis. Minister, while we will not be pushing this Budget to a vote, we do have significant concerns about some of the contents of this passive, robotic Budget statement. As I said, it fails to address the crisis in waiting lists, it fails to properly address our economic recovery and it fails to properly —.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am coming to the end of my statement, so I will not, I am afraid.

It fails to properly address Brexit. I am afraid that, for all of us, it simply is not good enough going forward.

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

11.45 am

Mr Muir: As the Alliance Party's finance spokesperson, I will speak on and support the motion. I will touch on the contributions of two Members, and the first is that of the Chair of the Finance Committee, Dr Steve Aiken, about the need to streamline the budgetary process.

I became an MLA in December 2019, and my term has been most unusual. We had two months of normality — that is, if you could call it "normality", in that these institutions were restored — and then we had COVID-19. I have never experienced what might be considered a normal Budget process. Thus far, I have seen an elongated, baffling process that is difficult for me, never mind for members of the public, to make sense of.

The Alliance Party has no member on the Finance Committee, so, without having access to the Committee papers, I am inhibited in my ability to provide scrutiny in the Chamber. If I may speak for members of other parties, none of whom are here during this important debate, I will say that they do not have access to those papers either. That is a fundamental issue that has to be examined by the Assembly authorities. I have written to them on numerous occasions about that.

We are now coming towards the end of May, and, very soon, it will be June, yet the Department for Infrastructure has still not confirmed its budget. We are two months into the financial year. No other business would run its operation like that. The same is true of other Departments, so I am not getting at Nichola Mallon. It is just not a sensible way to run our finances.

Also, we do not have multi-year Budgets. If anyone was listening to 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, they would have heard about the impact of COVID-19, the state of the health service and the impact on individuals, and they would know that it was heart-rending to hear some of the stories. Waiting lists are so long that some doctors do not even tell patients how long they will be waiting because it has no meaning. We have a two-tier health service where, if you can afford to go private, you can get your treatment, but if you have to rely on the NHS, you will not get treatment for many years. So many people rely on the NHS, yet it was founded to serve the people. The waiting lists are for not weeks or months but years.

There is a need for multi-year Budgets. I take on board some of what Matthew O'Toole said about the health service, but the need for multi-year Budgets also relates to Treasury and the fact that it did not come forward with the much-promised multi-year Budgets that were outlined some time ago.

However, to constantly pass the buck and the blame back to Treasury does not cut the mustard. We have devolved institutions, Departments and an Assembly. We in Northern

Ireland have the power to effect change. We agreed the Bengoa report, a key element in reforming the operation of the health service. One person said this morning, "It is not just money that is required, it is also reform."

I agree that significant investment in the health service is required. I know that at first hand from my mother, who used to work in the health service, but there is also a need for reform. As we signed up to the Bengoa report, we need to show leadership and deliver upon it. Time and time again, we see situations where difficult decisions are to be made, but people are not prepared to follow through. Such debates have already occurred in the Chamber. We need to show responsibility, and that goes not just for the Finance Minister but for all Departments and MLAs.

I welcome the establishment of the Fiscal Council, but we need clarity about the role it will play in the budgetary process. Today is just the start of the elongated Budget process, and although I am speaking on the Budget, I do not hold out much hope that Members will stick to the topic and will not get sidetracked by other issues in this debate, the debate on the Budget Bill and debates on further Budget Bills. We need to understand how the Budget process will be better and different now that the Fiscal Council has been established.

We have a Programme for Government, but the fact that the Budget does not link through to it in order to ensure a connection to goals and outcomes is a matter of concern. The best example of that, which was outlined yesterday and again today, is electric vehicle charging. Responsibility for that falls between two Departments, so what happens? Nothing. That is what happens. We then have a situation where people do not want to take responsibility to drive forward that programme because it requires cooperation. If we had an outcomes-based Programme for Government that was linked to the Budget, we would have a very different outcome on that.

I welcome the decision to borrow £170 million. We did not utilise that borrowing in the last financial year. It is critical that the Government learn to spend and invest that money better. The Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, which I sit on alongside Matthew, Maolíosa and others, have conducted inquiries, most recently into the capacity and capability of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The Committee published its report on that last week. I am grateful for the work that has been done by civil servants, who have gone above and beyond the call of duty

over the last year and before. Their efforts have been immense. However, if we are to ensure that this investment is realised, we need to address the recommendations in that report and in a previous report on major capital projects. I fear that those reports are produced, inquiries take place, and the reports then gather dust. If we are to ensure that those reports have meaning, we need to take action.

One example of that would be the establishment of an infrastructure commission. Why can we not establish that during this mandate? It must be established. It does not have to be established under legislation initially, but it needs to be established. We need to drive that forward. Something that always comes up in Budget debates is who will pay for it. About half a billion pounds is wasted every year on the cost of division. That is a clear example of how we can invest in the services that we need and realise those changes.

In conclusion, I support the motion. The Alliance Party is part of an Executive. It supported the Budget process in that Executive and will support it today. However, it is important that we also take those difficult decisions.

Mr Frew: First, I raise a certain truth in the House. When it comes to Budget debates or legislation, it is clear that:

*"The needle returns to the start of the song
And we all sing along like before."*

It seems that nothing ever changes. We all have the same frustrations and raise the same points, yet nothing seems to change. I must say that it was quite refreshing to hear Luke Skywalker in the corner *[Laughter]* although, at times, he sounded more like Chewbacca. He alluded to another truth: we all need the wisdom of Yoda in times of stress such as these.

Once again, the Budget highlights the overwhelming financial contributions that the Government make to Northern Ireland. That is an undeniable fact. The financial benefits of our membership of the UK are invaluable to public services and the economy in Northern Ireland. The additional contributions to fund the pandemic response underlined that. That must be put into context. The UK has experienced the largest fall in output for more than 300 years and will not return to pre-crisis levels until at least quarter 4 of 2022. No doubt, that will mean some economic scarring, which will lead to unemployment levels rising in the coming months. Where in the Budget, in the drafts or new version, do people find hope, inspiration and confidence?

I heard a number of colleagues in the Chamber talk about the hard times and the difficult role that the Finance Minister will have with a standstill Budget. May I let you into a secret? The people out there, who have just about managed in the past year, are not standing still; they are going backwards. They are losing capital quickly, they are spending their savings at an unbelievable rate, and they do not see hope in this document. Where is the inspiration? Where is the confidence for those hard-pressed families? I smile a wry smile when I hear Ministers — the Finance Minister and all other Ministers — talking about standstill, challenging budgets. Out there in the real world, mums and dads just have to get on with it and deal with the hand that they have been dealt. They look to us to give them hope, inspiration and confidence.

The same can be said about waiting lists in our Health Department. We have lived through a pandemic. There is no doubt about that, and it was probably the most challenging time in our political careers. However, in the heat of that battle, where was the drive and vision to fix things? There is little evidence that we have achieved anything in our health service other than treading water and sinking deeper into the mire. When will it change? When can we stand up and say to our people, "We can fix this. Have confidence in us. Here is the hope and inspiration". That said, it is difficult not having a multi-year Budget; I get that. However, even if we go to a multi-year Budget, how can we ensure that the same things that we do annually will not happen on a three-year basis? That should give us more latitude to input a long-term strategic vision to those difficult decisions, but there is no guarantee. If the model is not fixed, how do we move forward?

Today, you will hear about the broken Budget process from many Committee Chairs. The process is broken, and it does not allow Committees to scrutinise properly or input strategic thought. That is a massive problem. My colleague Paula Bradley, the Chair of the Communities Committee, outlined that problem, as will others today. I congratulate my colleague Paula on her new role as deputy leader. I wish her all the best in the future.

Here we are again with a one-year Budget, and I understand the pressure that that brings. Over the year, we have seen the way in which in-year monitoring rounds have not really worked for us, because of decisions that are taken and, almost as importantly, decisions that are not taken. Committees find it difficult and struggle to scrutinise those decisions.

The rates holiday is a big thing for business. It was massive last year, and I commend the Finance Minister and the Executive for that decision. I commend the Finance Minister for the decision to extend the rates holiday to this year. However, that will not grow business; it just allows business to survive. The rates holiday is the difference between a business being here and not being here. Businesses want inspiration and promises of growth. They want promises that, in this place, we have the remedies to fix the problems that we face this year. I am not sure whether businesses will see that, but I hope that they do. I hope that, if we do not have the answers, government stays out of the face of businesses and allows unrestricted operation so that they can trade safely and bring growth to the economy and our people. We need business to do that.

We should not ignore the damage that the Northern Ireland protocol does to this country and to east-west trade. It has a massive bearing on us as we go forward, no matter what our Budget line or process is. The protocol will be diabolical —

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

Mr Frew: — for the future, and it should be removed in its entirety so that we in Northern Ireland can enjoy the benefits of a free United Kingdom.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): We continue to be in exceptional times with annual Budgets and a reliance on ministerial directions to implement COVID relief schemes. It is not an ideal context for a Committee to scrutinise a departmental budget effectively. However, the Economy Committee has received regular budget briefings from the Department. Over the past year, the Committee has had regular engagement with officials about budgeting. Most recently, on 12 May, the Economy Minister briefed the Committee about her spending plans in the economic recovery action plan and the 10X economic vision.

As with other Departments, the Economy budget has flatlined in 2021-22. That has resulted in the Department realigning budget lines and beginning the financial year with an overcommitment of £7.3 million. Officials reassured the Committee that the overcommitment was manageable. The Department has also received £12.2 million from the Treasury to manage protocol issues, and the Committee will monitor that closely over

the next few months as the impact of Brexit continues to unfold.

12.00 noon

A key element of the Department's budgeting for 2021-22 is the economic recovery action plan, which the Executive have agreed to fund at a cost of approximately £290 million in resource funding, with £11 million of capital spend. Roughly half the resource allocation for the economic recovery action plan will go to the high street stimulus voucher scheme. I will comment on that later.

The Department has secured £23 million from the NIO, with £8 million of that to support the development of Invest NI locations overseas over the next two years and the other £15 million for skills, which is to be spread over the next three years. In addition to the economic recovery action plan, there is a range of New Decade, New Approach commitments that are relevant to the Economy Department. The Department and the Executive must ensure that the commitments in the economic recovery action plan, 'New Decade, New Approach' and the Programme for Government are closely aligned. Failure to align the work of all Departments runs the risk of duplication or failure to maximise the impact of spending. The economic recovery action plan highlights in particular the Department's key commitments on strategies for skills, energy and the economy more widely, as well as on further and higher education. The Department has suggested that the economic recovery action plan and the recently published 'A 10X Economy' have the potential to be game changers for our economy. The Committee will, however, be looking for clearer delivery on what are very high level statements of intent. Funding for those, and for other departmental strategies, will come from in-year allocations, and the Committee will want to see as much detail on those as possible. This is not a time for lack of transparency.

The high street stimulus voucher scheme, which I mentioned earlier, represents some £145 million of spending. That is roughly half of the economic recovery action plan's overall funding. It is therefore vital that the scheme be successful and that it provide the economic stimulus that is expected. Officials have briefed the Committee on the scheme, but there are many aspects of it on which specifics are still lacking, with elements of the policy still to be pinned down. The Committee will be watching the implementation of the scheme carefully, and members are heavily engaged with stakeholders to provide as much advice as possible.

The Committee has flagged its concern to the Department about funding being made available for schemes to reskill and upskill workers who cannot return to jobs once the furlough scheme has ended. The Executive must consider how support can be funded and put in place when that happens in the autumn.

In their recent briefings to the Committee, Department for the Economy officials have suggested that they are optimistic about the Department's budget situation for 2021-22. It is likely that the sizeable allocations beyond the Department's static baseline have encouraged that optimism. Contingency funding is also in place to mitigate the impacts of the protocol and departure from the EU. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

I will now make a few remarks as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. I will not repeat any of the detail that has been outlined. Beyond the standstill departmental budget, as has been described, funding has been allocated to deal with the outworkings of Brexit, and there have been significant allocations to the economic recovery action plan. That money, more than half of which is going to the high street voucher scheme, is going to be vital in supporting our economy in its recovery. As I have said, we need to hear more details about the voucher scheme as quickly as possible. When departmental officials briefed the Committee on the budget, they said:

"just short of £131 million has been allocated to be used at DFE's discretion for economic support measures."

As we saw last year with the COVID support schemes, some flexibility is useful in allowing money to be moved to where it is needed. I ask the Minister to clarify what "at DFE's discretion" means and whether business cases will be approved for schemes being developed.

We have talked about the furlough scheme a number of times in Budget debates, and my colleague Maolíosa McHugh mentioned it today. The furlough scheme is due to end at the end of September. Undoubtedly, there will be businesses that will not be in a position to bring back all their employees. I have talked to some businesses, including businesses in the tourism sector that rely on international visitors. They are not looking at recovery in this year. What engagement has the Minister had with Treasury about furlough, including on issues to do with the employer contributions that will be required later in the summer? There are going to be businesses that will not be in a position to meet those contributions, and redundancies are likely

to follow. It is therefore important that we call for some sector-specific flexibility for the furlough scheme.

It is not often that I agree with Mr Frew in a Budget debate, but I had a sense of déjà vu as well when I listened to some Members' contributions. I remind the Members who criticised the Budget process that the approach of having a rollover Budget was agreed by Executive Ministers in October. We all agree that it is important to align PFG outcomes with budgets. However, if Members are not happy with how the Budget process is being taken forward, they can raise their concerns within their parties. We would all like to see a more dynamic process.

Mr Givan: Before I comment on the Budget, I apologise for not being in my place during Justice Question Time yesterday. That was an oversight on my part.

I will make some remarks in my role as Chair of the Committee for Justice. The Committee was initially briefed on the Department's financial planning for the years ahead in early November 2020. At that time, the Committee heard that the Department faced inescapable resource DEL pressures of almost £60 million for the 2021-22 financial year. Officials advised that it would be difficult to absorb those pressures without impacting on frontline service delivery. The Department pointed out that those pressures should not be considered in isolation, but rather in the context of a baseline that has fallen by around 9% since 2011-12. I mentioned that in a previous debate, but I wanted to repeat it.

The Department provided details of the range of measures that spending areas have already taken to manage the reduced budget, along with the further measures that may be required in future across all spending areas. To help inform its consideration, the Committee used that information, along with information provided by the Department's non-departmental public bodies on their indicative allocations for the year ahead, which remain mostly unchanged in the final Budget allocations.

During an oral briefing on 29 April, the Committee was advised that the final budget position represented a small increase of £0.3 million to the draft allocation that was announced in January 2021. The £8 million for tackling paramilitary activity was removed from the baseline, to be held centrally by the Department of Finance. COVID funding of £7.7 million was received and will be allocated to the Police Service, the Prison Service, the Courts

and Tribunals Service and smaller bodies. There were some technical transfers of just over £0.5 million. The Department will also receive an in-year allocation of £12.3 million for police staffing that, for technical reasons, could not be included in the final budget outcome.

After a critical examination, officials advised that the £55.7 million pressures that were identified in November have been reduced to £20 million, of which nearly £6 million relates to the Police Service. The Police Service also still has pressures of nearly £6 million for EU exit and £1.6 million for transformation. That brings the overall pressure that the Department currently faces to £27.7 million. The draft capital allocation for the Department is £96.4 million, which is an increase of £8.3 million from the previous year. The Department believes that that allocation is sufficient to meet existing commitments and progress priority projects.

The Committee will not formally agree its response to the final Budget until Thursday, in line with the deadline that was set by the Committee for Finance. However, I will reflect on some of the key issues that were raised by Committee members during our discussions with officials. The Police Service provided information at the Policing Board about the measures that it may require in order to live within its indicative budget allocation. That was of particular concern to the Committee when considering the draft Budget allocation. Instead of working towards the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increase the number of police officers to 7,500, the staff complement would have been reduced by 300 police officers, bringing the number of police officers down to 6,700. I welcome the representations and the changes that have now been made whereby £12.3 million additional funding for the Police Service will address that issue. The Department advised that £9.8 million of that allocation will enable the Police Service to retain its current numbers and that £2.5 million of the allocation will facilitate the recruitment of 100 new officers in 2021-22. That puts it on a trajectory to meet the NDNA commitments in due course.

There will obviously be recurring costs beyond this year that the Department believes should be included in future baselines from 2022-23. The Finance Minister advised that future budgets will depend on funding being available and that it will be for the Executive to agree the allocations at that time. Therefore, we are still some way from meeting the NDNA target, but we have taken a step forward. As I mentioned, the Police Service still also faces a shortfall in funding for EU exit, and the Committee

understands that discussions are ongoing with the Treasury to secure the balance of funding required for the forthcoming year.

At the meeting in April, because of the information that had been provided to us, much of the discussion with the officials focused on the Prison Service. Officials advised that jobs are not expected to be lost; rather new staff will not be recruited. That may not have an immediate impact as the Prison Service is close to its full staff complement, but, if it continues, that will have an impact over time. Members heard that other options may be considered to help the Prison Service to live within its budget, including relocating working out units back into prisons, reducing learning and skills provisions or closing down policy units. Such approaches, evidently, have an impact on rehabilitation, and that would have a negative impact, not only on prisoners but on their families, wider society and prison staff. As the official put it:

"prisons operate most effectively when you have an appropriate number of staff per prisoner and appropriate activities for prisoners to be engaged in. Any reduction in one or the other will have a detrimental impact."

The fact that the Prison Service could potentially get to that position is of particular concern to the Committee, and we will continue to consider that.

Other issues, such as those involving the Probation Board, were considered, but I want to conclude by mentioning the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. Members know that that scheme is set to open for applications on 30 June. Although it is the Department of Justice's responsibility to deliver the scheme —

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

Mr Givan: — responsibility for its funding rests with the Executive Office. It will not come out of the Department of Justice's budget, and I welcome the commitments that those costs will be met. However, I support the idea that this needs to be funded by Her Majesty's Treasury —

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

Mr Givan: — to support the Executive to fulfil their responsibilities in this area.

Mr McAleer: The AERA Committee recognises the significant pressure on future budget planning as a consequence of Brexit and the challenges posed by COVID-19 and the recovery from the pandemic. Whilst the Committee welcomes the continuation of recurrent funding for many of DAERA's core work programmes, there are several outstanding fiscal challenges that need to be urgently addressed in order to ensure that public bodies in rural communities are supported to recover and modernise in the next financial year.

The Committee particularly welcomes the planned investment of £9.8 million in 2021-22 to support the agri-food sector as it emerges from the pandemic and the resourcing of innovations such as the planned new surveillance scheme, which is co-led by DAERA and the Belfast Trust, to facilitate early detection of coronavirus in waste water outlets. However, our agriculture producers have been profoundly impacted by the downturn in market activity due to COVID, and it is vital that our farming industry has access to sufficient support in order to continue to deliver high-quality produce for consumers across the country and further afield.

The pressures on rural communities to modernise and innovate to tackle the challenges associated with climate change are significant, and, whilst the Committee welcomes the planned £2 million of investment in this financial year for green growth strategies, it is vital that the Department puts in place sufficient resources to support farming communities to transition to eco-friendly farming practices and ensures that innovations and best practice can be disseminated across the sector.

The biggest threat to our agriculture economy is from the many challenges and uncertainties posed by Brexit. Members will have heard the media reports in recent days about how the proposed free trade agreement between the British Government and Australia threatens to undermine the viability of farming communities across these islands. It is essential that our local farmers are supported with appropriate funding to remain accessible, competitive and sustainable in the years ahead, so that our high-quality agriculture produce can be traded effectively in our closest markets.

The Committee also recognises the additional requirements posed by the protocol. It is essential that DAERA is provided with the investment needed to ensure that sufficient resource and staffing levels are in place at our ports of entry to —.

12.15 pm

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the protocol, in addition to dealing with some of the checks required, also offers our farmers an opportunity to be protected from imports of cheap food? Those in the Chamber who supported Brexit might want to reflect on what they have done to farmers here. We see a cut in agricultural payments, which have not been replaced by the British Government, and we see a cheap food policy that will devastate farmers in Northern Ireland and Britain.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Tá bomaite breise agat. The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McAleer: I could not agree more with the Member. The protocol is in place to protect our farming communities and to facilitate and protect east-west trade. I welcome the fact that, recently, the European Commission encouraged the North of Ireland to be part of an all-island protected geographical indicator status for Irish grass-fed beef. That can only be made possible by the protocol.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Yes.

Mr Allister: Will the Member care to reflect on the idiocy of what he has just said? He said that the protocol exists to protect east-west trade, but the protocol is, deliberately, the biggest barrier builder to east-west trade. Surely even the Member can grasp that and not lose his sense of reality as he fantasises in some euro-world.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I just remind Members — *[Interruption.]* No remarks from sedentary positions, please. I remind Members that the debate is principally about the Budget. Although the Brexit protocol has implications for that, I advise Members to steer back to the Budget debate.

Mr McAleer: Yes. The protocol will protect our farmers. We watch the British Government entertain trade deals with Australia, a huge beef-producing continent that wants unfettered access to the British market, which, of course, is our main market. When the British market becomes flooded with Australian beef — of course, that will be the precedent for trade deals with the USA and the Mercosur countries — with which we cannot compete, we will need

the protocol. We need to work with the rest of the EU to access other EU markets and other opportunities across the globe, because we will be completely displaced from the British market. We need a protocol to protect our farmers and agri-food businesses here on the island of Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has made his point. Will he move back to focus on the Budget?

Mr McAleer: You can blame your colleague Mr O'Toole, and Mr Allister, for distracting me. *[Laughter.]* The continuation of the £18.8 million Brexit-related funding from last year is welcome but is insufficient to employ enough suitably trained staff to undertake checks at our ports. The Committee is particularly concerned about the projected £19.5 million shortfall in DAERA's budget this year to support farm payments that would have been delivered via EU funding. The deficit is the direct result of the Treasury's decision to net off £14.4 million of ring-fenced EU funding against other manifesto commitments and a failure to fund £5.1 million towards programmes to support disease eradication. It is vital that that funding pressure be addressed in order to provide assurance to our rural communities and to ensure that they are supported at this particularly challenging time.

The Committee welcomes the planned capital investment of over £90 million in 2021-22 that will support improvements in research and development strategies, ICT infrastructure and rural development programmes. However, it is essential that the Department be supported to access any additional capital moneys that may become available over the next year to boost our rural development framework and ensure that our agriculture industry can continue to modernise its equipment, infrastructure and estate to deliver innovations and best practice.

The challenges that face our rural communities are stark and wide-ranging, and there are many uncertainties posed by Brexit, the outworking of the pandemic and the future transition to eco-friendly initiatives to address climate change. The Committee calls on the Minister and the Executive as a whole to ensure that our agri-food sector and its associated stakeholders are supported adequately to meet these challenges and to thrive in the coming years.

Briefly, in my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs, I underline the fact that Brexit is a huge threat to our sector. Of major concern last week was Minister Murphy's revelation that we have a £60 million hole in our

budget this year as a consequence of lost EU funding that has not been replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The £11 million Community Renewal Fund will not even be administered by the Executive here. The Brexiteers told us that they were "taking back control" and that there would be all these wonderful opportunities. This just exposes the lies and spin of Brexit because not only are we losing funding but we are losing the control to manage what funding is left.

To conclude, I thank you for your indulgence, and I support the motion.

Ms McLaughlin: This is not a good Budget. My colleague Matthew O'Toole stated the reasons why the Budget is beyond poor and inadequate and why the people of Northern Ireland deserve better. For the past 14 years, Northern Ireland has been led by joint First Ministers from Sinn Féin and the DUP. That leadership was supposed to deliver prosperity after the peace that was delivered by gigantic leaders such as John Hume of the SDLP. Instead of prosperity, the North continues to have some of the worst economic outcomes —.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes.

Dr Aiken: For clarity, will you add David Trimble to that?

Ms McLaughlin: I will.

Instead of prosperity, the North continues to have some of the worst economic outcomes of anywhere in western Europe. My city of Derry has the highest levels of poverty, unemployment and economic inactivity, but it is not just Derry that is suffering. The situation is the same in Strabane, west Belfast and east Belfast. Those are the areas that have suffered most from the neglect of Sinn Féin and the DUP.

I will give you an example. It was 19 years ago that the British Government transferred the Fort George site in Derry to the people of Derry. It was supposed to be transformational for Derry. There were plans to make it a marvellous example of how this place can move forward, exploiting a prime riverfront location that would make our people proud. Instead, it is almost empty. It is a telehouse for Project Kelvin — that is another disappointment for Derry — plus one Catalyst business incubation centre. That is all, unless you now include its use as a stacking area for McDonald's in order to eliminate the

terrible risk of a car accident waiting to happen. Now we are merely waiting for Fort George or something to happen.

Yes, we have the promise of a health hub on the site, but, to be honest, we should all be fed up by now of promises being given but left unfulfilled. It is not just Derry, as I said. What about the other major site transferred into the care of our Government on behalf of our people? I am talking about the Maze site, which is a perfect metaphor for the joint Government of Sinn Féin and the DUP, with row followed by row and lack of delivery followed by lack of delivery.

That brings me to our universities. Making Derry a proper university city was one of the demands of the civil rights movement over 50 years ago. It is perhaps the only demand of the civil rights movement that has yet to be delivered. Despite 14 years of joint leadership by Sinn Féin and the DUP, that demand has yet to be delivered. There is crystal-clear evidence that expanding the higher education sector in Northern Ireland would be good for our economy, but the Government in Northern Ireland refuse to be evidence-led. If we had an evidence-led Government, the Finance Minister would put far more resources into skills and would recognise the result of holding down the size of our university sector. The result is not only economic harm but social harm: the dislocation of families, the loss of skills and the impact on innovation and invention, our cultural and arts sectors, civic life, wages, poverty and productivity. The list goes on. It all flows from the refusal to be led by evidence on expanding our university sector and from allowing the continuation of the brain drain, which results from having 60 university places for every 100 applications.

We have a bizarre situation here. The Sinn Féin spokesperson for higher education in the South is calling for more funded university places, and a Sinn Féin Minister here in the North is continuing to preside over a policy of capping university places that forces young people to leave the island, many never to return. There is no point in the Sinn Féin Finance Minister blaming the DUP Economy Minister for that failure. Two parties are in joint government. Two parties are in joint leadership of the Executive. They have been at it for 14 years. They have to step up and get things done. They have to put aside their constant mutual recriminations and stop the blame game.

I say this to the Sinn Féin Finance Minister: he should be more than a pawn or, as my colleague said, a robot that delivers on behalf of

the British Treasury. He needs to be a leader. He needs to think for himself and do more than just accept how things were done in the past and how the British Government want him to act. He needs to deliver for the North and Ireland, not for the British Government. He needs to stop playing fiddle to the British Treasury and start to put a vision for Northern Ireland front and centre.

Dr Archibald: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Ms McLaughlin: He needs to help to build this place that we call home.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is a point of order.

Ms McLaughlin: In the past, the two largest parties —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member resume her seat, please? There is a point of order.

Dr Archibald: Is this not supposed to be a Budget debate?

Ms McLaughlin: This is about the Budget: it is about how we allocate money in this place. I am talking directly about the Budget and the lack of investment in skills and education, including higher education, in Northern Ireland that has been going on for 14 years. I am entitled to explain what is actually happening here to the people of Northern Ireland, should they care to listen.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, I will.

Mr McNulty: It is clear that Sinn Féin does not like the truth. Sinn Féin and the DUP are in it together. For the past 14 years, they have held this place back. It is time for change. Choose change.

Ms McLaughlin: It is past time for the two largest parties to remember for whom they govern. It is not just for themselves or their party members; it is for the people of Northern Ireland. It is for our families, our children and the future. Those two parties lead the Administration, and they must lead. They must deliver. That means that they must deliver for those who are most in need: those on the longest health waiting lists; those who leave school without the skills and qualifications that

they need; those who struggle to pay their fuel bills; those who have cold homes; those who cannot get a job because they cannot afford childcare; those who have no job because there are none in the area where they live; and those who are super-intelligent but cannot go to university because there are no local places for them, and they cannot afford to move away to study. Those are the people for whom we need to deliver. They are the people whom the joint leadership of Sinn Féin and the DUP has failed.

May I remind the Finance Minister where the people who have been failed are? They live in Derry, east Belfast and west Belfast. The Finance Minister, Economy Minister and joint First Ministers need to remember the people for whom they are supposed to deliver: our families and our people living here in Northern Ireland. This Budget does not cut it.

Mr Nesbitt: It is nice to see a bit of passion being injected into a Budget debate. I am sorry to say that I missed the Minister's opening remarks. I imagine that I would agree with some of the trends mentioned and the high-level remarks made. I agree, for example, that we need multi-year Budgets, which many Members mentioned during the debate. It is high time that we removed the toxic uncertainty that accompanies 12-month Budgets and the negative impact that they have on the ability to deliver services.

I am sure that the Minister agrees with me on the need to better coordinate the Budget with the Programme for Government, which was another theme of the debate. Going forward, there may be a third issue to be locked in: a Northern Ireland-specific bill of rights. Of course, that is a debate for another day.

12.30 pm

The other big issue that the Minister and I agree on is the need to bring forward a prosperity agenda for the citizens of this country. I am most obliged to my party leader, Doug Beattie, who, today, has asked me to become the party spokesman on the economy, which is a role that I fulfilled when I first joined the Assembly 10 years ago. My theme will be a prosperity agenda, with more people getting out of bed with a sense of purpose, with a worthwhile job to be done and with the assurance that people like the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy have their backs.

I think that we can all agree that, if people are getting to a Friday with more money in their back pockets, with a good sense of their own

mental health and well-being and with a feeling that they have an equal shot at success as the next person, they can transform our economy, and our economy can transform them and their lives. Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker. That was a party political broadcast on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

As this point, I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board because I want to talk about what the Budget says about the policing budget. Quite disturbingly, it admits that the funding requirements far outweigh the Department of Justice budget allocation and, therefore, the extent to which the priorities of the Department of Justice can be met.

Specifically, we have a commitment that we all recognise in New Decade, New Approach to increase the headcount of the Police Service of Northern Ireland from 7,000 to 7,500. You will also note that NDNA puts no timescale on that transformation. In this budgetary year, the plan is to get from 7,000 to 7,100. That will be funded not through baseline but through Barnett consequentials. It costs £9.8 million just to maintain the status quo of the 7,000 figure, because of the churn of retirements, injury on duty and all the rest.

It will cost £2.5 million in recruitment to get the extra 100 officers, and the annual cost will be £5 million. If you add the churn of £9.8 million to the annual £5 million, you have £14.8 million, which we do not have. It is not baselined, and it is not in next year's budget or in the budget the year after that or the year after that. If it costs £5 million for 100 new officers, in order to get to 7,500, we are missing £34.8 million. We are nearly £35 million shy.

It is not just in recruitment that we have that issue. The paramilitary crime task force is currently £5.8 million short of target. Nobody is saying that that money will not be found through the likes of June monitoring, but, again, it is not baselined. Is that acceptable for such an important work stream to tackle terrorism and paramilitary criminality? We have seen that recently in the north-west, and part of the plan for the paramilitary crime task force is to open a new unit in the north-west, yet the funding is not there in the baseline. The need for the task force will not go away this financial year; it will be with us for some years to come. We have to start to address those issues.

The point is made in this Budget that a lot of the services from the Department of Justice, such as policing, prisons and the rest, are demanded, but we can look at certain areas in which to make savings and recalibrate the way in which

we spend the budget. We have a segregated prison regime for paramilitary prisoners. Why do we do that? We call them criminals when they are outside prison, and then we allow them to be paramilitary leaders when they are in prison. It comes not only at a financial cost but at a cost to society's perception.

There is also legal aid. Compared with any other region of the United Kingdom, our spend on legal aid is disproportionate. We therefore have huge questions to answer about the Department of Justice's budget for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and what we ask that police service to deliver.

Reference has been made to the legacy agreements from the Stormont House Agreement. I put on record once again, because some people fail to grasp this, that not every party in the House signed up to those legacy proposals. The Ulster Unionist Party did not. Let us remember that it appears that the United Kingdom Government have also —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — changed their mind about the Stormont House Agreement legacy proposals, but, again, that is probably a debate for another day.

Mrs Cameron: I will focus my remarks on our Health Department budget. If there was ever a year in which we have seen just how important funding for our health service is, the past 12 months have been it. Unprecedented demand has been met with unprecedented levels of financial support. It has been a time when the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom have been so clear. Although those who foolishly wish to end that Union may not acknowledge it, they cannot argue otherwise.

As we now emerge from the pandemic, thanks to the sacrifices of our people, the heroic actions of our healthcare workers and the wonders of science, we must look at the future of our health and social care provision. The current model in Northern Ireland is unsustainable. If we want the best health service for our people, yes, we need funding, but we also need reform. What we have talked about in this place year after year must now be progressed: no excuses. It is hard to ignore the fact that health and social care accounts for half of day-to-day spending this year, at just under £6.5 billion. What more evidence do we need to underline the need for reform and transformation? We all know from constituents

who contact us in despair just how bad things are with waiting lists. Given estimates that it will take in the region of £750 million to £1 billion to tackle the elective waiting lists alone, it is clear that the funding impetus for the long-term change that is needed is simply not there at present. That cannot be an excuse to stop the smaller steps that we can take, however. Key to pursuing that agenda are multi-year Budgets. Making that transition is in the interests of more strategic spending decisions and stands to encourage greater scrutiny of expenditure. It is important that no stone be left unturned in ensuring that the current spending review ushers in a three-year Budget.

We all know the limitations of in-year monitoring rounds and one-year Budgets and the impact that they have on planning. Stopgaps and temporary fixes go only so far. The culture needs to change. That is particularly important for health transformation and the implementation of commitments contained in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I fully agree with those who responded to the consultation by expressing concern around funding for social care. That issue needs greater funding levels if the needs of our constituents are to be met. The lack of certainty on funding yet again hinders our drive to reform and to do what we all know needs to be done.

Finally, I will raise an issue as the chair of the all-party group on autism. Last week, it was revealed that almost one in 20 schoolchildren in Northern Ireland has an autism diagnosis, yet the budgets that are allocated for addressing the needs of our autism community in school and outside of it are a drop in the ocean. We all join rallies and share posts on autism week, but, when it comes to funding sensory facilities or building stadiums, we pour money into stadiums. When it comes to funding speech and language therapy or minority languages, we pour millions into the latter. Where is the perspective? When are we going to stop insulting those with autism and their families and decide what really matters in this country? The term "Tory austerity" will be parroted by many across the House today, but we cannot complain about austerity when we continue to prioritise vanity projects for votes. That is for all of us to consider. On all sides of the House, let us get real. Let us spend wisely what money we do have. We are all familiar with the phrase, "every pound is a prisoner", and that should be our approach to the use of our public money.

Mr Gildernew: I rise to provide the House with details of the Health Committee's scrutiny of the 2021-22 budget.

First, I acknowledge the enormous pressure under which the health and social care system is working. I have said many times that the system has been stretched beyond breaking point. We are grateful to all our health and social care workers, who have sacrificed so much over the past year. It is true that our health and social care staff have been, and are, the greatest asset that we have. We need to do everything that we can to support them in their roles as we move out of fighting COVID-19 and into recovery, and addressing the very lengthy waiting lists and increasing health inequality gaps that we see right across the North.

The Committee was briefed by officials on the 2021-22 budget on 29 April. At that briefing, the Health Committee was advised that, as things stand, the Department anticipates additional funding of £495 million compared with its opening baseline last year. While that additional amount is welcome, the Department did outline that, with the lack of recurrent funding, this is, essentially, a standstill budget that will make it difficult for the Department to make any inroads into the waiting lists that the Minister has called "dire" and "appalling". The Department's director of finance outlined that she is even more concerned about the 2022-23 position as the temporary COVID funds are, essentially, masking the scale of the underlying financial pressures within the system.

The Department outlined that it would be very difficult to achieve the effective delivery of strategies, such as those for elective care, cancer, emergency care and mental health, without recurrent funding and reliance on in-year monitoring. That is deeply worrying and should strike us all with fear as those are strategies that, if not resourced and implemented effectively, will result in poorer health outcomes for patients. I think that we all agree on the need for a health and social care system that is resourced in a way that produces better health outcomes for all our constituents.

The Committee raised a number of concerns with officials in relation to the budget. Everyone is agreed that transformation is essential to deal with rising costs. That is a priority agreed across the Executive and reiterated in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The 2021-22 Budget provides £49 million for NDNA transformation. That is 0.75% of the overall health budget. While allocations for additional nursing staff and mental health are indeed welcome, it just does not go far enough.

Over the past number of months, we have heard significant evidence of the very real benefits of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) in

primary healthcare. GPs have told us how beneficial they are, and we see the reality of that where they exist. However, in this Budget, there is an allocation of £22 million for MDTs. That is not to allow the expansion of a very successful transformation programme but merely to continue to service the MDTs that exist. It was disappointing to hear that the funding set aside for transformation projects is largely to fund programmes that had previously been implemented, and that there is little scope to expand or introduce new transformation projects within the current budget settlement.

The Committee has significant concerns in relation to the length of waiting lists, which have been referenced by nearly every Member who has spoken. The COVID-19 pandemic has, no doubt, exacerbated waiting lists and left patients in very difficult circumstances, resulting in them needing more complex treatment by the time that they get around to their appointments. The Minister recently outlined that it would take £1 billion over 10 years to address the waiting lists. I think that we all agree that this needs to be a priority over the coming financial years. There is a clear need for recurrent funding in the coming years to make inroads into those waiting lists and, ultimately, see better health outcomes for patients. That needs to be taken on board by the British Treasury.

The Committee considered the issue of health inequalities. We raised concerns with officials and the Minister about what are increasing health inequality gaps, especially in relation to mental health and substance use. We continue to see large inequalities in health outcomes for large parts of the population. We need to see more work from the Department and the Executive in tackling health. While we appreciate the fact that many other factors result in health inequalities, such as housing and education, there is simply no doubt that health is a key component and that we need to see active planning rather than a restatement of the problems. We must ensure that our population all have equal access to services and equality of outcomes.

12.45 pm

Although in-year allocations are, no doubt, hugely welcome in a very difficult system, Members will appreciate that they are not conducive to long-term planning, and the Committee underlines the need for a multi-year budget that provides the recurrent funding and certainty that we need to see.

In concluding my remarks as the Health Committee Chair, I say that there is concerning

evidence of increasing financial strain in the health and social care system and little opportunity to make the type of progress that is needed to address those strains due to COVID-19 as well financial pressures. The Committee will continue to monitor the situation and seek to engage constructively as that progresses.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson. The health and social care sector is being challenged in ways that we have rarely seen. The state of our healthcare system has undoubtedly been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, but our problems started long before that. The Tory Government and their austere economic policies have failed, and nowhere is that failure clearer than in the emergency departments and the GP waiting rooms across the North that every one of us is dealing with. It is undeniable that austerity causes suffering. It causes workforce shortages, bed shortages and equipment shortages, and, most importantly, it denies our constituents the right to enjoy good health standards.

The waiting lists that we are talking about today are not a new story. The Royal College of Surgeons advised today that, as of December 2020, over 323,000 people were waiting to see a consultant and 105,000 people were waiting for admission for surgery. That equates to one in four of our constituents waiting for the healthcare that they need, with some of them experiencing unbearable pain and stress. That simply cannot continue. We cannot address waiting lists without addressing chronic staffing shortages, and we need to see multi-year budgeting for that to take effect.

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

Mr Gildernew: Our health and social care system is in crisis. There is a huge challenge in the coming years to deliver the health services and care that our constituents need, deserve and are entitled to.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Finance Minister — you will not hear that too often today, Minister — for presenting his Budget. Like others, I will be voting for the Budget. What other option do we have? Any delay in getting this one-year Budget confirmed will put pressure on our civil servants and the many organisations and businesses that await contracts and grants. I hope that, as highlighted by others, this is the last time that we receive a one-year Budget from the Minister of Finance. The Minister and all of us in the House recognise that, without a

multi-year Budget process, the efficiency savings made through the planned and strategic delivery of services cannot be realised.

Before joining the House in 2016, I worked in the community and voluntary sector, where late letters of offer, the constant threat of redundancy and mad March moneys made planning very difficult. That all added a dimension of stress that was unnecessary, and it is time that we plan for multi-year Budgets to give those who deliver our services some reprieve and some confidence that their jobs will be secure.

As the Alliance Party spokesperson for communities and Deputy Chair of the Communities Committee, I share the concern that is felt by all the members of the Committee for Communities, as expressed by the Chair of the Committee earlier in the debate. The bid made by the Department was £132.589 million but the award allocated was £66.825 million; a shortfall of almost £66 million. That shortfall will have a serious negative impact on the community, which is trying to come out of COVID.

Minister, this is a cold Budget. It is a very difficult Budget; one that I am sure that you are not happy to have to bring to the House. The shortfall means that there is zero support for councils to deliver COVID-recovery programmes; social supermarkets received zero; arts, cultural and heritage recovery also received zero; the charities and social enterprise recovery fund received nothing; new welfare mitigations to close the loopholes in the bedroom tax and the two-child limit were allocated nothing; and the advice sector, which provides much-needed welfare reform advice, was allocated zero.

I am aware that the Department for Communities submitted a bid to the Department of Finance to update COVID funding requirements. The updated bid for £68,645,000 aims to address some of the areas that were not allocated any expenditure in the 2021-22 Budget. It is disappointing to all of us that Departments have to wait for in-year resource bids to be able to fund necessary services which we all agreed through Bengoa and New Decade, New Approach for transformation to deliver more efficient services.

I also found it very difficult to read that the Communities Department's Budget presentation confirmed how it had to focus on how workloads are aligned to the Department's strategic objectives. Why should I find that difficult? I find it difficult because we have a

draft Programme for Government in which all Departments should be working together to deliver cross-cutting outcomes. However, where are the shared budget areas in this Budget? If we are to achieve societal objectives as outlined in the draft Programme for Government or in any future Programme for Government, we need to see a more strategic Budget that reflects both departmental priorities and how outcomes will be delivered.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. That is a very important point. If you have a Programme for Government that is not budgeted, you do not have a good Programme for Government. If you have a Budget that is not aligned to the Programme for Government, you do not have strategic thought or vision in the Budget. It is a massive issue, and I agree with the Member.

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

Ms Armstrong: Hopefully, I will not need it, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member very much.

Our intention with the Programme for Government was that strategy would guide the Budget rather than money guide what we can do. As my colleague Andrew Muir said earlier, I welcome the role that the Fiscal Council will have in assisting the Minister of Finance and his Department. I say to the Minister: is it time for a new way of thinking on our Budget? Is it time to start the work today on a new way to develop and deliver our Budget? How can we improve Committee scrutiny? How can we include the public? How can the Budget be presented in order to demonstrate how the Programme for Government outcomes will be achieved?

Perhaps, in his response, the Minister will provide his thoughts on the way forward and on how, for the rest of this year, he and his team will develop a Budget-setting process that will enable the House to have a Budget presented in advance of a financial year. Minister, Westminster will always provide figures late. I know that that breaks our hearts and yours. We know that not all that we ask for will be provided. It is time that we proactively move to let our strategic outcomes guide the Budget, and I will support you when you are trying to do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): 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 questions to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. This debate will resume after Question Time, when the next Member to be called will be Robin Newton.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.53 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Climate Change

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the support for the Climate Change Bill [NIA 19/17-22], which is now at Committee Stage, whether he intends to bring forward an alternative climate change Bill. (AQO 2104/17-22)

5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the risks of carbon leakage with a carbon net zero target by 2045. (AQO 2108/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 5 together. I want to ensure that Northern Ireland plays its part in minimising greenhouse gas emissions and tackling climate change head-on. I am committed to Northern Ireland having its own climate change legislation to achieve that. We do not need just any Bill; we need the right, evidenced-based climate change Bill that sets out an achievable pathway for Northern Ireland to contribute to the wider UK and global efforts for greenhouse gas emission reductions. Therefore, I intend to bring a climate change Bill that is an alternative to the private Member's Bill, one that is strongly evidence-based and better for Northern Ireland and that will be a high-quality piece of legislation. I have been seeking to get the proposals for that on the agenda of an Executive meeting since 24 March 2021, and it has yet to happen. My officials are working with the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) and are very well advanced on the drafting of a climate change Bill based on my proposals. I intend to circulate my draft Bill and accompanying explanatory and financial memorandum to Executive colleagues. Once agreement to proceed is secured, I intend and am prepared to quickly move to introduce the right climate change Bill for Northern Ireland.

It is important that carbon leakage is taken into account when setting emission reduction targets so that we do not inadvertently displace emissions to other jurisdictions. In some

situations, such leakage could result in higher levels of overall emissions due to practices in other jurisdictions potentially not being as sustainable as those in Northern Ireland. In that context, the agri-food sector, for which my Department has sectoral responsibility, aiming for a net zero carbon target by 2045 presents an increased risk of carbon leakage. The Climate Change Committee (CCC), in recommending an emissions reduction target of at least 82% for Northern Ireland by 2050, took account of the importance of the Northern Ireland agri-food sector and the fact that around 50% of NI produce is exported to other parts of the United Kingdom.

Whilst targets, such as having net zero carbon by 2045, may stimulate some sectors, carbon leakage is extremely pertinent for the agri-food sector. In its analysis for Northern Ireland, the CCC felt that, based on current knowledge, meeting net zero carbon by 2050 would require such a significant reduction in livestock production, particularly in the beef and dairy sectors, that it did not present a viable option.

Mr Speaker: You went well over your two minutes, Minister, if I may remind you.

Mr Poots: Apologies.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I think that the answer was yes. Did the Minister have sight of the current Climate Change Bill that is going through the Assembly before it was made public, or did he have any input into it?

Mr Poots: No. I did not have input into the private Member's Bill. It was not consulted upon with the public in the first instance. There are serious flaws in the private Member's Bill. Leaving aside the issues that I outlined about not taking the independent expert advice and simply latching on to what is happening in other jurisdictions, where there is no direct interchange, leads to the very significant flaws in the private Member's Bill.

I wish there to be climate change legislation. I wish that legislation to make a real and tangible difference. The problem is if we simply introduce legislation that translates to the beef or dairy that is produced in Northern Ireland being produced in South America, for example, we will be cutting down trees in order to produce that beef and will do more harm to the environment. Jumping up and down and pretending that you are doing something for the environment whenever what you are actually

doing is entirely counterproductive is not a wise way forward, in my opinion.

Mr Irwin: Will the Minister outline what other risks he envisages as a result of being net zero by 2045?

Mr Poots: First, there is the risk of job losses in the agri-food sector, which employs well over 100,000 people. If there is a 50% reduction in beef and dairy, which are the two largest parts of the sector, there will be job losses. For example, County Tyrone is a hub for agri-food and has many large factories. Such a reduction would lead to job losses and have an impact on the regional balance of our economy, with a disproportionate impact on rural communities, particularly in the west of Northern Ireland.

Going beyond the natural rate of stock turnover would also lead to the premature scrapping of assets. High-quality dairy cows and beef cows, for example, may have to be slaughtered at a much earlier age, and that is not a benefit to the environment.

We are looking at a potential increase in prices due to a loss of control in production and the importation of so many goods. There is the potential for lower welfare standards and the quality of imported goods being of a lesser standard than what we have at home. There is also the potential for increased transport emissions, depending on the means of transport into the country. For example, it is not only about the shipping of meat from South America to here but the fact that it may have been hauled for thousands of miles to get to the port. There is potential for a loss of support from the very sectors and those who rely on them that we need to achieve emission reductions. We could fail to meet legislative carbon budget targets at an early stage, which would result in a loss of momentum and detract from any positive progress that is made. Finally, there is the sheer cost of achieving net zero by 2045 as opposed to an 82% reduction by 2050, with the ability to increase that if the science allows us to do so.

Mr McGuigan: Notwithstanding the fact that climate legislation was a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA), my colleague and Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, Declan McAleer, tabled a motion calling on you to introduce a climate Bill almost a year ago. The private Member's Bill that is in motion and is supported by the Assembly is a response to your failure to act. Given the important issue at stake and the extremely tight time frame, does the Minister

agree that his time would be better spent engaging with the existing Bill, rather than attempting to belatedly bring forward his own?

Mr Poots: That demonstrates the desperation of those who are trying to undermine me and have been sitting on my Bill from 24 March. My paper has been with the Executive since 24 March. I will provide the Executive with a full copy of the Bill so that they have absolutely no excuse for not moving it forward. The legislation is there, and it will go before the Executive. That legislation has been consulted on, and work has been done on the costs. We can produce a Disney World Bill from anywhere, put it out there and say, "This is what's good for Northern Ireland", but it will not be Disney World when the farmers in West Tyrone are driven off the hills because people do not want their beef and they cannot produce their beef because of a Climate Change Bill that Sinn Féin has supported.

I hope that you will be able to go back to North Antrim and tell the farmers there that they are no longer needed because Sinn Féin wants to back a Climate Change Bill that has not gone through the regular processes of consultation, has not been costed and has not taken the independent advice that is available. Instead of that, you should back and support me in bringing forward my legislation. I said that I could not bring forward legislation in three months because I had to go through a consultation process, and that was accurate. The other Bill was rushed. That leads to rushed legislation, and rushed legislation, as always, gets the label of "bad legislation".

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for confirming that he intends to introduce said Bill. Will there be specific emissions targets for the agriculture sector in the Minister's Bill? If so, what support is envisaged for that sector to assist it in meeting those targets?

Mr Poots: The Bill that we introduce will have targets and will identify where those targets can be achieved. Northern Ireland has made substantial progress on transport and energy and can make substantial progress on agri-food. Farmers and the agri-food sector have bought in to doing this. Cranswick pork factory, for example, is operating a net zero plan.

People are totally committed to achieving this. Why are we saying to those people, "Yes, you are committed to helping, but we are not interested in working with you to ensure that you have an industry in the future"? We need to ensure that we bring people with us in a way

that sustains jobs, sustains the economy and puts food on people's tables. We all say that we might not have a planet in a number of years, but we will not have a life if we do not have food on our tables. Food production is one of the most important tasks anywhere in the world, and I for one am not prepared to take the quality food production in Northern Ireland and offset that in some other part of the world that has lower animal welfare standards, lower workers' standards, lower carbon standards for us to say, "What good boys are we", because we are not producing carbon but are using material where carbon has been produced at an even higher level than it would have been had we used material produced in Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: Minister, you and the Economy Minister have asked Sir Peter Kendall to do a review of agribusiness in Northern Ireland. Sir Peter Kendall was clear that this is not about a zero-sum option for agriculture but about being smarter. Will the Minister and whoever will be the new Economy Minister commit to taking the recommendations and implementing them in full?

Mr Poots: We did not take on Peter Kendall to do work and then for us not to give due regard to his recommendations. He comes with an excellent track record, and I expect that his report will be of a high standard. It would, therefore, be foolish of us, having commissioned such a report, not to pay attention to what is in it.

Mr Catney: Minister, on the basis of your answer to my Lagan Valley colleague Trevor Lunn, I am not sure whether you are still committed, as stated in the climate Bill that you intend to introduce, to having zero emissions by 2050. I heard you mention a figure of 82.5%, but I hope that you are still committed to making that target in your climate Bill.

Mr Poots: I am absolutely committed to this country — the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland — reaching net zero by 2050. I am absolutely committed to Northern Ireland making its contribution, as recommended by independent experts on climate change.

Mr Allister: Given the governmental system in which the Minister operates, will he clarify whether he is at liberty to bring a Bill to the House without the assent of the Executive? If he is not, does that mean that his best intentions, which are far preferable to what we have before us, can be stymied by other

political parties, most particularly Sinn Féin, simply declining to give assent?

Mr Poots: There is a lot of truth in what the Member says. The problem for Sinn Féin, however, is that the issue probably impacts on the farming community that it represents more than on any other, because it is more likely to impact on hill farms and marginal land. The land that will have the lowest carbon footprint will be the lowlands. Sinn Féin talks a lot about hill farmers and people who operate on farms that are marginal because of the quality of the land, but Sinn Féin does not seem to mind turning those farmers over on this issue. Sinn Féin can reflect on that when it blocks my Bill and supports something that will do demonstrable harm to the people whom that party purports to represent.

Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation

2. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme. (AQO 2105/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have secured an initial allocation of £5.5 million — £2.5 million resource and £3 million capital — for the 2021-22 tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme, which will support a range of interventions that are consistent with the programme's objectives and intended outcomes of the TRPSI framework. I recently approved the 2021-22 TRPSI programme action plan, which builds on the success of working collaboratively with other Departments, statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector.

The plan reflects the important role that the TRPSI programme budget will play in sustaining existing initiatives and promoting the development of new approaches.

2.15 pm

The resource funding will support the rural community development support service (RCDSS), the charity Rural Support, the assisted rural travel scheme (ARTS), the farm families health checks programme, the social farming support service, social prescribing and employability schemes. The TRPSI programme will also fund capital projects that enhance and develop rural recreational facilities such as forest parks and community trails. The rural micro capital grant scheme will support

community and voluntary sector projects to address localised poverty and isolation issues, while the rural business development grant scheme will support the sustainability of rural businesses. Other collaborative projects focusing on the regeneration of villages, the use of rural schools as community facilities and increased access to buildings for persons with disabilities will continue this year.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he agrees with me that, in the context of the overall budget, the TRPSI programme represents a modest amount but is an example of how a modest amount can go a long way. Does the Minister agree that a well-funded TRPSI programme will be essential to enable rural community organisations and rural communities at large to emerge from the COVID pandemic?

Mr Poots: That is why I have secured the provision that we have. That is a demonstration of our commitment to the rural community, which goes beyond the agriculture sector, and of our ability to assist rural communities in a tangible way in conjunction with other key bodies. For example, the farm families health checks will be carried out in conjunction with trusts. Much of the work that we will do will be done in conjunction with local government. We can achieve a considerable amount by leveraging additional money through the TRPSI funding, which can significantly boost rural communities to an even greater extent.

Mr McNulty: What measures does the Department use to assess rural poverty, social isolation and loneliness? How successful do the measures show his programme to have been?

Mr Poots: All the measures that we have identified have been significantly addressed as a result of the programme. We have been targeting communities in which isolation is a significant problem. A lot of that funding was used during the COVID period, when, for example, we entered into agreement with the Department for Infrastructure on the rural transport scheme to ensure that people who were isolated and vulnerable because of COVID and who had previously used that transport to travel into town continued to get food and medicines and had that transport bring produce to them.

There has been a series of schemes that involve the better utilisation of public buildings to ensure that they can be used for other purposes; for example, schools are used for purposes other than education. We have been

able to support education providers with iPads and digital technology, particularly on the back of COVID, to ensure that children in rural communities have the opportunity to continue their education even when they could not travel to school as a consequence of COVID.

Applications to Area-based Schemes

3. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the review of decisions for area-based schemes applications. (AQO 2106/17-22)

Mr Poots: Last November, I stated my belief that the decision of the independent panel in review-of-decision cases should be final. My officials are working to put in place the necessary legislation, and a consultation document will be published shortly. The tenure of the current panel ends in January 2022, and the consultation document will ask for views on the make-up of a future panel, given its decision-making role.

I have decided that, until the legislation is in place, I will make the final decision in all cases coming from the independent panel. As of May 2021, there are 108 ongoing applications for a case officer review of decision. There are a further 51 ongoing applications for an independent panel assessment. Of those, 36 have a panel pending, while officials are preparing submissions for my final decision for 15 businesses, following the independent panel assessment.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. I represent a rural constituency, and this issue can impact on farmers' mental health. Will the Minister and his Department, with other agencies, mitigate the impact on farmers?

Mr Poots: Unlike previous Ministers, who overturned many of the panel appeals, I have not. I accept the decisions of the independent panel. I do not see the point in having an independent panel to deal with appeals if a Minister, such as Ministers O'Neill and Gildernew, strike out the decision of the independent panel and take the advice of the civil servants who rejected the farmer's case in the first instance. The Member can be grateful that he now has a DUP Minister who reflects the views of the panel, as opposed to Sinn Féin Ministers, who often rejected those views.

Mrs Barton: Minister, you have just said that you will uphold decisions made by the

independent panel. Will that policy be backdated to 2016, 2015 etc?

Mr Poots: I had not planned to backdate it. I have a responsibility for the decisions that I make; I do not have responsibility for the decisions that previous Ministers made.

Fish Kill: Aghlisk River

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the investigation into the fish kill in the Aghlisk river on 2 May 2021. (AQO 2107/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following extensive investigations by the Loughs Agency, it is confident that the source of the pollution has been identified and stopped. Analytical results from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) laboratories are now awaited. That will determine the next steps for the Loughs Agency. As with all investigations of this nature, details remain sub judice until their formal conclusion. That being the case, I am unable to comment further.

Mr O'Dowd: Given the significance of the fish kill in this incident and too many other incidents of pollution of riverways, lakes or loughs, does the Minister believe that the protections and enforcement in place are sufficient to protect our natural habitats?

Mr Poots: These are tricky issues. Some of the pollution incidents come from our Water Service. That has improved fairly dramatically. We also have some industry pollution incidents. Invariably, it proves very difficult to identify the sources of those. That has been particularly problematic in rivers like the Sixmilewater, where there has been a regular number of incidents but an inability to identify the sources. If you follow the pollution, it takes you to a large industrial estate where it is hard to identify the source. There has been a substantial improvement in incidents related to agriculture, but there is more to do. We continue to educate in the first instance and enforce in the second. I much prefer the education route to enforcement. Enforcement is for when failure has happened, and we want to avoid failure.

Mr McNulty: When was the last time that a prosecution was brought by NIEA or the Loughs Agency following a fish kill?

Mr Poots: I do not have the detail of when the last time was, but many cases are brought. It is usual for that to happen. They are reported

regularly, so people know the costs that can be involved. Those costs can be hefty, because there is full cost recovery for the incident. People are usually talking not about hundreds of pounds but about many thousands and, sometimes, five-figure sums.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has referred to the fact that there can be a wide range of sources of pollution, including the Water Service. Given that our sewerage system is already at capacity in many areas, will the Minister advise whether he has been involved in any discussions at Executive level to solve the impasse with the Water Service so that pollution does not continue to be released, affecting the quality of our rivers?

Mr Poots: I have directly met the Infrastructure Minister on that issue. We need to be very careful that the area plans produced by local authorities take full cognisance of Northern Ireland Water's ability to deal with the sewage arising from new developments. I am not sure that that is the case. That area needs to be addressed. At the Executive, I have supported additional funding for Northern Ireland Water, because more investment in the capital infrastructure is critical. It is not the most popular thing to invest in. Sewerage and water pipes are beneath the ground. It is not a new school or hospital. People do not see it, but there is a significant benefit from that investment, and it is important that the Northern Ireland Executive continue to invest in having good-quality sewerage and water infrastructure to help to ensure that our environment is maintained at a high level.

Biodiversity

6. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action he is taking to reverse the damage to our biodiversity as a result of human activity. (AQO 2109/17-22)

9. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to encourage biodiversity and habitat creation in urban settings, including in private gardens. (AQO 2112/17-22)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to group questions 6 and 9 together.

My Department has commenced preparations for a new Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy that will take account of the international post-2020 targets for biodiversity. Those targets will be discussed at the forthcoming international

meeting known as COP15, the fifteen meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The COP15 meeting is scheduled for 11 to 24 October 2021 in Kunming, China.

A major feature of COP15 will be the agreement to protect 30% of the planet by 2030, often referred to as the "30 by 30" target. I endorse the 30 by 30 target, and my Department is considering how best to achieve that. Protecting and restoring biodiversity in Northern Ireland is a long-term commitment. The actions that we take now will enable Northern Ireland to meet the overarching global 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature.

I recognise the importance of encouraging biodiversity in the urban environment. Priority habitats such as rivers, ponds and open mosaic habitats on previously developed land underline the importance of habitats in urban areas and the need to promote those special places for nature. My Department is involved in a number of initiatives to promote urban biodiversity, including the promotion of the all-Ireland pollinator plan in working with local communities to create and protect habitats for pollinators, such as by having urban pollinator-friendly planting and sustainable parks management. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and Eco-Schools work to inform, support and promote biodiversity and habitat creation and receive funding from the Department to carry out that work.

DAERA works with councils to advise on the development of biodiversity strategies, green infrastructure plans, the designation of local nature reserves, conservation actions to support biodiversity and habitat creation and conservation in urban areas. The Department also gives advice to the public on wildlife-friendly gardening —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's two minutes is up.

Mr Poots: — recognising the importance of urban gardens in providing a refuge for biodiversity.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. A number of studies, including the 'State of Nature' report, the National Biodiversity Forum report and the 'Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland' report, have shown very worrying trends in our biodiversity. The 'State of Nature' report showed that 11% of species assessed were under threat of extinction on the island of

Ireland. Will the Minister agree that we are experiencing a biodiversity crisis?

Mr Poots: I absolutely recognise that we need to do more biodiversity work, and that is one of the reasons why I have commissioned a peatlands strategy, for example. That strategy is close to completion and will be made public during this session of the Assembly. The peatlands strategy is an important piece of work for a very large part of our biodiversity — not the only part, but a large part. We also need to encourage pollination in urban and agricultural settings to ensure that we can continue to promote wildlife and biodiversity right across our country.

Mr Speaker: There is time for a very brief question in response.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer. Obviously, there is a great renewed interest in biodiversity, especially given the last year. Can the Minister tell us a bit more about the actions that he is taking to increase overall biodiversity?

Mr Poots: My Department has commenced preparations for a new Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy. The strategy will implement the international post-2020 targets for biodiversity that will be agreed when the COP15 meets later this year.

Protecting and restoring biodiversity in Northern Ireland is a long-term commitment. The actions that we take now will enable Northern Ireland to meet the overarching global 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature. That is critically important.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Mullaghglass Landfill Site

T1. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether, following his written response last week to her colleague Paul Maskey in which the Minister shared her party's serious concern about the foul and offensive odour coming from the Mullaghglass landfill site, which residents have been living with for years, he can commit to looking into the possibility of closing the site and launching an independent investigation. (AQT 1351/17-22)

Mr Poots: Yes, I have plans to visit the site in the near future. I recognise that there have been a substantial number of complaints from the residents in that area. I believe that it is not a tolerable situation, so I want to ensure that either we get on top of the odour problem or we look at the suspension of activities at the site.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his response, and I am glad to hear that he is going out on a site visit. In his letter, he mentioned that the health implications were of the utmost concern to him. Although the Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised that unpleasant smells are not known to be harmful to health, the PHA has also said that persistent odours can cause headaches and nausea and that extreme smells and unpleasant odours can lead to mental health issues. All of those effects have been reported from local residents. What is the Minister's opinion on the assertion that there are health implications for residents? Will the Minister give a firm assurance that he will try to get this sorted?

Mr Poots: I cannot make a statement on the health implications, because it is the Public Health Agency that gives the advice and the Health Minister who makes those statements. I hear what people are saying, and we will pass that information on to the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency for their further investigation, but my Department has to take the advice from the experts in public health.

Beef: Protected Geographical Indication Status

T2. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who will be aware that the European Commission has called for the North to be included in the Irish grass-fed beef protected geographical indication (PGI) application, whether he joins him in welcoming that development. (AQT 1352/17-22)

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr Gildernew: The Minister will be aware of the welcomed additional value that such an inclusion would have in the value of our beef output — up to 20%, some evidence indicates — and of the fact that the carbon footprint of our grass-fed cattle is much lower than the global average. Does the Minister agree that an all-Ireland PGI status would play a key role in recognising the fact that we have the world's most climate-friendly beef here on the island of Ireland?

Mr Poots: I am delighted to hear the Member making the argument that I was making earlier in Question Time — that it would be ludicrous to shift beef production from Northern Ireland to less carbon-friendly places in the world and that, therefore, the legislation before us is unwise. With regard to the issue that he raises, yes, we should be looking to identify every marketing opportunity that exists, and I therefore support the PGI Irish grass-fed status. There is potential for a British grass-fed status, which we may also be able to apply to. I do not care who gives us the highest price for our beef; I will be happy to take the highest price for beef from anywhere in the world if I can get it for my farmers.

North/South Ministerial Meetings

T3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who is due shortly to take up an important role in which he wishes him all the best, whether, given the importance of North/South working and having emphasised the importance of the agri-food sector, which is a key element of it, he can confirm that he will not obstruct any further North/South meetings. (AQT 1353/17-22)

Mr Poots: I remain committed to all my duties as a Minister in this devolved Assembly.

Mr McGlone: I am glad to hear that. Exports from the North to the Republic in 2017 amounted to £2.17 billion. Indeed, 600 million litres of milk traversed the border in 2015 for processing in creameries and other places. Does the Minister therefore accept that trade, business development and food safety promotion, which he mentioned could be at risk due to a race to the bottom in other trade deals, will be very important?

Mr Poots: I consider our North/South relationships to be very important. That is why, as a Minister, I very quickly made the decision to open the radiotherapy centre in Altnagelvin Hospital, which provides cancer care for people on both sides of the border. That is why, when it became obvious that we could not carry on paediatric cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland because we were unable to have a surgical team in place, I came to an agreement to have it in Dublin. I remain totally committed to working on a North/South basis on issues that benefit the people in Northern Ireland who I represent. I will continue to do that, whether it is from within or outside the North/South bodies.

Relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have never been worse,

however, because the Republic of Ireland, when it was led by Mr Varadkar and Mr Coveney in particular, sought to create barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, which is our main trading partner. As a consequence, every home is being damaged, and, on the Executive's papers, there are red boxes for health. We are in the red zone in every area of health, including for medical devices and medicines. We were put in that zone as a result of the protocol, which was very heavily driven by the former Taoiseach and Tánaiste. Relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are very bad, and they need to be fixed. In order to fix those relations, however, we need reassurances that we will get somewhere considerably better than where we are currently with the protocol.

DAERA Port Staff

T4. Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the imposition of the protocol on Northern Ireland as a result of the agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union, which has been legislated for in UK law, to highlight the costs of his staff at the ports (AQT 1354/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am happy to do that. We have developed, since June 2020, the costs over the last year. The cost for vets, including managers, is £5,271,696. The cost for the other ancillary staff provided by DAERA is £6,324,902. The cost of the environmental health officers and ancillary staff provided by the councils is £12,848,034. That brings us to a total of £24,444,632.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. That is yet another example of the unacceptable nature of the protocol and the need for it to be replaced and challenged. Those are staggering figures, and we have only just commenced with this process. What steps are you taking to right that wrong, which is outside the control of the Northern Ireland Executive?

Mr Poots: One of the wrongs that the European Union demands of us is to pass all those costs on to businesses. Of course, when the grace period ends, those costs will spiral considerably, because we will move to what the Department suggests will be some 15,000 checks per week, which is considerably greater than what we do currently. Those costs will absolutely spiral. Meanwhile, the European Union says that we need to pass those costs on to businesses. Do you know who pays when we

pass the costs on to businesses? The consumers. That is why I have repeatedly said in the Assembly that the protocol will hurt every single individual in Northern Ireland, whether they are consumers who are affected by the costs in shops being driven up, consumers who are told, "We do not supply to Northern Ireland any more, because it is too small a market and there are too many complications", or consumers who need healthcare and the use of medical devices that our health service will not be able to provide because of an ill-thought-out protocol that is doing fundamental damage to every single person in Northern Ireland and that will continue to do fundamental damage to every single person in Northern Ireland if it remains unchecked.

Therefore, I will continue to press the UK Government hard on the issues that are at stake here, and I have the benefit of knowing that the case is unarguable — this protocol is bad for Northern Ireland. The people who previously called for the rigorous implementation of the protocol have gone very quiet about seeking its rigorous implementation. Not too many in the SDLP, Sinn Féin or the Alliance Party now call for rigorous implementation. People are recognising the harm that they have done. We now need those people —

Mr Speaker: The Member's two minutes are up.

Mr Poots: — to stand up and say, "We do not want this protocol either".

Urban/rural Divide

T5. Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who will be aware of the recent decision of the Rural Women's Network to close for two weeks, citing workload and limited resources as key issues, whether he agrees that the pandemic has amplified the urban/rural divide on matters including access to services, broadband and opportunities to work from home for key workers in industries such as food processing. (AQT 1355/17-22)

Mr Poots: Our food processing sector continues to grow, and we are delighted to support it in so many ways. I have just launched a significant investment in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The greater part of that investment, some £43 million for the Loughry campus in Cookstown, is in food processing. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that rural

communities do not suffer as a consequence of not having the same opportunities. DAERA is contributing to Project Stratum some £15 million of the overall package of £200 million, and that has been delivered as a result of the confidence-and-supply deal done by the Democratic Unionist Party. That will help to ensure that people in rural communities are not disadvantaged, and it will show that we care about them.

Ms Dolan: Given the disparity between urban and rural and the impact that that has, does the Minister agree that all Departments must fulfil their rural needs duty to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged when accessing government funding?

Mr Poots: Yes, and that is one of the reasons why I am opposed to the Climate Change Bill that your party supports. It had not gone through a rural needs assessment before coming to the House. Despite that, your party supports the Bill.

Animal Cruelty Register

T6. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the discussions that he has had with the Minister of Justice to progress an animal cruelty register. (AQT 1356/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Justice Minister and I met earlier this month to discuss that very issue.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for his short and sweet answer. What are his plans to strengthen the laws on cruelty and animal welfare? Is there a time frame for the progression of such an animal cruelty register?

Mr Poots: I am very keen to see these laws progressed, and I am very keen to get to a situation in which people who have been cruel to animals have their names associated with that cruelty. Then, when councils are looking at applications for dog licences or for people to keep dogs, they can very quickly assess whether individuals are suitable people to keep animals.

We seem to have issues with the Department of Justice and the sharing of information. I believe that, if people have engaged in criminal activities that involve cruelty to animals, there should be no hiding place for them. I hope that the Department of Justice will find a way of working with us — there is, perhaps, a greater willingness than there was — to ensure that,

first, we can identify people who engage in animal cruelty and, secondly, ensure that people who engage in it do not have the opportunity to persist in their activities by being allowed to keep animals in the future.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

2.45 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget 2021-22

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-22 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information laid on 27 April 2021. — [Mr Murphy.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "information" and insert:

"provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021." — [Mr Murphy.]

Mr Newton: I will just get myself ready. I did not quite expect to have the principal position of being the first Member to speak in this debate this afternoon.

I was thinking about this matter last night when my wife asked me a question. She said, "What is happening tomorrow in the Assembly?". I said that I would be speaking on the Minister's Budget Bill, and she said, "Well, I hope that you are speaking on the Micawber theory of economics". It took me a minute or two to work out what the Micawber theory was, but she reminded me anyway. She said, "It would do the Assembly well to think about the Micawber theory", and she reminded me that the advice came from 'David Copperfield'. Mr Micawber's theory was this:

"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery."

In short, if you continue to spend more money than you earn, you will find yourself in serious trouble. To put it even more simply: you have to budget. You would think, in the current climate of the world's economy, that nobody had ever been warned about the dangers of debt. A significant amount of what the Minister has to play with this year comes via debt. It is COVID-19 money that has been borrowed by the Exchequer, and some day it will have to be

repaid. It certainly will not be paid by me or a number of others here, but our grandchildren will end up repaying it somehow.

The Minister has presented the Budget and states in his introduction at chapter one:

"This Budget document sets out the Northern Ireland Executive's spending plans for the one year period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022."

It is now 25 May 2021.

The Minister states:

"the Executive constructed this Budget in a curtailed timeframe, and made difficult choices as the non COVID-19 resources made available are only slightly more than the 2021-22 financial year."

If ever there was a need to think about a three-year timescale when planning a Budget, it is encapsulated in what the Minister said in his introduction. In my latter days as a representative for east Belfast on Belfast City Council, I remember arguing — it was generally accepted, certainly by the senior officers in the council — that the council budget needed to be thought about in a minimum of three-year cycles, and perhaps even three-year to five-year cycles for the more strategic aspects of budget planning.

The Minister also rightly makes the point that his funding sources are the block grant, reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, European Union income, other income that he has not specified and, indeed, specific financial packages. He also highlighted regional rates as a funding source. We all know that the regional rate this coming year and likely next year too is going to be reduced.

In paragraph 3.15, he indicates:

"Changes to the level of funding for the Executive are automatically determined by changes in funding for comparable spending in Whitehall departments."

As other Members mentioned earlier today, we know that Whitehall spending is under critical examination and review. That is likely to have implications for spending potential in Northern Ireland.

I welcome aspects of what the Minister has been able to do within the constraints. I welcome the increase in the Health budget,

which is an area that holds a special place in our mind at the moment. The Minister has been able to make £430 million available for the health service from COVID resources. Having got that money, the Assembly needs to think much more about having a strategic spending review. We need to think about reform of our health service. We need to think about the Bengoa report, which is sitting on a shelf gathering dust. We swiftly need to implement many aspects of that document, which, I think, was accepted unanimously by the Assembly a few years ago. It would have been unthinkable if the Minister had not allocated the £430 million to Health to address the situation.

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

Mr Catney: I recognise that we are in a unique time owing to the pandemic, and the struggles that the Minister has had to get the Budget agreed by the Executive after the late announcement of the funding envelope by the Treasury in November. However, I have serious concerns that we rely too heavily on excuses instead of driving forward the significant changes that this place needs.

As a general point, although it is largely outside the control of the Department, the time that was allowed for consultation and scrutiny of the Budget was, obviously, far too short. There also seems to have been limited consideration of issues that were brought by those who were consulted. I notice that action is in the summary, but, surely, that requires more than two thirds of a page. There is a clear lack of detail in the document. We have proposals and total allocations for Departments but, with the exception of some headline announcements, very little is said about what new spending will be funded and how existing spending might change.

I am also concerned about the lack of confirmation of funding for specific proposals in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. There was progress on some NDNA commitments during 2020. However, there is no clarity about the current status of many commitments, such as action on health waiting lists, developing a regionally balanced economy and driving the delivery of essential infrastructure. One key area of concern is the lack of confirmation on the £25 million for low-carbon transport. The Minister for Infrastructure has done excellent work with a limited budget. However, significant investment is needed to bring forward low-carbon transport in order to tackle the climate crisis.

Even before NDNA, we lacked confirmation of funding from the confidence-and-supply agreement, including £10 million for mental health, £20 million for severe deprivation and £42.3 million for broadband to help those in digital poverty. Last night, I heard of another one of my constituents in Lagan Valley who took their own life. We must not lose focus on the terrible impact of poor mental health in Northern Ireland. That funding must be secured.

There has been a missed opportunity to set a key strategic focus throughout the Budget to increase Northern Ireland's rate of business start-ups, which will be crucial to rebuilding after the economic devastation of COVID-19 and relaying the foundations for economic prosperity. It is very disappointing that there was no move to a multi-annual Budget in the recent UK spending review. That hampers the delivery of long-term strategic objectives, such as creating a culture of entrepreneurship and embedding apprenticeships at the heart of the skills programme. Successful economies promote a culture of innovation and investment in research and development across the business community. That increased productivity, which is the foundation for higher wages, is typically associated with higher-value-added, high-tech sectors like life and health sciences, advanced manufacturing and ICT. However, driving innovation can have huge benefits for the entire community.

Furthermore, it is important for us to lead from the front, push for a dynamic digital government strategy and develop a culture of innovation in the public sector. It is, therefore, concerning that no additional funding is clearly directed towards rebuilding the economy post-COVID. In addition, the Budget lacks a defined budget line for the upcoming skills strategy and long-awaited childcare strategy; both of which will have massive direct and indirect impacts on rebuilding the economy.

In comparison, another £1.3 million has been allocated to the preservation of the Maze site in my constituency, with no engagement on further development from the Executive Office in a year. I raise that point in every Budget debate, and will continue to do so until the economic opportunity of that massive piece of development is realised.

What is probably the best site in all of western Europe is sitting there gathering dust and idle. Shame. Shame.

3.00 pm

A key example of the lack of detail in the Budget is that there is no specific mention of funding to help Northern Ireland to achieve its environmental targets. Although it is a long-term issue, tackling the climate crisis will require a response across all Departments, and funding coordination will be integral to achieving that.

Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) research has shown the percentage of electricity generated from renewable sources in Northern Ireland. Our natural assets create an opportunity to develop the renewable energy sector further. As well as delivering environmental benefits, there is the potential to deliver significant economic benefits and create jobs.

However, managing the viability of wind energy is a major challenge. Up to 18% of wind power here is thrown away because it cannot be used at the time that it is generated. That compares with 5% in the Republic. In the first half of 2020, 295 gigawatt hours of wind energy, worth £50 million, was thrown away.

The storage platform for the integration of renewable energy (SPIRE 2) project, which involves academic partners from Ulster University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow and Queen's University, is looking at the potential use of energy storage technologies in people's homes. As part of that project, the rural-led energy transition initiative is aimed at reducing or eliminating the risk of low-income households being left behind by the transition to clean-energy systems. That work could allow up to £100 million a year of clean energy to be used to tackle fuel poverty. Similarly, work should be done to see how that energy could be used for electric vehicles, ownership —

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

Mr Catney: — of which is estimated to increase 100-fold in the next 10 years. Those recommendations must be taken forward in a fully funded energy strategy to prevent Northern Ireland from falling further behind.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. There is no doubt that the financial climate in which we find ourselves is one of the most challenging for many years. COVID-19 has had a very serious impact on many areas of life. Of course, sadly, it has also caused a great cost to life itself, and many families have been plunged into grief following the loss of a loved one to the virus. It has also

wreaked havoc across our business community, with many sectors being completely shut down for many weeks and months and many now facing an uncertain future as the lockdown eases and businesses begin to fully reopen.

With those prolonged business closures, there is no doubt that, without the significant central financial input of the Treasury, our journey through the pandemic would have been so much more difficult. Unprecedented levels of support have been offered to our Executive to mitigate the worst aspects of the crisis. That has meant vital cash for businesses to stay afloat and assistance for employees across the Province. Of course, that perfectly illustrates the real benefits of the Union, as we have seen the Chancellor and the Treasury offering unprecedented levels of support across the United Kingdom, with a very clear approach of supporting people in their hour of need. That Treasury support also extended heavily to the maintenance of our network of public services and directly supported many thousands of staff in the public sector at this time of pressure.

With regards to agriculture and the environment, the Budget document rightly refers to the importance of the agri-food sector in supporting around 100,000 jobs and contributing in the region of £5 billion to the local economy. The sector is vital to our economic future post-COVID and must be strategically supported on many fronts in the months ahead.

In recent weeks in the Chamber — indeed, as late as yesterday — we discussed climate change and climate action. In many ways, the agri-food sector is at the centre of that debate. I used those recent opportunities to call for clear thoughts and actions going forward. We must ensure that the actions that are taken to mitigate climate change are proportionate and help to sustain that important sector in Northern Ireland. That is of great importance.

The production of food and the maintenance of the environment is vital to life in Northern Ireland, and it would be foolish to bring forward too much change too quickly. Overambitious measures would serve only to destabilise the agri-food sector and do serious harm to Northern Ireland generally.

It is also vital that future financial support schemes are brought forward in line with any proposed climate action measures to assist farmers in assessing equipment and new ways of working. I welcome the Minister's efforts around green growth and his plans for the

planting of 18 million trees in Northern Ireland, targeting climate change. That represents an essential step forward and one that will provide important benefits.

Brexit is another important area, especially for the farming community of which I am a member. As everyone knows, the protocol is never far from the headlines. The imposition of the unworkable protocol has been a total nightmare for agriculture and has meant the most ridiculous hold-ups, costs and procedures for farmers, suppliers, businesses and, indeed, hauliers. Brexit is referred to heavily in the Budget document, and it correctly states that it is one of the most significant changes in the sector for 40 years. Those changes, when taken in the context of moving away from the bureaucracy of the EU system, represent a great opportunity to create a thriving agri-food sector, playing to our strengths. However, that can be achieved only with the rejection of the protocol, and I welcome Minister Poots's commitment to erasing that unhelpful and costly barrier to trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. The righting of the protocol wrong will assist everyone and be of significant assistance to agriculture and many other sectors that are struggling with the nonsensical rules that hamper trade and ramp up costs for businesses and consumers alike. It will also assist in our budgets, where considerable financial resources are being required to operate the despised protocol. The fact that the grace period is quickly coming to an end and the difficulties that exist with having anywhere near the necessary staffing to effectively operate the protocol should be seen as a concerning and looming economic threat that must be dealt with effectively.

Food security is important, and the ability of Northern Ireland to produce high-quality food with the highest traceability standards is a quality that must be protected and enhanced. COVID-19 proved just how resilient our agri-food sector is. It continued to operate at full capacity throughout the pandemic, meeting consumer needs under significant strain. That has to be commended.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Irwin: I will.

Mr Muir: I entirely agree with the Member about food quality and the importance of investing in ensuring that. Will the Member also agree that leaving the EU single market would be a retrograde step for food safety and that

Northern Ireland needs to remain within that sphere?

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

Mr Irwin: I take on board the Member's comments, but I disagree with him in that regard.

Disease eradication continues to be a source of concern, with particular reference to bovine TB. We know just how costly the disease is to farmers and the Department generally. Despite the passage of time, progress remains much too sluggish in that regard, and the result of the current approach is that costs continue to mount and prevalence of the disease remains much too high. What is of further concern is the fact that funding around this area is under huge pressure. That points to an urgent requirement for improvement in eradication policies and practices to bring the disease under control.

The pandemic has certainly taken a toll on finances and financial forward planning, and there is a significant onus on all Departments to ensure that they target their resources effectively and avoid the return of unspent money. In the months ahead, resources will be under scrutiny and strain like never before. We must all do what we can to see resources used to their maximum advantage.

Mrs Barton: While we have had a year of considerable challenge due to the pandemic, the focus, quite rightly, was on saving lives, a pathway that Minister Swann was always focused on and never veered off. With the vaccination programme — recognised in Europe as one of the most successful — progressing at pace, with shops and non-essential retail having opened up and with the infection rate declining daily, it is only right that our attention turns to the revival and rebuilding of the rural and urban economy, including our agri-food sector.

During COVID, DAERA had an allocation of £25 million, and I welcome the further £9.8 million secured for further COVID-19 support in 2021-22. Looking at the Budget from a DAERA perspective, it is disappointing to learn that, once again, we have only a single-year Budget. This is not a multi-year Budget, which will be essential as we move forward. Long-term strategic planning is impossible. How can prosperity across Northern Ireland be promoted or a balanced and sustainable agri-food economy achieved when year-on-year cuts to the Budget are being made? DAERA must be

equipped to support the agri-food sector, which is so vital to the local economy as it is worth £5 billion and supports in excess of 100,000 jobs. It is disappointing to see that the DAERA budget of £553.8 million has decreased by approximately 3%. DAERA will be one of the lead Departments in working towards the reduction of greenhouse gases and carbon emissions as Northern Ireland progresses its Climate Change Bill. Incentives are needed to encourage change on our farms by using machinery or promoting the green growth approach, which DAERA will be expected to deliver.

With the exit from the EU, it is anticipated that a new future agricultural policy framework will be launched specifically for Northern Ireland in the next year or so. That will bring about change in the basic payment and support for the agricultural economy. It is disappointing to learn that £315.6 million has been allocated for direct payments, which falls short of the £330 million manifesto commitment, meaning that £14.4 million of the projected EU funding for the next year has gone directly to Her Majesty's Treasury. Overall, there is a disappointing shortfall of £19.5 million in EU replacement funding. That will have a profound effect on DAERA's ability to examine new measures in the future Northern Ireland agricultural policy framework.

Of greater concern, however, is the reduction in the funding allocation of £5.1 million for the programme aimed at eradicating TB. That is an essential programme to ensure the well-being of our animals and the quality of the final product.

The capital investment allocations will permit DAERA to continue with many of its projects, including the £95.5 million that it took forward through a priority investment programme, with another £48.1 million for priority investment.

Overall, this is a disappointing Budget for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs at a time when agriculture faces such difficulties with the fallout from the protocol and the greater expenditure needed to prepare for the necessary changes that a climate change Act will bring about.

Mr Durkan: As already alluded to, this has been an incredibly difficult year for families and businesses. As we look towards a period of post-pandemic recovery, we are acutely aware of the significance of this Budget and its need to address the economic fallout of the crisis. The Budget, I am afraid, fails to do just that. While we appreciate the significant challenges and

unique pressures that have presented this year, there appears to be no vision to tackle the urgent issues facing our society in the aftermath of COVID and beyond. That should be at the forefront of our minds today as we debate the motion.

The Communities Committee was briefed by officials last week, and they laid out the tough reality and blatant failure to deliver key objectives in the Department. As my party's social justice spokesperson, I will focus my remarks on our housing crisis and the dire situation facing our social security system and those dependent on it. All Departments will feel the pinch this financial year, but the impact of unmet bids on the Communities portfolio will reverberate around society, directly affecting the ability of people to weather the storm in a post-COVID landscape.

3.15 pm

While I sympathise with Departments — the COVID response has dominated all Departments — I urge Ministers to recognise that the Budget is part of that response. Figures highlighted a 90% increase in universal credit claims last year, a figure that is set to soar further as furlough ends and our businesses face the double challenge of the pandemic and leaving the EU. The Economy Minister has estimated that over 100,000 will be unemployed. The rise in the number of new applicants highlights even more starkly the gaps in current protections. People who currently receive the benefits and the people making their applications now and in future need the certainty and assurance that they will be protected against the sort of system that the Tories would impose on them. The reality is that, under this Budget, they will not be.

The £42.8 million directed at extending welfare mitigations is welcome. However, our Communities Minister had promised a raft of mitigations that have gone unmet in the Budget, including new welfare mitigations; additional payments for carers, those in low-income households and people with a terminal illness; and offsetting the impact of the cruel two-child limit, which affects nearly 3,000 households. It is a frightening prospect that, when need has never been greater and the financial outlook more precarious, people are effectively being left without protections. Consideration must also be given to worsening health outcomes as a result of our awful waiting lists, which will inevitably force more and more people into a benefits system that is already under immense pressure.

It is welcome that the cut to the independent advice sector floated in the draft Budget has been reversed, that the Job Start scheme is going ahead and that recruitment is finally under way to beef up our benefits workforce. However, it is deeply concerning that, other than that, no allocation has been *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* New Decade, New Approach. The Budget does not tackle poverty *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* We are in the grip *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* the full impact of COVID is realised.

A roof over your head is the basis for a healthy life and for cohesive policymaking. There are few areas of public and social policy that housing does not affect, and the housing crisis needs a multifaceted solution. We urgently need to build more social housing to accommodate the thousands of people on waiting lists. Our social housing stock is nowhere near the level that it needs to be. The Executive pledge under the New Decade, New Approach deal to enhance investment in new build social housing is another promise apparently forgotten. Improved social housing must remain a key objective, not just to address the current demand or need but to boost the construction industry and create vital jobs. We also need to look towards a reformed private rented sector and the repurposing of existing stock. None of us can honestly be satisfied with the current rate at which we build social homes.

The absolute minimum that the Executive should be able to guarantee to everyone in the North is a secure and accessible home. Over 29,000 families here are on a waiting list and in acute need of a home. Just this month, the Communities Minister confirmed in response to my Assembly question that over 80,000 people, most with disabilities, are on the social housing waiting list seeking a ground floor property, yet, in the past five years, only 164 bungalows have been built. How, then, can the Finance Minister justify the lack of investment in housing transformation, and what are the potential ramifications of those vital requirements not being met?

Some £6 million has been directed towards Supporting People, which, for the reasons previously outlined, will be a vital provision in the months ahead. Yet that is a COVID-related allocation and represents just half of the required funding. We must also bear it in mind that, even though demand has grown massively, that programme has not experienced an increase in funding in over a decade. It is unforgivable that allocations to date have not reflected the increasing demand for housing support services. In effect, that has

failed extremely vulnerable individuals. There is more to tackling homelessness than building homes; we need to tackle the root causes and give people the support that they need.

The most lamentable aspect of the paper before us is the glaring lack of strategic foresight. Prevention is the best cure. The SDLP has appealed for a mortgage support scheme to prevent families losing their home as a result of the economic hardship brought about by the pandemic.

Although Minister Hargey recently assured me that such a scheme is under review, it is conspicuous by its absence from the Budget.

The economic fallout from the pandemic makes the grim prospect of families struggling to pay their mortgages highly likely if not inevitable. On top of the personal trauma and distress that that causes those people and their families, it places pressure on an already buckling housing system. I stood in the Chamber in October, pleading for serious consideration and outlining the need to introduce such a scheme, but in our book it is inexcusable that that does not even feature seven months later.

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

Mr Durkan: Given the economic situation that we face in the coming months and years, it is with a heavy heart that we debate today's Budget. We cannot endorse its shortcomings and outright failings. Before long, the gaps will become gaping holes, which will be surely felt as society struggles to get back on its feet.

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

Mr Chambers: This is a Budget of two halves. The additional £380 million of COVID funding will be crucial in the months ahead as we continue at pace with the very successful vaccination programme and concentrate our efforts on rebuilding and restoring as much elective activity as quickly as possible. However, while the additional funding is welcome, it should not be used to shield or deflect from the fact that much of it will have to be used to meet inescapable pressures and maintain key existing services in our health service.

As far as the Ulster Unionist Party is concerned, tackling our waiting lists must become one of the Executive's greatest collective priorities. Unfortunately, this Budget is instead largely

made up of non-recurrent funding, which does not provide the certainty or security that is needed to tackle the absolutely appalling waiting lists on a sustainable footing. The current Finance Minister, like all Finance Ministers before him, is no doubt aware that short-term funding boosts do little for the health service. Knowing what money it will have in the years to come allows it to appoint and train staff and commission the services that are necessary to meet the demand.

The Health Minister has been very clear about how he wants to streamline the system, increase capacity and instil new ways of working. However, as well as additional funding, that will require clear political buy-in. Clinicians and patients are already travelling outside previous boundaries to deliver and receive care. We should learn from what is working well and extrapolate it across the system.

I welcome the additional allocation of just over £52 million to help to fund the Agenda for Change pay uplift as well as the further £20 million for safe staffing. It seems like a lifetime ago, but it was only 16 months ago that there was serious unrest among our health workers. Yet, within days of taking office, the Health Minister had pulled together a package that restored pay parity and ultimately saw the unprecedented industrial action ended. The additional funding, as well as the clear commitment to safe staffing, was a key part of that.

If ever there was an occasion for the Assembly and all the parties in it to pledge to work together to evolve long-term budgeting and strategies to eradicate the unacceptable waiting lists for elective surgery and consultant appointments, it is now. It is certainly not a time for anyone to try to make political capital out of the current difficulties that our health and social care sector faces. Doing so would be recognised by the people of Northern Ireland for what it was.

Hard decisions will need to be taken. The Health Minister will not shy away from making those calls, and they will not be made with any selfish political considerations in mind but rather because the transformation of our health service will be in the best long-term interests of the people of Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party will support those hard decisions because it is the right thing to do.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate in my capacity as the SDLP's health spokesperson. We are facing the biggest

crisis in the NHS of any of our lifetimes. The pandemic has not only greatly exacerbated an already dangerous situation but has served to highlight the faults and gaps in our healthcare system. Real people in real pain are behind the waiting list statistics. Greater levels of funding would help alleviate some of the most pressing and urgent issues, such as waiting lists, which are truly in a dire and deeply alarming state, and, most importantly, red-flag procedures such as cancer surgeries and treatments. Forty million pounds is not enough to tackle all of that. It is crucial that we invest correctly in order to help preserve life and provide improved quality of life for all our people who are currently on waiting lists.

Earlier this week, it was heartbreaking and deeply concerning to hear the Department of Health's estimate that it could take anywhere from five to 10 years to address the current waiting lists. There are real people on those waiting lists who are deteriorating and living with chronic pain. As time passes, their conditions only worsen and are somewhat irreversible. Really addressing the health crisis will require extensive reform and possibly a complete reimagining of our services. Money talks, and it is undoubtedly needed in order to support the regeneration of our NHS and how we do things.

What we have currently is a two-tier system. Those who can afford to go private do so, and their lives improve. Oftentimes, many are using their life savings, which is so sad. Others who cannot afford to go private, suffer and wait, wait and suffer, often dying on the waiting list. That is a sad and horrific reality of which none of us can be proud. We must make our health service run effectively and efficiently, but, to do so, we need a better Budget: one with ambition and vision. I am very disappointed that I do not see that today. As a result, we still see many challenges as we come out of COVID.

I welcome the funding that has been allocated in this year's Budget for mental health, but I am deeply disappointed that, in a 74-page Budget document, mental health is mentioned only twice. It is arguably one of the biggest difficulties that we will encounter coming out of the pandemic. The physical and mental well-being of people who are on waiting lists is at utmost risk. Many people have been willing to be patient during the COVID crisis, but, as we emerge from it, patience is wearing very thin. The Budget does nothing to tackle proactively the historical waiting lists, and it is important today to highlight that evident failure.

As a young person looking at the health service, I am filled with dread. Those waiting lists will take a significant amount of time to fix, but doing that is heavily dependent on having the correct funding. We all know or love somebody who is waiting on an appointment. That is the reality for one in four people in Northern Ireland. Over 300,000 are currently awaiting a treatment, a surgery or a meeting with a consultant. We must be ambitious and creative in tackling waiting lists so that we can improve their lives. Surely there is more that can be done. We must work harder and smarter for the results that our citizens deserve.

I will conclude with a few quick comments and questions to the Finance Minister. On 13 May 2021, Minister, your Sinn Féin colleague and health spokesperson in the South said:

"Waiting lists have been allowed to spiral over the last decade, due to chronic underfunding and neglect by the Government. This isn't good enough and patients across the state are being forced to suffer the consequences of this Government failure."

Now is our opportunity to tackle underfunding and neglect in the North, but, unfortunately, looking through the Budget that the Minister has put forward today, I feel that it lacks the vision and ambition that his colleagues have been calling for to address waiting lists in the South. Minister, I ask you this today: what more can you and your Department do to tackle waiting lists and to provide the appropriate funding so that they can be tackled?

I have another concern. Although it is good to see other political parties regarding waiting lists as a priority, I respectfully ask this: with the resources that you have, Minister, including civil servants in your Department, a joint First Minister, multiple Ministers and spads, what more creative and innovative ways and what vision do you have to help tackle issues in the health service? It is really important today to highlight some of the failures in the Budget. It is crucial to mention that, although it is good to have a cross-party commitment to improving waiting lists, we have not seen that today.

3.30 pm

Mr Allister: What other country in the world, in its centenary year, would produce a Budget without that centenary even being mentioned and without a penny in it to celebrate that centenary? It is a shame on every party that is part of the Government in this House that they

collectively produced a Budget, so ashamed of the centenary of the place where they are the Government, in which it is not mentioned and there is not one penny to mark it. There is not a single penny for a community grant from the Department for Communities for those who might want to celebrate it. Nothing.

Indeed, Minister Murphy told us that not a single Department applied for a line in the Budget to mark the centenary. That is a staggering indictment, particularly of those who profess, outside of the House, their pride in Northern Ireland and this centenary. It is no surprise, maybe, from Mr Murphy, because what sort of a country produces a Budget in a centenary year without mentioning it or that does not want money for it? Maybe, the sort of country that has, as its Finance Minister, someone who thought it appropriate to join a terrorist organisation to seek to bomb that very country out of existence. Now, he is in the smug position to deliver a Budget that delivers such an insult to this place called Northern Ireland of which he is the Minister of Finance. Of course, he did much more than that. He rubbed the nose of every unionist in the dirt when he refused to allow a centenary stone within the grounds of Parliament Buildings, as did the Assembly Commission when, subject to the same belligerent Sinn Féin veto, it refused a centenary stone within the curtilage of this very Building.

Yet, this Budget can find room for squander. The Minister told us about £1.6 million for a translation hub to translate into Irish and Ulster Scots. I asked some questions for written answer of every Minister in the House. If we are going to have a translation hub, where is the demand for translation? I asked every Department how many requests they had in 2017-18, 2019-2020 and 2020-21 for translation of departmental documents into Irish or Ulster Scots. Of the five Departments that have answered so far, here are the results. They rival the UK's performance in Eurovision and probably have the same political connotations. The Health Department had no requests. The Department for Infrastructure, in three years, had eight requests for Irish and none for Ulster Scots. The Department of Agriculture, in three years, had no requests. The Department of Finance, in three years, had five requests for Irish and one for Ulster Scots; that will be a square challenge. The Department of Justice had no requests. In three years, there were 13 requests to translate government documents into Irish and one such request for a translation into Ulster Scots. Yet, according to the document, that Department wants to spend, the Minister tells us, £1.6 million on a translation

hub. We hear today of the billion pounds and more that our health service will need to tackle waiting lists, but the Government prioritise a translation hub that no one needs and that is not required, because everyone who reads government documents can also read English, in which they are published. For the political optics, however, we must, at a time of COVID, spend £1.6 million on such nonsense. What a sordid commentary on the Executive.

Then we find in the document that Mr Poots's Department wants to spend another £18.8 million on implementing the protocol. Mr Poots tells us that he is opposed to the protocol, and yet, in the Budget document, he is looking for EU exit staff costs of £18.8 million. How could Brussels ever take seriously anyone who says that they want to dismantle the protocol when, at the same time, they ask for —

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

Mr Allister: — almost £19 million to implement it? That is another part of the farce of this House.

Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): I speak today as the Chairperson of the Audit Committee to reflect the scrutiny of the 2021-22 Budget for the Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

As the House is aware, the Audit Committee scrutinises and agrees the budgets and estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and lays the estimates before the Assembly. The Committee also scrutinises the Commission's budget and is actively pursuing codification of that role, with a view to extending it to include consideration of the Commission's estimates. In recognition of the independence of the non-ministerial bodies, the Committee fulfils those budgetary functions in place of the Department of Finance. Following considerable scrutiny of the 2021-22 budgets for the three bodies, the Committee agreed its initial budget position document in December 2020. A debate specifically on the Commission's budget took place in the Chamber on 2 March 2021.

I wish to reflect on some particular areas covered during the Committee deliberations. I will start with the Assembly Commission. The Commission has a legal requirement to meet all costs associated with Members, including salaries, allowances, expenses, Members'

staffing costs and pension contributions. Those budget elements are determination-driven and are not under the control of the Commission. However, the Committee considered those areas that are under the control of the Commission.

In relation to the capital budget, members recognised that resources were needed to address underinvestment in the fabric of the Building in the last three years. The areas discussed during evidence sessions with officials included electronic access control; the security management system; the audio system in the Chamber; updates to the telephone and television systems in Parliament Buildings, which are ongoing; and the potential financial impact of roof repairs to Parliament Buildings. Other resource elements considered included some income-generation options for the Commission, such as the use of Parliament Buildings for weddings and ceremonies and the staffing implications of a fully functioning Assembly.

In relation to the Audit Office, members questioned the officials on its accommodation project and the increasing cost from the concept design estimates that were shared with the Committee previously. However, it was noted that the increase was due to moving to a detailed design process, allowances for COVID-19 and construction inflation in the current marketplace. Discussions also took place around the costs associated with the Audit Office's continuing recruitment process, which is intended to achieve the appropriate balance in skills and expertise in the organisation in order to allow it to operate effectively, and the potential impact on income with the loss of European agricultural funding for rural development. The challenge of taking forward some of the RHI inquiry recommendations was also discussed at length.

During evidence sessions with the NIPSO and her officials, questions were asked around the resources required to deal with the projected increase in maladministration work and the additional staff needed to place a greater focus on learning and development work. It is hoped that that will lead to increased awareness and insight around complaints and ultimately result in improvements in public service delivery. The resources needed to allow the NIPSO to provide a high-quality, impartial and independent investigation service were also subject to discussion, including the resources needed to increase the capacity for own-initiative investigations. The Committee was keen to see commencement of complaints standards authority powers for NIPSO, and

members paid particular attention to the resources needed to recruit appropriate staff and to put necessary systems in place.

As I have already mentioned, the Committee agreed its initial position on the draft budgets for the three bodies in December 2020, but, following correspondence from the Minister of Finance in relation to pay pressures and the public-sector pay freeze, the Committee revised its position to take the pay freeze into account. I can confirm that the Department of Finance Budget document has made provision for figures agreed by the Audit Committee.

I will now make remarks as an MLA for West Tyrone and the spokesperson on education for the SDLP. Some Members have mentioned that this is a disappointing Budget, and that is putting it lightly. There are many aspects of this Budget that lack vision, that lack strategy and that lack prioritisation of key, important issues that affect our constituents on the ground and on a daily basis. Members across the House have shared concerns about the state of our health service and about the waiting lists that are growing by the hour, let alone the day. People's pain is increasing, and they are becoming even more challenged by the circumstances that they find themselves in. When they seek support and help and the necessary medical attention, they are told that they are on the waiting list. As my colleague Cara Hunter said, people are literally dying on these waiting lists. That is a terrible indictment of the political failure of these institutions and of the Executive to deal with this fundamental issue, and it is not as a result of coronavirus. This predates coronavirus and was a problem then. What did we as an Assembly do, and what did parties of the Executive who were in a position of power and strength do, then? They walked out the door for three years, collapsing the institutions on the very feet of the people who were struggling and needing intervention and medical support. That is a terrible indictment and reflection of the political failure of this place that needs to stop. I know that the majority of constituents whom I speak for and represent in West Tyrone share that frustration as well.

Looking to roads, I see elected representatives across the various political parties, particularly Sinn Féin, standing next to potholes. These are not just councillors but MPs — abstentionist MPs, at that — and MLAs standing next to potholes, pointing at the road and saying, "Isn't this terrible?". I agree. It is terrible, and it should be resolved, but, unfortunately, in this Budget and after many bids from Minister Mallon, there has been no meaningful investment laid out by

Minister Murphy as the Minister of Finance, the man who holds the purse, the man who holds the money, the man who has failed to provide adequate funding to the Department for Infrastructure, which has an outstanding Minister who is delivering on the ground for people but has been hamstrung as a result of a Finance Minister who is not coughing up the funds to deal with the roads — roads that run through every single community in Northern Ireland and that are becoming more and more embarrassing as the day goes on. This Finance Minister —

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

Mr McCrossan: — needs to put his money where his mouth is and start delivering for the priorities of people on the ground.

Mr Carroll: This Budget utterly fails to meet the transformational change that we so desperately need in the wake of a global health pandemic, as we sit on the brink of climate catastrophe and as economic crisis and widespread social need grow. I have made my views on this Budget clear. Indeed, many in this Chamber have also recognised today its failure to deal with waiting lists, poverty and many more issues, yet the Minister is asking us to approve it and to accept the continuation of the damaging conditions that our communities have faced for far too long. I will certainly not be supporting the Budget today, and I wonder whether Members from Executive parties who have rightly condemned Minister Murphy's Budget will stand by their words and refuse to endorse it. Will they join me in pushing to reject these huge shortcomings? We will wait and see.

The Minister has presented this as a standstill Budget. Indeed, this is the very year when the Budget should break away from the neoliberalism of the past, address increasing needs and adjust for rising costs.

It harks back instead to an era of politics plagued by neoliberalism and underfunding. There has been no attempt at all to expand and properly fund the health service, community services or transport services, to name a few. All those areas were in crisis long before the Budget, but there is no attempt to bail them out financially. The Budget imposes effective reductions in funding for welfare support, homeless and mental health services and a real-terms cut for public transport.

3.45 pm

It is particularly insulting that one of the most effective organisations in this city and one that my constituency office uses, the Belfast citywide tribunal service, which assists people with the brutal welfare reform system, was not allocated sufficient funding to keep its doors open over the next year and beyond by the Communities Minister as part of the Budget. The workers in that service do not know whether they have a job from year-to-year. That is not where the threat to workers and jobs ends.

Public-sector pay is devolved, yet the best that the Minister can offer civil servants is 1%. That is a slap in the face for those workers. My solidarity and full support go to those in NIPSA who are balloting on action against that meagre pay cut. The Hovis workers show what can be done to fight against pay cuts and freezes. If there is a strike for NIPSA workers, I will certainly support them.

The lack of allocation for health pay is a further disgrace. A year on from giving the commitment to increase the minimum wage, the Executive have done nothing. That is offensive to many working people, who deserve better. The Budget shows clearly that they are not a priority for the Executive. The Minister tries to make much of the Health budget increase of 5.7% in resource spending on last year, but health costs are estimated to have risen by roughly 6.5%, which is a reduction in real terms in the middle of a health pandemic, no less.

Where is the £75 million set aside for transformation that was previously promised? Where is the money to review adult care via 'Power to People'? Where is the £6.5 million for the extra nursing and midwifery student places that were designed to alleviate pressure? We heard from the Health Minister at the Health Committee, last week or the week before, about the lack of investment in mental health services. Where is the increase in provision for counselling? Where is the money that was set aside to rebuild cancer, oncology and haematology services and for improvements in palliative care and many other issues? Where is the increased provision for those in need of IVF treatment, to name just a few of the issues?

The Department for Infrastructure faces the same fate. With inflationary increases, the Budget represents a real-terms reduction. The document is littered with none too subtle threats of future cutbacks. We are told that Translink may need to consider "service reductions" and:

"there are likely to be significant impacts on public service delivery, including in areas

such as public transport and roads maintenance."

Twenty-four hours after the Minister's party signs up to the politics of a green new deal, he lays down a threat to public transport, footways and street lighting, and he cannot even provide for a proper winter gritting service. That is a very worrying sign that working-class people will pay for the crisis once again.

The legacy of previous Stormont Budgets and decisions is well illustrated by the fact that we will pay out tens of millions of pounds in interest on private finance initiatives (PFIs) over the next year. That is a colossal waste of public money, brought about by the same parties that were also responsible for the likes of the renewable heat incentive (RHI); the same parties that lobbied Westminster for a decade to let them lower corporation tax for the wealthiest; and the same parties that struggled to spend a lot of money — it was hundreds of millions — on COVID support.

The same parties will roll their Ministers out to tell us that their hands are tied and that they cannot find the money for public services in the Budget. We have some outstanding journalists here, but, to put it frankly, the Executive get off lightly with how little they are held to account for what goes on in this Building and for the lasting impact that has on communities. I am sure that the big parties are very glad of that today.

That is not to say that the Minister gives journalists an easy job. The figures for the Budget are so general and broad-sweeping that it is next to impossible to detail exactly where the money will go. Where is the scrutiny? Where is the accountability, as others said today? We were barely given a chance to scrutinise it effectively or properly in our Committees. How on earth is any member of the press or public to ascertain from that where the money is going?

The failure of the Budget to protect young people, sick people and the environment is a gross abdication of duty. It is an attack on the working class, and we need, ultimately, an economic strategy that is based on redistributing wealth and providing for those in need. The Budget from the Sinn Féin Minister is the antithesis of that. For that reason and many more, I intend to vote against it today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I call the Minister to make his winding-up speech, I remind him of the convention that Members and Ministers seeking to amend their own motion are invited to address the motion and the

amendment together when winding. The Minister will have up to 23 minutes, and I invite him to conclude the debate on the motion and the amendment.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I thank Members and Committee Chairs for their participation in the debate. I thank Members who supported the Budget proposals for their input, and I listened with interest to Members who spoke against them. With the last couple of Members to speak, certainly the two in the corner, I am interested to see whether, rather than simply speaking against the Budget, they vote against it. I will try to respond to as many of the points raised as possible, although multiple points were raised by all who spoke and some of those were overlapping and cross-cutting.

I thank the Chair of the Finance Committee for his contribution. He raised the question of the notice given for the debate. That was an error in the Department. The Committee was not made aware of the exact timing, and I apologise for that oversight. I understand that the Committee was anticipating the debate, but we need to ensure that that does not happen again.

Dr Aiken raised points about streamlining the Budget process and the difficulties of that. I spoke about that before taking up this post, and I am determined to assist in delivering a more streamlined, accessible and understandable Budget process. The ongoing review of the financial process will help Members and the wider public to scrutinise the Budget, the Estimates and the accounts. We intend to take forward that work in the not-too-distant future.

The Member raised a number of other points about the fiscal council and its role. He has been speaking to people who have experience of fiscal councils, and the issue of independence has been raised by the Committee. I assure him that the council is an independent entity and will continue to be so. It will provide independent analysis of the Budget process.

Dr Aiken, the Chair of the Justice Committee and others asked about the victims' payments. They will be aware that, along with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Justice, I have given an undertaking that payments will be made to successful applicants under the scheme. We remain committed to delivering the scheme and are mindful of the needs of the victims and survivors who will be the recipients of the payments. That undertaking provides reassurance and confidence that payments will

be made when they fall due under the terms of the scheme, regardless of where the funding comes from. However, it remains the position of the Executive that the British Government should meet the costs of the expanded scheme legislated for by Westminster, and we continue to progress that. On occasion, the Member has referred to the idea of top-slicing Departments: I have always said that, if we cannot reach agreement with Westminster and have to meet the costs, that is one option for the Executive, but we intend to pursue vigorously with Treasury the funding of the scheme.

Dr Aiken also asked about the New Deal funding and the Community Renewal Fund. The Member may recall that the New Deal fund is outside the control of the Executive and is administered by the NIO. It is a matter of concern that that fund and others, such as the Community Renewal Fund, which are EU replacement funds, are administered by Whitehall, although the funding is clearly in the devolved space. The Community Renewal Fund and EU replacement funding were also mentioned by Maoliosa McHugh and Paula Bradley. We continue to be concerned about a lack of information on the replacement of EU funding. To date, our sense is that it will not match the funding that came with European membership, and the interference in our ability to distribute and prioritise that funding remains an ongoing concern that we continue to raise with Treasury, as do the Finance Ministers for Scotland and Wales.

The Budget exchange scheme — the carry-over of spending — works on the basis of an ongoing analysis of the provisional out-turn and an assessment of the funding that can be carried forward under the scheme limits. At this stage, I am reasonably confident that we remain within our agreed limits: non-ring-fenced resource DEL of £85.8 million and capital DEL of £22.3 million.

A number of Members raised issues about multi-annual Budgets, and we have made repeated requests to the British Government about that. Part of the position here is that we are in a cycle of one-year Budgets.

It was very late notice. We were advised over the year that there would be a multi-annual Budget cycle. In my discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer a fortnight ago, I was assured that that would be the position from next year onwards. We certainly hope that that is the case, and we will hold him to that promise.

The Chair of the Economy Committee raised issues about the discretion that the Department for the Economy will have with regard to the economic recovery action plan, which includes £145 million for the high street support scheme. The remaining funds are to be used at the Department's discretion for economic support measures. The discretion is not extended to other funds and does not remove the need for business cases to be completed to support expenditure decisions and for expenditure proposals that are above the Department's delegated limits. Those business cases must be submitted to the Department of Finance for approval.

The Chair also raised a point, as others did, about the furlough scheme coming to an end. We have talked to Treasury about the importance of the furlough scheme. We recognise the support that the furlough scheme has provided, and we will engage with Treasury about the importance of the scheme as we move into a new phase of economic recovery. There is a real fear among employers about approaching a cliff edge.

The Chair of the Justice Committee and Mike Nesbitt raised the issue of funding for policing. The Budget has allocated £12.3 million for police numbers, which will help to progress the NDNA priority of 7,500 officers. The Executive will decide on future Budgets, and that issue will undoubtedly form part of those deliberations.

Questions were raised about a number of Departments. Kellie Armstrong asked about the Department for Communities. I am happy to say that, last week, the Executive agreed over £50 million of COVID-19 funding for the Department for Communities to help to address some of the issues that the Member raised, including support for arts, culture and sports. Of course, all Departments remain significantly challenged.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I am prepared to give way, but I have limited time.

Dr Aiken: Sorry, my intervention is very limited.

Apologies, Minister, but I have to chair another meeting. It means no disrespect to you that I am heading off. I am sure that my able Deputy Chair will do what is required. I am not sure whether he will do it using a 'Star Wars' theme.

Mr Murphy: I appreciate the Chair's advice.

A question was asked about the Programme for Government's alignment with the Budget. Of course, that is and has been the intention since the Executive returned. The difficulty with that is twofold: first, an annual Budget and, secondly, dealing with the pandemic. As we get reassurance from the Treasury in the time ahead, I would like to see us getting back to that issue.

Pat Catney raised a number of issues about new spending and NDNA money. We could not include some of the money that came late, as the Secretary of State had not signed off on it. It is not included in the document, and we made that clear at the start. You cannot have new spending if you have a flat-cash Budget, unless you take it off other Departments, so that is impossible.

I enjoyed Robin Newton's Mr Micawber proposals. He would have been a tax-and-spend man: you spend only what you have. The other Governments are looking at spend and tax to try to stimulate economic recovery, and I hope that that direction is thought through in the future. It allows investment in necessary services and infrastructure and allows prosperity to be generated through the spending of government money and tax returns on the back of that.

Jim Allister raised the issue of the translation hub and criticised the lack of spending on the centenary. The cost of the translation hub is £160,000. I think that the Member said £1.6 million. It is £0.16 million, which I clearly said in my statement.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I am happy to give way.

Mr Allister: I said £1.6 million because that is exactly the figure that the Minister said in his first speech today.

Mr Murphy: If that is the case, I apologise. The figure is £0.16 million. We will not haggle over a decimal point, but I am glad that that matter can be cleared up.

From the number of SDLP Members giving speeches, it is clear that they have decided to go into election mode on the Budget statement. That memo has not been shared with other parties. The SDLP has gone back to the position that it has tried to hold over the past 14 years with limited success: straddling two positions at one time.

4.00 pm

Mr Catney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: No. A litany of SDLP Members have spoken, and I have listened to them all. I now have the opportunity to reply to them. They are attempting to straddle two positions — being in the Executive and in opposition — at the same time. They spoke passionately and vociferously against the Budget proposition, looking for new spend, new vision and new ideas, yet, when we got notice on 24 November that we had a flat-cash, one-year Budget, the SDLP accepted, at the Executive, that there was no other prospect for the Executive but to accept a rollover Budget. That was agreed by all Ministers on the Executive. The SDLP agreed that the only way of doing new thinking, new vision and new spending was by taking money off other Departments and allocating it to wherever we wanted to see that new vision, and, in the time frame afforded to us, that was not possible. The SDLP therefore accepted that at Executive level, but today its Members have decided that they are on an election footing. They claim credit for things that the Executive do, as they will do in the time ahead — if that works for them, more fool the people — and ignore the fact that there is a 29% increase in the Department for Infrastructure's capital budget.

I have just listened to Mr McCrossan complaining about roads. For this year, the Department for Infrastructure received the biggest increase and largest capital allocation in its history, so I hope that there will not be a need for any more photographs beside potholes and that SDLP Members will be able to celebrate all the money that the Minister for Infrastructure has to spend. That approach is an attempt to claim the credit for the Executive's work and anything that is done — certainly anything that is done by their ministerial colleague — and to blame us all for the rest of the problems arising out of a bad budgetary outcome, which we have clearly acknowledged.

One of the benefits of being in this institution for as long as I have is that I can remember positions that people took in the past. In the past, the SDLP used to vote against the Budget, even though it was in the Executive. Occasionally, it put forward some fairly ill-thought-out suggestions as to how we could do things differently. It once suggested that we sell off the forests and, indeed, airports that we did not own in order to raise funding. They have learnt a lesson from that, so its Members are not bringing forward any policy positions or suggestions as to how, with this limited Budget,

they would do things differently. They will probably vote for the Budget while pretending to oppose it at the same time. The SDLP's consistent position over the past number of years is that it has never had any workable propositions to do things better, particularly in the context of a one-year, standstill Budget, yet it professes to oppose all the necessary measures in this Budget.

I have been about here for so long that I can remember the portfolios that SDLP Ministers once held. They held the Department of Finance and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) portfolios — you will remember it, Mr Speaker — at the same time. DEL had responsibility for further and higher education. The fact that the SDLP ran both those Departments meant that it had the possibility of doing something with the university in Derry, had it wanted to.

It also held the Department for Social Development portfolio. I listened to a lecture from Mr Durkan about what all needed to be done on housing, but he ignores the fact that £160 million has been set aside for social housing this year. That is an 11% increase on last year. The policy that the SDLP has adopted is as transparent as it is dishonest. We all know the impact of bad Budgets. We are dealing with one this year, as we have done for many years, as a consequence of austerity policies from Whitehall: austerity policies that Mr O'Toole was paid to write press releases endorsing when he worked in Whitehall, as we here were battling their impact.

We know that waiting lists are crucial and critical. They affect all parties and all members of society. The response to that is for all Ministers to work together, constructively, with the limited resources that they have and not to attempt to exploit the misery of waiting lists for some hoped-for electoral advantage.

It is the responsibility of a Finance Minister to bring Budget proposals before the House. That is a responsibility that I take seriously, whether they are Budget proposals with a lot of resources attached or with very limited resources, as is the case today. Following the successful roll-out of the vaccine programme, together with the decisive actions of the Executive, we are entering a new phase of the COVID-19 response. The Executive are looking forward to how best they can support our economy and our people in their recovery. In a world where the future economic, social and health landscape is uncertain, it is imperative that we provide the platform that is needed for

public services to respond to changing demands.

This Budget seeks to support key services now and is a platform for future responsive planning. On that note, I commend the Budget to the Assembly for approval.

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

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

Main Question, as amended, put.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that they should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

I ask Members to take their seats. Before I put the Question, I remind Members that it would be preferable to avoid a Division.

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I remind all Members of the requirement for social distancing while the Division takes place. I ask you to ensure that you maintain gaps of at least 2 metres between yourself and other Members when moving around the Chamber or the Rotunda and especially in the Lobbies. Please be patient at all times, observe the signage and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks. Clear the Lobbies.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 80; Noes 5.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Brogan, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildermew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

UNIONIST:

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

OTHER:

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Ms Dolan.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Ms Sugden.

OTHER:

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister and Mr Carroll.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>[94.1%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>[94.7%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>[70.0%]</i>

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2021-22 as set out in

the Budget laid before the Assembly on 1 April 2021 and the further detailed information provided to Members on 27 April 2021 and laid on 19 May 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before the next item of business.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

School Estate: East Antrim

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Mr Gordon Lyons to raise the matter of the school estate in East Antrim. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Mr Lyons: First, I thank the Business Committee for scheduling the debate. At the outset, I apologise on behalf of my party and constituency colleague Mr David Hilditch, who is unable to be here. As most in the Chamber will know, he is getting chemotherapy treatment today. Of course, we wish him well with that and with the rest of his treatment.

I pay tribute to staff in schools right across East Antrim for all the work that they have done in what has been a very difficult year. I thank teachers, who have been put under huge pressure over the past number of months. We recognise that teaching from home and having to balance many different priorities at once has not been easy. I thank the senior management teams in schools, who have come under an awful lot of pressure and had to deal with an awful lot of uncertainty and a very fluid situation when schools were open and then closed, and all the additional pressures that came with that. I also thank other staff in schools, who have, perhaps, had additional responsibilities and work that they had to be involved in. They have done that work well. It is important to place on record our thanks to those who have done so much to try to ensure that children's education has continued, albeit in difficult situations and less than ideal scenarios.

As we get back to normal, the old problems persist. Many pupils in East Antrim are being educated in less than ideal facilities and poor accommodation. I want to raise a few issues with the House and the Minister. The first relates to the rationalisation of the school estate. Along with Mr Hilditch and other colleagues, who are here, we have all, in some way, been involved with Islandmagee Primary School and the long saga of getting it a new build. It has been over 10 years since I was first

involved in meetings about Islandmagee Primary School. The school came about as the result of the merger of two schools: Kilcoan Primary School and Mullaghdubh Primary School. The new school building had been talked about for a long time. The new school has been operating on split sites since 2016. Here we are, five years later, and it is still on split sites.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: Of course, I will give way to Mr Beggs.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware that it predates even that date and that the school originated from a proposal to merge three schools?

Mr Lyons: Yes. Indeed, that is the case, although I think that the third school had closed down quite some time prior to that, and it was the two schools that I mentioned that merged in 2016. However, the Member is absolutely right.

Progress has been made. I am pleased that I was able to host the chairman of the board of governors and the principal, Arlene Cambridge, who, by the way, has done a fantastic job for that school and has been very determined over the last number of years, and that we were able to meet the former Education Minister, Mr O'Dowd.

I am pleased that progress has been made and that the application is in the system. However, five years after the schools merged, never mind all the time that has passed since it was originally discussed, there is still no building. That shows some of the problems with rationalisation.

4.30 pm

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way. I, too, pay tribute to Arlene Cambridge for the work that she has done.

I was speaking to a pupil who was in primary 1 when the merger went through who has now graduated from university. That is the length of time that we are talking about. My fear — I am sure that it also that of the Member — is that the pupils at Carrickfergus Academy might well see something similar. I fear that no one who is at that school will see a single new school site come to fruition. Does the Member share those fears?

Mr Lyons: I absolutely agree with the Member. In fact, the second example that I was coming on to was Carrickfergus Academy. Again, we have all been involved with that school. We were there when the Minister was there and had other meetings together. Mr Dickson was ill at the time of those meetings, but he sent a representative to them, and it is good that there is cross-party agreement.

Carrickfergus Academy is a very poor example of how to do things. Two schools amalgamated — they are now in their third year of amalgamation — and the school is on a split site. As a result of that split site, there are 318 staff movements between the junior and senior sites every week. That is staff moving back and forward for different periods and subjects. Of the 83 staff members, 73 of them travel, and some teachers teach in 10 different classrooms each week. That is a waste of teacher time and a duplication of provision and overheads. It also restricts opportunities for young people.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: That is before we even start on the condition of the existing buildings. I will give way to Mr Dickson on that point.

Mr Dickson: This will be a very brief intervention. I wholly appreciate and thank Mr Lyons for securing the debate.

On Carrickfergus Academy, in particular, it is not only a split site but the two sites are on opposite sides of the town. Staff not only travel between the two schools, which sounds very easy, but taxi between the two schools to meet the teaching timetable. That situation is untenable.

Mr Lyons: The Member is absolutely right. If you consider a teacher sitting in his or her classroom, what would normally happen in most of our schools is that a class would go out and another one would come in. What happens in Carrickfergus Academy is that teachers finish their classes, get packed up, walk out to their cars, get into their cars, drive across the town, park their cars, get out of their cars, taxis or whatever and then walk to class. A huge amount of time is wasted doing that, and, as one of the teachers said to me recently, there is no time at the end of class to stop to talk to those pupils who may have a pastoral issue or need a little bit more support.

I am glad that there is a recognition of the issue and that extra funding is given to schools that are on split sites. However, certainly last year,

the available funding did not even cover a quarter of the extra costs that were incurred by Carrickfergus Academy because of its operation on the split site.

I am also glad that the Department of Education's protocol for the selection of capital works programmes gives extra points in its scoring mechanism to schools that are part of a development proposal (DP) and have had to rationalise or that are on split sites. However, that needs to be greater. Such is the impact on the education of and outcomes for our young people and the additional burden that is placed on teachers and the senior management teams in those schools that a reasonable case could be made for giving additional weight to schools such as Carrickfergus Academy that have had to wait for so long. It is also important to put it on the record that it was promised that priority would be given to Carrickfergus Academy if Carrickfergus College and Downshire Community School merged. That has not been the case, and I fear that Mr Stewart is absolutely right and that pupils who are at that school will experience the split site for the rest of their time there. I would appreciate the Minister looking at the funding mechanism when schools operate on split sites and the scoring mechanism for the capital works programme.

It is not only about rationalisation. When schools are forced to close, such as Carnalbanagh Primary School on the edge of my constituency, can we please make sure that there are spaces available in nearby schools? Many pupils from Carnalbanagh would like to go to somewhere such as Hazelbank, which is only a few miles down the road, but there is no space there. It is already overcrowded, and I made those points when the announcement was made that Carnalbanagh was to close.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way.

Mr Weir: Carnalbanagh falls directly outside East Antrim, but it has a draw from East Antrim. When the development proposal was signed off, it was done on the specific condition that additional transport and space would be made available if required. That instruction was given as part of the conditions of the DP to the Education Authority, so, if there is an issue there, I am happy to contact the Member about it. As I said, however, that was part of the sign-off. It was put down in writing as part of the development proposal decision.

Mr Lyons: I appreciate that intervention from the Minister. It is very important. Yes, you can make transport available, but, from a place such as Carnalbanagh, which is still in East Antrim, it can be a long journey at certain times of the year, particularly to Larne or Glenarm. Hazelbank is nearby, however, and if the decision goes ahead to close Carnalbanagh Primary School, I am glad that the Minister has given that commitment again today that children can go to a school that is as close as possible to them.

As well as closure and rationalisation, there are issues for the school estate more generally. Simply put, improvements are needed. Some schools will need new builds, while some will need enhancement programmes. We will hear about many different schools in this debate, but I will mention a couple that I have been able to visit recently. The first is Larne High School, which is a fantastic school. It is really doing its best by its children and providing opportunities for the young people who go there. It has seen greatly improved results and is really innovative in what it does, but, unfortunately, significant improvements are needed. It has a very high maintenance budget, so we need to look at the existing problems and make sure that we allocate the funding to where it needs to go so that we are not just racking up bills for years to come on maintenance but, rather, are spending the money smarter and sooner.

Capital expenditure is required, and I know that the Minister visited the school and was able to see that for himself. Spend needs to reflect the protocol that is in place. It needs to reflect where the need is, so I ask the Minister to look at that again. If it is the case that more funding is needed, we need to provide that funding, and I urge the Minister to lobby and bid for more funding for places such as Larne High School and Greenisland Primary School, where resource is much needed so that it can provide a quality education for our young people.

Why is that so important? There are a number of reasons. First, it is about equality. Why should some pupils get the opportunity to be taught in a state-of-the-art facility when others are in decent, adequate or inadequate accommodation. Let us make sure that all our children feel that they are getting the same treatment. Secondly, we want our children and young people to aspire to more and to better. We want our young people to be inspired by their surroundings. If we do not have the facilities in place and if our young people do not have confidence in the buildings in which they are being taught, how can we expect them to take pride in their work?

I am coming to the end of my time, but I want to raise one other issue, which is sports infrastructure. In many of our schools, especially our secondary schools, we do not have the facilities that are required. We have a great sporting history and tradition in East Antrim. We have much to be proud of, but we want to develop it. In some of our schools, we have gravel hockey pitches that are no longer fit for purpose. We have football pitches that have become waterlogged and unusable. We have some tennis courts that have had to be condemned, because they are no longer safe to use.

We want to encourage people to take part in sport, fitness and physical activity. That requires those facilities to be in place. I urge the Minister to look at funding specifically for much-needed sports facilities. I also ask him to work with colleagues to see how sports facilities in our schools could be used by the wider community. All too often, sports clubs come to me because we have a shortage of pitches and training areas in East Antrim, certainly in Larne and Carrickfergus. It is important that, where schools have those available, they share them with the local community. A lot of the time, they come up against insurance issues or problems with the Education Authority (EA). Our schools are a fantastic resource that could be used outside of school hours as well. I urge the Minister to look at that.

I thank the Business Committee for allocating the time for this Adjournment topic. I hope that we will hear more from other Members about the great need that we have in East Antrim. I know that the Minister will get that from all constituencies, but some of the accommodation that we have is completely unacceptable. I ask the Minister to look at this favourably. If he is inclined to get his chequebook out, I have no doubt that we will find many projects that could use those funds.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is my intention to call first constituency Members, who will be allocated seven minutes each. All other Members will be allocated five minutes each. That is in order to facilitate a 10-minute response from the Minister, should he wish to offer one.

Mr Beggs: I thank Gordon Lyons for bringing forward this Adjournment topic. It is right that the difficulties that exist in the school estate in East Antrim are aired. I hope that they will be addressed subsequently.

Young people in East Antrim over the years have not benefited to the same extent as other constituencies have in terms of the funding of new educational premises. I am not entirely sure why. Over the past 20 years, there have been repeated announcements of new builds, but very few have been in East Antrim. It may be the fact that the constituency has an older, settled community and has not expanded to the extent of requiring a new build. Clearly, however, there has been a dearth of investment, and there is a need to correct that. Perhaps the Minister will allude to what might come in the future. I hope that he, having viewed the condition of some of our schools, recognises that there is a need to ensure that there is suitable accommodation in which our teachers and young people are able to thrive and reach their full potential.

I pay tribute to the teaching staff and other support staff in our schools for their work over the past year and a little bit longer. It has been a challenging time for everyone. They have had to learn new skills to continue to support young people through remote learning and adapt to new technology. They have done their best to try to support young people. I, like most people who are associated with schools in East Antrim, am really pleased that we have been able to return to more normal school activity. I hope that we will be able to maintain that and keep on top of the dreadful pandemic that we have faced.

As I said, we have had a lack of investment over the years. Many of the school buildings are really quite tired and no longer fit for purpose. The standard specification in terms of space in a classroom, lighting levels and lots of things no longer applies. Yet many of our schools have an excellent reputation. There is demand for the schools. I think of Greenisland Primary School and Whiteabbey Primary School. Those are older premises, but there is still huge demand for those schools because of the quality of the teaching that occurs. However, if we are to give the teachers the full tools and the young people the full benefits and opportunities, we should provide the right facilities for them.

Mr Lyons mentioned Islandmagee Primary School. It really has been a saga. It was in 2003 that the then three schools agreed to amalgamate. In 2007, the site was bought on the Low Road, and then it sat for years and years with changes in policies. I am pleased that that has now progressed through planning. I would be interested if the Minister could update us on the tendering for the actual building, when we can expect the foundations to be laid, when we can expect completion and

when the community can expect to have a facility for which they have yearned for so long.

4.45 pm

The remaining two schools in Islandmagee, Kilcoan and Mullaghduh, are operating on split sites. Again, that causes problems for teaching. It causes problems for families, picking up perhaps two young people of different ages having dropped them off in the morning. It causes complications.

As was alluded to, in the post-primary sector, there are extra costs associated with this. It is vital that, if the Department is encouraging school amalgamation, it ensures that the budget is appropriate and that young people and teachers are not caught out and suffer as a result. The budget should be appropriate to operate in such conditions. It is not only that. Significant priority should be given to schools that agree to amalgamate.

Turning to Carrickfergus College, which is operating on that split-site scenario, there are significant time factors resulting from teachers and staff having to work across two sites. That is costing the public money. It is costing the school funds as well. It is not good management. We have made the point previously to the Minister that the funding arrangements should, again, be reflecting the priorities in the area plan and good value for money in how public funding is spent. I am concerned that, whilst we have not yet had an announcement of our new build to allow all those children to amalgamate in a new build on one of their sites, we are wasting money and failing our young people. I urge the Minister to ensure that that issue is progressed.

Equally, Larne High School is no longer adequate. There has been great success there, with pupil numbers increasing in the last few years from 430 to over 700. The school is not fit for purpose. My dad actually started working at Larne High School in 1957, and some of the premises are still being used. Facilities from 1957 are still being used, perhaps with a lick of paint and that is about the height of it. It is no longer fit for purpose.

I have to say that there is a question of equality. I am very happy that Ulidia has had an announcement of a new build, but its school was built 20 years ago — was it 20 years ago? — and significant parts are being knocked down. We are knocking down a 20-year-old school, yet we are forcing others to continue to use 70-year-old premises. I urge the Minister to ensure that there is appropriate funding and an

equality of funding so that all our young people can reach their full potential.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate Mr Lyons bringing this debate; it is an important one.

First of all, I associate myself with his opening remarks with regards to our colleague David Hilditch, and I wish David very well in the treatment that he is going to have. David and I go back many years on Carrickfergus Borough Council, and I count him as a good friend.

Like all the Members in the Chamber today, I have been in touch with many of the schools across the constituency. To be truthful, we all have and will continue to express very serious concerns about the dilapidated state of many of our schools. Simply, it is not an acceptable situation. Pupils in East Antrim deserve much better from the Department, from the Executive and from the Assembly.

Just two weeks ago, like others, I was invited to visit Larne High School. I am highly impressed by the work that goes on in that school, but it happens in conditions that are literally unacceptable and, in many cases, may be described as Third World. Today, I posted photographs of the school on my website so that the Department and the public can see the circumstances and facilities in which the principal and staff have to work and teach. It is a building that goes back to the 1950s. There is damp and water damage across the school building, as well as missing parts of ceilings, leaks, missing floor tiles, electric sockets that cannot be used because water pours into them, a gymnasium that is not fit for purpose and changing facilities that have to be shared by both sexes because the male changing rooms were closed a number of years ago as they were not fit for purpose.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that, with sport being an important aspect of the school's curriculum, particularly in its sixth form development and links with Larne Football Club, it is scandalous that there are not adequate changing places there for the important work that it is carrying out?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you. I totally agree with Mr Beggs's comment. For example, it is great to

see a new 3G pitch being built at the school, but how do you get changed to use those facilities and how do you shower afterwards? That is part of the problem and the conundrum.

We need to value our children and their education and provide a great deal more for them. It is not just secondary schools. For a number of years, I have been working with the Education Authority and the Department to address the unacceptable state, which Members have recognised, of Greenisland Primary School. I have visited the school on a number of occasions — in fact, it is the school that I started my education in — and its list of problems is endless and very similar to Larne High School: damp classrooms, inadequate toilet facilities and a severe lack of daylight. It was a school that was built for 200 pupils but today has over 400. There is no space for a library or for parking, and it is wholly inadequate for the traffic mayhem in the mornings around the school. I am hopeful that things will move forward for Greenisland Primary School following the allocation of school enhancement programme funding. However, I hope that the Minister will confirm that the Department will endeavour to move those projects along at speed and get the school up to a standard quickly.

In addition, reference has been made to Whiteabbey Primary School, which is of the same vintage and has broadly similar problems. Monkstown Community School and Newtownabbey Community High School had the promise of a new school building when they merged, but nothing has materialised there either.

Moving to the other end of East Antrim, St Killian's College in Larne is in a beautiful historical building that is no longer fit for purpose and, again, is crying out for a new building. It is facing many of the same problems, but one of the major problems that it faces is access to the internet: it has to rely on a microwave link. Let us hope that Project Stratum will at least help in that respect.

I would be grateful if the Minister could advise how he is working with the schools across East Antrim to develop the school sites and school buildings and ensure that they have 21st century facilities like high-speed broadband. I also note my concern at the very slow pace of the building in Islandmagee, which Members have made reference to. Again, I have been involved in a number of the meetings on that. I am pleased that the matter is progressing to seek planning permission, but we need to know when it will move beyond that point to the actual

contract to build. People have been waiting some 10 years for that.

We should also look to some of the successes in East Antrim. For example, the wonderful new build at Corran Integrated Primary School provides a modern and spacious school environment for the children who attend it. I hope that that success can be replicated in many more schools in the school estate across East Antrim.

We have to invest in our school estate. Children, teachers and staff deserve much better than what has been provided. It is a great credit to the staff and the pupils who work and are educated in those buildings in East Antrim. While the credit goes to them, the poor marks have to go to the Department of Education for the way in which it looks after its estate. I encourage the Minister to grasp the problem for the school estate across East Antrim, work with school principals and school boards of governors and help us deliver the education facilities that our young people deserve going into this century.

Mr Stewart: I echo the comments about our colleague David Hilditch. It is hard to believe that it is 10 years since I was elected to Carrickfergus Borough Council: I enjoyed serving with him there and I have enjoyed serving with him here. We all wish him well in his recovery.

I thank Mr Lyons for securing this topic for the adjournment debate. I think that this is my first adjournment debate in the House since we came back, so it is quite novel to take part in it. However, it is on such an important topic.

Our pupils and parents in Carrickfergus and Larne and across East Antrim are spoilt with the quality of education that is provided by our amazing schools, our teachers and our principals. That is without doubt. When anyone comes to me saying that they have been turned down for their first choice, I have no hesitation referring them to another school in the area because I know that the quality of education is fantastic. However, it always falls down with the infrastructure and the quality of the facilities that are provided. We could wax lyrical today about the list of issues in many schools in East Antrim. I know that the situation is the same across the entire school estate in Northern Ireland and that money does not grow on trees, but we are here to discuss schools in East Antrim, and it would be remiss of us not to bang the drum on their behalf.

This has been a hugely difficult year. I am a governor on the boards of two schools, Silverstream Primary School and Nursery Unit, and Woodlawn Primary School, and I am also a trustee of Carrickfergus Model Primary School. When I drop my son off there every day or when I visit as a governor, I know about the staff's workload, their passion and the difficult circumstances that they have operated in over the last year. However, that has not deterred them one bit, and they have cracked on and got the job done. The pupils are smiling, even though things are not easy and it has been a difficult year. My hat goes off to each and every one of them for the amazing work that they have done.

We have proved that we have been able to work together as MLAs. Mr Lyons referred to a number of examples of that. I can think of a letter that I put together, which was sent to the then permanent secretary, Derek Baker, on behalf of all our colleagues in East Antrim, about the delays at Islandmagee Primary School. The discussion on that has been well rehearsed, but, for the record, I will make the point again that I was speaking to a former pupil who is about to finish a master's and was in primary 1 when that amalgamation happened. It is hard to believe that the school has had to wait for 20-odd years. The kids of the pupils from that time are about to start school, and it is still not complete. We take our hat off to Arlene Cambridge and all the staff at Islandmagee Primary School for their tenacity. It will come about eventually, and we look forward to the first brick being laid and to the school being complete. It is very frustrating that that has not happened yet and that so much time has gone by.

When you compare that with other sites where things have gone quite quickly, you find that there is often no excuse for things not happening. To go back to my original point about Carrickfergus Academy, I fear that that is where we could end up. The whole idea of that amalgamation was predicated on the notion that it would be prioritised for a new build. When the vote on it took place, the governors and the parents were carried on the momentum that there would be a new school very quickly.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Of course. Always.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that, unless the Minister and the Department prioritise such amalgamations appropriately,

very few schools will come forward to seek an amalgamation in future?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Stewart: Thank you for that. Absolutely. Given the way that things are going, maybe because there is a changing strategy for education and the prioritisation of sites, more schools will be asked to look at mergers. They will certainly think twice if the experience of Carrickfergus Academy and the schools that formed it is anything to go by. I fear that there are pupils in that school, now in year 8, who will not see that site. If the experience of Islandmagee Primary School is anything to go by, their kids may not see the site.

It costs money, teaching hours and logistics. The entire weight of effort to transfer between those two schools — it is two and a half miles — means that hundreds of teaching hours are lost every single year. What is the result if you multiply that by what could be 10 or 12 years or however long they have to wait? The uncertainty of it all has an impact. We should at least know where the site is, but that has not even been confirmed yet. There has been a nudge and a wink that it will remain where it is, but that has not even been confirmed.

Because of that, Carrickfergus Grammar School, which I left in 2000, is still waiting for new sports facilities, as Mr Lyons mentioned. We do not know whether we can invest in the site itself broadly enough to share across two school sites because we do not know whether, in the long term, the new school at Carrickfergus Academy is going to be there. Even getting certainty that it will be located there would mean that we could start to build the infrastructure around it so that shared facilities at least could be developed while we wait for the new build. With every piece of strength that I have, I urge that we at least try to give certainty as quickly as possible to the pupils, parents and staff at Carrickfergus Academy.

I referred to other schemes that have gone well. The rebuild at Corran Integrated Primary School and Nursery in Larne was announced in 2013 and has long since been built. It is up and running, and hats off again to the staff there. However, the focus goes back to the other schools that are still waiting. There is a disparity that I can never get my head around.

5.00 pm

Aside from those two schemes, there have been other projects in recent years. Woodburn Primary School has been a roaring success and a really good asset, and its numbers are up because of that. When I visited recently, all the pupils and staff were overjoyed by the standard of their new building, so we thank the Minister for getting that completed. The same applies to Acorn Integrated Primary School.

I have some concerns. Recently, the Antiville Primary School and St Comgall's College sites were sold off. Local taxpayers had put money into those schools. In future, when schools are closed and the land sold off, it would be nice if that money could be reinvested in the local school estate. In that case, it went to building houses. Maybe that could be looked at. I do not know whether that is pie in the sky thinking.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Mr Weir: I do not have details of the individual sites. However, when any public land is sold off, there will be some restriction on where the money goes. It will depend on whether direct money has been provided for the site in the first place. Generally speaking, the money from sales goes back to public finances and the Treasury. The Member makes a reasonable point. Unfortunately, however, the money cannot be ring-fenced for reallocation within the Department of Education. My job would be a lot easier if it could.

Mr Stewart: Maybe we can look at that collectively. I do not know whether that can be done. As I said, maybe it is pie in the sky, but it was just a thought.

In my last minute, I want to comment on a couple of points. A number of rural schools have been added to the latest round of area planning, which, in my opinion, is a euphemism for earmarked for closure. It would not be right to mention particular schools. Those governors and staff are working tirelessly, and they fear becoming victims of death by a thousand cuts, Minister. It is really sad to see that. They provide a vital service in the rural community and should be given every opportunity to continue doing that. They should, at least, be kept informed, rather than having this year-on-year uncertainty.

Finally, in my last 30 seconds, if you will indulge me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I have a real fear about the loss of our traffic patrolmen and women. There have never been more cars on

the roads, yet every school is being told that, if their patrol person retires or, sadly, passes away, they will not be replaced. We had that at the Model Primary School with the tragic death of its patrol person last year.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Of course, yes.

Mr Dickson: I want to comment on that particular issue with the Model Primary School. When travelling to my constituency office in Carrick, I strictly observe the 20 mph signs that are there to replace the patrol person, but I am constantly passed by other cars every time I make that journey.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that the Alliance Party has stolen your last 10 seconds, Mr Stewart. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGuigan: I thank Gordon Lyons for securing the debate. I echo the comments from others in praising the school staff across the constituency of East Antrim for their work and commitment every year, but particularly this year. East Antrim is not my constituency, of course, but it neighbours my constituency of North Antrim. A small number of pupils in parts in the glens of Antrim, for example, attend schools in East Antrim. Therefore, I have a few issues pertaining to the debate that I want to put on record.

St Killian's College, on the coast road, is on one of the most picturesque and beautiful sites anywhere on this island. However, it has a building meant for 600 pupils and a current enrolment of 850. When my party colleague John O'Dowd announced and committed to a new school building in 2014, no one expected that, by 2021, no sod had yet been dug. I echo and agree with all the commentary from other Members on other schools. St Killian's is in stage 3 of planning with Mid and East Antrim Council and, hopefully, is on track for Christmas 2022. However, more than a whole school generation of pupils has missed out on a modern school environment because of bureaucracy and delay in the process. In a similar situation in another school in my constituency, I recall a member of the board of governors describing the process as trying to wade through treacle. Minister, that needs to be streamlined. We need to ensure the speedier delivery of new school buildings when they are announced.

Parts of East Antrim are particularly rural, and, whilst this is not an issue specific to schools,

planning constraints and infrastructure deficits in parts of the glens of Antrim are having a major impact on our rural school estate, and I echo the commentary from John Stewart on rural schools.

Given the issues with planning and infrastructure in places like Cushendun, Cushendall, Glenariff etc, young people have to build away from where they were brought up or buy outside the community in which they were reared, and that has an impact on primary school enrolment in those places. While that is not the direct responsibility of the Minister, he needs to help to address that with his Executive colleagues.

School transport in the constituency is another issue that has been flagged up to me, particularly for children attending special educational needs schools in Ballymena and Larne. Some of those children are being picked up as early as 8.00 am and are not getting to school until after 9.00 am, and they are not getting home until after 4.30 pm. Some are spending as much as three hours travelling to and from school, perhaps because they are being taken, as it has been described to me, on a tour of East Antrim rather than via the most direct route. Again, Minister, that needs to be reviewed to ensure that those children spend less time travelling and more time at school and at home.

This is a general point about all schools, which has been raised by Gordon Lyons and others. I spoke earlier about St Killian's new build. New builds need to take account of more than just the educational needs of our school community, given the lack of sporting and other facilities, particularly in rural parts of the constituency. The Department needs to make provisions to allow schools to have excellent sporting facilities and to open up those facilities to the general public. Communities in rural areas should be able to access, after 5.00 pm, at the weekend and during the two months over the summer, good sporting and other facilities that are on their doorstep. For example, why not incorporate state-of-the-art facilities in St Killian's and allow the numerous GAA, soccer, rugby, rowing and athletic clubs in the constituency to use them? Those are just a number of things that I would like to see.

Mr Stewart: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGuigan: Yes.

Mr Stewart: I am chancing my arm because I think that you are about to finish. I will use 30

seconds of your time to get in a point that I was going to make earlier, so please indulge me. Does the Member agree that the plan by the EA not to replace traffic patrol people outside our schools, particularly those with dual carriageways outside them and even those in rural communities, is dangerous and is not in the interests of pupil safety? We have to be rightly obsessed with pupil safety inside and outside school. Given that there are more cars on the roads now than ever before, surely now is the time to invest in safety in getting to school as well as safety inside it.

Mr McGuigan: I congratulate the Member on his use of that intervention. I wholeheartedly agree. We should be passionate about making travel to school safe for our children. I agree with the point about school patrols. I also agree that that is outside this Minister's remit, but there should be a 20 mph limit outside schools. We need to work to ensure that there is active travel provision so that our children can walk and cycle safely to school. I totally agree with what the Member said.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. On Mr Stewart's point, it does not help in other ways either. For example, if parents know that a patrol person is there to help the children get safely across a road, that may encourage them not to drive to school. I know that a number of schools, including Linn Primary School, Greenisland Primary School and Whiteabbey Primary School, face problems with traffic, as do the residents. That is a big issue, and it should be taken into consideration before planning approval is given, because it can cause a real hassle for residents. Corran Integrated Primary School got that right with the parking on its site.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Just as Alliance stole the Ulster Unionists' last 10 seconds, the DUP has now stolen Sinn Féin's last 10 seconds. I now move on to the next Member on my list, and that is Daniel McCrossan.

Mr McCrossan: I thank Member Lyons for securing the debate. I am all for such debates, particularly when it comes to putting a very bright spotlight on the school estate, its dilapidated condition in many parts of Northern Ireland and safety issues inside and outside schools. Various constituents right across Northern Ireland have shared with me, as the SDLP's education spokesperson, many stories that are truly shocking and definitely question the safety at some of the schools and the condition of some of the estates.

I do find it quite strange, however, that a Member who is in the same party as the Minister has to bring an Adjournment debate to highlight those issues. Perhaps the best thing to do is to have a conversation directly with the Minister to resolve the issues in your constituency, because I can tell you that they are not unique to East Antrim. The condition of the school estate right across the entirety of Northern Ireland is in question, and, although it is easy for all of us to point the finger at the Education Authority, the buck certainly stops with the Department of Education and the Minister, and not just Minister Weir, who has been in office for just over a year since the three-year collapse of the institutions, but consecutive Education Ministers, who have failed to grasp the nettle and resolve the issues with the school estate.

That having been said, I am not a Member for East Antrim, as Members will know, but all the issues that have been shared by Members today are reflected in schools by school leaders, principals and parents right across the entirety of Northern Ireland. I have done a fair bit of research on some of the issues, and I have looked at some correspondence from principals in East Antrim. I share Member Lyons's disappointment at the lack of commitment and willingness from the Education Authority to invest in Carrickfergus Grammar School and the disappointment of Members across the Chamber who echo his concerns. The Minister is best placed to resolve those issues and could very quickly, with a phone call or the stroke of a pen, add pressure to ensure that the steam is taken out of the delays.

Some of us might blame the Minister, and some would say that I continually blame the Minister. I understand, however, that, politically, it is a big issue. It is an issue in all our constituencies that needs to be resolved, and it is one that has been going on for many decades. I have written to the Minister in recent times about similar issues that exist in the school estate in West Tyrone and in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The Minister will know that St Conor's Primary School in the heart of Omagh is suffering similarly. The school was built many years ago and accommodates 400 young people and many teachers. As Mr Dickson and Mr Stewart outlined, the issue lies outside the school estate. The higher volume of vehicles on the roads brings into question the safety of our children and young people. Similar to Carrickfergus Grammar, there is a very serious issue with traffic management at schools such as St Conor's in my constituency, where the main road, which is surrounded by hundreds of housing estates and residents, sees a logjam

every single day. Children are coming straight out of the school gate to go to their parents' cars or to buses or taxis and are running in between and behind cars, putting themselves at risk. The issue is that there is so much congestion that it is threatening the lives and safety of those young people.

Members have highlighted Larne High School, which was built in 1957. Member Beggs said that it needs work, as it is 64 years old. In West Tyrone, Strabane Primary School is another example. It is 50 years old and has been waiting for a major refurbishment since 2004. I declare an interest, because my former primary school —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Let me bring the Member to order briefly. His contribution to the debate on schools in East Antrim has been tangential to say the least. This is an Adjournment debate on the school estate in East Antrim. I am sure that, if the Member wanted to at some point in the future, we could have a similar debate on West Tyrone, but can we try to return to the theme of the Adjournment debate?

Mr McCrossan: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with respect, the theme of the debate is the school estate, and that is not unique to that specific constituency.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The title in the Order Paper is "School Estate in East Antrim". The Member is veering dangerously close to questioning a ruling of the Chair, and I am sure that that is not his intention.

Mr McCrossan: As I stated previously when mentioning Larne High School and Carrickfergus Grammar School in the context of the school estate, I am all for debates about the condition of the school estate in East Antrim, but, equally, Adjournment debates by themselves do not solve the issues.

Fluffy conversation around the issues will not resolve the school estate problems in East Antrim; what will resolve them is swift action by the Minister of Education. Less debate, more action, more money, more investment in the school estate and swift leadership are absolutely necessary to ensure that our children in East Antrim and every other constituency have the best possible access to high-quality provision.

5.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that the Member's time is up. I call the Minister of Education to respond to the comments that have been made.

Mr Weir: First, I associate myself with the remarks of Members who sent their best wishes to my colleague and friend David Hilditch for his treatment.

I am delighted to respond on this Adjournment topic. I am sure that Members will forgive me if I keep my remarks on the school estate to East Antrim. Road infrastructure, traffic management and safety on our roads may lie outside the scope. If only there were some other Minister from a different party who could answer on those issues. One assumes that there will be a quiet word rather than a debate on the subject.

I appreciate a lot of the frustrations and concerns. In the 10 minutes that I have, I hope to deal with as many as possible of the issues that have been raised directly by Members. If, however, particularly in relation to individual schools that have been mentioned, I inadvertently omit a school or do not have the time to complete a response, I will endeavour to write to Members with the specifics.

Members will be aware that the broader school estate, including special schools in the system, comprises about 1,100 schools. Part of the frustration comes from the sense that the budget for capital expenditure could, if the money were there, be spent three or four times over. That has resulted in a range of schools not being in the best possible condition.

Area planning was mentioned. I do not intend to touch too directly on that because, while we are moving to a longer-term cycle for area planning, specific decisions on individual schools are a legal process to which I have to directly respond and on which I am forbidden from commenting.

Mr McGuigan commented on special needs transport. While it does not cut down the travel time, the EA has recently launched a series of new buses with a much greater level of comfort and safety for children, with a particular focus on special needs schools. Tomorrow, I will visit Roddensvale special school in Larne. It will be interesting to see whether those transport issues are raised.

The school estate in East Antrim comprises 52 schools, with 14,000 pupils being educated in them. Under the major capital programme initiated in 2012, work on five schools in East Antrim was announced. While mention was

made of the slightly quicker progress at Ulidia, that work was announced under the Fresh Start programme, which has enabled the money to be levered in directly. Of the other school projects, two — Woodburn Primary and Corran Integrated — with an investment totalling £8.7 million, are complete.

Every school would like a new build, of course, but sometimes that is not possible. The other device that has principally been used is the school enhancement programme (SEP), which enables investment of up to £4 million. Four SEP programmes have been announced for East Antrim: Roddensvale, as I mentioned, Carrick Grammar, Thornfield House and Greenisland Primary. I will come to Carrick and Greenisland in greater detail later. Two SEP programmes have been completed in recent years at Acorn Integrated, which was mentioned, and Belfast High, with total investment in the region of £5 million.

In the past three financial years, over £6 million from the minor works programme has been invested across schools in East Antrim. From the broader perspective, it is, obviously, the responsibility of the managing authorities to plan sustainable provision and, as I will touch on, to be the gateway for building applications.

I turn to some of the individual schools that have been mentioned. Islandmagee Primary School and Carrickfergus Academy share the particular pressures of being split-site schools. I was recently at Carrickfergus Academy, and I will look to see whether there is any scope for additional funding to be looked at for split-site schools. That will impact on a limited number of sites across Northern Ireland, but any adjustment to the common funding formula by way of additional money for split sites will mean, effectively, a different division of money. Any money going to one school will always have a knock-on effect on others.

There has been frustration at Islandmagee. The business case was approved in July 2019 and identified a new-build school on the Low Road. I can update Members that the design of the new build progresses well and that stage 4, which is the technical design report, was submitted by the integrated consultant team for approval by the Department on 17 May 2021. Members will be aware that the planning application for the project has been lodged with the council. We hope that it progresses.

As for Carrickfergus Academy, in the last capital call prior to devolution, mention was made of incentivising amalgamations. One of the problems, to some extent, was that nearly

all the schools that went forward at that stage and were approved in that capital call were amalgamations. Carrickfergus Academy fell just a little bit below the radar in numbers. However, it is the intention for there to be a fresh capital call later in 2021. That will be scored independently by officials, but Carrickfergus Academy is well placed for it. Strong consideration will be given in the scoring. I cannot make any direct promises in relation to that; in the past, sometimes, too many promises have been made.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he confirm whether he thinks that there will be changes to the protocol, the scoring mechanism?

In response to Mr McCrossan's point, I say that I am glad that he was able to visit many schools in East Antrim. Mr McCrossan, whose default position seems to be outrage right now, can be assured that I raise these issues not only with the Minister but on the Floor, which is appropriate.

Mr Weir: I am glad that one Member is raising the issue of the protocol without it causing quite the level of controversy that it does in other subjects. *[Laughter.]* We will examine the protocol to make sure that it is fit for purpose. At times, not enough credit is given to the state of the school buildings. I assure Members that I believe that it is critical that there is a high level of scoring for split sites. As Members have pointed out, there is an inequity, and it raises the pressures that are there.

I have been to Larne High School, and I am aware of the very good work that is going on. One of the important things to note is that, in any process for capital build, be it SEP or major works, the managing authority will put forward a range of schools to be considered. The Education Authority did not put forward Larne High School in either the latest school enhancement programme call or the latest major capital works programme. Therefore, it did not even make the starting gate for consideration. That is why, I think, there needs to be continued engagement.

Greenisland Primary School has been announced in the SEP. It is at an early stage. An initial site visit has been undertaken by the EA, and procurement of a design team for the project is well-advanced. Once a design team is appointed, formal steering group meetings will take place, and that will allow the school to make an impact directly.

Good work has gone on with the sports pitches at Carrickfergus Grammar School. I know that there has been the situation in the SEP. I visited with the mayor, and there has been good work between the council and Carrickfergus Grammar School. That should be advanced.

An application was submitted for Whiteabbey Primary School, but it did not get a green light for a full announcement. However, some work has been provided for in minor works. Those projects are expected to go to tender over the next week or two.

St Killian's College was mentioned. It was announced under a major works programme in June 2014.

The business case was approved by the Department with a total capital value of £32.9 million. The current position is that the developed design stage 3 submission is being reviewed by the Department's technical advisers. Therefore, there is a level of movement there.

Abbey Community College —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, this debate is scheduled to end at 26 minutes past the hour. Therefore, you have an additional minute, if you want to take it.

Mr Weir: If I had known that earlier, I could have spun this out a little bit better.

Mention was made of the Abbey Community College project as well. It was announced in 2014. The integrated consultant team has been appointed and a feasibility study completed. It identified a number of feasible options to provide accommodation for the college. A business case is being developed by the Education Authority to determine the preferred option to be taken forward.

The valid point was made that we need to look at how the process can move more quickly. Balanced against that is a need to ensure value for public money, particularly with major capital works, and that creates a need for a level of checks. As part of that, with any new build, there is a requirement to look widely for any potential venues, which means that any capital build, by its nature, will tend to be a lot more elongated than, for example, the school enhancement programme.

I thank the Members for their contributions today. I will continue to work with schools in

East Antrim and beyond, because every student deserves the best possible facilities for their education.

Adjourned at 5.26 pm.

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