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Brooks, David (East Belfast)	McAllister, Miss Nuala (North Belfast)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 26 February 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: If Members wish to be called to make a statement, they should indicate so by rising in their places. Those Members who are called will have up to three minutes to make their statement. I remind Members that interventions are not permitted, and I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until this item of business has been finished.

Narrow Water Bridge

Ms Ennis: I will take this opportunity to reflect on the positive announcement last week around Narrow Water bridge and the opportunities that I believe now exist. Those of us who have championed Narrow Water bridge know that it is more than just an infrastructure project. We know that it is key to unlocking the huge economic and tourism potential that we have in south Down and right across the Carlingford lough region. Funding has been secured from the Irish Government's Shared Island unit, and that will help to boost Ireland's eastern corridor region and help strengthen our all-island ties.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and Louth County Council have a strategic alliance to promote, strengthen and stimulate the social, cultural and economic links within and between the people of the Carlingford lough region, and Narrow Water bridge is not just an example of that but an example of what can be done when we work together on an all-island basis.

We have a huge, unique tourism offering in Warrenpoint, Rostrevor and, of course, into the Mournes, but we must build on that to ensure that residents and visitors can be proud of South Down's attractions and we continue to offer a first-class visitor experience. That is why, as we see the Narrow Water bridge progress, Sinn Féin will work with Louth County Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to see the restoration of Warrenpoint's iconic baths. With planning permission in place, a viable and innovative project such as

Warrenpoint Baths will complement the Narrow Water bridge when it is built. I hope that funding from the Shared Ireland unit can be a viable avenue for the funding of the Warrenpoint Baths project, because it is time to deliver the investment that is needed to transform that iconic landmark and restore Warrenpoint Baths to their former glory.

Waiting Lists: Mental Health Services

Mr Frew: As reported on Downtown Radio and Cool FM news by journalist Tara Griffiths on 16 February, the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) waiting times statistics for Northern Ireland were published on 14 February. Those statistics were for the period up to December 2023. As of that date, more than 2,000 children and adolescents were waiting for a CAMHS appointment. More than half of those 2,000 young people had been waiting for more than nine weeks. In December 2022, nearly half of the total number waiting were in the Northern Trust area. As of 31 December 2023, the Northern Trust had reduced that number to 697 out of the 2,095, but, out of that 697, 415 were waiting more than nine weeks.

It is important that those figures are on record, because those are our young people and adolescents. Waiting lists are one thing, but the sheer number of children who need to use the service is astronomical. It is absolutely shameful. Children as young as two years old are on mental health waiting lists. The figures correlate with school absence figures. The number of children missing 50% of school time has doubled. The number of children missing 80% of school time has doubled. Those figures have doubled since the onset of lockdown philosophy and the deployment of fear.

Anxiety levels in children have gone through the roof. Children and infants are struggling with developmental and social problems that they should never have had to deal with. When they seek support, they have to go onto a waiting list

and wait nine weeks to get it. Not only have we let those children down through the pandemic, we are letting them down now. Not only that, but no one wants to talk about it. I assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will keep talking about it until those figures are reduced.

Peanut Allergy: Palforzia

Mr McReynolds: I rise to speak on a medical treatment that, I am sure, some Members may already be aware of: Palforzia. It was brought to my attention a few years ago by Tierna Byrne, a mother from East Belfast who was concerned about the impact that lack of access to the drug could have on the future of her now five-year-old son, Matthew, who, sadly, lives with a severe peanut allergy. In her initial email to me, she described the fear and worry that she and her husband live with daily; how her son has experienced swollen eyes and lips or his face covered in blotches; how he has been hospitalised due to anaphylactic shock; and her heartbreak that he has had to grow up a lot faster than his classmates by having to immediately tell new people that he cannot eat nuts.

I was shocked to learn that one in 50 children in the UK live with a nut allergy. In 2021, NHS England approved access to the drug. In Northern Ireland, it has been approved since February 2022. The Belfast Trust has committed to introducing Palforzia as it knows that it will help to reduce risk further down the line.

The reason that I raise the issue in the Chamber today, however, is that children in Northern Ireland living with nut allergies are missing out when compared with children in the rest of the UK and many other children across the globe, as Palforzia is regarded as being too resource-intensive to distribute fully here; instead, it is distributed on a case-by-case basis by consultants. That is done despite parents' rightful concerns, the evidence confirming Palforzia's efficacy, the support that I have seen in the medical sector and from consultants, and the acknowledgement that I had from permanent secretaries during the most recent Assembly collapse.

Everyone knows about Palforzia and that it works. They know the benefits that it brings and that its full introduction is needed in Northern Ireland. I was working on this when these institutions' hands were tied through the lack of a Minister, but Northern Ireland is now in a better place. I call on the Minister of Health to do what he can to make Palforzia more widely

available for the families and children who so desperately need it.

EU Protection of Geographical Indications Regulation

Dr Aiken: Members will now be aware of the notification of a new EU regulation on protection of geographical indications for craft and industrial products. You wrote to Members of the Assembly on Friday evening, Mr Speaker, informing us that an applicability motion must be tabled by the FM and the dFM, acting jointly, to the Assembly within 14 days of its receipt. Members may not be fully aware that that applicability motion requires the cross-community consent of the Chamber for it to be added to the Windsor framework legislation. The notification, which came originally to the Clerk of our Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee, was not, as I understand it, originally forwarded to you, Mr Speaker, as it should have been, by the Cabinet Office, and there is a particularly tight timeline for it that commenced on 21 February. The Chair of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee has made clear to the rest of the Committee that our remit stretches only to future regulation, among other areas, as outlined in the letter that the Committee sent to Ministers the previous week.

In the light of that and the taut timelines required, we are concerned that insufficient scrutiny will be conducted on this new EU regulation, whereby, according to the explanatory note, it may downplay the implications for Northern Ireland businesses. There is, by implication, a possibility that it may impact on internal UK trade, particularly on the vital east-west dimension of our internal UK market. While the note refers to minor changes, those of us who have been in the Assembly previously may remember that the impact of the removal of only a few minor words from a piece of transferred legislation brought down a Government. Our party notes with concern that scrutiny of the legislation has not already been expedited. Furthermore, with future timelines of five working days for other matters that are due to come under the purview of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee and the need for us to move accurately at pace, there is a need to ensure that our Committees start looking beyond the narrow remits that they have been given, and if the lessons of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry are not to be forgotten, we must stop being incurious and start critically examining the potentially fundamental changes in legislation that are beginning to affect us, starting with this

protection of geographical indications regulation.

Encephalitis

Mr McCrossan: I would like to raise awareness of the significance of encephalitis, following World Encephalitis Day last Thursday. Encephalitis is a serious condition that impacts on individuals and families across the UK and Ireland and, indeed, globally. Raising awareness about the disease is crucial in promoting and understanding the needs of those affected. Encephalitis is a condition characterised by inflammation of the brain, often leading to symptoms such as confusion, seizures and, in severe cases, coma or even death. The disease can have a profound impact on those affected and their families, making it emotional and challenging in all circumstances. In the UK and Ireland alone, encephalitis impacts on thousands of people each year, highlighting the importance of increased awareness and support for that terrible condition.

I will take a moment to acknowledge the efforts of a family in my constituency. Sonia Hargan and Jackie O'Kane — two sisters — and their families have been instrumental in raising awareness about encephalitis on behalf of their late mother, Bridie Hargan, who passed away in recent weeks. Bridie was a native of Douglas Bridge and a huge part of the local community, and she battled against this terrible disease for a significant period. She spent months on end in hospital and in care. The sisters' dedication to the cause, despite the untimely loss of their mother to the disease, is truly commendable and serves as an inspiration to all those affected.

It is through the efforts of people like Sonia and Jackie and their families that we are able to shed light on the impact of encephalitis and work towards greater understanding and support for those affected. Today, I amplify their voices and the voices of all those affected to raise awareness and provide crucial support to individuals and families who face the challenges of encephalitis.

12.15 pm

As we reflect on World Encephalitis Day and the important work being done to support the cause, let us all commit to spreading the necessary awareness, offering compassion and advocating for those affected by this debilitating disease. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of individuals who are battling

encephalitis, and we must ensure greater awareness of, and support for, all those affected.

I thank all those who have dedicated their time, energy and resources to raising awareness of this important cause. Your efforts are making a difference, and we stand with you in solidarity as we continue to support this important cause. Together, we can make a positive impact. It is worth noting that encephalitis can affect anyone at any age and at any time in their life. In helping this particular family, I have seen its worst possible effects, which, unfortunately and ultimately, resulted in the loss of Bridie Hargan.

Postnatal Depression in Men

Ms Sheerin: I congratulate the bravery and courage of a couple in my constituency, whom some of you might have seen in the news over the weekend: Danielle and Nial Sands. They spoke out very bravely about their experience following the birth of their baby, Joe. Danielle suffered from postnatal depression, and Nial then realised that he was going through the same thing. I thought that their courage, in talking about their story and raising awareness of something that is never really discussed, namely men's mental health in the wake of a new addition to the family, was amazing. I know them personally — Danielle's granny is my neighbour — so I congratulate them on their bravery.

Lisa Dorrian

Mr Dunne: This week marks the nineteenth anniversary of the tragic disappearance of Lisa Dorrian from a caravan park in Ballyhalbert in County Down in 2005. Lisa's disappearance left an irreplaceable hole in the lives of her loving family and her many friends. Lisa's body has not been found. Her family has led a courageous and dignified campaign called "Let's Find Lisa", as they seek to bury her with her mother, Patricia, who sadly passed away in 2015 with a broken heart following her daughter's disappearance.

I commend the Dorrian family for their bravery and resilience in continuing to search for justice and fighting to bring their beloved Lisa home. Their dedication to getting truth and justice for Lisa is as strong today as it was 19 years ago. I particularly pay tribute to Lisa's sister Joanne, who I have met a number of times, for all her ongoing efforts and campaigning to find Lisa. The family has worked very closely with many other families who are in similar circumstances, from right across the country and beyond, to

look at ways that they can support each other and give each other hope through the most trying of the circumstances that they face. The investigation remains open. I encourage anyone with any information at to contact the PSNI immediately.

Recently, Lisa's family has backed the campaign to introduce Charlotte's law, which would see murderers face tougher sentences if they do not disclose the location of their victim's remains. The campaign is named after Charlotte Murray, who, similarly, went missing in 2012. She, too, was tragically murdered and her body secretly buried. If passed, this law would impact on a perpetrator's parole and include incentives for their cooperation in disclosing where they have put the victim's body. Lisa's family has been heartened in recent weeks by the Justice Minister's commitment of her intention to legislate in support of Charlotte's law as part of the upcoming sentencing Bill. I certainly welcome that, and I urge the Minister to move at pace to deliver that much-needed legislation, which will bring some hope and comfort to families. It will support the tireless work of families like the Dorrians and the Murrays in their search for justice, truth and peace. Importantly, it will give families that peace to grieve properly for their loved ones.

No family should ever have to face the additional heartbreak of not being able to bury a loved one. I commend the family of Lisa Dorrian for their bravery, dedication and courage, 19 years on, as they fight for justice for Lisa.

Apprenticeships

Ms Eastwood: February is the month when we mark Apprenticeship Week and celebrate our apprentices. I believe that we had another bit of business on that week, so I raise it now, and better late than never.

Apprenticeships are a great way to grow our economy, to tackle poverty and social inequality and to help us to address the many and various challenges that face our economy, including productivity, meeting the challenge of skills gaps and looking at how we develop a strategic plan for our economy. They are a key part of widening participation and access to education. However, all of us can do a lot more to promote apprenticeships. We need to be honest: every time that we talk about education and skills, there appears to be an ingrained bias in our society that always goes down the well-trodden path of academia. Did anyone ever stop to ask why?

I am one of those in the House who benefited from a pilot of a higher-level apprenticeship, which was brought in by my party colleague Dr Stephen Farry when he was Minister for Employment and Learning. I see some younger people in the Gallery, and it is a shame that they cannot shout down. I believe that there is a perception in society about apprenticeships. I do not know whether that is developed by the system or how it has come about. It may be due to different policies that seem to be, at times, at cross purposes, but there is a bias out there around apprenticeships. However, I believe in our young people and that they are being more informed than ever. Indeed, Members will know that one of the issues that I will seek to further in my time as this mandate goes forward is careers advice in schools. I believe that there is very much an effort across Education and Economy. Part of helping us to grow apprenticeships and opportunities for young people and, indeed, people of all ages is having a vibrant and thriving further education sector. I am deeply concerned about some of the issues that are being raised by people who work in that sector and by people who avail themselves of the courses that are available there.

We speak about 25 years of prosperity, and all of us want to see that. However, each one of us has a role to play in the House in advocating for not just apprenticeships but the role of further education. I also want to raise again the issue of the apprenticeship levy. We have a role to play on that issue in this House and in the other place, and I will not rest until we get that resolved. I also want to place on record my thanks to all the apprentices working across Northern Ireland. They are delivering great work.

Chris Nicholl

Mr Nesbitt: I rise to pay tribute to and mourn the loss of Mr Chris Nicholl, who passed away on Saturday night at the age of 77. Chris, on no fewer than 51 occasions, was selected to represent the Northern Ireland senior men's football team. He became a stalwart of the early glory years of Billy Bingham's second spell as manager, beginning in 1980, when he was a regular in the team that went on to win the British Championship that year. That was a year when I was a rookie reporter/commentator on the Northern Ireland team. He was always very kind to me, although, to be fair, he never pushed himself in front of a microphone. He was content to make his contribution on the field of play.

I was lucky enough to see him play in all five of Northern Ireland's matches at the 1982 World Cup in Spain, including that famous night on 25 June when we inflicted a 1-0 defeat on the hosts in the Luis Casanova stadium in Valencia. Chris contributed more than his fair share because, inexplicably, the Spanish kept throwing high balls into the Northern Ireland box. At 6 feet 4, Chris was fit to nod them away again and again and again. After he retired as a player, he enjoyed success as a manager, including a spell at Southampton, where he mentored he likes of Matt Le Tissier and Alan Shearer. A few years ago, Shearer made a documentary called 'Alan Shearer: Dementia, Football and Me', and, sadly, Chris was one of his interviewees. He said that he was suffering from brain damage brought on by heading footballs. He talked about his memory, and he said:

"Everyone forgets regular things, where your keys are. But when you forget where you live, that's different. I've had that for the last four or five years ... It bothers me."

He suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy, and it appears that it cost him his life.

I should acknowledge that, in 2022, when Stormont and devolution were down, Billy Bingham also passed away. Billy played in Sweden in 1958 in our first World Cup and managed the other two — Spain in 1982 and Mexico in 1986. He was the only manager ever to have straight home and away wins over the great West German team of that era. I would like to think that we will see the likes of Billy Bingham and Chris Nicholl again, but their exploits have set quite the challenge.

Shared and Integrated Education Capital Funding

Mr O'Toole: I associate myself with the remarks about Chris Nicholl.

I will speak about the news that emerged at the end of last week — shocking and unacceptable news — that shared and integrated education capital funding, totalling, it appears, £150 million, has been removed from 10 schools in Northern Ireland. I should declare an interest: I am a parent of a child who is at one of the affected schools, Forge Integrated Primary School, which was expecting to be funded. As a serving MLA and someone who follows the policy, it was shocking that I and, indeed, other parents found out that the money was being cut because we received emails from the principals

of the affected schools. I have been in touch with the principals in my schools in South Belfast, including Millennium Integrated Primary School. That is a brilliant integrated primary school just outside Carryduff that had been expecting to build a new 14-base classroom and a two-class nursery. The school was also expecting to invest in special educational needs provision.

This case goes far beyond South Belfast. It is shocking news, and we will seek answers from not only the Minister of Education and the UK Government but other Executive parties, because it comes after a whole range of other bits of information about the agreed financial package has leaked out. Let us face it, this was leaked or sneaked out. It was not based on an official announcement from the Minister or the Department. Boards of governors were contacted in private and given the information. That, in itself, is unacceptable, but it is also unacceptable that £150 million that was designed to be allocated to shared and integrated education — that should be a priority for all of us in the Chamber as something that we are all signed up to support under the agreement and subsequent legislation — is being cut in private and in secret.

We need to know how the decision was made to reallocate the funding, which parties and Ministers knew that it was going to happen and why the Assembly was not told and had to wait until the information was sneaked out to parents, via an email, so that they could find out what was happening. What other important projects are going to lose funding as a result of the reallocation? What has been waved through by Executive parties in the rush to deal with these things? It is completely unacceptable. I hope that we get more clarity from the Education Minister on how the decision was taken, who knew that it was being taken and what will be done to support those integrated schools and shared projects that are expecting to build facilities.

Horizon Post Office Scandal

Mr McHugh: I want to talk about the miscarriage of justice in the Horizon post office scandal. The details of the saga have been well publicised, thanks to a very successful ITV drama this year. In 1999, Post Office began the roll-out of its new IT system, Horizon. It soon became clear that Horizon was faulty, which made it appear as if money was going missing. Management and Post Office blamed the sub-postmasters, and, as a result, the accused were sacked and forced to pay money back, and

many were wrongfully prosecuted. Hundreds of innocent postal workers were scapegoated in that way, including here in the North of Ireland. The injustice went on for years, with Post Office refusing to acknowledge that Horizon was to blame, despite repeated attempts by victims to raise complaints.

The First Minister and I met victims of the post office scandal here in the North and heard of the impact on their lives and how their livelihoods and those of their families were completely destroyed.

They told us about how they were dragged through the courts and convicted of crimes they did not commit. Not only was their good reputation tarnished in their communities, but they were dismissed from their employment after many years of loyal service and, in some cases, faced financial ruin. Some of the victims told us that their health, including their mental health, suffered and that they developed disease as a result of the stress that they were under because of the false accusations.

12.30 pm

The victims all agreed on what was needed in order to go forward: all convictions should be quashed and fair compensation provided to the victims. I welcome the announcement by the British Government and the legislation that has been brought forward, which will exonerate victims in England and Wales. However, because the Post Office is a reserved matter, it does not include the victims in the North of Ireland. I commend the call by our First Minister and the Minister of Justice to ask that the issue is addressed to ensure that the convictions are reversed and that the law is extended to the North of Ireland to cover the people here who should also be compensated for the losses that they have suffered over the past number of years.

DUP: Humble Address

Mr Allister: As part of the dud deal that brought the DUP back into the Executive, today, in the House of Commons, one of the DUP's fig leaves — what is grandly called a "humble address" — will be promoted. It is built around a flagrant deceit, a deceit that, in the words of that humble address, includes:

"acknowledging the foundational importance of the Acts of Union 1800, including the economic provisions under Article 6 of those Acts".

I say "deceit" because the deal that it celebrates confirms the suspension of the very article 6 that it references.

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

Our Supreme Court, in clear terms, because of the supremacy afforded in law to the protocol, because it establishes a continuing Irish sea border and because of the foreign EU law that it submits Northern Ireland to, has held that article 6 of the Acts of Union is in suspension. Nothing in the dud Donaldson deal reverses one word of that: article 6 remains in suspension. Yet, because of that, we continue to have a country partitioned by a customs and regulatory border, subject to foreign law and subject to a foreign court. Thereby, the Acts of Union, despite the deception of the humble address —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Member's two minutes are up.

Mr Allister: — continue to be diminished and violated. Those whose mission it is to dismantle the Union will rightly say —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Can the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Allister: — "Well done, Jeffrey".

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Pádraig Delargy be appointed as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office. — [Mr Stewart.]

Resolved:

That Miss Jemma Dolan and Mr Stephen Dunne be appointed as members of the Committee on Standards and Privileges; and that Mr Nick Mathison be appointed as a member of the Audit Committee. — [Mr Stewart.]

Private Members' Business

Strategic Framework to End Violence against Women and Girls: Implementation

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Emma Sheerin to move the motion.

Ms Sheerin: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire. Déanaim comhghairdeas léi faoina post nua. Bíodh a fhios aici go bhfuil na daoine i Lár Uladh iontach bródúil aisti ag an am seo. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the First Minister. I congratulate her on her new role. She should know that the people of Mid Ulster are very proud of her at this time.]*

We are moving this motion this afternoon —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Will you move the motion?

Ms Sheerin: Gabh mo leithscéal. *[Translation: Excuse me.]* Can I move the motion? Is that me? *[Laughter.]* I beg to move

That this Assembly affirms that the Executive Office's strategic framework to end violence against women and girls must recognise that misogyny is a root cause of violence against women and girls; laments that, since 2021, we have had the joint highest rate of femicide in Europe; expresses deep sadness that violence against women and girls is endemic here, with one woman killed every three months; regrets that victims of sexual and gender-based violence still face obstacles within the justice system and within society itself and that these obstacles prevent many women from reporting their abuse; condemns the budget cuts imposed by the British Government that significantly cut funding for public services, early intervention and rehabilitation services, community and voluntary sector services and Women's Aid; and calls on the Executive Office to urgently implement, in full, the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls to transform how society understands and responds to violence against women and girls.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to wind up. As an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled

List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes be added to the total time for the debate.

Please open the debate on the motion.

Ms Sheerin: I should have said, "Ba mhaith liom é a mholadh." That translates as "I want to move it".

We are moving the motion this afternoon because we want to end violence against women and girls. We are agreed across the House on the importance of that and on the harm that violence against women and girls does. We know that this is a commitment from the previous mandate and appreciate the work that has already gone on. I specifically thank the co-design team; I know that some of those involved have joined us this afternoon to listen to the debate. I credit those who are involved in front-line services and the people who work with victims and survivors every day. They play a massive role in society.

Gender-based violence is endemic and pervades society. We know that it has to be a priority in this mandate. It has to be a priority for all parties, and we all must work together on that. We want to set this at the top of the agenda to ensure that it is a priority and that the framework is implemented in full. We will support the amendment, because it is totally in line with the spirit of our motion. We know that it has to be funded to be implemented fully, and we want to see that happening.

The reason for moving the motion today is to start the conversation about this and to bring it in to the public discourse. Gender-based violence has happened for centuries in Ireland and has been facilitated by silence: people knowing deep down that something was wrong but not having the courage to call it out. That is how it has been allowed to manifest itself in the way in which it has. We have to break the silence and call it out. We have to start the conversation. Hopefully, the debate today will serve that end.

We know that misogyny is the root cause of gender-based violence. Misogyny, in its simplest terms, is the belief that women are lesser. Just like any discriminatory mindset, it manifests itself, breeds and festers in a vacuum, in a situation in which there is no conversation, no information being shared and no myth-busting, where people are allowed to spread disinformation, fear and hatred. That is how misogyny has taken shape. An awful lot of the time, we do not even recognise it. Those

thoughts are so internalised that we do not sometimes call it out.

We know about it and have seen it all too often, even in recent years. There were 42 women murdered between January 2013 and June 2023. We see an extreme act of violence against a woman, in that a woman is murdered, and then there is an outpouring of grief. We all stand at vigils, and everybody is so sorry that it happened. However, further back in the chain, when the beliefs were first being issued, we did not challenge them. That is what we have to do and what the strategy has to do. It has to address it at the root. I am pleased to see that the framework sets it out clearly that this is about addressing cultural norms and challenging the structural inequalities that lead, ultimately, to someone losing a mother, a daughter, a sister or a friend as a result of gender-based violence.

Misogyny is the cause of so many problems across society. It is the reason why women who present to their GP with what is clearly the menopause are told that they are just a bit stressed and are prescribed antidepressants. It is the reason why it takes about eight years to get a diagnosis of endometriosis or PCOS. It is the reason why, if a female politician wears a dress, it is the subject of news articles, yet a male politician will never face the same criticism for a suit that he wears. It is the reason why our dresses do not have pockets. That is the reality, and it is the reason why women are being murdered. We have to get to the root of that to stop it happening.

Over the weekend, in preparation for today's debate, I re-familiarised myself with some of the statistics. Some of the facts and figures that have been gathered on the issue are totally depressing and shocking. One of the statistics that really shocked me was in the 2022 life and times survey, which showed that 75% of the 16-year-olds surveyed had experienced street harassment. I read that and said, "Oh my God, three quarters of our teenage girls have already been harassed on the street". Then I said to myself, "Why am I shocked at that? I was a 16-year-old girl. I have friends, a sister, a mother. We have all experienced that, and we all know what it feels like". The overwhelming emotions that you have are shame and embarrassment, so you do not call it out. It has become completely normalised to the point where, an awful lot of the time, those remarks are made or you are harassed and, 10 minutes later, you are back to getting a cup of coffee or talking to a friend, and it does not even have an impact on you. However, over time, those things build up to the point where the situation gets so extreme

that there is an act of violence, and that is when we all react.

This is not about demonising anyone. The issue affects everyone across society. The victims are men and women. We know about its impact on families, particularly in situations of domestic violence, where children suffer and that has an impact on their relationships later in life. We know that it is intergenerational: hurt people hurt people. We have seen that time and again. The studies all reflect that. We have to address it to stop it getting that far.

I urge everyone to support the motion. I want to see us all working together to call out gender-based violence and to stop that phenomenon.

Mr Harvey: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "abuse;" and insert:

"condemns inadequate levels of UK Government funding for public services, early intervention and rehabilitation services, community and voluntary sector services and Women's Aid; and calls on the Executive Office to urgently implement, in full, the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls, including by prioritising funding for the delivery of programmes contained in the associated action plan, to transform how society understands and responds to violence against women and girls."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Mr Harvey: The motion draws our attention to the unacceptable and ongoing issue of violence against women and girls in our society. The issue affects us all and has the potential to affect every home represented in the Chamber. For women and girls, it affects them directly. For men and boys, it has the potential to affect them indirectly, should violence be perpetrated against a female whom they hold dear, be she a mother, a sister, a wife or a partner. In light of that, it is incumbent on us all to be willing to play our part to tackle the issue head-on and tackle its root causes.

The need to address violence and the causes of violence against women and girls formed a core aspect of my party's Assembly election manifesto in 2022. I am pleased that progress

is being made across government, particularly in the Executive Office, on spotlighting the issue.

12.45 pm

The first necessity is to acknowledge the existence of the problem. The Executive Office's strategic framework does exactly that, as does the motion. The stark reality is that 75% of girls, even at the formative age of 16, have experienced street harassment at least once in their life. Sadly, such events occurring on our streets mirror the far more serious circumstances faced by too many women behind closed doors. The problem exists, and the message must be that it is wrong, regardless of the form that it takes.

The framework's vision is one of:

"a changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse, and harm, including the attitudes, systems, and structural inequalities that cause them."

That aim will be achieved through working together as partners across society, in the public, private and third sectors and in the community, to prevent and eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls. While it is right and proper to have such a document in government, it will be for every sector and every community to buy into its vision and seek to make it a reality, because that will not be achieved by government alone. I am encouraged by the willingness for collaboration that has already been evidenced in seeking to address and tackle the issue.

Co-design has been a vital aspect of developing the framework, bringing together expertise and experience from across government and the community and voluntary sector, as well as from lived experience. It is important to acknowledge the great work that has been done to support women and to tackle the issue of violence against them over many years. Organisations such as Women's Aid have been at the coalface dealing with the ugly realities and outworkings of misogyny and sexism in wider society. I am hopeful that the strategic framework will build on the foundation that has already been laid and provide further support for the organisations and bodies dedicated to supporting women and girls across Northern Ireland. It is astonishing to think that it is estimated that domestic and sexual abuse across Northern Ireland costs £750 million to £1 billion a year. Not only is there a direct and

often catastrophic human cost to the victims of such abuse but there is a financial cost as a result of the ongoing prevalence of that societal illness.

We must be clear by our actions as well as our words that our women are to be valued, respected and protected against the minority who would do them harm, be it physical or emotional. I look forward to seeing the practical outworkings of the strategic framework and to working collectively towards the eradication of violence against our women and girls.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, this is Connie Egan's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Ms Egan: I am honoured to stand here as an MLA for North Down. I am delighted finally to be able to make my maiden speech, after getting elected in May 2022. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Rachel Woods, who was a dedicated representative for North Down as an MLA and as a councillor on Ards and North Down Borough Council, where I enjoyed working alongside her. I thank everybody who trusted me with their vote and all my friends and family, two of whom are in the Gallery today, who have supported me in getting to this moment. I have lived in North Down all my life. It is a wonderful place to live, work and visit and has so much unfulfilled potential. It is home to a welcoming and diverse community, and I will endeavour to be a voice for all in my constituency.

Ending violence against women and girls is a subject that I care deeply about. I am glad to support the motion and amendment, which recognise misogyny as the root cause of violence against women and girls and call for the implementation of a strategy that we desperately need. Shamefully, this is another area in which Northern Ireland has fallen behind, being the only region in these islands without a strategic framework to end gender-based violence. Last year, Ulster University produced a report titled 'Every Voice Matters!', which found that 98% of women who were interviewed had:

"experienced at least one form of"

gender-based

"violence or abuse in their lifetime."

That is a harrowing statistic that reinforces the need for urgent action to seriously tackle this issue in our society.

The strategy recognises the whole-society approach that is needed to end violence against women and girls and tackle its root causes. In the last mandate, the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, made much-needed progress on the issue to protect victims. That included introducing a stalking offence, updating revenge porn laws, outlawing upskirting, downblousing and cyberflashing and creating the new offence of coercive control.

Legislation is important, but the issue of violence against women and girls is not solely for our justice system to address; we need a whole-society approach to tackling gender-based violence, which thrives in a society where misogyny and sexism go unchallenged. The Executive Departments need to work collectively to implement the action plan, which includes things like education programmes to empower young people with information about consent and healthy relationships; a housing system that recognises domestic violence as intimidation; and support for organisations, such as White Ribbon NI, that work in the community to prevent gender-based violence.

Last year, when we had no sitting Executive or Assembly, we saw one of the devastating consequences of siloed working between Departments. We had the absolutely perverse situation that the Executive Office was consulting on an action plan and strategic framework to end violence against women and girls, yet, at the same time, the Department of Health was removing all core grant funding from the Women's Aid Federation. That situation was completely contradictory and failed those who had worked hard to co-design the strategy and all the women whom they support.

We need to see not just commitment from all Departments to tackle gender-based violence but resources to fund the necessary programmes and interventions. It is unreasonable to move forward with the strategy and expect the community and voluntary sector, which already leads in Northern Ireland on responding to and tackling the issue, to deliver more, if the resources and support from the Executive do not follow. Last year, Nexus, the organisation that delivers the domestic and sexual abuse helpline, had to close its services for under-16s due to insufficient funding from the Executive. We are failing people by not fully funding those vital services.

To go back to my constituency of North Down, we have a Women's Aid refuge that is run by a dedicated and compassionate team but on a shoestring budget. There can be no doubt that that refuge has saved lives and rescued families, but the facilities fall short of others across these islands. A new and accessible facility is urgently needed to meet the needs of all victims and survivors and their families.

I hope that the commitments that we have seen so far across the parties will continue in the Executive, with cross-departmental working and sufficient funding to implement all the actions in the strategy. We have a real opportunity to transform Northern Ireland. We can all play a part in tackling the root causes, supporting victims and survivors and ending violence against women and girls.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for that maiden speech.

Mr Stewart: I congratulate you on your new role, Mr Deputy Speaker; I do not think that I have spoken with you since you took the Chair. I also congratulate the Member for North Down on her maiden speech — it was very well done — and echo her words about Rachel Woods, who is a sad loss to the Chamber. I wish her well too.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion and the amendment. I thank everyone for bringing forward this important issue, which should have been tackled through a strategic framework before now. As we know and as has been mentioned, the process of setting out that strategic framework is well advanced. I chaired the TEO Committee during the last mandate. At one of the last meetings of that Committee, evidence was sought from the Women's Resource and Development Agency. I commend that organisation and the many thousands of people who completed the survey and took part in the consultation that helped us to formulate the strategic framework. Motions were tabled in the House in 2017 and 2021, and there was unanimity in all the responses on both occasions about how we should go forward in tackling the issue. The sad reality is that, were it not for the five years out of seven of political vacuum in this place, a strategy not only would have been in place but would have been well advanced and tackling the issue. Sadly, we are where we are. If any positive can be taken from not having a long-overdue strategy on tackling gender-based violence, it is that we can learn from models of best practice elsewhere, learning from what has worked badly, taking on board what has worked well across these isles and applying that to any

strategy that we begin to roll out. We owe that to our women and girls.

In the absence of any live strategy or strategic framework, I acknowledge the tireless and invaluable work of organisations such as the Women's Policy Group, the Cithrah Foundation, Women's Aid, the White Ribbon project and the many other groups and organisations across the country that dedicate their time to supporting women and girls, striving to end violence and raising awareness of the issues at all levels of our society. I also acknowledge the huge volume of work that has been carried out by Executive Office officials over many years. They have worked tirelessly to resolve the issue and put together a strategic framework, and they have brought forward all the responses that have been made to date. I look forward, as they do, I am sure, to seeing the strategic framework in place.

As I said, in March 2021, a similar motion was debated in the House, and there was unanimity in the responses that day. During the debate, many Members discussed the critical issues around the violence, harm and abuse that women and girls continued to face and the need for a strategy to ensure that we protect women and girls and eliminate gender-based violence in Northern Ireland. That motion was discussed during the COVID pandemic. Unfortunately, violence and domestic abuse towards our women and girls did not disappear or reduce; they increased. As we move into a post-pandemic society, we must reflect on the things that were said.

Statistics were quoted, and, regrettably, three years on, they are not the same but worse. We still have no strategy to end violence against women and girls. We have failed them. Between 2022 and 2023, the PSNI recorded 32,875 incidents of domestic violence here in Northern Ireland — an average of one every 16 minutes. Sadly, in 2021, when the issue was last discussed, the figure was one every 17 minutes. As we know, over one third of such incidents are not reported or recorded, which makes it even worse. The statistics show how important it is to have emotional support, counselling and referral support, such as that provided by Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, but such organisations must be properly resourced and funded, as Members have said. Our party met the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland in September, after it had reached out with concerns that its local government funding was due to end that month. Since then, Women's Aid has lost significant funding that helped to support women and girls who were victims of domestic abuse, harm and

violence. A consideration in the strategic framework must therefore be to improve the support available to victims and ensure that support networks are adequately funded.

We must start as we mean to go on and ensure that our youth are educated to be respectful towards one another. Educating our youth is necessary from nursery school onwards. Young people must be encouraged to respect and listen to others and to accept that violence towards any person, regardless of gender, is totally unacceptable. Our society must be educated through awareness campaigns. There needs to be change in the long-established societal attitudes towards domestic and sexual violence until the statistics reflect respect towards women and girls.

I am encouraged that the Executive Office said that the strategy will be cross-departmental. It needs to straddle the Department of Justice, including probation services, the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department of Finance. I hope that the strategic framework will be laid out as soon as possible, allowing us to tackle this hugely important issue.

Ms McLaughlin: We have all been here before. Violence against women and girls is a crime, and it has become endemic in our society, in our homes and on our streets. The violence has been fuelled by the toxic legacy of our past and the deeply misogynistic culture in our society. The violence has gone unaddressed by government here, whether through sheer dysfunction, the inability to agree or the stop-start nature of our politics.

1.00 pm

I welcome the opportunity to once again be here, debating the issue, yet I do not think that anyone in the Chamber disagrees with implementing the strategy. We are here, in essence, to put our agreement on the record. That is no bad thing, and I applaud the sponsors for tabling the motion and demonstrating the consensus that exists in the Chamber, yet this is too important an issue for us to debate in the Chamber and satisfy ourselves that we have moved the needle.

Today, I want to discuss a number of issues that the Assembly must address. The first is funding; we have heard it around the Chamber this afternoon. As we stand here, there is still uncertainty about the funding for the strategy to end violence against women and girls. The strategy has been painstakingly crafted, and I

pay tribute to the team that did that. I commend the work of Claire Archibald and those whom she has worked with. The strategy has the voices of women right at the centre of its creation. I know that, at the conclusion of the process, we can hope for a financial package to accompany its implementation and the immediate action plan, but the Assembly must state unequivocally that a strategy without funding to go with it is not worth the paper that it is printed on. The women who are affected by it deserve so much more than that.

We know what we need to do in order to hold perpetrators to account and ensure that survivors have the support that they need, but, as the UN Women executive director said:

"We must do what we always do when we recognize the gravity of an issue: allocate serious resources ... To unlock financing across different sectors, to track budget allocations, to do more gender-responsive budgeting, and to resource the crucial efforts of women's rights organizations who are at the front line of response and are crucial partners for policy change."

Of course, the issue goes much wider than simply funding. For me, it is about culture, our society and the value that we attach to women's lives. That culture is writ large by newspaper headlines about femicide. It is right that our reaction to each and every one of those murdered women is profound devastation and that we say each time that they deserved to live and that their murder is unforgivable. The same culture that drives our most extreme violence happens around us each and every day in passing comments and the quiet acceptance of misogyny and sexism. It starts with phrases in schools like, "Boys will be boys" or jokes in workplaces, but we know that those examples are part of a pyramid of escalating violence. That culture can be addressed only from the earliest possible days in children's lives.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for giving way. She mentioned the earliest days of children's lives, so will she agree that it is in those years, specifically in secondary school, that we start to learn the importance of consent and boundaries and that, given that importance, there is a dire need for comprehensive and inclusive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) for our young people?

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

Ms McLaughlin: Absolutely. I thank the Member for her intervention. Education is at the heart of the matter, as is RSE, and consent and learning about consent are at the very heart of the strategy.

I know the frustration that the public can have with strategies. When we are faced with urgent crises and devastating need, demands for a strategy can sometimes sound like kicking an issue into the long grass. I understand that instinct, even though I have a view that a strategy is essential.

We need to do much more in the immediate term, starting with supporting the services that exist and the organisations that are doing incredible work. Those are organisations like Women's Aid and others, which have lost core grant funding in the past year. That does not mean an inadequate level of funding; it is a cut, plain and simple. I find it hard to quantify the scale of the impact of the work of Women's Aid, and I do not think that anyone here actually can. Through its practical front-line impact, the small investment through the core grant to Women's Aid paid off many times over. When we are debating the very strategy to end violence against women and girls, it is absurd that we would rip money away from organisations like that. It is absurd that we passed a Budget Bill last week that underpinned the cut to organisations like that. Will any Minister now guarantee that funding?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms McLaughlin: Otherwise, as was said earlier, I worry that the commitment to the strategy and the consensus that we have all shown today will be a commitment in words only.

Miss Hargey: I echo what everybody else has been saying: this is a really important debate. I welcome the fact that, within a few weeks of the Assembly being up and running, this is one of the key items for discussion. That is reflective of the change that we have seen in our society. In the past couple of weeks, there has been a visible sign of change in the Executive Office with the offices of First Minister, deputy First Minister and junior Ministers all now held by females. We know that females make up more than 50% of the population, so why should that not be reflected in our policies and procedures in this place but also in society as a whole?

As was said in the report, women and girls cannot be reduced to a statistic, nor can they

be reduced to a story that appears in the media one day and is gone the next. Indeed, the concerning figure that 90% of women and girls believe that sexism and misogyny is an issue should really be the headline; in this day and age, 90% of over 50% of the population believe that sexism and misogyny is a key issue. That goes to the heart of why the motion has been tabled today: it is because of the importance of bringing forward the strategic framework as part of the strategy to end violence against women and girls.

We know the history of, and we have seen and heard the statistics on, domestic abuse, misogyny and the culture of mistreatment of women and girls by society, which goes back decades and decades. In the past couple of years, we have looked at that through the institutional abuse inquiry and in respect of mother-and-baby homes, which are a real scar on society right across the island. We have all heard the comments that a woman's place is in the home, doing the dinner and washing the dishes. We have heard the whistle calls and the abuse that women take on a daily basis. Indeed, many of us have seen the physical and psychological signs of women being abused on a daily basis. We have also seen the health and economic impacts on women and how they are seen in society as a whole.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Miss Hargey: No, you are OK. Thank you.

The issue demonstrates the need for a cross-societal approach. It is not just for women and girls to grapple with the seriousness of the issue; we need all of society to work together to look at our responsibilities and what we can do in order to meet the challenges. Importantly, a cross-departmental approach is needed. While I know that the Executive Office will lift the strategy and drive it, it needs all the other Departments to pull together. We have heard about Health, Education, Communities and Economy, but to see implementation being driven forward will require all the Ministers to pull together under the leadership of the Executive Office.

Over the past couple of years, a lot of good work on co-design has been done with the women's sector and women's organisations on the ground. That work and those relationships definitely need to continue. Overall, it is about saying that we want a society that treats people equally; that is based on rights and enshrined in an international human rights setting; and that embeds not just gender rights but economic, educational and class rights. All those issues

are interwoven. The grassroots women's movement would also say that, which is why it stands on the front line with other rights organisations that are looking at rights in their entirety.

I welcome the fact that we are having this debate today. I welcome the action that will follow and the leadership that will be given, and I look forward to working with everyone across this Chamber to ensure that we eradicate this scourge on our society once and for all.

Ms Forsythe: I will speak on the devastating impact of violence against women and girls. Across the United Kingdom, the police receive a domestic abuse call every 30 seconds, yet it is estimated that less than 24% of domestic abuse crime is reported to the police. Most women do not call the police following the first time they are abused; they usually have been abused a significant number of times before they contact the police. Violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland is very real. As detailed in the motion, it is horrific that, on average, every three months, a woman is murdered here.

In this Chamber, women are in the minority, representing just one third of our Members. While that is an improvement in representation, the lack of female MLAs for so many years has meant that Northern Ireland has fallen behind on many important issues. We lack strategies on childcare, on women's health and on violence against women and girls. Women have been left behind because they were not in the room when the decisions were being made, and it is our responsibility now to make that right. The lack of strategies and laws to define domestic abuse offences as criminal has shaped behaviour in society, and the suite of new legislation brought in in the previous mandate was much needed and has already had a significant impact in this area. The Justice Minister, the Justice Committee and the all-party group on domestic and sexual violence all played important roles in that change, along with the many stakeholders that serviced those. As the new chair of that all-party group, I am committed to supporting the delivery of more and look forward to working with the many Members across the Chamber who are also committed to working on that all-party group.

The deep-rooted misogyny in society is a cause of this violence. The attitudes to, behaviours toward and treatment of women need to change. From subtle comments to sexual harassment, stalking, upskirting, downblousing, physical abuse and coercive control: where does it stop? For some of us, it means being

the victims of online abuse and deepfake harassment; a vicious weapon used to degrade and humiliate women. The escalation of these things often leads to violence and murder.

I support the motion today for the urgent implementation of the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls. Every Department has a role to play, from lawmaking and enforcement in Justice; to healthcare and mental health support; to crisis homelessness for women who flee; and to schools, where child victims need support. The roll-out of Operation Encompass has already proved impactful on this. We need everyone on board. We need to change attitudes and educate society. I thank the co-design team and all involved in the hard work in bringing this so far to date. I also support the amendment, which condemns the inadequate funding levels provided by the Government for public services here. It is critical that the strategy to end violence against women and girls is allocated sufficient funding or it will become just another strategy on the shelf. In allocating funding to the strategy, I also call for the priority to be supporting and sustaining the voluntary and community groups delivering these support services and shaping the policy on these matters. It was a travesty that the Women's Aid Federation for Northern Ireland lost its core grant funding last year, as referenced by others. Funding that body and restoring this money should be a priority within this strategy. Where expert services exist and already support women who are the victims of domestic abuse, we should be securing their existence with multi-year funding.

We also need to remember the victims and keep their names and their stories to the fore. Those were real women who were murdered. They were daughters, sisters, mothers, grandmothers and very dear friends from right across Northern Ireland who were viciously murdered, mainly by people whom they knew and trusted. They deserved better, and it is our responsibility to do better for them. We need to change attitudes in society, and we need to be brought into line with the rest of the United Kingdom on the issue.

We need to stop the count of dead women in Northern Ireland and work together to end violence against women and girls.

1.15 pm

Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I will

make some initial remarks as Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

As we know, initial work on the draft strategy followed an Assembly motion three years ago. During the previous mandate, the Committee heard about the initial steps to develop the strategy with co-design partners. The public consultation on the outcome of that work concluded in October. That is all to ensure that actions are grounded in the collective experience and knowledge of those who deal with those issues daily.

Already during this mandate, the Committee has heard that responses to that consultation have led to revisions of the draft strategy. Then, there will be a process of brokering with other Departments, which is essential because all Departments need to take ownership of specific actions. The strategy will then require sign-off by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee expects to be kept updated and engaged as the strategy is rolled out. As we heard during the debate on the Budget Bill, £2 million was allocated to the Executive Office for that work. The Committee will look forward to hearing how that money is spent and what other resources are needed. It will be on hand to provide advice and guidance on implementation at every stage.

I will now make a few remarks in my capacity as an Alliance Party MLA. I thank the proposer of the motion for bringing it to the House so soon after restoration. We will support the motion and the amendment.

At the outset, it is essential not to miss the vital foundation of the strategic framework, namely the action plan and the vision contained in it. The plan recognises that transformational change requires collaboration; in other words, it requires a commitment from us all, and that commitment should be nothing less than:

"a changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse, and harm".

It goes on to emphasise something important: that, in order to be free from all forms of gender-based violence and abuse, we also need to be free from:

"the attitudes, systems, and structural inequalities that cause them."

One striking and horrific statistic from the strategic framework is that three fifths of 16-year-old girls in Northern Ireland have been sent unwanted sexually explicit pictures. That is

deeply shocking and speaks to the attitudes that we need to challenge, yet it gets worse. Research that was carried out by Ulster University found that over half of 11-year-old girls reported that they had experienced violence or abuse of some form. It could be any of our daughters, nieces or granddaughters reporting that. I find that chilling.

The first-100-days decisions for the incoming First Minister and deputy First Minister include approval of the Executive Office's response to the consultation on the strategic framework, approval of the budget for the action plan and approval of long-term implementation. I look forward to an assurance that those things will happen within that time frame.

One of the main pieces of evidence that went into the design of the framework and action plan was called 'It's Just What Happens'. We can be and, in many ways, already are much better than that. The passage, in the last mandate, of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, the Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, and the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 brought Northern Ireland into line with and, in many ways, put it ahead of neighbouring jurisdictions' legislative interventions to protect women and girls from violence, abuse and unwanted attention, while supporting victims. Clearly, I am proud of the leadership that my colleague, the now returned Minister of Justice, Naomi Long, showed on that, but it shows that the Assembly is capable of passing laws that can bring about greater good. Going forward, we need to deal urgently with the obvious remaining area of violence against women and girls. Let us be clear: our task is not to tackle violence against women and girls but to end it.

We have heard and will, no doubt, hear many compelling contributions in the Chamber. I commend my colleague Connie Egan for her hard work as my party's spokesperson on the topic and congratulate her on her maiden speech. I also thank Women's Aid, White Ribbon NI, Nexus, the Rainbow Project and many others for their ongoing contributions on the issue. What we need now is concrete action from the Assembly. We must commit ourselves to ensuring that women and girls feeling safe everywhere is something that just happens.

Mrs Dillon: This is a difficult topic to speak to, because it is so real for so many women and girls every day of their life. It causes untold damage and trans-generational trauma. We in the Chamber have a responsibility to show leadership on the issue of violence against

women and girls. There can be no level of tolerance of misogyny or abusive behaviour in our society. It will require a cultural change that will take many years and cannot be seen as solely a judicial problem, because the law alone cannot address the cultural change that is required. Change begins in our homes, schools, sporting organisations and clubs, and every one of us must be part of the solution.

To change the culture, we need a reset in our education system. Our young people — young women, girls and boys — need to know what a healthy relationship looks like. They need to know what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. We need age-appropriate sex education. One of the most valuable programmes that have been rolled out in recent years is the NSPCC's Talk PANTS. As a mother of a young child at the time, I would not have had the knowledge of how to have that conversation in an age-appropriate way. It was on the radio, however, and it taught me how to do that. That was extremely valuable, because it had the potential to protect my child. Everybody should have that conversation with their children, and it needs to be done in conjunction with organisations such as the NSPCC and Women's Aid, which fully understand the impact but also understand how to do it in the right way, at the right time, with the right people. Unfortunately, some children are as young as small babies when they are first abused, so we cannot wait until children are teenagers in secondary school. We need to have those conversations with them at a very young age.

Silence and shame are what perpetrators rely on. It is what shields them and allows them to carry out their horrific acts. I listened to Amanda Brown talk about her guilt at not speaking out sooner. She thought that her silence would protect her family. Silence makes the victim think that somehow it is their fault: that is what silence does. I think of women such as Caoimhe Morgan in north Belfast and Katrina Rainey in Knockloughrim, murdered in front of their children. A victim is not just the person who dies or who is abused: their children, who are witnesses to the violence and abuse, and their children's children will suffer because of it. All the information that we have tells us that violence and abuse of women and girls is mostly carried out by people whom they know and trust: partners, husbands, fathers, other family members and family friends. That needs to be a part of the conversation. We cannot keep it to stranger danger — those evil people who are out there somewhere whom you do not know — rather, they are the people whom you

know and trust. They are the people who are supposed to love you.

Abuse and violence against women and girls knows no barriers. Victims and perpetrators come from all backgrounds. Victims and perpetrators are doctors, teachers, shop assistants, nurses, police officers and elected representatives. The strategy to tackle violence against women and girls needs to include every element: education, support services, policing, the courts and much more. If we get this right, we can transform the lives of women and girls and transform our society.

We have seen the immeasurable pain that is caused to families when their mother or daughter is murdered, in most cases by a partner or an ex-partner, who is the very person who was supposed to love her, be good to her and protect her. We need to end the silence and see greater reporting and better support for those who take that brave step. We have seen a lot in the way of legislation, but legislation alone cannot protect women and girls. It is how that legislation is implemented and how the courts deal with perpetrators that matters. Bail conditions and delays in the judicial system must be improved in order to give women and girls the confidence to come forward.

I have a 15-year-old daughter, and I talk openly with her about what is appropriate behaviour and what is not. I talk to her about challenging misogyny among her friendship group, but I want to see age-appropriate relationships and sexuality education being standardised across all schools, so that I know that all our young people are being taught better than we were. Frankly, it is not good enough that that is not in place in 2024.

Ending violence against women and girls is the responsibility of all of us. Let us take that responsibility seriously. Let us take it on together and finally end violence against all women and girls across our society.

Ms Brownlee: I support the motion and the amendment. I am pleased to see that we have got straight down to business since the return of the institutions and that we are dealing with the real issues that affect people across Northern Ireland every day.

Violence against women and girls is a society-wide problem and requires a collaborative, whole-of-society approach. From the outset, it is important to acknowledge that a lot of excellent work is already being done by a variety of groups and organisations. It is vital that that work is supported, funded properly and

progressed and that we recognise that those people are literally lifesavers. Anything that comes from the Executive should serve to further enhance and complement the existing work by looking at where there is need, establishing what work is already being done and looking at how that can be better signposted and communicated to create a joined-up approach to ending violence against women and girls across society.

Co-design has been an integral part of developing the draft strategic framework, bringing together expertise and experiences from across government, sectoral organisations, the community and voluntary sector and those with lived experience. The framework contains a strong focus on the prevention of violence against women and girls by challenging misogyny and sexist attitudes. Of course, we must not forget that men and boys will also suffer violence, and by no means do we want to forget them. However, the framework is to address the fact that victims of gender-based violence are disproportionately female. Men and boys also have an important role to play in challenging the current culture.

I stated earlier that violence against women and girls is a society-wide problem. It is also important to remember that abuse does not necessarily have to be physical for it to have a damaging impact. Verbal abuse, coercion, degrading remarks, humiliation, threats, financial control: none of those will necessarily leave any physical marks, but the emotional scars that they leave can be just as devastating. For example, almost two in three women who were surveyed across the United Kingdom said that they had experienced harassment at work; 67% of female students surveyed said that they had had at least one unwanted sexual experience during their time in higher education; and 71% of women of all ages have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space. I was particularly alarmed to see that one in two girls aged just 16 have received an unwanted intimate picture or video in their lifetime.

A number of Ministers have a very important role to play in the process. I very much welcome the commitment from the Minister for Communities at Question Time last week to explore how we can better support those suffering from domestic abuse when they seek to be rehomed in social housing. Supporting people at that time is an absolute priority.

There is a serious lack of confidence in our justice system in Northern Ireland when it comes to cases involving domestic and sexual

abuse. While that is unfortunate, in many ways it is understandable, due to unacceptably long wait times, a serious lack of prosecutions and convictions and an overall worry about not even being believed. While finances pale into insignificance when discussing such a serious topic, it is important to note that it is estimated that domestic and sexual abuse costs Northern Ireland up to £1 billion per year.

I have a young daughter, and I worry when I hear some of the statistics and stories that have been mentioned in the debate. I am sure that that will resonate with all parents here today and those watching from home, but it should not be the norm. I want our daughters to grow up in a world where they do not need to worry about walking home at night by themselves or experience any unwanted comments or actions simply because they are female. I want them and all other girls to be able to be themselves, do their own thing and enjoy happy, prosperous lives.

I absolutely join in the calls for the Executive to implement this much-needed framework, and I will finish with the same sentiment as that with which I finished my maiden speech on the childcare debate last week: we must do more.

1.30 pm

Ms Eastwood: I was going to say that I welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue, but I really do not. The Member for Mid Ulster Linda Dillon spoke so incredibly and said out loud in this debate in this Chamber what matters to me and to the people across the North who are listening. She said out loud that the vast majority of people who suffer this absolutely heinous abuse and, in some cases, death, do so at the hands of somebody whom they know. Looking across the Chamber, I note that we have all said worthy things and that everyone has spoken amazingly. However, I want to make this real, and I want to make this impactful. I could point at every woman in the Chamber right now and remember things that have been said about them in the media. There was a huge outcry at the time; absolutely nothing was done after it.

We find ourselves in a truly shameful position here in Northern Ireland. Violence against women and girls is a systemic and ingrained issue, and one theme that I find throughout the comments is that vow of silence. We still live in an incredibly conservative culture in Northern Ireland. I remember, years ago in one of my old jobs, having a talk about training. There were 20 people in the room, and someone said that

one in whatever figure was going to be an abuser. Everyone looked around the room to find the abuser, and guess what? They do not come with "Abuser" written across their head, do they? No, they are people whom we love. They are people whom we respect. They are people whom society respects. The one thing that I want people to take away from the debate today is that nobody is beyond reproach in this regard. If someone makes a disclosure, that must be taken seriously, because these people live amongst us.

Improving the situation that our girls and women face will take a whole-society approach, as everyone has outlined. The violence that we see is not caused by one single factor but is endemic and has existed for centuries. For context, divorce was legalised in the Republic of Ireland only in 1996, following the referendum the year before. Marital rape was defined as an offence in the UK only after the case of *R v R* in 1991. This lag in our laws leaves a long tail of societal acceptance, minimising and death in its wake, and I commend the work of my party leader and current Justice Minister, Naomi Long, and the strides that she has made. The grim reality is that there is absolutely no point in having that life-saving legislation unless every person in society recognises the role that they have to play.

Would it surprise you to know that the remnants of the patriarchy, violence against women and girls and misogyny are strewn throughout the strata of our life? The echoes, as well as the overt and deafening shouts of misogyny, are ringing around the public square. Shall we prosecute the case of violence against women and girls in the media and in the public square? Let me give you some examples of headlines: "Jealous man kills wife due to failing business"; "Strange case of domestic murder"; and "Did living in the shadow of his successful wife cause her death?" In a world where the president of the United States of America once said that he wanted to grab women by the — can we be shocked when people like Andrew Tate are held up by some in the media or seen as role models or heroes? I am sorry, but I am done with women being the butt of the joke. We can have laws and debates, but, unless every person, including men in the Chamber, their sons and everyone else whom they know stands up for us, there is absolutely no point.

Finance and budgeting are crucial, and a number of Members raised them. I believe strongly that we lag behind in some areas in our society because women have not been in the room.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Will the Member conclude her remarks, please?

Ms Eastwood: We intend to be in every room, and we will end violence against women and girls.

Ms Hunter: It is regrettable that we are here today talking about this matter, but it is greatly important. We know that our society has a deep-rooted problem with misogyny and violence against women and girls.

Just some of the heartbreaking and brutal murders over the past few years include those of Stacey Knell, Karen McClean, Natalie McNally and so many more. Their murder brought such sadness to our communities, a feeling of lives unfinished and justice not served. Their cases have brought to light, as have many others, the sheer and clear inadequacy of our society and its total inability to protect women and girls. Without the correct protections, women will suffer and continue to die. In order to tackle the issue, we must start at the root cause, with early intervention.

I welcome the fact that the Education Committee will soon do a micro inquiry into the implementation of relationships and sexuality education in Northern Ireland. We need to educate our young people to recognise what sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual abuse look like. Such education is fundamental to their well-being. We must make our young people feel empowered and educate them on the significance of fostering a culture that emphasises the importance of sexual consent. That includes promoting open communication, respect for boundaries and understanding the key role that bystanders can play in preventing non-consensual situations.

Sadly, though, we have a culture that has normalised violence against women and girls and taken pleasure in violence against women and girls. Women are often seen through the lens of victim blaming or are even blamed for their assault. It is horrific, and we can and must do better. Tackling rape myths and challenging the narrative is extremely important. It is on each and every one of us, specifically when we have a platform such as this, to call out rape culture and rape myths. There is an evident call to consider our need to tackle the issue, specifically from an educational perspective. Younger years are key and are where healthy perceptions of women are shaped and created. Our education system must reflect that in its commitment to create a fair and equal society.

A comprehensive student survey that was carried out in the past few years showed the extent of sexual harassment on Northern Irish campuses in third-level educational institutions, with one in three students revealing that they had experienced unwanted sexual behaviour during their time at university: one in three. That is an astonishing statistic, particularly when we think about the long-lasting, traumatic impact that such behaviour has on victims and survivors.

I also want to look at the obstacles to reporting sexual violence, and I am happy that those have been raised today. When researching for my speech, I came across a really inspiring young lady called Ellie Wilson. She is a rape victim and survivor based in Scotland who waived her right to anonymity in order to talk about the humiliating journey of reporting a rape and talking about it, publicly and with family, and the painful and excruciatingly embarrassing moments that can happen in court. I was really impressed by her story and her bravery, waiting years at a time in the court process and enduring those humiliating cross-examinations in court. The retraumatisation of victims is absolutely awful, and it can take a large amount of money to get things like court transcripts. The Assembly and Executive need to look at prioritising victims in our court systems and ensuring that we do all that we can to make sure that the process does not retraumatise them. That is really important.

I thank Ms Forsythe for her contribution when she talked about emerging technologies and, sadly, how those are weaponised and used to harm and harass women. Sadly, a few of us are no stranger to that. It is key that we educate our young people on the importance of treating women with respect.

I thank the team at Nexus and, of course, Women's Aid, who have been fantastic in dealing with these issues and supporting constituents because, sadly, we see these matters every week and month. We cannot talk about strategies without funding. Strategies are meaningless pieces of paper if we do not have the resource to back them. We all want to support the victims; we cannot do that without adequate funding. I call on all Departments and all Ministers to do all that they can to ensure that we stamp out violence against women and girls for good.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. As there are still a small number of Members wishing to speak, I have decided to exercise the grace period in accordance with Standing Order 17(4). That will last for a maximum of 15

minutes following Question Time. First to be called at that point will be the First Minister to respond. I now call Sian Mulholland.

Ms Mulholland: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the proposers of the motion for bringing it to the Assembly. As others have said, it is a shameful reality that this is statistically the most dangerous place for women in Europe. However, it is not just the most serious of crimes that makes it such a dangerous place to be a woman; we have to factor in the interconnected continuum of violence, from everyday misogynistic attitudes and damaging social norms to harmful and unwanted behaviours.

As mentioned earlier, in the 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Experiences and Attitudes of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland in 2023' report, one third of sixteen-year-old girls said that they had experienced online violence in the past year. It was by far the most prominent form of gender-based violence experienced by the young women who responded to the survey. The type of violence most experienced by young men was in the physical form. It is clear from the statistics that young women often experience a type of violent behaviour that pervades so much more than a physical act and cannot easily be avoided. It is evident that online spaces, particularly social media networks, are simply not safe spaces for young women and girls.

Worryingly, in the 'It's just what happens' report, young women indicated that they considered receiving unsolicited sexual imagery and advances as just:

"a normal part of online life."

How perverse is that? As highlighted in that report and many others, more needs to be done to hold the social media companies to account. It is not good enough to abdicate responsibility for the safety of your clients just because you are not curating a physical space. That includes but is not limited to — some have been mentioned before — dealing with the AI generation of deepfake pornographic material, being quicker to delete offensive material that has been reported, blocking the IP addresses of accounts with multiple violations so they cannot simply create yet another account immediately, and having an easily contactable department that responds immediately to serious complaints of abuse.

Reports have pointed out that parents and carers feel that it is now simply impossible to keep their children safe in online spaces due to

the lack of appropriate protections against acts of violence and inappropriate sexualised behaviour. Like most behavioural and attitudinal changes, early intervention and age-appropriate education programmes, like those outlined by Mrs Dillon, are effective tools to create the catalyst for long-term societal change.

Seven in 10 young female respondents demonstrated their commitment to combating sexism by being willing to intervene when their peers made sexual or sexist jokes. That 69% figure significantly outstrips the 30% of young male respondents who expressed a similar inclination. The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, age-appropriate relationships and sexuality education in schools, because by equipping all young people, regardless of their gender, with knowledge about healthy relationships, consent, gender equality and respect, we can foster a generation that is confident and has the tools at their disposal to challenge harmful stereotypes and nip in the bud those questionable approaches to women and girls.

It is clear that this is not just a women's problem; this is a societal problem, and boys and men need to be included in the solution. The key aspects required for the strategic framework delivery to be effective are that it must be cross-departmental, multidisciplinary and involve stakeholders from the statutory, private and voluntary sectors. We have also seen initiatives, such as Ask for Angela, which nightclubs and bars have signed up to, and Hospitality Ulster signing up to the Women's Night Safety Charter, something that I championed in the arts sector. Those and other societal approaches to protecting women in social spaces, challenging dangerous norms and, ultimately, preventing violence against women and girls are so important.

To conclude, this is an issue that impacts women and girls in every aspect of their lives. It is imperative that central to every strategy is the desire and cooperation to work using a joined-up approach. If we make this place safer for all women, we will create a society that is safer for all. We need to address attitudinal change from an early age, we need tangible outcomes, we need targets that are experience led and intersectional, and we need to deliver it all with the utmost urgency because women are paying the price with their lives.

1.45 pm

Mr McNulty: I wholeheartedly support the motion. The levels of violence against women and girls in the North are terrifying. Reading the

motion is disturbing. As I speak, women and girls are suffering and living in fear and terror in their own homes. Women and girls are suffering years after the trauma of violence or abuse has been visited upon them. Some of the facts that have been mentioned in the debate are equally terrifying. Since 2021, the North has had the joint highest rate of femicide in Europe. On average, one woman is killed every three months. Research conducted by Ulster University found that 98% of women have experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime. Of the 540 women surveyed by Ulster University, seven out of 10 had experienced some form of violence or abuse within the past 12 months: 29% from strangers, 23% from romantic partners and 19% from a friend or acquaintance. Harrowingly, 26% reported that that violence or abuse had occurred in their own home. Only one in three of those surveyed by Ulster University felt able to speak up about or report the incident. Shame and embarrassment were cited as the primary reasons for not coming forward.

The Women's Policy Group NI has found that men's violence against women and girls has reached endemic levels. Research that it conducted showed that 80% of women surveyed first experienced men's violence before the age of 20. Incredibly, it took until 2021 for the Northern Ireland Executive to even agree that a violence against women and girls strategy should exist. It is right that the motion laments funding cuts by the British Government with respect to early intervention and rehabilitation services and the community and voluntary sector, including Women's Aid, but it is equally important to lament the fact that, in the face of an emergency that claims the life of one woman every three months, our Executive have failed to act. Let us focus on advocating a fully funded strategy. That is more meaningful and conducive to addressing the crisis than attacking London for failing to provide funding for an unimplemented strategy.

The life of a woman is being lost every three months. That is not an abstract statistic on paper; it is fact. Those women have names such as Natalie McNally and Ashling Murphy. It is 425 days since Natalie's life and that of her unborn child were taken and 775 days since Ashling Murphy's life was taken. So many other women's lives have been taken in that time. I pay tribute to Noel and Bernadette McNally and their three sons for how they have moved through their trauma, grief, heartbreak and sadness to share only love, kindness and hope. They will lead a Women's Aid conference in

Newry on Wednesday that I encourage everybody here to attend.

Thousands of others whom you will never hear of or know have lost their life or been abused in their own homes by people they know. Some women feel too much shame to come forward. Some women who come forward are unable to overcome obstacles in the justice system. The strategy, legislation and associated funding must be as cross-cutting as the crisis that is engulfing us. The united efforts of the Executive must transcend political ideology and departmental responsibilities. Action to address violence against women and girls must be aimed at facilitating a profound paradigm shift. It must overhaul toxic cultures and attitudes with respect to women and girls.

The fact that the North of Ireland has the joint highest rate of femicide in Europe brings great shame and disgrace on everyone in the House. The only appropriate response to this crisis engulfing our society —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr McNulty: — is for government and every Member of the Assembly to put their might behind a fully funded, far-reaching and cross-departmental response that can begin to address it and save us from our collective shame.

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

Mr Easton: I support the motion and the amendment. We must realise that violence against women and girls is not only a violation of human rights but a multidimensional issue that goes across economic, social and political boundaries. We see misogyny manifested in physical, sexual, psychological and economic harm. The statistics are horrifying, and we must focus on the fact that they are the lived realities of numerous women and girls. Their lives, routines, hopes and ambitions are shattered by violence. Nobody has the right to harm, coerce, control, threaten or psychologically abuse a woman.

I salute the work of Women's Aid in my North Down constituency. I have witnessed at first hand its outstanding work, but I am horrified by the fact that, year on year, its workload rises as the level of domestic abuse against women and girls also, sadly and depressingly, increases year on year. Each statistic represents a life devastated, impacted by violence and

emotional abuse, and yet, 24/7, Women's Aid supports women and girls, including many children, on their journey.

I salute the resilience of so many women and girls who have had the courage to speak out and who refused to suffer in silence, but we must go beyond policies and programmes to a societal shift in attitudes and behaviours. Let us commit today to challenging, through every avenue from education to legislation, every stereotype that perpetuates violence. Let us address, through a preventative strategy, the root causes of violence through educational awareness raising and make the protection of our women and girls key through access to services. I think here of the provision of safe shelter, legal aid and representation and psychological support in the short and long term.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: Let me get on a wee bit.

Let us ensure that, through prosecution, justice is done and seen to be done through robust legal frameworks, with tailored wrap-around support for the victim that includes healthcare, counselling and economic support to allow the rebuilding of lives. It also includes enhancing access to employment, vocational training, financial services and housing. Let us ensure that our response is survivor-centred and education-centred and compatible with international human rights standards. Let us ensure that, no matter how horrifying the numbers, the data in that area are robustly accurate in order to allow us, through research, to measure the prevalence and, indeed, the patterns of violence and let that research lead our public and policy response.

As we go forward against the backdrop of disturbing research from the PSNI and Women's Aid, may we address and utilise existing good practice. Here I think of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women being taken alongside the sustainable development goals of addressing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

As we set our collective face against violence against women and girls, let us never stop, both in words and deeds, to be part of the solution, supporting survivors, allowing their voice to be loudly heard and pointing towards a society where women and girls in Northern Ireland can be free from abuse, violence and misogyny.

Mr Allister: This has been an important and indisputably necessary debate, in which significant and essential things have been said in the motion, particularly in regard to femicide, and in many of the speeches. One of the issues touched on by Ms Hunter, for example, was victim blaming. Others talked about misogyny, and so they should. However, the proposers of the motion need to take a long, hard look at their organisation. Where on the spectrum of victim blaming would these words appear:

"You know ... sometimes abusers are so manipulative that the ... abused actually enjoy it."

They are certainly misogynistic. They are certainly victim blaming. They are the words of Gerry Adams to Máiría Cahill, a young woman who reported to senior Sinn Féin figures her repeated rape and abuse by a prominent IRA man and was then subjected to a kangaroo court by that party and organisation and made to confront her abuser. In the words of Máiría Cahill:

"Sinn Féin told everyone I was a liar, and they still can't admit that I told the truth."

That is borne out by the notorious response of she who is now the First Minister:

"It's not for me to say that I believe"

Máiría Cahill.

We then come to the House and talk about misogyny and victim blaming, yet we have a motion from a party from which all the matters that I have read out originate. The hypocrisy of that needs to be addressed.

It is clear that these are difficult issues. I have seen them from a side that other Members probably have not, which is through the courts. Yes, it is necessary to protect witnesses and to hedge around them all the assistance that there is, but, at the end of the day, our system is a criminal justice system, if justice is to be attained. As a criminal justice system, it requires the rights not just of the victim, which are very important, but of others to be observed, and cross-examination cannot be dispensed with in a criminal jurisdiction. It is easy to say that we have to do more, but we have to set that in the context of realising that there are certain restricting realities, particularly when dealing with the criminal justice system. Yes, let us make it as easy and as straightforward as we can, but we cannot

contradict the fundamentals of the proof system and the justice system.

The final thing that I want to say is that the motion:

"condemns the budget cuts imposed by the British Government".

Those are now the cuts of the Sinn Féin Finance Minister. Since we adopted the Budget, it is now the budgetary approach of the Executive, so it is time to own up to that. It is time to face that. If something is to be done about it, the responsibility now lies with those who are promoting the motion. Let us see whether the budget cuts continue, or will they now be blamed in perpetuity on someone else? You to have to man up. You have to own up to what is now your own budgetary situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, I ask you to take you ease for a moment or two, before Question Time begins at 2.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Mr Speaker: Question 13 has been withdrawn.

Workers' Rights: Legislation

1. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he will bring forward legislation to enhance workers' rights. (AQO 46/22-27)

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): In outlining my economic vision to the Assembly last week, I identified increasing the number of good jobs as one of my key objectives. To that end, I have instructed my officials to develop policy options for a wide-ranging good jobs Bill. As part of that work, my officials are engaging with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to discuss how that Bill could strengthen workers' rights. Trade unions have a vital role to play in improving the pay and conditions of workers, particular those in low-paying sectors of our economy.

Mr Carroll: I look forward to scrutinising that Bill and looking at its detail. As part of bringing forward that legislation, will the Minister commit to looking at removing the ban on secondary, solidarity strike action, which he will know was a cornerstone of Margaret Thatcher's anti-union laws?

Mr C Murphy: We intend to bring a significant employment Bill through over the course of this mandate. It is early days in relation to that. The Member tried to bring in private legislation on some of these areas during the previous mandate. We will consult with the trade unions, who have a specific interest in this, but also with employers and other sectors. Last week, we had an early conversation with trade unions, business organisations, the social economy sector, the NI Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and community development trusts: they were all in the room together when we outlined the broad approach that we will take in relation to this. We will continue those conversations to try to put together a comprehensive Bill, and there will be analysis across all those areas to inform what goes into that legislation.

Mr Kearney: One of the most repulsive practices within the workforce, particularly with regard to young people and women in employment, is zero-hours contracts. Will your legislation bring an end to zero-hours contracts?

Mr C Murphy: Yes. I have clearly indicated a number of areas that I want to look at and intend to try to address as part of that legislation. I agree with the Member that we often find that the people in the most vulnerable, insecure and lowest paid jobs are generally young people, women and people with disabilities. That is a clear disadvantage to sectors of the community that we are duty bound, under our obligations under equality law, to try to assist. I have clearly stated that one of my intentions is to introduce legislation to bring an end to zero-hours contracts.

Ms Eastwood: Does the Minister have any plans to introduce unpaid leave for carers as part of an employment Bill?

Mr C Murphy: I know that that issue has arisen. It is a very pressing issue for those who find themselves in those circumstances. I am certainly very sympathetic to ensuring that we have that flexibility and support for people. That will be part of the broad consultation on putting together the employment Bill that we intend to bring through, which will be a fairly broad Bill. I invite the Member, and others with a specific interest in this area, to come to the Department with their suggestions and views on that. We will be very happy to take all that on board.

Mr McCrossan: We cannot allow the rights of workers here to continue to fall further and further behind those of their counterparts elsewhere. Will the Minister give his personal commitment, today, that this legislation will be introduced before the summer recess?

Mr C Murphy: Some particular elements and provisions of the legislation are ready to go, and we intend to move forward with those. The employment Bill will be a substantial piece of legislation. With the best will in the world, I do not see any piece of legislation being drafted, consulted on and ready to go this side of the summer recess. My estimation is that, with a very fair wind, it will take a year, but it is more likely to be 18 months before such legislation can be brought to the House.

Tour de France: All-island Bid

2. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether there are plans to submit an all-island bid to host the Tour De France. (AQO 47/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: In July 2023, discussions on a potential all-Ireland bid to host the Tour de France Grand Départ were suspended, largely due to the absence of an Executive. Since coming into post, I have instructed my officials to reopen that dialogue. As part of those deliberations, the cost of the bid would have to be weighed against the benefits. I note that, when the Giro d'Italia Grande Partenza was hosted in Ireland in 2014, it generated around £2.5 million in economic activity, £12.7 million in tourism impact and attracted around 227,000 visitors.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his response. He mentioned the £2.45 benefit for every £1 spent in bringing the Giro d'Italia here. That included £13 million in additional tourism spend and £12 million of free advertisement worldwide to over 56 million viewers. Does the Minister agree that bringing events such as, potentially, the Tour de France or the European soccer championship to Ireland has a positive benefit for our economy, tourism and businesses in general?

Mr C Murphy: That is well recognised. Of course, they require some upfront investment, and at a time when we are very challenged financially by the funding available to the Executive, but most of those large events tend to have a longer-lasting economically beneficial outcome, certainly for tourism, which is a growing market for us and a key part of our industry. It will be no different for the Euros, if, hopefully, we can secure their coming here.

I approach it from the point of view of what the investment can achieve. The question is whether we can secure the necessary investment when we set it against all the other priorities that the Department has. I look forward to doing the analysis and rejoining the discussion, which has been parked as a consequence of there being no Executive, to see what the estimations are for it and what we can hope to achieve.

I do not pretend to be as keen a cyclist as the Member, but I enjoy the odd spin on my bike. I was present for the Giro, and it was a great event, particularly because it came through south Armagh as well.

Mr Buckley: The event space is so important to portraying a positive Northern Ireland around

the world. We have seen that through events that have been held here, now and in times past, no more so than with the North West 200, which attracts crowds of over 150,000 spectators each year. It has had continual funding concerns and contributes £12 million to the local economy year-on-year. Will the Minister look at ways in which his Department could further support that important activity in the north-west to ensure that it continues?

Mr C Murphy: I recognise the contribution of the North West 200. The other day, when I was doing a radio programme, someone rang in about it. It is clearly an event that has enormous benefit for the north-west. Of course, up on the north coast, you will be looking forward to hosting the Open again, which will bring enormous benefit to that area.

I am happy to look at it. It is the consequence of having very tight budgets that decisions have to be made on the level of support that can be given to any particular event. Like all Departments, the Department for the Economy has been challenged to find savings rather than make additional investment, but I am happy to consider the case for the North West 200 to see how we can match it with the level of support that we can provide.

Mr Honeyford: Such events are a major driver in tourism numbers, and our tourism industry is based around them. I agree with what the Minister said, but what other sporting events or major events such as business conferences can Northern Ireland target to host in the future? Will the Minister seek to bring agreement to the Executive?

Mr C Murphy: I think that the Irish Open is coming to County Down this year, which is good news. As I mentioned in response to the previous question, the Open is coming to Portrush in 2025. That, again, is good news and will have enormous benefit. The tourism sector, and that sector in my Department, will look at any future opportunities that we have. Of course, as I said in my original answer, they always require upfront investment, but, in general terms, we have a significant return on the other side.

One fly in the ointment is the unresolved question of the outworkings of Brexit on travel permits and how that will have an impact. A lot of this is based on international tourism and international visitors coming here, staying and spending money. If we do not resolve the issue of the electronic travel authorisation (ETA), it could present an enormous challenge in future.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I agree with you on the sporting events, particularly on Euro 28 and the potential of Casement Park to bring a transformational, world-class stadium to west Belfast, the North and the island more broadly. Will you instruct your officials to work on specific economic analysis that will look at the potential long-term economic benefits and multiplier effect of building Casement Park, which will include having not only the Ulster final every year and the European championships —

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the Member please ask a question?

Mr O'Toole: — but, potentially, a whole range of other events?

Mr C Murphy: I do not disagree with the Member. A lot of those issues have been brought into the business case for Casement Park, because it is not just about the potential of building a football stadium and hosting football matches but the wider economic driver that it would be, as he rightly said, not just to west Belfast but to Belfast as a whole, the entire North and, I am sure, beyond. That will be considered. If we in the Department are asked for assistance by, for example, giving analysis, I would be happy for us to provide that.

10X Economy

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of his Department's 10X Economy strategy. (AQO 48/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: The 10X economic vision has many positive elements, and I intend to build upon those strengths in taking forward my own economic vision. The vision that I outlined to the Assembly last week provides a clear strategic focus on good jobs, regional balance, productivity and decarbonisation. It takes account of the recommendations of the independent review of Invest Northern Ireland. It also factors in greater certainty in our trading conditions, which creates opportunities to boost trade on a North/South and east-west basis.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. Does he agree that tourism did not get the showing that it deserved in the 10X strategy? I acknowledge that steps are being taken to address that. What is his assessment of the potential negative impact of the electronic travel

authorisation? Would it be helpful if the North West 200 circuit took in Armagh?

Mr C Murphy: I am not that parochial, I have to say.

I agree with the Member. We are looking at a separate tourism strategy, which has been out for consultation and which will no doubt come back to us for a further look. I have received many views on that, and I think that it can be improved.

The ETA is already causing very serious concerns. I have no doubt that, for some of the projects that we are talking about, including the big competitions and other events that we bring here, it is a factor in the minds of the organisers, because they depend on international tourism. About 70% of international visitors to the North come through the South. Over a quarter of a million day visits every year are made by people who come up from the South, where they have been holidaying. That is a growing trade, and it is enormously important to not only our tourism but our broader economy.

We intend to consult the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance, because it has particularly strong views on the damage that the ETA can do. Our intention is to build up the evidence on the concerns on the ETA and to bring that to the Home Office in London in order to make a particular case for a relaxation of it for tourism. From what we have been speaking about in both the previous question and this one, tourism potential could be seriously undermined if we have a significant restriction on travel across the border.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, do you agree that, as well as creating opportunities to attract high-quality inward investment, the Windsor framework provides opportunities for local firms to grow their exports?

Mr C Murphy: Yes. The 10X strategy, which was the point of the question, has a lot of positive areas, but it is largely silent on post-Brexit trading arrangements. Now that we have some certainty on that, it helps in making sure not only that those internationally who are interested in potential investment here understand what the position is — that means North/South, east-west and the dual access that we have — but that local firms that clearly want to get involved in exporting into the South, Europe and internationally have a clear understanding of the arrangements. I hope that we are on the point of resolution, because any

continued uncertainty will continue to damage not only international investment but investment by local people in their businesses. The more certainty that we have on that, the better.

Mr McReynolds: Education and skills are essential parts of facilitating the 10X strategy. A public consultation has recently ended on the potential closure of the Castlereagh Belfast Metropolitan campus, which is in my constituency of East Belfast. Will the Minister commit to meeting the management of Belfast Metropolitan College in order to discuss the challenges that it faces and any assistance that his Department can give?

Mr C Murphy: Belfast Met has autonomy in decision-making on its resources, infrastructure and estate, but I have had some representations on the matter, and I have asked officials to look at what the issues are. I know that there is some disquiet about it. I have to confess that I am not entirely certain of Belfast Met's plans for carrying its business into the future, but we will have that conversation with it and see what can be done. The day-to-day decisions on its resources and estate are a matter for the college.

Tourism Industry: North Belfast

4. **Mr Brett** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how his Department can support the growth of the tourism industry in North Belfast. (AQO 49/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: North Belfast has a number of significant tourist attractions, including Crumlin Road Gaol and Belfast Castle. Tourism NI is developing plans and seeking opportunities for future capital programmes in order to enhance the tourism industry, and it is open to proposals for North Belfast.

Tourism NI is also working with Belfast City Council on a new £350,000 neighbourhood tourism investment programme, which will run over the next 18 months and will be of interest to stakeholders in North Belfast.

2.15 pm

Mr Brett: I thank the Minister for his response. From the shores of Belfast lough and the historic White House to the beauty of Cave Hill and the cultural corridor on the edge of our capital city, as he rightly says, North Belfast is blessed with historic landmarks. How can we tie those across the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and Belfast City Council areas

to ensure that all residents of North Belfast benefit from a tourism strategy?

Mr C Murphy: Part of the Department's approach generally will be about co-design, including on things like North Belfast's tourism product and areas of historical significance. Cave Hill does not just have its beauty; it is also where the United Irishmen declared their revolution, so it has historical significance as well. Where a tourism product straddles council areas, such as in North Belfast, it is incumbent on both councils to work together. Then, it is much easier for Departments, tourism agencies and Tourism NI to respond to any particular propositions to support the tourism product in the general north Belfast area and make sure that full value is obtained from all of the assets that it has.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister give us a wee update on the development of linkages between the Causeway coastal route and the Wild Atlantic Way?

Mr Speaker: That is slightly off the topic of the tourism industry in North Belfast.

Mr C Murphy: I did not realise that North Belfast had stretched its boundaries all the way to the north coast. There has been ongoing discussion between Tourism NI and the agencies responsible for the Causeway coast and the Wild Atlantic Way. Various signage issues are being looked at. The Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands have become very successful tourism brands, not just in terms of international recognition but in lifting the tourist product in those areas by encouraging people to invest more and improve their tourism offer. It will be important to bring some of that understanding and knowledge across to the Causeway coast. Work is ongoing under the auspices of Tourism Ireland to look at improving that. Recognising the value that those brands have created over time, there is a case, which I will look for, to extend those brands into the North.

Miss McAllister: This is my first time addressing the Minister in the Chamber, so I wish him well in his new role.

Sticking with North Belfast, what engagement will he commit to having with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on dealing with derelict and dilapidated buildings, such as Crumlin Road courthouse, which also have the potential for huge tourism opportunities?

Mr C Murphy: I spent time in Crumlin Road courthouse — not by choice, I have to add. *[Laughter.]* My memories of it are not that fond. Nonetheless, I recognise the value of it and other significant listed buildings. I am very happy to engage with the Minister to discuss whether there is an overlap between our Departments. Sometimes we struggle to get to this place, but there is a recognition in the Executive that, with the limited resources that we have, the more joint work we do on various initiatives and areas of policy, the better the outcome that we can achieve across the board. I am happy to talk to the Minister in relation to that and try to generate some fond memories of Crumlin Road courthouse .

Mr McNulty: Minister, what initiatives and efforts are your Department pursuing to bring the Ireland's Ancient East tourism product to Counties Armagh, Down and Antrim?

Mr C Murphy: As I said in response to the previous question, those brands are very strong and successful, not just in terms of their international recognition but because they have encouraged people who have received increased business to invest in their businesses to improve the tourism offer. The Member knows, as I do, that that area of Armagh and County Down, which has a beautiful and historic coast with many tourist attractions, and right up through the glens of Antrim coast would benefit from the additional boost that that marketing would give and the number of visitors that it would attract. There is a strong argument for building on those brands, and I look forward to engagement with Minister Catherine Martin, who represents the Southern Government on tourism matters, and to getting the North/South arrangements formally up and working again. We have had contact with the Departments that we share interests with, but I want to get those arrangements formally working to examine the case for bringing those brands northwards, because it would benefit tourism providers right along the north coast and on the east coast of Ireland.

Energy Strategy: Path to Net Zero Energy

5. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy to provide an update on the implementation of the path to net zero energy strategy. (AQO 50/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: The energy strategy, 'The Path to Net Zero Energy', was published in December 2021 following agreement by the Executive. It contained a commitment to report

progress on cross-departmental actions to implement the strategy. Annual action plan reports on delivery in the first two years of the strategy have been published. The 2024 action plan is due to be published in the coming days and will outline priority areas of action and the associated tasks for delivery in 2024.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his reply. Minister, the strategy details the requirement for capital investment of £461 million per annum from 2021. Can the Minister detail how much of that investment has been delivered to date?

Mr C Murphy: I do not have the exact figures to hand. I am happy to provide him with that. Nonetheless, the strategy is a combined strategy across the Executive. It is about meeting our targets. Substantial work has been done, but it will have to be substantially improved to make sure that we meet the target for 2030 of an 80% reduction in carbon emissions. There are a number of investments. Some of them are from the Executive, and some of it is annually managed expenditure that we can access and other funds that we can access. I am happy to get a breakdown of the figures and provide them to the Member.

Miss Brogan: Will the Minister outline what actions he is taking to tackle electric connection charging policy prices here?

Mr C Murphy: If our strategy is to work in terms of the general renewables agenda that we want to promote across the island and the localised, smaller-scale improvements that people are doing in their own homes and areas and given the number of new builds that we have, we have to make sure that the connection charges are fair to people who are trying to invest in that. We will talk to the Utility Regulator and others in that area to try to make sure that we get a degree of fairness there, because there is a recognition that there is a high cost associated with connection. If we want to make sure that we get people connected who are producing their own renewable energy or some of the bigger-scale renewables that will be absolutely vital going forward, we need to make sure that connection is not an off-putting element to all of that.

Mr Allister: If the costing is of the order of £460 million per annum running up to 2030, that is in excess of £2.5 billion. Can the Minister tell us whether there has been any budgeting for any of that that he is aware of?

Mr C Murphy: The Budget that we are currently dealing with is one that essentially should have

been done or was due to have been done by the Secretary of State, and he stepped aside from that and left the Finance Minister with a very short-notice Budget. Of course, the Budget that we will be dealing with for next year has not yet been able to take account of what, I hope, will be the re-fixing of our financial position and our fiscal framework, which the Executive intend to talk to Treasury about. In that context, I am not aware that that has been planned in the future, but I am aware, as all Members here are aware, that we do not receive the funding that we should be entitled to and that we have to renegotiate that with Treasury. In that context, I am hopeful that we can genuinely plan into the future, because this is a key commitment not just for the Department for the Economy but across the Executive. It is a moral as well as a legal obligation that we have to meet, and the Executive will have to meet it.

Mr Durkan: Has the Minister had or does he intend to have any practical discussions with Executive colleagues on how households can be supported to become more energy-efficient and how the transition to net zero can be made more affordable for ordinary people?

Mr C Murphy: There are programmes that have come out of the Department in relation to supporting that energy efficiency. There are programmes that the Department has, but I understand that it will be an issue for Communities as well, which is in that kind of housebuilding arena. It is incumbent on us all to work together and link together to make sure that what programmes are available are understood and supported across the Departments, both in terms of new build — that comes from new housing stock — and of retrofitting, because there are enormous opportunities to reduce energy consumption, particularly in older households, if we can get the right schemes there. The challenge that we always have is in finding the right resource to go into such programmes. Nonetheless, it is an important area of our ambition to reach net zero.

Nursing: Higher-level Apprenticeship Framework

6. **Mr Donnelly** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what progress has been made on the development of a new nursing higher-level apprenticeship framework. (AQO 51/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: A level 6 higher-level apprenticeship in adult nursing is currently approved for delivery by the Open University.

Joint funding for a single cohort of nine apprentices was provided by my Department and the Department of Health. That cohort was recruited into the programme in 2020 and completed their apprenticeships in 2023. All nursing apprentices on the programme were employed in the private sector, mainly in private care homes.

Mr Donnelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. What else does the Minister intend to do, working with the Health Department, to support workforce development?

Mr C Murphy: Primary responsibility for that will be with the Health Department. My Department has a general responsibility for skills, education and training, particularly in relation to apprenticeships. That scheme shows that, where there is collaboration between Departments, it can have a positive outcome. Albeit that is small numbers, it is still a positive outcome.

As I said in response to a previous question, the best outcome that we can get from an Executive with limited resources is collaboration across Departments to ensure that we are not duplicating or cutting across one another. I am happy to work with the Health Department to ensure that we work together, where we can, to provide support for people to improve their skills and qualifications and the productivity that they bring to the workforce.

Mr Middleton: Does the Minister agree that we need to improve career guidance and entry rates across the board, not only into the health service but across the public sector, and that any development of such a programme needs to be reflected in the ethos in our schools and in careers advice?

Mr C Murphy: Yes, I do. I have had that conversation briefly with the Minister of Education. The traditional pathways, basically through schools, were either into vocational work or universities. They are much broader and more varied now, and there is much more opportunity for people to follow high-level apprenticeships. We need to ensure that, when kids are 13 or 14 years old, they get all those options laid out for them and their parents, so that they can pursue whatever option, they think, is best for them, and that they continue to receive advice as they progress through school. Again, it is a bit like my response to the previous question: the more cohesion we have between Departments working together, the better the outcomes we will get, particularly for young people.

Mr Delargy: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he recognise the opportunities that public-sector apprenticeships present?

Mr C Murphy: Yes, I do, increasingly. In my previous role in the Department of Finance, we had responsibility for civil servants. There were efforts there to ensure that we gave opportunities for people to come forward, particularly people who, perhaps, would not ordinarily have ended up working in some parts of the public service. It is to the good of the public service generally that we have more diversity and ranges of experience in it. It leads to better outcomes in the decisions that it has to take and the ideas that it generates. It is of enormous value.

We have recognised that we have a stubbornly low level of productivity. We are the worst-performing region on these islands. It is through assistance, career progression, studying and apprenticeships that we will bring individuals up in terms of their approach to it, and that, in turn, will bring up overall productivity levels.

Onshore Petroleum Exploration and Production

7. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he will introduce legislation to ban onshore petroleum exploration and production. (AQO 52/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: The Department is undertaking a review of that policy area. A consultation on new onshore petroleum licensing policy is currently live and will close on 12 April. My intention, which was also the proposed position set out in that consultation, is to introduce a legislative ban on all forms of onshore petroleum exploration and production. Following analysis of the consultation responses, I will seek Executive approval for a final policy position. I will then be able to introduce the necessary legislation.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for his answer. He has outlined his position with regard to onshore petroleum licensing. I understand that offshore petroleum licensing is a reserved matter. Does he intend to engage with the UK Government on securing a ban in that area?

Mr C Murphy: The Member is correct to say that it is a matter for the Government in London, but I am happy to engage with them and raise any particular issues. Part of the rationale for introducing a ban on onshore exploration is that we need to move away from fossil fuels and

that they do not contribute to our carbon reduction targets.

If the Government in London are intent on continuing to do that offshore, I do not think that that assists us generally in moving towards those targets. I am therefore very happy to talk to them about that.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: We will move on to topical questions.

Investment Zone: North-west

T1. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy to commit to ensuring that the British Government place an investment zone in the north-west city region, given that investment zones are exactly the type of positive discrimination and incentive needed to deliver regional equality, with the north-west's being the first place that an investment zone for Northern Ireland should go in order to meet the objectives in his economic vision and demonstrate loudly and clearly the ambition for regional balance. (AQT 31/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: On many occasions since I came into office, including last week when I made a statement to the Assembly, I have outlined my ambition for regional balance, particularly for the north-west. A decision on an investment zone is a matter for the British Government, but we want to ensure that what we do through policy here creates regional balance. That is the vision that I outlined last week, and it is that vision that I intend to follow through on. We will adjust policy, and how Invest NI does its business, in order to deliver greater regional balance, with a particular focus on the north-west. It, however, is not the only area that feels left behind by investment over the years. Many areas in the west and in the south feel equally left behind. Nonetheless, there is a particular focus on the north-west, and we view the expansion of Magee to 10,000 students as being a central part of that. It will require work across the Executive, but where we can effect policy in that regard, we certainly will.

Mr Speaker: Ms McLaughlin, we want a question rather than a speech.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, placing an investment zone throughout the whole of Northern Ireland will not address the lack of regional balance effectively. We need positive

discrimination and incentives for places, such as the north-west, that have been left behind for decades.

Mr C Murphy: There are things that we can control and things that we may not be able to control. Where I can control policy and investment, and the actions of Invest NI in that regard, I will attempt to achieve the objective of regional balance, particularly for the north-west. We will, of course, try to take advantage of whatever initiatives the British Government take, but they will be in charge of how those are set out.

Euro 2028: Economic Boost

T2. **Mr Baker** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he agrees that staging the Euros will deliver a tremendous economic boost, not only in West Belfast but in the North as a whole. (AQT 32/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: There is a real opportunity here for all sports fans, not just soccer fans, to get the Euros here. We had discussions earlier about the impact of the North West 200 and golfing tournaments, all of which bring a very positive news story. They also bring very significant international attention to the place, and I have no doubt that, if we were able to get the Euros here, we could get the Casement Park stadium ready to accommodate them, and that would have an enormous impact, not just as a result of international exposure but through visitor numbers. The stadium itself will have an ongoing regenerative impact on that part of Belfast in particular but also on the whole city and the wider region.

Mr Baker: Will the Minister provide an update on the Open Championship?

Mr C Murphy: The Open Championship is due to be held in 2025 in Portrush. The experience of holding a recent Open Championship there outlines what I said previously. It brought enormous positivity, visitor numbers, exposure and viewing figures from around the world and led to an increase in golf tourism as a consequence. The holding of the Irish Open in County Down this year will do that as well. The fact that those tournaments are both coming here, this year and next, will have an enormous impact.

There are already meetings going on with officials, local councils and businesses in the area to see how we can improve on the offer, which was already very good the last time that the Open was held on the north coast. We will

try to improve on that offer and on the tourism benefit from it.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that their supplementary question is supposed to be associated with their first question.

Economic Boost: North Down

T3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of his departmental programme to boost the Northern Ireland economy, especially in the North Down constituency. (AQT 33/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I set out a vision last week of what I see as being the economic challenges here and of where areas of growth need to occur. We have stubbornly low levels of productivity and very high levels of economic inactivity. I am sure that pockets of the Member's constituency suffer from that, as do many others. We have a mandate that is shorter than we would have liked — only three years — but there are a lot of economic levers that we can adjust to try to achieve outcomes for places and people that have not previously benefited from those. I hope that, as we follow through on that strategy, we will give a better potential outcome to people who have been left behind either in the labour market or in skills and education. Many sub-areas within areas that might otherwise be considered to be affluent have struggled as well. We intend to try to provide support to those people.

Mr Easton: What plans does the Department have to ensure that educational and vocational training is adequate to meet the demands of future economic employment opportunities through the use of the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) in my constituency?

Mr C Murphy: The colleges are underutilised. Over the past number of years, we have had quite a significant investment in that estate. We have a very good offering when it comes to the colleges and the courses that they provide. In the current circumstances, they are not fully utilised. I want to work with the colleges to make sure that people are able to take advantage of the services that they have to offer.

The Member will recognise that one of the difficulties is that a lot of the money that the Department for the Economy previously put into skills, retraining and trying to bring people into the workforce was European funding like the European regional development fund (ERDF) and the European social fund (ESF). Post-

Brexit, that is gone, and it has not been replaced, despite the Government's promises. We are left with a significant hole in the Department's budget in that regard. It will be a challenge to try to find the necessary resources to support some of those programmes and courses that traditionally used that funding. It is essential that we do that in the time ahead and are creative in how we try to find support for people who find themselves in those circumstances to give them the opportunities that they deserve to try to improve their skills and get a good job that gives a benefit to wider society.

Shared Island Enterprise Scheme

T4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of how the £30 million from the Irish Government's Enterprise Ireland fund can be used. (AQT 34/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: The £30 million is very welcome. It is to be shared between Enterprise Ireland and the enterprise agencies here, and it will be worked through InterTradelreland. There are enormous opportunities. There are very high numbers of business start-ups here, which is very beneficial, and a very strong entrepreneurial streak runs through the North and the island generally. Those additional funds to try to assist people and give them the start that many of them want to make their ideas into a business opportunity will be very beneficial in the time ahead.

We are doing that in the same context as I mentioned in answer to the previous question: we do not have the resource that we used to have for those matters, but we can have creative solutions to that. If that means getting assistance from Dublin at times in relation to that, that is very beneficial, because, in the immediate future, we do not have the financial resources that we need to do those things.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his response.*] In addition to the areas that the Minister outlined, will he provide us with some security about how he will work with Minister Simon Harris on ensuring that not only those who are looking at innovation but students who are looking at further and higher education can enjoy that right across the island?

Mr C Murphy: I have had a conversation with Minister Harris already, and some work had already been done on making sure that there is more synchronicity between how exam results

work so that we can ensure that people have greater access across the island to whatever university or college is their choice. Much more work can be done there, and he has committed, as have I, to working together on that. We are very much looking forward to the formal North/South Ministerial Council structures being up and working in the very near future, and, forbye that, a lot of work will be done between the two Departments to try to make sure that young people have as much access and clarity as possible in relation to some of the courses and studies that they can pursue across the island.

Trade Union Consultation

T5. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he will ensure that the trade union movement is fully consulted on the drafting and implementation of any legislation that he brings forward to improve workers' rights, given that, for far too long, the Irish trade union movement and its individual affiliates have been denied meaningful involvement in the development of public policy, particularly in relation to industrial, employment and economic matters. (AQT 35/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I have always followed the principle — I think that it is a good one and a beneficial one — of co-design, particularly for the people who are being impacted on by any particular policy area or legislation. Last week, we had a meeting where the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and a number of trade unions were represented, along with business organisations, the social enterprise sector, NICVA, community development trusts and others. That was a very useful, valuable discussion for not just me but officials. I always think that, when we are trying to decide policy or legislation, there is much more benefit in going out and consulting and engaging with the people who are represented. That broad discussion, including with that organisation, will be a regular feature for me, not just specifically in relation to particular measures that we might consider. I think that it is a very useful forum for engagement when we are discussing how the Department is doing, how people view the areas that we are dealing with and what they think the priorities should be. In particular, I commit, in relation to specific legislation that we might bring forward, to engage with the unions and others that have an interest. We want to strengthen the role of the trade unions, particularly in protecting the most vulnerable workers, including younger people, women and disabled people, who find themselves at the

brunt of the worst employment policies in society, generally speaking.

Mr Kearney: Thank you, Minister. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has prioritised social dialogue as a process of consultation and policy formulation. I very much welcome the fact that, next week, you will sponsor the democracy at work policy launch here in Stormont. Can you set out for us how you envisage social dialogue being implemented between the trade union movement and your Department?

Mr C Murphy: I am very pleased to be able to sponsor that event next Tuesday, and I invite any Members who wish to do so to come along to come to the Long Gallery, where the trade unions will present a policy paper on that area. I think that it is very important. We have the responsibility here for legislation on how people work, the conditions under which they work, the flexibilities that they might have and the pay that they may get. It is vital that, when we take action like that, we engage with all those responsible. The trade unions have a particular role in representing the rights of workers. Businesses have a role in being the employers, in a lot of cases, of those workers. Therefore, we need to make sure that we have forums in which we can engage with all of those interests and all of those sectors. We do that regularly, and I think that it would be beneficial to the Executive as a whole to have that regular engagement with such a group so that we can test ideas off each other and share analysis of and opinions on how things are moving. It makes for much better policy and legislation when you have that level of buy-in and input into its development.

Flood Recovery Funding

T6. **Mr Brown** asked the Minister for the Economy, further to the positive announcement that applications for the second phase of flood recovery funding will open via local councils this week, to outline how he will prioritise any underspend that might be available once this phase has been fully allocated. (AQT 36/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: We do not anticipate underspend because, to be quite honest and probably taking the same view as you, I do not think that there was enough money in the pot to begin with. It was decided and developed before the Executive were back, and there is a ceiling of £100,000 in compensation for businesses that lost stock and suffered other damages as a consequence. The priority is to get money out quickly so that businesses can assist in their own recovery, but I would be

surprised if there were an underspend. If there happens to be, we will certainly take stock of how that might be used. As the Member knows, £15 million was set aside originally for that purpose. Some of the other funds that we have attached to that are about flood prevention and measures that individual premises can take to protect themselves in the future, so there may be scope for expanding that further. Given the damage that he has seen and that I have seen in my constituency, we could probably have spent a lot more if we had had the resource to do so.

Mr Speaker: That brings topical questions to a conclusion.

2.45 pm

Education

Statutory Assessments: Parental Referrals

1. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Education whether the Education Authority has changed the process for parental referrals for statutory assessments. (AQO 61/22-27)

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): The Education Authority (EA) has not changed the process for parental referrals for statutory assessments. Article 20 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 clearly sets out the duty on the Education Authority to comply with a request from a parent or carer to arrange an assessment of special educational needs (SEN) for a child.

Following the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the emergent code of practice asks that the Education Authority provide a standard pro forma for referral for use by a relevant party. The Education Authority launched the standard pro forma in May 2021 via an online portal. That is for schools, health professionals, educational psychologists and parents or carers to access in their capacity as a relevant party to a child and to request or refer a child for a statutory assessment of special educational needs. That process remains live online for all the relevant parties to access, with specific support available via the Education Authority's special educational needs helpline or from the Education Authority's psychology service for those parents or carers who wish to progress a direct request for assessment for their child.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his fulsome answer. I asked the question because I have noticed in my constituency office an increased number of appeals to decisions made by the EA on statutory assessments. Will the Minister ensure that those important assessments have not been limited or reduced and that the educational needs of the child will always take precedence over budgetary issues?

Mr Givan: There are, obviously, statutory obligations for processing statements of education. That has been borne out with the additional spend that the Department has had to make over the past number of years given the exponential growth in this area. The Member can be assured that assessments being carried out is a priority for the Department. The greater accessibility of an online portal and greater awareness of it is a good thing because it allows people to register those issues. Processing statements then needs to be carried out effectively, but it is a priority for the Department.

Mr Mathison: Minister, is there any plan in the Department to tackle the shortage of educational psychologists and speech and language therapists, who are required to progress those statement applications in a timely fashion?

Mr Givan: The Member raises an important point around having a workforce that is available to carry out these processes, and making sure that there is such a workforce is a challenge. We are aware of that, and, obviously, it is important that we can recruit people into those roles so that they can carry out the functions that they need to.

Mr Brooks: Minister, in which circumstances is the EA likely to refuse a statutory assessment request by a parent?

Mr Givan: Obviously, there are issues around making sure that the information that is provided is there, and, often, it is that inability to garner the appropriate evidence that becomes the challenge. Where there is evidence, the assessment can take place. There are some circumstances where that assessment has maybe not been carried out because of a lack of evidence.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, do you think that the Education Authority is fit for purpose, and, if not, when do you plan to do something about it? In this issue, it is certainly not fit for purpose.

Mr Givan: I am happy to come back to that question in due course.

Shared and Integrated Education: Funding

2. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister of Education whether the UK Government's financial settlement, published on 13 February 2024, will have any impact on previous funding commitments arising from the Fresh Start Agreement for shared and integrated education. (AQO 62/22-27)

Mr Givan: Funding of £150 million that was previously earmarked for Fresh Start projects has been placed in the UK Government's financial settlement for the Executive. In addition, construction costs for the Fresh Start projects have risen considerably in recent years. The remaining Fresh Start funding is, therefore, sufficient to cover only those projects that are currently in construction contract.

In order to give clarity to the remaining Fresh Start projects that are not yet in contract, I will say that they will now be delivered in my Department's conventional major works programme and will continue to advance in design and planning. I hope that that will provide reassurance to the schools on the immediate way forward. I have written to the Secretary of State to set out the strategic importance of the programme for Northern Ireland, and to seek additional capital funding for those projects.

Mr Tennyson: This is devastating news for the schools affected. I have to say that the news was delivered in a rather abysmal way by the Department, and the Minister's response will be cold comfort. Will the Minister agree with me that investing in integrated education is public service transformation and, therefore, now commit to reallocate the money back to its original purpose, so that schools like Millennium Integrated Primary School, which have commenced on-site, can still proceed?

Mr Givan: I am not sure where the Member has been. I highlighted on day 1 in office that the budget allocations for my Department were a real cause for concern. Long in advance of devolution even being restored, it was flagged that the way in which the UK Government were treating the Fresh Start money would create difficulties for us. This is not new.

I say to the Member that, when it came to the restoration of the institutions and the financial

package for getting back to Stormont, his leader stated:

"I think we're looking a gift horse in the mouth here by refusing to actually grasp that money and bank that money at this stage".

Clearly, the leader of the Member's party was wrong when it came to the financial package. We outlined that the financial package was nowhere near sufficient, yet the Alliance Party and others said, "Get back in. Let's not look a gift horse in the mouth". I am clear, and my actions are clear: I have moved those schools into the conventional programme — rather than pausing and cancelling them — not because I have let them down, but because the Secretary of State and the UK Government have let them down. Those schools have moved into the conventional programme, they will continue to be advanced, and I am making the case to the Secretary of State for the funding to be provided. I hope that the Member's party and leader will join me in my efforts to try to support those projects rather than play cheap party politics over them.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Dillon: Minister, I understand the extreme pressure that your budget is under, but can you give a commitment that the business case for the non-teaching staff pay and grading review will be with the Finance Department as soon as possible?

Mr Givan: The Member raises the important issue of support staff. It is vital that that business case is finalised. The Department of Finance continues to look at aspects of it. Issues with the business case have been raised by the Education Authority, the Department of Education and the Department of Finance. I have made it clear that I want it to be prioritised so that we can complete the business case. That will allow the Finance Minister to take an informed view, which could feed into the next financial year. I am seeking to progress that, because it is important that the pay and grading review comes to successful conclusion and that we can resolve the issues.

Mr Frew: Minister, the MP for North Antrim, Ian Paisley, and I have spoken to you of late about how important the Ballycastle shared education campus is to the local area. Can you provide an update on that vital project, which was part of the Fresh Start Agreement?

Mr Givan: I can. The announcement was made at the tail end of last week, and I know that,

over the weekend, the Member of Parliament for North Antrim expressed his concern about the proposals for Ballycastle. I can assure the Member and, indeed, the Member of Parliament for North Antrim that Ballycastle shared education campus is proceeding.

Let me provide an update for Members. There are nine projects that are contractually committed and that the Treasury has said that it will support: Ulidia Integrated College; New-Bridge Integrated College; Shimna Integrated College; Phoenix Integrated Primary School; Mill Strand Integrated School; Parkhall Integrated College; Rowandale Integrated Primary School; Strangford Integrated College; and the Ballycastle shared education campus. Those school projects amount to around £266 million, which is contractually committed to by the Treasury. Those will proceed. My action is to make sure that the other schools that are not able to proceed are advanced by their being moved into my Department's conventional major capital programme.

Mr Butler: Can the Minister give an update on the impact that the funding cuts will have on the new-build project for Fort Hill Integrated College in his constituency of Lagan Valley?

Mr Givan: That is one of the schools that will continue to advance in the planning phase because, rather than being cancelled as a result of the UK Government and the Secretary of State's position, I have moved it into the conventional major capital programme. However, it is not one of the schools that was contractually committed to. A number of those schools are at different stages, but, because of the action that I have taken, they will continue to advance. That, however, will be subject to the necessary capital becoming available. When they are ready for construction, it will be for the Department of Education and the wider Executive to ensure that the necessary capital is available for those schools and all the others to be taken forward.

Ms Hunter: I am mindful that, nearly a decade ago, that funding was promised for shared and integrated education. However, the money has been removed with little thought for schools, teachers and pupils. Exactly when did you, as Minister, and other Ministers become aware that that money was being reallocated?

Mr Givan: It was part of the £3.3 billion financial package that the UK Government presented. The capital funding that was still outstanding from Fresh Start for shared and integrated education and shared housing

schemes was included in the totality of that package. The ring-fencing that was there for Fresh Start is no longer there. Just to give the House some more figures, it was in 2018 that the totality of all those projects was announced, and it came to £483 million. As of today, that figure sits at £925 million because of the rising costs of inflation in the construction industry. That shows the necessary increase in the quantum of funding. So far, £266 million for those schools has been committed, and some have been completed. If it is beneficial to Members, I am happy to place in the Library the correspondence that I have entered into with the Secretary of State, in which I make it very clear that, if the UK Government are serious, as I am, about shared and integrated education, the announcement that they made in 2018 is no longer fit for purpose and that they need to provide to the Executive the funding that was originally envisaged under Fresh Start. I will continue to make that case, and I hope that others will join me in making it.

Free School Meals/School Uniform Grants: Legislation

3. Mr Donnelly asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to introduce legislation, before the beginning of the 2024-2025 academic year, following the review of the criteria for free school meals and uniform grants. (AQO 63/22-27)

Mr Givan: My Department's review of the eligibility criteria for free school meals and uniform grants continues to examine a range of options for increasing the number of children and young people who are able to access free school meals and uniform grants. The options that are being considered include raising the income thresholds that apply to some of the means-tested criteria; the introduction of universal free school meals provision to pupils in some school years; and options that are a combination of the two. The arrangements for the provision of milk, meals and related facilities that were made under the provisions of articles 58 and 59 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 set out the eligibility criteria that apply to the provision of free school meals. Although it will be dependent on the detail of any change to the eligibility criteria, any changes are likely to be able to be made through the revision of those arrangements, and, as a result, no additional legislation is anticipated.

The eligibility criteria for uniform grants are very similar to the criteria for free school meals. They are detailed in the EA's clothing allowance

scheme under article 60 of the 1986 Order, and, as with free school meals, it is anticipated that any change in the eligibility criteria will be able to be taken forward as a revision to that scheme and therefore will not require legislative change. I will be considering the next steps of that review in the time ahead and, in doing so, I will take account of the potential budgetary implications of any change in the eligibility criteria.

Mr Donnelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned a couple of options that he is looking at. Is he considering implementing a cap on school uniform cost?

Mr Givan: The cost of uniforms is one of the issues that I will be engaging further on with the Department. Guidance was provided to schools on that issue. It is one that comes up every year, and I again appeal to schools. If they were following the guidance, legislation would not be necessary in this area. It is a prohibitive factor for some families when they choose the school that children go to.

It does not just apply to school uniforms. Children may be in a multiplicity of sports clubs in a school that have different kits, and, if those kits are branded, they can come to a significant amount of money. Cost should not be a prohibiter in deciding what school a child goes to. We need to be cognisant of that reality for a lot of families across Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Mr Clarke: Thanks very much for your answer, Minister. In your response, you talked about the uniform grant and the guidance. It is clear that some schools are not following the guidance. Given that, what are your plans, going forward, for the removal of some of the costs that you referred to?

Mr Givan: The Member is right about the fact that some schools are not following the guidance. I should say, however, that a considerable majority are doing so. Obviously, I want all schools to follow it.

My officials have carried out significant work to identify possible solutions. A pre-consultation exercise, which engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, has taken place. A public consultation, launching in late spring, will gather stakeholder views on areas such as the need for statutory guidance on school uniforms, the cost and affordability of school uniforms, the use of branded items and sole-supplier arrangements.

Mr Baker: Does the Minister have plans to reinstate the school holiday food grant scheme and put it on a statutory footing?

Mr Givan: I have asked for an assessment to be provided to me on what is commonly known as the "holiday hunger payment". Members will know that that came to an end on 31 March last year because of budgetary pressures in the Department of Education. I have asked for an assessment of the issue to be provided to me.

The issue cuts across other Departments. The Department for Communities, for example, has a role when it comes to the anti-poverty strategy. It is important that we look at this in its totality. I have asked officials to provide me with a report that I will then consider.

Independent Review of Education: Recommendations

4. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Education whether he will allocate a budget to implement the recommendations of the independent review of education. (AQO 64/22-27)

Mr Givan: The Department is currently considering the report produced by the independent review panel and is carrying out an internal consultation to inform a way forward. That process includes discussion with key education stakeholders, including other relevant Departments and arm's-length bodies. Following the consultation, officials will produce a paper for my consideration setting out advice on the various recommendations in the report. It is anticipated that the paper will be available by the end of April. I hope to be in a position to respond to the paper before the summer, at which point I should have a clearer understanding of the budget available to my Department.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Minister. Recommendation 21 in the review is to "Promote learners learning together", including shared and integrated education. I declare an interest as a parent of a child at one of the schools affected, which will have its funding cut as a result of what was announced last week. Have the Minister and the other Executive parties agreed a package of funding that devastates capital funding and investment for shared and integrated education?

Mr Givan: On day 1 in the Assembly, I made a ministerial statement to the House that set out my ambitious capital plans for the Department. I said that I would be bidding for £528 million.

That is more than double the capital spend that has ever been carried out by the Department of Education.

I have an Executive paper for consideration, I trust, this Thursday on the Strule shared campus, which I want to see advanced. We need to get a positive outcome for it at Thursday's meeting. Along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I was at the shared campus in Limavady. I am taking forward the Ballycastle shared campus project. A range of integrated schools are progressing as part of the £266 million contractual obligation that I have just outlined.

I want to make sure that we have the capital available for major capital works. As I indicated in that statement to the House, we need to see curriculum-led capital investment and smaller-scale capital projects. We have a huge problem with getting the investment needed in special educational needs provision and in providing the support classes and infrastructure in order to mainstream children who want to go into mainstream education.

My ambition is to represent every sector of our education system, and I am putting forward bids to the Executive for that. The challenge will be for my Executive colleagues. Do they share the ambition that I have for every sector of our education system? If they do, I will be able to make significant progress across every aspect of it.

Mr Sheehan: At the launch of the independent review of education's report, the chair of the panel, Keir Bloomer, conceded to me that the education system here lags way behind the education system in the South in educational attainment. What will the Minister do to address the high levels of educational underachievement in this jurisdiction?

Mr Givan: The Member is right to raise those concerns, particularly in areas where there is multiple deprivation for those who come from a more disadvantaged background. There needs to be the support in those areas to give children the opportunities to flourish and reach their full potential that children have in other parts of our society.

I share with him that agenda of trying to make sure that resource goes into the areas most in need. If best practice in doing that is in the Republic of Ireland or in another part of the United Kingdom, I will happily look at that and, where I can learn from it, take it forward. I want to make sure that we can get best practice and

then get the necessary resources to be able to invest.

Ms Brownlee: Is there a timescale for the implementation of the report's recommendations?

Mr Givan: It is planned that an options paper will be available for my consideration by the end of April. Following consideration of that, I will decide on the scope and priority of an implementation plan in the light of the wider financial pressures and constraints under which the Department is operating.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn. Mr Carroll is not in his place to ask question 6.

Preschool Education Expansion Programme

7. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Education to outline his engagement with preschool education settings on their readiness to facilitate the extension of the preschool education expansion programme. (AQO 67/22-27)

Mr Givan: There has been significant engagement with stakeholder groups and preschool settings on the standardisation of preschool sessions as part of the wider early learning and childcare strategy engagement. A stakeholder engagement forum was established in autumn 2022 to ensure maximum engagement and to assist with the development of costed options for an early learning and childcare strategy.

My Department also commissioned an independent in-depth scoping study to assess the state of readiness of the preschool sector to transition to a standardised 22.5 hours a week. That involved detailed surveys for every funded preschool education setting. The scoping study is nearing completion. In addition, my officials carried out extensive engagement in regard to the amalgamation for standardisation pilot. The information gathered will be used to inform further decisions and plans for the phased implementation of standardisation for all preschools and to inform the development of costed options for standardisation for the Executive. It is essential that we have input from a wide range of stakeholders as we take forward that work, and I am committed to ongoing and meaningful engagement.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Given the advancement of the plans

that you have outlined to the House, what are the capital investment needs for those preschool settings in order to facilitate the meeting of those requirements?

Mr Givan: The full, detailed costs of standardisation will depend on a range of factors, on some of which decisions have yet to be taken. It will also be informed by the scoping study that is due to report at the end of March. I will engage with Executive colleagues on that in due course. In order to give a figure to the Member, however, we have estimated that standardisation is likely to cost approximately an extra £35 million a year when fully operational, with additional up-front and one-off capital costs of approximately £10 million plus human resource costs. That is on top of the £65 million that the current programme costs annually.

Mrs Mason: Knowing the issues with the workforce in early years settings, has the Minister considered a workforce strategy as part of that engagement with childcare settings?

Mr Givan: The Member raises a point that has already been highlighted to me by childcare providers, which is that the ability to attract and retain people in the workforce is a challenge. That needs to be taken into account in what we are trying to achieve. There is a childcare strategy stakeholder engagement forum, and I will seek to engage with that, as well as with other organisations that make provision in this area. In providing appropriate childcare, we need to make sure that we have the workforce available to make that provision.

Mr Dunne: How long will it take for all sessions to move to 22.5 hours?

Mr Givan: That will be dependent on Executive approval and the availability of funding. Options will be set out in the scoping study. Decisions taken on those options will impact on the speed of transition to a standardised session length. Some preschool settings will be in a position to transition to the standardised session length quickly, while others will take much longer. It is likely to be a number of years before standardisation is fully implemented and all funded preschool sessions are moved to 22.5 hours per week.

End-to-end Review of Special Educational Needs

8. **Ms Egan** asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the end-to-end review of

special educational needs (SEN). (AQO 68/22-27)

Mr Givan: The Department of Education and the Education Authority embarked on an end-to-end review of special educational needs in early 2023 to examine the entire special educational needs system from a policy perspective and ensure that delivery and outcomes are in line with objectives and policy intent. Phase 1 of the review, which involved scoping the review and establishing appropriate governance structures, is complete. Phase 2 has commenced and primarily focuses on stakeholder engagement to ensure that all decisions and solutions are underpinned by meaningful engagement. In addition to targeted engagement with individuals and organisations, a programme of engagement events is being developed for schools, parents and carers, children and young people and wider stakeholders so that they can share their knowledge and experience and be part of co-designing a more agile and improved special educational needs system.

Following that engagement phase, an action plan will be developed for implementation. I expect the implementation plan to be ready for September 2024. The overall vision of the end-to-end review is to ensure that all children with special educational needs get the right support delivered by the right people at the right time and in the right place through a high-quality education that is cost-effective and improves outcomes.

Ms Egan: Will the Minister give assurances to pupils and parents that, at the start of the academic year in September, children with special educational needs will not still be sitting unaware of what school they are going to, as has happened in previous years?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for raising that point. In October 2023, following what happened in the previous academic year, a strategic placement group was established in the Department. That group meets every week and has deputy permanent secretary-level engagement. The new post of director of special educational needs placements was created in January 2024. The group meets at the highest levels. It meets about the issue every week, because we recognise that a real challenge is coming in September.

I cannot — I wish I could — give a guarantee that every child will have a placement by then. I do not believe that that will be the case, despite the urgency and priority that I place on this in

my Department. I want to provide some reassurance to the House and to parents, and we will touch on this in the debate on the substantive motion on the issue in the House this afternoon. This is a priority for me, and I want to provide the support that is necessary. I have come into office at a time when there are real pressures and challenges in this area, but I am very much committed to doing all that I can to help.

Mr Kingston: When does the Minister think the new special educational needs framework will be fully implemented?

Mr Givan: Following public consultation on the draft new SEN regulations and code of practice in 2021, several changes have been made to both documents to take on board the views of those who responded. The new regulations are in the final stages of drafting and, once all the necessary approvals are in place, they will be presented to the Education Committee before being placed before the Assembly for consideration.

My officials are working closely with the Education Authority on a timetable for commencing each provision in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and associated SEN regulations. The Act places additional duties on the EA and on boards of governors in schools, including the appointment of a learning support coordinator and for each child on the SEN register to have a personal learning plan. Agreed additional funding of £30 million per annum has been identified to support schools to implement the legislative changes, but, due to budget constraints, only £11 million was made available to schools for 2023-24. Unless the full amount is made available in future years, it will negatively impact on the outcomes of children with special educational needs.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: We will now move to topical questions.

Integrated Schools: Fresh Start Funding Withdrawal

T1. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Education to give an assurance to the integrated school community that the capital funding that was promised a decade ago will be replaced, in light of the recent changes to Fresh Start funding for integrated schools, with many of those schools

having tendered for contractors after spending years on planning processes. (AQT 41/22-27)

Mr Givan: I cannot give that commitment, but I can give a commitment to my determination to make every representation possible with the United Kingdom Government that they should honour what they announced in 2018 in relation to the increased cost associated with those projects. I will also make an ambitious capital bid, which I outlined in the House, to my Executive colleagues in order to take forward the capital works associated not just with the schemes under Fresh Start but across the totality of my Department. That does not come in year 1; those schools are at different phases of development, and that can be profiled over a longer period, subject to the various processes being complete.

I will continue to make the case for the necessary funding for the schemes under Fresh Start and all the other schemes in my Department's conventional major capital programme.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is his assessment of how the funding reallocation will affect the completion dates and timelines for these schools? Will he commit to meeting some of the principals to discuss the issues further?

Mr Givan: I am happy to meet schools. There is an extensive list of schools that have asked to meet me, and colleagues in the House have asked me to engage on different projects. It is my intention to be as accessible as possible to Members and across the Department of Education's responsibilities, including by engaging with schools. Bear with me, given the considerable number of requests for me to do so.

Secretary of State for Education: Engagement

T2. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Education to outline the engagement that he has planned with the UK Secretary of State for Education. (AQT 42/22-27)

Mr Givan: I will engage with and speak to the UK Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan, later this week and will have an opportunity not only to highlight some of the issues that we have talked about today but to raise the issues contained in the Safeguarding the Union agreement that my party secured with the UK Government. In it, Members will

see a focus on educational matters when it comes to east-west relations. I will press the UK Secretary of State to develop that with me so that we can deliver on the commitments into which the UK Government entered.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, are there also plans to meet the Scottish and Welsh Education Ministers?

Mr Givan: Yes. I will host a joint education meeting of my counterparts from the devolved Parliaments. Arrangements are being made for that to take place in, I think, April so that we can share best practice. Certainly, I will do that through my engagement with colleagues in other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom.

Education Budget

T3. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Education, given that so many of today's questions have been about budgets, to outline his budget position for next year and to state whether it is enough. (AQT 43/22-27)

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. My Department's budgetary position, prior to the allocation of additional funding from the financial package that the Treasury announced, was that the resource DEL budget bottom line was £2.582 billion. There were further allocations as part of the financial package. They came to £296.8 million, and that funding is to help with some of the costs over the past financial year and with providing a resolution to the teaching pay awards dispute.

Members will know that I have outlined, even in this Question Time, the vast range of budgetary pressures that sit in the Department of Education. That is because of the need that individuals in our constituencies have for support. I will put forward for the consideration of the Finance Minister and, ultimately, the Executive an increase to £3.594 billion in my Department's overall requirement. That is an uplift of £1 billion that my Department needs to meet its objectives. That will go forward as part of the budgetary process for next year.

Mr Bradley: The Minister has partly answered my supplementary. Does he think that he will get the support of his Executive colleagues to increase his budget, considering that so many in the House, from all parties, have put pressure on him to do so?

Mr Givan: The bid that I will put forward will certainly challenge Executive colleagues to

match that ambition. It also puts into stark focus why my party leader, at the time of the discussions with the Government, said that the financial package was not enough. Other parties said, "Get the Executive back up and running". Our position was constitutional — it was not based on financial considerations — but we made it clear that it would not be enough. Others said, "We can fight this fight from within". I quoted to Mr Tennyson what his party leader said at the time, and I look forward to seeing how effective that strategy is when it comes to securing the additional funding that is needed. We as a party have outlined from day 1 that we are underfunded and that that needs to be corrected, and we will continue to make that representation to the Treasury.

Mr Speaker: Cathal Boylan is not in his place.

Youth Service Funding Allocation

T5. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Education whether he will commit to reviewing Youth Service funding allocated to statutory and voluntary providers, given that, during a recent meeting with the Youth Work Alliance, representatives highlighted quite a contrast in that funding, with the community and voluntary sector providing services to 117,418 children at £97.90 per child and the statutory sector providing services to 91,795 children at over £254 per child. (AQT 45/22-27)

Mr Givan: The point that the Member raises about the most effective use of public resources is worthy of consideration. The voluntary sector provides excellent support to our children and young people, and I want to see it supported. It faced significant reductions in its budget when Stormont was not up and running. Subject, obviously, to all my Department's budgetary requirements, I want to make sure that we are able to support community/voluntary use. The Member makes the comparison with the statutory sector and raises value for money, and that is certainly worthy of further consideration and assessment.

Mr Allen: Minister, in highlighting the excellent work that our community and voluntary organisations provide, will you commit to joining me in my constituency of East Belfast to meet the Ledley Hall Youth and Boxing Club and other providers to hear at first hand about the impactful work that they are carrying out?

Mr Givan: That may be for the Department of Education or the Department for Communities, so we can follow up that invitation and make

sure that an appropriate meeting can be set up for the Member.

Access to Education: Costs

T6. **Mr Donnelly** asked the Minister of Education to state whether he plans to initiate cross-departmental working to lower the cost of accessing education for families across Northern Ireland, given the earlier discussion about his various options to do so. (AQT 46/22-27)

Mr Givan: Collaboration with Executive colleagues takes place in a number of areas. I can think of the skills agenda. There is a framework in place with the Department for the Economy, for example, because of the overlap between the age of 16 and moving into the ages of 17, 18 and 19, which requires collaboration. Importantly, the Executive's early learning and childcare strategy requires effective collaboration across a whole range of Departments.

I have already put forward a paper to the Executive and got agreement to set up a group that includes the Department of Health, which has an important role, the Department for the Economy, because of the employability aspects, and the Department for Communities. I have no doubt that the Department of Finance will also have an interest. Where there is a need for collaboration, I will work with Executive colleagues to try to take that forward.

Mr Donnelly: We have already heard about holiday hunger from the Member for West Belfast. What other steps will the Department take to try to alleviate holiday hunger?

Mr Givan: The Member will have heard the response that I provided to Mr Baker in respect of the report that I await on that matter. Obviously, where budget is available, the Department will be able to do much more. That scheme ended last year. The annual contribution towards it was approximately £20 million a year. In considering all these things, there are budget constraints. However, there is a very clear policy objective of trying to help people who need help. That needs to be what guides my Department in the bid that we will make for our financial resources for next year.

Careers Advice: Reform

T7. **Ms Eastwood** asked the Minister of Education whether he will make the reform of

careers advice in schools a priority. (AQT 47/22-27)

Mr Givan: Yes. I do not know how much advice and guidance young people will get to become politicians. I did not need advice or guidance on that when I was at school, because I always wanted to do it.

The Member makes an important point, however, about getting the right careers advice. It is not always about pursuing academic qualifications; there are apprenticeships and trades. It is also about making sure that the qualifications that you come out with will, ultimately, lead you to getting a job. Albeit I went into politics, but, when I graduated with my degree in business studies, so too did hundreds of other people. When it comes to seeking employment, what is it that sets an individual apart from other people with a generalised type of qualification? The Member is right to raise the issue of getting the right careers advice. It is also about making sure that the curriculum aligns with the needs of the economy.

Ms Eastwood: We heard earlier from the Minister for the Economy about the need for collaborative working and the overlap, and you have referenced that in some of your answers. Will you consider working collaboratively and commit to a joint action plan with the Economy Minister on the issue of careers advice in schools?

Mr Givan: Yes. I will meet the Minister for the Economy. We have already discussed the need for that collaboration. We will set about having that meeting and see what more we can do in that area.

Mr Speaker: Linda Dillon is not in her place. I call Michelle McIlveen.

EOTAS Centres: Capital Investment

T9. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education, given the challenges for all aspects of the Education budget, to provide information on future capital investment in the education other than at school (EOTAS) centres. (AQT 49/22-27)

Mr Givan: The Member raises the important issue of the capital requirements that are needed, whether that be for an EOTAS centre or for other aspects of the education system. My bid is a very ambitious one because of the capital needs that exist.

Miss McIlveen: Having witnessed the commitment of staff who work with young people who have challenges in settings that are not always fit for purpose, I encourage the Minister to pay those centres a visit at his earliest opportunity. Further to that, I ask the Minister for his assessment of the EOTAS provision.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her question. I am more than happy to visit some of the centres that she mentioned.

There is an inadequacy in some of our estate, and it requires capital investment. I have already witnessed that first-hand in some of the schools that I have visited. We have excellent schools, and we have schools that are completely inappropriate for the 21st century, and that will require significant investment.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Education. Members, take your ease before we move to the next item of business. Thank you.

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

Private Members' Business

Strategic Framework to End Violence against Women and Girls: Implementation

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly affirms that the Executive Office's strategic framework to end violence against women and girls must recognise that misogyny is a root cause of violence against women and girls; laments that, since 2021, we have had the joint highest rate of femicide in Europe; expresses deep sadness that violence against women and girls is endemic here, with one woman killed every three months; regrets that victims of sexual and gender-based violence still face obstacles within the justice system and within society itself and that these obstacles prevent many women from reporting their abuse; condemns the budget cuts imposed by the British Government that significantly cut funding for public services, early intervention and rehabilitation services, community and voluntary sector services and Women's Aid; and calls on the Executive Office to urgently implement, in full, the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls to transform how society understands and responds to violence against women and girls. — [Ms Sheerin.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "abuse;" and insert:

"condemns inadequate levels of UK Government funding for public services, early intervention and rehabilitation services, community and voluntary sector services and Women's Aid; and calls on the Executive Office to urgently implement, in full, the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls, including by prioritising funding for the delivery of programmes contained in the associated action plan, to transform how society understands and responds to violence against women and girls." — [Mr Harvey.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the First Minister to respond.

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle; I thank you for your latitude in extending the debate,

given the significance of the issue and the fact that so many Members wanted to contribute. I am really grateful for that, and I am really grateful for the collegial approach that everybody took and the tone that was set in terms of the seriousness of the issue and the fact that leadership on the issue starts with us in the Chamber. I really think that having the debate today underlines the significance and the priority that we put on tackling violence against women and girls. I commend that approach to the issue and to every other issue as we grasp many nettles in the time ahead.

On day 1 of the new Assembly, I stressed clearly how vital it is for all of us to work collectively and to end the violence, abuse and harm suffered daily by women and girls in all our communities. Many Members referred to many examples. I have said it before and will say it again today: those women are not statistics. They are our mothers, our sisters, our aunts, our daughters, our friends and our work colleagues, and they are us. They are we who have been speaking in the debate today. Therefore, we must take action now to stop the violence, and we must never forget those who have been killed. There are too many names to mention, sadly. There are too many families that are grieving for their mothers, sisters and daughters. The murders did not occur in isolation; they are part of an epidemic. The sad reality is that we all know someone whose life has been impacted by her experience of domestic violence, abuse or harm. Women all have their own stories to tell and their own experience of behaviour that makes them feel uncomfortable or anxious every day. Challenging violence against women and girls is not a new problem, but dealing with it requires a whole-of-society approach, which everybody recognises.

One of the very first actions of the Executive must be to introduce a new strategic framework and the associated action plan, and many Members referred to the need for action. That work is now being finalised, and I look forward to coming back to the Chamber to talk about it in more detail. People and organisations from across our communities have helped to shape the framework, and I had the pleasure of meeting some of those people briefly in the last number of weeks. They absolutely reflected their different backgrounds, their different perspectives and the needs of those who have experienced gender-based violence. In particular, we pay tribute to the support that has been provided by the community, voluntary and statutory sector organisations. They have been carrying out that vital work in the most difficult circumstances. As we know, many have been

impacted by recent budget cuts. It remains a challenging situation, but we are committed to securing a fair and just financial settlement to deliver public services that allow Ministers to begin to deliver on the vision of the strategy, which is to end violence against women and girls. I look forward to continuing to engage with Executive colleagues on funding for the Women's Aid Federation and other delivery partners who work so hard in that area and do so daily.

The extent and variety of the good work that is being done is clear, but so is the fact that obstacles remain to reporting abuse and getting the help that is so sorely needed. We need to end the silence around violence against women and girls. Together, we must all say collectively, "Enough is enough". Barriers persist in the justice system and society that prevent women and girls from accessing support. To overcome those challenges, the strategic framework is clear on the outcomes that must be achieved. Core to that is delivery of the domestic and sexual abuse strategy and a real commitment to enhance joined-up working across Departments and with our community partners. Our justice system must be one in which victims, survivors and the public can have confidence, knowing that offenders will be held to account. High-quality and accessible services must be available to every woman and girl who needs them.

Much more than that, prevention is key. Many Members referred to the root causes. We have to get right down to the nub of it. For children and adults of every age, we need to work towards changed attitudes and behaviours. Everyone needs to understand what violence against women and girls is and help to prevent it. Women and girls have to feel safe and be safe everywhere, in all places where they live, work, learn and socialise. We will end violence against women and girls only if men and boys are part of the solution. Everyone should be equipped and empowered to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships.

Delivery will require commitment from every corner of the Executive and, indeed, every corner of our society. We want women and girls throughout our community to know that we have their backs and are looking out for them. There has to be that effort from the whole of society. Partnership working is key. That means partnering with education, sport and workplaces, service providers, young people and communities. We will work to develop campaigns to influence and change attitudes and behaviours for the whole of society.

Just as important, we will work to support partners to develop training packages to equip people to do the right thing. Partnering with employers, businesses and trade unions, we will ensure that there are good policies and tools to protect women and girls wherever they are. Partnering with our colleagues in other Departments, we intend to remove barriers to support that make life harder for women and girls rather than helping them.

The framework is just the beginning. Now, our focus is on finalising the strategy and taking forward actions in a coordinated and joined-up manner, with the goal of making a real difference to people's lives as everyone understands what violence against women and girls is and plays an active role in preventing it in every sphere of life. We know that it is urgent and that we must take action. We will ask the Assembly for its support in the time ahead as we bring forward the action plan.

I will finish by making a direct appeal to the public to be aware that every one of us in society can do something to protect women and girls. I ask everybody to play their part. Let us get to work. Let us not waste any more time. Let us make this happen. Let us break the silence. Let us work in partnership. Let us turn talk into action. Let us end violence against women and girls.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Brian Kingston to make the winding-up speech on the amendment.

Mr Kingston: I thank all Members for their thoughtful contributions to the debate on the important matter of the strategic framework to end violence against women and girls. The purpose of our amendment is to highlight the need for the Executive Office and other Departments to prioritise funding for the delivery of programmes contained in the associated action plan and to clarify the need for the Government at Westminster to address the current inadequate funding of Northern Ireland, which is below the level of need, so that essential programmes such as this can be adequately funded.

As a man, I acknowledge, reflecting on the attendance and on who spoke most during the debate, that, if we view this as a woman's issue, we miss the whole point. I will reflect on some of the comments made earlier. In proposing the motion, Emma Sheerin said that the commitment was outstanding from the previous mandate and that extensive co-design work had gone into it, including with groups providing support to victims and survivors. She said that

the root cause is misogyny and the belief that women can be dominated by men. That is a challenge to men and boys to examine their attitudes.

In proposing our amendment, my colleague Harry Harvey said that the issue has the potential to affect every home and that the onus is on all of us to recognise the issue and take action. The vision is one of a changed society, with the goal of eradicating violence against women and girls.

I congratulate Connie Egan on her maiden speech. She pointed out that Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK and Ireland not to have such a strategy and that we need a whole-society approach in which misogyny and sexism do not go unchallenged. John Stewart, who chaired the Committee for the Executive Office in the previous mandate, during the consultation phase, said that it is important that we learn from what has worked well and not worked well elsewhere. He said that previous motions on the topic passed unanimously. Sinéad McLaughlin expressed concern that there was uncertainty over the funding for implementation. She pointed out how everyday phrases can commence a negative, escalating attitude. Deirdre Hargey pointed to changes in society and said that the four Ministers in TEO are now all female. We have a long history of mistreatment of women in society, however, so there are roles for all Departments to play. Diane Forsythe said that violence against women and girls is very real in Northern Ireland. She added that under-representation of women in senior positions has affected the prioritisation of many issues, including in the Assembly, so there is a need to change attitudes and educate society.

Paula Bradshaw, as Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, said that consultation had resulted in some changes to the draft strategy and that the task is not to tackle violence against women and girls but to end it. Linda Dillon said that there should be no acceptable level of misogyny and disrespect towards women. She added that we need to have challenging conversations with children from a young age and that abuse should not be ascribed to stranger danger but, in many cases, comes from people known to the victim, be she a woman or a girl.

Cheryl Brownlee said that co-design, including involvement from the voluntary sector, government and the voice of lived experience, has been key to the strategy. She pointed out that men and boys also suffer violence and abuse and that that should not be overlooked.

She said, however, that victims of gender-based violence are disproportionately female. It is estimated that domestic and sexual abuse costs Northern Ireland up to £1 billion a year. SORCHA EASTWOOD reminded us of the uneven criticism directed at female MLAs in many areas of the media compared with that directed at male MLAs, and she said that abusers can be at every level of society. CARA HUNTER pointed to the need to educate young people —.

Mr Harvey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kingston: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Harvey: Does the Member agree that our actions outside the Chamber will matter much more than our words in it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Member has another minute.

Mr Kingston: Absolutely. A recurring theme in colleagues' comments was that this needs to be a strategy that results in actions, not just in fine words.

As I was saying, CARA HUNTER pointed to the need to educate young people about what sexual harassment is and for them understand issues of consent. SIAN MULHOLLAND said that there is an important role for protection measures online. She said that men and boys are an important part of the solution and that a safer society for women and girls will be a safer society for all. JUSTIN McNULTY said that under-reporting is a major part of the problem. When lives are taken, their names are known, but thousands of others are abused in silence, and their abuse goes unreported.

3.45 pm

ALEX EASTON said that lives, hopes and ambitions are being shattered by violence and abuse and that we need to address the root causes.

JIM ALLISTER pointed out that the debate was important and necessary, that victim-blaming is part of the issue and that the powerful testimony of MÁIRÍA CAHILL, who suffered repeated abuse, was very relevant to the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Will the Member complete his remarks?

Mr Kingston: That is me finished.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. Now, to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion, I call Carál Ní Chuilín, who has 10 minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh míle maith agaibh [*Translation: Thank you very much*] to every Member who spoke. I recorded that there were something like 19 contributions to the debate, including my winding-up speech. I was delighted to see a collegiate approach and the contributions that everybody made, which were sincere, honest and very credible. I pay tribute to both the male DUP contributors: Harry Harvey moved the amendment and Brian Kingston made the winding-up speech on it, which was important. That will be appreciated, not only by those in the Chamber but by the many other people who are watching the debate.

I thank Kristine Gillespie from the Research and Information Service and the many people in the Public Gallery from the WRDA and Women's Aid for the massive information pack. That in itself shows the lengths to which some people have gone to research the issue, and we can use it as a reference point. When we tabled the motion, we knew that the response would be the one that we had today. Our party made it a priority to table the motion in one of the first sitting days after restoration, simply because, if you cannot see it or hear it, you cannot either be it or believe it. While many people look down on the No Day Named List for motions, a lot of people need to be able to recognise themselves in all our words. That is really important.

When Emma Sheerin moved the motion, among her first words was the comment that the motion was a cross-party initiative that should enjoy cross-party support. That was not her being presumptuous. People who have been here before and added to the whole discussion, particularly in TEO and elsewhere, will know that the issue went into Justice, Communities and Health. Although TEO is leading on the strategy, everything that we do on it has to be cross-departmental in outcome. I have faith that that will be the case.

Obviously, the need for money is at the centre of the matter. However, the majority of contributors mentioned the horrendous and shocking statistics. For example, 75% of 16-year-olds who were surveyed had experienced street harassment and had felt ashamed, embarrassed, harassed or humiliated. As many contributors said, they are us, our daughters, our sisters, our friends and our colleagues. It is only when you think of it in those human terms

that you start to realise the gravity of what we are all dealing with.

Unfortunately, far too many people have lost their lives or been murdered as a result of domestic violence or people feeling that it was somehow acceptable to kill women in the street, as in the cases that were mentioned. All Members who spoke said that we need to change the culture and the narrative so that violence against women and girls is not acceptable. For that reason alone, one of the good things to come out of the debate will be the people who are watching us or listening to us hearing how collegiate and sincere we all are about this matter, not that we need to be reminded of that.

I do not want to seem picky, but I would love us to change the term "maiden speech". It is archaic and like something out of a Charles Dickens film or book. We should refer to it as the "first speech". Connie Egan made hers. I met her mummy in the canteen, so there are two generations of women listening to the debate. Let us hope that we can have a third generation of women coming here and drop that term. While it is not sexist—men make their maiden speeches here as well—I just think that it is crazy biscuits, to be fair.

Anyway, I return to the issue of domestic violence. All the organisations that are trying to help people who are at their most vulnerable had their funding cut or removed. Many Members, including Michelle, the First Minister, spoke about the need around Women's Aid. Indeed, most contributors did so. That in itself should go to the point about vulnerability. Those people are trying to help people at their time of most need. We need to look at that as a priority.

I also want to mention other women's organisations that I personally worked with throughout and after COVID. They include the women's centres whose staff took huge personal risks going into people's homes to try to help them and worked with the PSNI and the courts. They went to court with women and were there for them throughout that journey when no one else was. We need to mention those women, and I want to take this opportunity to mention, in particular, the Falls Women's Centre and the Grace Family Centre, which are in west Belfast and north Belfast respectively. I know that each of us will have many other examples. Women who have retired are providing a befriending service to people who need it most, and that is really admirable.

Many Members, particularly Deirdre Hargey, Sinéad McLaughlin and Sorcha Eastwood,

mentioned the toxicity around the debate on ending violence against women and girls. Sorchá made that point in particular. Brian, in his winding-up speech, responded to Harry's intervention about how we behave in the Chamber. We are all used to the cut and thrust of politics, but it is belligerent to shout at people from the corner or from a sedentary position, or to put things up on social media with some vile commentary. That adds to people having permission, not that they need it, to abuse, insult, offend and intimidate others. Each of us has a responsibility to be courteous, and I include myself in that. Most people know that I am very straight, but I would never, ever deliberately go out to cause people harm and offence. I have been subject to it in here, as have many others, and it needs to stop. People who persist with that are nothing but cowards, and they need to be called out.

Deirdre Hargey, Linda Dillon and others mentioned the issue around mother-and-baby homes and the Magdalene laundries. That is our shame. That is our nation's shame, and we must ensure that not only does it never happen again but that those who were responsible have to restore financially. The people impacted now span three, four or five generations, and we need to put our arms around them and give them support.

Diane Forsythe, unfortunately, is no stranger to vile abuse, and she called out what that was like for her. In fact, as elected reps, we had to go and meet the police about the abuse that we received and our personal safety. I have to say, giving credit to everybody, that we were there to support each other, regardless of our positions politically. That is what we do as women, I would like to think. We will fall out and disagree, but when it comes to calling out abuse, violence and intimidation, we need to do that for everybody, not just for some.

I thank Paula Bradshaw, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office, and Connie Egan, the Committee's Deputy Chair, for setting out what happened in the previous mandate. I have heard today that, in the previous mandate, a lot of work was done. Michelle, on behalf of the Executive and as First Minister, has said that we will gather up that work and try to get the strategy sorted out. We have the framework, we need to get the strategy sorted out, and we need to have an action plan. The gift in all this is that we need to be able to see it. I pay tribute to everyone who spoke. Cheryl Brownlee spoke about the abuse that young boys and young men get as well. Regardless of where it is or where it emanates from, we want to call a halt to all of that.

I will end on this note: it is not just about all of us around the Chamber agreeing for the sake of agreeing. I believe that this was an honest and credible debate. I appreciate the amendment from my two colleagues, but I would like to see us send very clear and resounding support to ending gender-based violence against women and girls. Like the rest of my colleagues, I support the amendment and ask that we support the amended motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I thank the Member for concluding the debate.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly affirms that the Executive Office's strategic framework to end violence against women and girls must recognise that misogyny is a root cause of violence against women and girls; laments that, since 2021, we have had the joint highest rate of femicide in Europe; expresses deep sadness that violence against women and girls is endemic here, with one woman killed every three months; regrets that victims of sexual and gender-based violence still face obstacles within the justice system and within society itself and that these obstacles prevent many women from reporting their abuse; condemns inadequate levels of UK Government funding for public services, early intervention and rehabilitation services, community and voluntary sector services and Women's Aid; and calls on the Executive Office to urgently implement, in full, the Strategic Framework to End Violence against Women and Girls, including by prioritising funding for the delivery of programmes contained in the associated Action Plan, to transform how society understands and responds to violence against women and girls.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Members, please take your ease while we make some changes at the top Table.

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ní Chuilín] in the Chair)

Special Educational Needs and Disability: Investment and Transformation

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Nick Mathison to move the motion.

Mr Mathison: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Moved. *[Interruption.]* I am still learning the processes.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: You are grand. You are not the only one.

Mr Mathison: I beg to move

That this Assembly commits to prioritising the needs of our most vulnerable children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); notes that the current system for supporting children with SEND has failed to deliver appropriate and timely support for parents, pupils and schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to prioritise and invest in SEND transformation, to ensure that the end-to-end review of special educational needs produces an action plan that will be implemented urgently, and to make a commitment that all children with SEND in key transition years are notified of a school placement that meets their needs no later than children without special educational needs.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. As an amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for debate.

Mr Mathison: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Take 2. I am now able to say that I am delighted to move the motion. I am sure that we all agree that the need to invest in and transform our special educational needs and disability system in schools must be an immediate priority for the Assembly and the Executive. It is not overstating it to say that our current system is failing children, parents and schools. We need to ensure that reform is implemented as soon as possible so that we can deliver for our most vulnerable learners.

The many issues that we see in our SEND system should come as a surprise to no one. Those issues have been ongoing for a significant number of years. There have been numerous reviews and scrutiny reports undertaken on the issue, including those from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC); the Northern Ireland Audit Committee (NIAO); the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY); and, most recently, the Ipsos independent review of special educational needs. Over 150, and possibly more, recommendations have been made in this space, yet we are still experiencing the problems that were identified many, many years ago. Placements are made on a crisis management basis every year, needs are identified too late and interventions do not come when they are needed.

Communication between the Education Authority (EA) and parents is poor and, at times, non-existent, and cross-departmental work between Health and Education remains a noble ambition but, in reality, is not delivered on the ground. Every Member will have experience of being contacted by constituents who are at their wits' end trying to secure a placement with provision that adequately meets their child's needs. That is not a big ask: provision that adequately meets their child's needs.

Many parents end up feeling that they have no alternative other than to go to the media to give their case profile to secure a placement. Parents describe the concept of "the fight" that they must undertake to give their child access to that most basic human right: an education.

4.00 pm

In December 2023, there were over 215 children in crucial transition years who were still on the waiting list for a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and surpassing the legal 26-week limit. Some of the children on the list had already been waiting for over 52 weeks for the statement to be finalised. Far too many children are being left behind their peers, placed in a school that is not appropriate for their needs or left at the start of the school term without a placement altogether.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. This is a hugely important issue, as he has rightly pointed out. It is a challenge for all our offices. This is a crisis. Does the Member agree that, although, every year, we hear about the challenges facing those children in schools, particularly those who cannot get a place, the Education Authority does not seem to learn any

lessons from the previous year and, in fact, for whatever reason, seems to end up with a much worse situation the following year? Can the Education Authority not handle the situation?

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for his intervention. I cannot promise that I will take too many more, as I have a lot to get through. There seem to be serious questions about the Education Authority's ability to get a handle on the matter. I hope that we will hear from the Minister about a plan of action to address that.

I will sum up the last section of my remarks by saying that learners find themselves in a system that focuses just on delivering the placement and getting the box ticked rather than on the provision that is appropriate for them. That cannot be acceptable.

A lack of meaningful support for children at the point when needs are identified means that many parents have no option left to support their child other than to go for the parental request for a statutory assessment. That was discussed during the Minister of Education's Question Time today. Shortages of educational psychologists in the EA mean that families face huge delays in the process, and the 26-week statutory time frame that I have referred to is regularly breached. Valid exceptions criteria are regularly brought into play, and the process is delayed.

I want to be clear: parents of children with special educational needs or disabilities should absolutely be able to pursue their legal right to acquire a statement of special educational needs and to acquire the protections in law that their children are entitled to. However, we should not be operating a system where a statement is sometimes the only mechanism by which a child with additional needs can receive support. Support for learners with SEN should simply be normal practice that is embedded at every level of our education system. Early intervention must become the norm.

The motion and my comments are clear in assessing the situation as one of failure. However, I want to acknowledge the work that the EA and the Department are undertaking through the end-to-end review of SEND. The principle that they set out and that I have heard at many engagements with them of all children and young people getting the right support from the right people at the right time and in the right place is welcome and receives my full support. That is the ambition that we should all aspire to.

It is my understanding, further to the Minister's contribution in the Chamber today, that an

action plan is due in the summer or perhaps early autumn, which is encouraging. However, I must be clear: it must be a clear action plan to deliver meaningful transformation. It cannot be another suite of recommendations; it cannot be another report; it cannot suggest that another review is required. Parents have waited long enough, and they need to hear clearly what the Department will do, when it will do it and how success will be measured. Anything less than that would be a wasted process that will achieve nothing.

I also hope that the motion is clear that action is needed now. Long-term transformation is vital if we are going to get this right and not be back in the Chamber having this debate year in, year out. However, there is a need for action now if we are going to make sure that the parents who are already looking to September with huge anxiety can be reassured that the Department is working as hard as it can to ensure that their children get a placement.

In August 2023, there were 149 children with statements of special educational needs, many with complex learning needs, still awaiting the allocation of a school placement. Immediate action must be taken now to ensure that we do not see those mistakes being repeated, especially for pupils in those key transition stages. I hope that, today, in his response, the Minister will clearly set out what his Department is doing to address SEN placements in those key transition years for September 2024. We cannot repeat what we saw last year, where parents described feeling that they were utterly broken by the process of acquiring a statement. Sometimes, histrionic language is used in the Chamber and Members overstate their case to make a point, but that is a phrase that parents have used with me repeatedly while sitting in my office: that they feel broken and that nobody is listening. We cannot let that continue.

We should not have a system that is based on a fight. We should not have to fight for something that parents of children without any additional needs simply take for granted: a school placement. You apply, and you get your place. We cannot accept that a fight is necessary. That is not acceptable or normal. None of us should tolerate it.

I welcome the independent review of education's acknowledgment that there is a serious problem in how we confirm those places for children with SEN. Its recommendation around the ending of the system of those placements being treated as supernumerary is something that the Department needs to take away. Parents

should have confidence that their child will have a place, not that they will be tacked on to the end of some other mainstream admissions process. Money alone will not address the issues. It is clear, however, that investment is required. Money will be needed to make this happen, but we need that investment to be strategic. It needs to be done on a recurring basis, and it needs to allow the Department and the EA to plan properly to transform the services. I welcome suggestions that there will be an earmarked capital budget for SEN, and I hope that that can progress.

I mention briefly the non-teaching staff pay and grading review. It is imperative, if we are going to transform SEN services, that that work is taken forward and that business case is delivered. We cannot transform the system if we do not have expert and committed staff there to deliver it.

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

Mr Mathison: I am afraid that I am really running short of time. Apologies.

I thank the parents involved with SEN Reform NI, particularly for their engagement on the issues and their willingness to share their stories so personally. They should not have to share those painful personal stories to get the issue on the agenda, but they have done so in the hope that what we do in this place can bring about some change for them. It was an absolute privilege to meet some of those parents and children here today. It was a big deal for some of them to make the trip here and be present. It really is appreciated.

This is not a situation that we can accept for our children. Crisis has become the norm. It is time to meaningfully commit to investing in transformation and action. I finish my remarks with some reflections from a special school principal whom I had the opportunity to meet last week. She made the stark observation that many of the pupils in her care have life-limiting conditions and that some, sadly, may not complete their time in school. She was clear that those children cannot wait for another report or another debate; they need action now. I hope that the Assembly will speak with one voice on the issue today and support the motion.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Robbie Butler to move the amendment.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. We will —.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Robbie. We are all rusty.

Mr Butler: Sorry?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Move the amendment.

Mr Butler: Did I not move it earlier? No?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry.

Mr Mathison: That is karma.

Mr Butler: I was laughing at you.

I beg to move the following amendment:

At end insert:

"; and to work with Executive colleagues to provide a clear pathway for children with SEND to transition from education to post-education settings"

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: You have 10 minutes to move the amendment. Whoever is winding up on the amendment has five minutes, and all other Members who are called to speak have five minutes. Robbie, please start the debate on the amendment.

Mr Butler: That will teach me, won't it? I was laughing at the Chair of the Education Committee for making a mistake, but I made mine on purpose. I was thinking about your comment about crazy biscuits, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, and about how I could be funny. I do not need to be funny, because this is a serious debate. We have no hesitation in supporting the motion, and we hope that there will be unanimity in the Chamber and that the modest amendment that we have tabled will also be accepted.

Parenting is not easy for any of us. Anyone who has had the privilege of being a parent will know that it is not easy. It is one of the most significant and life-altering occurrences that you can have the privilege of having. From birth right through life, all of us will be faced with challenges, difficulties, opportunities and potential, but there is another reality. That reality is that life's opportunities, difficulties and challenges are not equal. We are not all born the same. Some of our most amazing young people are born with difficulties or disabilities,

and some develop issues that require them to have additional support throughout their formative years. Sadly and with growing regularity — the proposer of the motion has spoken to this — more children are having difficulties and are not being afforded the appropriate — I would go as far as to say "adequate", never mind "appropriate" — help at a really important moment in their life.

The Minister will, I am sure, refer, as he has done since taking up post, to the significant challenges that the full educational sphere faces. Most of that will probably be fiscal, but the unarguable point is that the most detrimental impacts are being faced and felt by some of our most vulnerable children. If that does not ensure that we make them our priority, I am not sure what will.

It is not all doom and gloom: we get it right at times. I pay particular tribute to our special schools, which are absolutely amazing. I have paid many visits to some but, sadly, not all of them over the years: Fleming Fulton, Harberton, Parkview and Glenveagh. I cannot commend the staff enough for the fabulous service that they give to our young people in those locations.

I will also mention Mencap, which has battled beyond expectations and capacity for many years to support families and young people. However, sadly, our special settings do not have the capacity to meet demand. Those schools and settings are now overcrowded, and the teachers and support staff struggle to meet the needs of individual children. I know that the EA and the Department have moved, over the last couple of years, towards supporting more of our children through specialist provision in mainstream schools, which is known as SPiMS. There are many instances of good learning and good examples that we can pick from there.

I know that the Minister, at some stage in his argument, will talk about the lack of funding and investment over the years and will say that that has led to a lot of the issues. However, one thing that I will repeatedly say to the two parties — the one that sits to my right and the one over there — is that funding is only one part of it. Failure to have government here for five out of eight years does not negate our responsibility in the transformation of education and the provision of opportunities for our young people. I hope that that is picked up in a mature fashion by the parties who have exercised the veto over the last couple of years.

It has, sadly, become a regular occurrence for me, as an MLA — I am sure that it is the same

for the MLAs in the Chamber — to assist constituents who are finding it difficult to get a statement for their child or to get additional support that sometimes does not need a statement. The reality is that — this is becoming a calendar event — young children are missing out on their first day at school. It is simple: missing out on your first day at school, whether it is nursery school, primary school or first year — year 8, as it is called now — is just not acceptable. When I think about the start in life that some of those young people have had and about the fact that that has been compounded by the systems we have in place that dictate that they will face the most disadvantage in getting one of those spaces, it breaks my heart. I know that that is the case for many Members in the room.

The motion calls on the Minister:

"to ensure that the end-to-end review of special educational needs produces an action plan that will be implemented urgently".

I have met the Department and the EA a number of times specifically on that point. I urge the Minister to detail in his response a clear timeline and his clear ambition that the project is recognised as a serious priority and say that it will be addressed in the appropriate way. We need to address the failings and systemic shortcomings of the past, treat our children who have additional needs with equality and dignity and show them that we value them as we do all our children.

I had the privilege of serving on the previous Education Committee from 2020 to 2022. We, along with the previous Chair, Chris Lyttle — I pay tribute to Chris and the outgoing Committee — made sure that work was done to ensure that special educational needs remained a number-one priority for the Committee.

Already, after our first two meetings, I know that the Chair will ensure that that is the case for the newly constituted Committee.

4.15 pm

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely.

Mr McCrossan: I totally agree with the Member about the work of the previous Committee. It was vital. In fact, it helped resolve quite a lot of the issues. Since the collapse of these institutions, however, do you believe that the

Education Authority has learnt any lessons about how children have been mistreated in special educational needs schools?

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I will try to answer him as briefly —.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Robbie, you do not have an extra minute, just in case you think that you do.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. This is going to get crazy biscuits now. To answer the Member briefly, if that is ok, the EA of our phase inherited a real catastrophe and was faced with an almost impossible situation. At this point, I am reserving judgement, because I believe that some of the people who are there, and who were there, have been doing, and did, their best. The problem has been compounded because we have not been here.

The education years are the nurture bed for life for all children, regardless of who they are. I think that we can all accept that. Those are the years in which we prepare our young people and encourage them to achieve the best outcomes that they can in life, whether those be in further education, higher education, in the workplace or in whatever adventures they want to undertake. Sadly, however, and for many years, young people with a disability or a learning disability have faced an unfair and unknown challenge, because there is a shortage of options and a lack of support as they move into that transitional phase. That is why I tabled the amendment.

An Assembly report from 2016 into post-education provision for young people with a disability or a learning disability found that that was the case back then. There was a lack of suitable provision to transition and a systemic process coupled with a lack of information for parents and young people to navigate that next stage of their life. A clear inequality exists. Although there are inarguable challenges to be faced in the creation of worthwhile and valued opportunities, that is unconscionable as a goal if we do not commit to broadening and maximising our commitment to creating a society in which those young people are afforded the very best opportunities and the very best and highest levels of support to fulfil their potential as valued members of society. I have to ask this: can we call ourselves a truly inclusive and empathetic society? I ask Members to support the amendment.

Mr Sheehan: The beginning and end of this issue is that every child, irrespective of background or ability, is entitled to — has a human right to — an education. Unfortunately, all too often, we see that right not being upheld or being only partly upheld when children do not get the quality of education that they deserve.

To illustrate that point, I will use the example of a case that I dealt with. In June 2022, a young child was transitioning from nursery to primary school. The principal of the nursery told the EA that a mainstream primary school would not be suitable or appropriate for that child, who was non-verbal, was not toilet-trained and had severe sensory issues. The EA, however, decided to put pressure on the local primary school to accept that child. After a period, the primary school felt that it was under such pressure that it agreed to take the child on an interim basis to see whether it had the capacity and the skills to deal with him. As it turned out, the school did not have the capacity to do so. The child's special needs were so complex that a mainstream school was not able to deal with them.

What then happened was that the child was sent home. The child sat at home from September until February the following year, and it was only then that the vice principal of the primary school became aware of the situation regarding that child and contacted me, after which I made an intervention with the Education Authority. Only then did the child receive a place in a special school, where he should have been in the first place. That child's rights were not being upheld when he was left, for six months, without any chance of social or educational development. We have known for years that the number of children presenting with special needs or disabilities has been rising, yet it is abundantly clear that there has been no strategic planning within the Department or the Education Authority to deal with that.

Every year, at the end of the school term in June and throughout the summer months, we see parents of children with special needs who are in transition years, and indeed, the children themselves, being left on tenterhooks, wondering whether a place will be made available in a setting that is appropriate for their additional needs. As demand has risen, advances in provision have failed to keep up. Within the EA, crisis management has taken the place of its statutory function to ensure that every child gets an education.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the need for greater access to specialist support

within schools. The Irish-medium sector in particular suffers from a lack of provision of special needs expertise delivered through Irish. It is worth pointing out that more than 20% of pupils in the Irish-medium sector have special educational needs or a disability. So, we have an absurd situation where children whose first language is Irish receive support from educational psychologists and speech and language therapists in the English language. It is therefore essential that the Education Authority-led review of gaps in services includes a systemic review of supports and services that are specifically tailored to the needs of the Irish-medium sector. The current provision of support does not take account of the bespoke needs of Irish-medium pupils who are learning in an immersion context.

Cuts to the education budget and SEND funding have disproportionately affected children and young people who are already disadvantaged. That is not good enough. Our children deserve better, and our most vulnerable children deserve only the best support that we can give them. Our children with special needs are not second-class citizens, and the Department needs to take urgent steps to show that it agrees with that assertion.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is David Brooks's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind everybody that it is convention that, when an MLA makes their first speech, it is made without interruption. David, you have five minutes.

Mr Brooks: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I am proud to rise for the first time in the Chamber, and I am thankful to those who elected me to represent the great constituency of East Belfast. In the traditions of the Chamber, I will refer a little to my predecessor and my constituency before I move on to the scope of the motion.

I follow my friend — a great servant of East Belfast, my party and the House — Robin Newton. As I told him before my election, he was long an encouragement to me. He was, and remains — even outside this place — a peerless example when it comes to providing public service to the place and the people that he was proud to represent and work for over three decades, two of which were in the Assembly. Thank you, Robin.

In some ways, I am East Belfast by choice. I was raised a little further east, in Comber, but my family on both sides is rooted in the east. My father hailed from Dundonald, and my

mother's side of the family was originally from Saunders Street — now gone — at the bottom of the Newtownards Road.

East Belfast has a proud history. It has been at the fore of some of Ulster's most iconic industries: the linen mills; the rope-works; aerospace and defence at Short Brothers; and shipbuilding at Harland and Wolff. It was home to the great CS Lewis, whose image and words greet us on the way into the Chamber. It gave us arguably the world's greatest footballing talent in the Cregagh's own George Best, and, of course, our first Prime Minister, James Craig.

Throughout my childhood, it felt like some of those iconic industries were in terminal decline, but the east does not just have a proud history; it has an exciting future, which is core to the new and emerging Northern Ireland economy. Today, we see Spirit AeroSystems seeking to grow their footprint here; Thales, which is at the cutting edge of defence systems; and the cranes of Harland and Wolff, which are such a symbol of our city and of Northern Ireland, again overlooking shipbuilding and a new generation of skilled yardmen and women. The nearby Harbour estate is now teeming with new and thriving industries in the sciences, cybersecurity, film and creative industries, and tourism and hospitality, all of which are foundations of what can be a bright future for all.

Through highs and lows, east Belfast's anchor has always been its people: resilient, loyal, hard-working and strong-willed. Today, they look forward, wanting, as we all do, a better future for this generation and the next, easy access to healthcare when their loved ones need it, decent homes for their family and quality schools and education for their children. The motion addresses the need to invest in and secure that education for some of our most vulnerable children.

Last week, I visited Greenwood House Assessment Centre and later spoke to the principal of Mitchell House School. I have nothing but admiration for the work of staff in both schools, which, I know, is replicated in others across the constituency in what are, too often, unfit facilities that are bursting at the seams and in need of repair and replacement. That is testament to their dedication to their vocation and to the children. There is recognition on all sides that, too often, the system in which they operate hinders rather than helps them in that difficult, if fulfilling, work.

From speaking to the Education Minister, I know that he is fully committed, as we all

should be, to do all within his gift to ensure that young children with SEN have, like their peers, an education that is suited to and takes account of their needs. Educational transitions should be as smooth as possible for every child, they should be timely and not disruptive to the pupil's education, and they should not exacerbate the challenges that children or their families already face. The Education Authority must be fully accountable in that regard. Too often, its approach appears to be policy-focused rather than child-focused.

The needs of the sector and, most importantly, the children go beyond the allocation of places. They require access to tailored and evidence-based support, the mainstreaming of SEN training for all our trainee teachers and facilities that are fit for purpose. We know, however, that, in every sector, transformation and improvement require resource. The implementation of the end-to-end review will be no different.

In my first weeks here, I have heard Members speaking in the Chamber and at the Education Committee about their commitment to and vision for SEN education. The intent of their words is, I believe, sincere, but words are not enough. A vision — a wish list — will remain only that unless the UK Government deliver on their promise of the sufficient, needs-based funding model that my party has advocated. Equally, all parties across the Chamber that are represented at the Executive must be prepared to back up the talk of prioritising education by empowering the Minister with the investment required to improve the lives of all those who depend on and work in our SEN education services. I look forward to working with Members across the House towards that shared goal.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I am rarely an angry person, but this is an issue that I am deeply unhappy about. I see it every day and every week in my constituency office, and it is heartbreaking. The dire need for more special educational needs support is an urgent and pressing matter that demands our collective attention and immediate action. We must listen to and learn from parents and caregivers in our communities, teachers, classroom assistants and health professionals to ensure that we create an equitable, sustainable change for all children with special educational needs. I have been to Rossmar School in Limavady, in my constituency, and have spoken to staff, parents and families there. It is such a positive learning environment for our young people. However, the lack of investment and funding mean that

there are so many challenges. Thank God for the good staff who support so many young people.

In my time in politics, this issue has often come to my office. Parents and families feel unheard and that they are entirely ignored by the system. Children with special educational needs being unable to get school places has created much stress for families. Pupils are unable to attain the transport that they need to get to school or to socialising opportunities. They often experience long waiting lists for speech therapy or health appointments to improve their quality of life, well-being and overall development. Our children face significant challenges, including inequitable access to education, inappropriate placements and countless systemic failures.

We in the SDLP believe that the time for action is now. We call upon the Minister of Education to prioritise SEN reform, ensuring that every child, without exception, has the opportunity to reach their full potential in our education system here. We support the motion and the amendment, and I welcome the fact that it includes the dire need for more investment and support for the key year when SEN pupils transition from an education setting into society.

4.30 pm

I have spoken with worried parents who have a child with learning difficulties, and they have touched on the fact that their child goes to a special school five days a week but that, after their time in school has finished, there will be barely any support in adulthood. There are gaps in group activities, which can lead to social isolation, but, thankfully, in my constituency, I have seen a number of groups, such as Destined in Feeny and Causeway Neurodiversity, that do an incredible job of filling those gaps and providing a sense of community for those with special educational needs. They are just brilliant.

I thank the parents at SEN Reform NI who have come together to work on the issue and who have shared their lived experiences. They have highlighted how vast the issue is and how dire the need and urgency are to fix it. If we look at the statistics, we see that they are absolutely staggering. Last August, 149 children with special educational needs and complex learning needs were left without a school. Let us be clear: that can never happen again. It is on each and every one of us. I am not a parent yet, but it is absolutely heartbreaking. Pat rightly said that children with special educational

needs are not second-class citizens, so let us not treat them as such.

We know that almost 20% of our school population has a special educational need, so why are we not investing in those students? Why are we not supporting them and investing in their futures? Why are we not building sufficiently sized buildings to support their complex needs?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that flexibility, or agility, should be built into the system and into settings to respond to the ever-growing demand and need? I am thinking of Ardnashee School and College in my constituency, which has received an extremely welcome but very long-awaited new build. It is so long awaited that, by the time that it is ready for occupation, the school population will have outgrown it by almost a third.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Cara, you have an extra minute.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. Absolutely. I recognise that, as we sit here today, so many pupils and families are waiting on assessments. We know that they will only add to the number of children with special educational needs, so the expansion of those buildings is necessary.

The present situation is marked by these systemic shortcomings: the inadequate capacity of our special schools, which I mentioned; limited access to education for children with special educational needs; and the delays and uncertainties surrounding assessments, which is a massive issue that I come across all the time. The pressure that that puts on the family setting can be extremely difficult to deal with.

One issue that Mr McCrossan loves to touch on — I share his enthusiasm — is the lack of accountability in the Education Authority. That will be really interesting to consider over the coming months when we dive a little deeper into how we can best support our children with special educational needs. I welcome the opportunity to look into that further.

I thank ADD-NI, which I met last week to talk about the lack of investment in support services for children in Northern Ireland who have ADHD. We looked at how the lack of investment by our trusts in ADHD support and the lack of available support services can cause a lot of difficulty for pupils and lead to a lot of mental health issues.

We must address those challenges, and we must start today. We in the SDLP stand firm in our call for immediate action to address the systemic failings in the sector. Every child, regardless of who they are, their diagnosis or where they come from, deserves a well-funded, well-supported journey through education to support them and enable them to fulfil their potential. I urge the Education Minister today, as I do at any given opportunity, to conduct the urgent review as soon as possible.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is Cathy Mason's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House of the convention that a Member's first, or inaugural, speech be heard without interruption. Cathy, you have five minutes.

Mrs Mason: It is a privilege to be here for the first time, making my first speech, and it is important that I thank all those in South Down who placed their trust in me to represent them in the Chamber. I gave my word that I would work hard for the people of South Down and try to bring forward solutions to the issues that matter to them in their everyday lives. Those include making childcare affordable; providing better support for children with special educational needs; dealing with hospital waiting lists; and ensuring that people can access mental health services when they need them.

It is with great honour that I stand here today representing the people of South Down from Newcastle to Downpatrick, Kilcoo to Drumaness and all the places that lie in between. I do so knowing the weight of responsibility that that brings, following in the footsteps of great Sinn Féin representatives like Mick Murphy, Caitríona Ruane and Willie Clarke, to name but a few. Anyone who knows me knows that I am a very proud County Down woman and that my heart lies in Drumaness, the village where I was born and reared. My children, husband and I now live in the small village of Loughinisland. Despite our Gaelic footballing differences, I am very proud to bring my children up in that close-knit community, which has itself, of course, dealt with a major tragedy but faced it with resilience.

When beginning my journey in the Assembly, it was very important to me that my office would be based in Downpatrick, Down's county town. In the time ahead, I want to build on the good work that was done by my predecessors, Chris Hazzard and Emma Rogan, to build a vision and a better future for our town. Downpatrick has faced devastation from the recent flooding events, but I have no doubt that it will come back bigger, better and stronger than ever.

A brighter future must begin with better access to healthcare and fighting for the restoration of services at Downe Hospital. Just a few weeks ago, sadly, I lost my hero, my big brother Peter. I witnessed at first hand the miracle that our healthcare system is, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff, nurses and doctors at the ICU in the Royal Victoria Hospital, who not only cared for Peter but lovingly wrapped their arms around us, his family.

In order to ensure that our young people in South Down receive the very best start in life, they must have access to the best possible education system. We were elected in May 2022, and, over the course of nearly two years, we were forced to stand by while the situation facing children and young people with special educational needs became increasingly difficult. We need to come together and work hard to secure and deliver the necessary resources to support those young people and their families.

There has been a systemic failure on the part of the Education Authority over a number of years, and we need to get to grips with the issues at hand. Of course, the case should and will be made for an enhanced funding package to be made available, but, first, we need to get things right at policy level. Time and again, the Department has refused to grapple with the EA's shortcomings on SEN policy. In fact, it was the work of whistle-blowers, frustrated system users and community and voluntary organisations that exposed the EA's failure on SEN policy implementation. In reality, those issues should have been picked up and dealt with by the relevant public authorities.

Recently, I have been working with St Brigid's Primary School in Downpatrick, which is fighting to get Team Teach training for its staff, who are educating and caring for children with the same level of need as those who attend Knockevin Special School, which is just a stone's throw up the road and where staff are entitled to Team Teach training. That does not seem fair or justified, and, for the sake of the staff and the needs of those children, it must change. Adequate training must be made available for all those who are caring for our children. I know that each of our constituency offices are dealing with cases of exhausted parents who are fighting for the rights of their children to get the education that they deserve and are overcoming barriers day and daily.

To conclude, I commend the work of those who tabled the motion. It has my full support, and I look forward to working with everyone in the

Chamber to deliver on the transformation that is required for special educational needs.

Ms Brownlee: In the debate on ending violence against women and girls, I remarked how pleased I was to see the Assembly dealing with real issues that are affecting people across Northern Ireland. In that regard, I will begin my contribution by congratulating and thanking the Members who tabled such an important motion. I am going through the SEN process with my son, so I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate not just as an MLA but as a parent in the heart of the process.

I recognise, as does my party, that special educational needs provision in Northern Ireland has been pushed to breaking point and is in dire need of investment and reform from the ground up that is underpinned by sustainable budgets and parental engagement. The number of statemented SEN pupils has risen by around 5,000 since 2019. While, initially, that sharp increase is a bit of a shock, I believe that there are some positives to take, such as early intervention, awareness, identifying conditions and providing support that might not have been provided in years gone by.

Having said that, it is important to highlight that the statementing process has its flaws. One of the fundamental issues lies with the initial forms. They are complex and paper-based, they take a long time to fill out, and there is general confusion around the process and the next steps, putting parents at a disadvantage before they even put pen to paper. We need to break the cycle. The Education Authority needs to provide an alternative, simpler, easier-to-navigate process that all parents can feel confident in and advocate for their child at the highest possible standard and not be disadvantaged due to the process. Another aspect is that the process requires parents to record their child in a number of specific situations. On that basis, a decision is made. How can a child be judged on six minutes of a 24-hour day, bearing in mind that the very nature of children with SEN means that their reactions can vary starkly based on different environments and situations?

We have also heard about the significant numbers of tribunal cases against the Education Authority. A significant number of decisions that are appealed through the process are overturned, which is great for parents but shows that the initial assessment process is severely flawed. There needs to be a cross-sectoral, cross-departmental approach to this process. As I mentioned previously, the number of statemented children has risen

sharply in recent years. The Department of Health projections show an expected continual rise in numbers of children and young people with special educational needs, but that is not reflected in the Education Authority's predictions. We need to see that increase reflected urgently and provide suitable education places that are supported by the correct infrastructure.

I take this opportunity to celebrate the community and voluntary organisations that are providing support to young people with SEN and their families. One particular organisation in my constituency of East Antrim is Little Stars. It was born out of a sheer passion and determination to see specific services offered for those with special educational needs. I also had a very useful meeting with SEN Reform NI on Friday, and I thank that body and all other community organisations that are making a difference every day and taking on the fight for so many. I also place on record my support for SEN staff, teaching and non-teaching, who do such incredible work in very difficult circumstances. They deserve to be paid a fair wage for the job that they do, and I welcome the Minister of Education's commitment last week to resolve the pay disputes in the education system.

As a final point, I will touch on the parents and carers in these situations. Of course, I speak personally when I say that every parent wants the very best for their child and will, of course, naturally fight to ensure that their child has the best start to life. However, many of those parents work full time, have other children and other commitments, and are being overrun by an overly complex, complicated and time-consuming process that is having a detrimental impact on their mental health as well as on the child. No person should ever have to fight that hard for basic education.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Sian Mulholland.

Ms Mulholland: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Did I get that right?

First of all, before I begin my speech, I pass on my condolences and those of my party to Cathy, who shared her personal story of loss.

In speaking on this important motion, I thank my colleague and my party's education spokesperson, Nick Mathison, whose passion for this issue was evident this afternoon in his opening speech.

I want to speak about the importance of early intervention and planning in the support and nurturing of children with additional needs in their education journey. Early detection of need and early intervention are critical in ensuring that our children receive the support that they require to succeed and thrive in life. There is significant research evidence on the importance of early interventions in the earliest of years. Prevention is better than cure, as they say, but investment so far has failed to match that rhetoric. Investment in prevention and early intervention makes sound economic sense, with well-documented and robust returns on investment felt right across society in every shape and form. The investment in early life interventions can be offset by the potential savings in terms of reduced need for late intervention. It is clear that the earlier we intervene, the better the outcomes. That is particularly important for children with special educational needs and disabilities. We cannot and absolutely should not wait until a child reaches preschool or primary school to begin planning for their education journey.

No parent should have to fight for their child's right to access such a vital component of their development needs.

4.45 pm

Although it is an education motion, it is not just an issue to be addressed by the Department of Education. In the light of the need for early intervention, we cannot overstate the importance of a joined-up approach from all those who have cause to be engaged with families and children from birth; the key cohort partner here being health visitors. Health visitation is an absolute priority in the early years service, with its reach and impact extending well beyond Health and its remit. Concerns can be raised at those key points in a child's development. Whether that is at a one-year, two-year or preschool review or at points of contact in between, health visitors are the perfect people to instigate early intervention, but it must be joined up and well communicated with the education system.

Once the issue is raised, it should not be a postcode lottery for children and families as to whether they have access to early intervention developmental services, but, unfortunately, that is exactly what is faced, given the inconsistency of the services that are delivered across trusts and, indeed, education areas. The independent review of education also acknowledges clearly the role of speech and language therapists in addressing developmental issues. There is a

widening gap between capacity and demand. It is a vital service, with early intervention through speech and language therapy (SLT) potentially helping to prevent or resolve problems that could emerge later in life, yet there are huge numbers of vacancies in those key roles. Without investment, we cannot address those workforce pressures, and that will not address the obvious urgent need.

Another essential cohort in that joined-up approach are those in the early years sector. Proposals to expand or improve early years services will have immediate cost implications — that is true — but the long-term consequences will be financially positive. We want to see funding for early years and the support systems that that sector provides to be adequate, strategic and seen as a long-term investment.

In Northern Ireland, 18.7% of children are recorded as having special or additional needs, and 6.8% have statements. Those children will not simply present themselves with those additional needs on their first day of school, so why do we have a system that waits until that point of entry to address their need and adequately plan for their education journey? We need to move forward urgently, ahead of the school year, so that we do not see a repeat of the shameful scenes last September, with our most vulnerable children not having a plan for their educational journey in place for their first day, their first week or even their first month. We need a joined-up approach that is adequately funded across Departments and stakeholders and is ready to deliver the right support at the right time for the children and young people who need it most.

Mr Baker: I thank the Members who tabled this important motion.

A battle a day is what every parent of a child with special educational needs goes through in order to get any support. Parents are exhausted from the daily challenges and need us to be their voice and deliver real change. Children with special educational needs and their families are being failed by the current system. They are being left behind, and children deserve better. I have listened to families, worked with support groups and been left absolutely heartbroken by the experiences faced by families in our communities.

It is important that the real-life stories are heard in the Chamber. I will share a story from SEN Reform NI. It is Alana's story. She is the mother of two children with autism, aged 10 and five. Alana's 10-year-old daughter was diagnosed

aged 4 through her health trust, whereas her son was diagnosed privately aged 3. The fights, struggles and battles for support and services are soul-destroying. When she first applied for an assessment for her daughter, she was turned down. She appealed that decision. To her shock, with no further evidence, it was then approved. All the worry and stress in between could easily have been avoided. The struggle to get her daughter's statement within the 26-week period was difficult. She had to constantly chase up her application. The process left her feeling emotionally drained, and her mental health deteriorated due to that process. Already in a bad place from having to go through a broken system with her daughter, it was more daunting knowing that she had to go through it all again for her son, more worry and stress than anyone should have to deal with to get their child's basic needs met. That is only one story. Sadly, there are hundreds. Children deserve better.

Whilst policy, legislation and reform are of the utmost importance, we all need to remember that it is the families of children with special educational needs who are under pressure, and everything that we do must have them at the forefront. It is important that children, young people and families have a platform and that their voices are heard at every level of government. Capacity across our special education schools and in units in mainstream schools is at breaking point. There is limited capacity for new pupils, and we are nearly at the time of year when parents wait anxiously to see whether their child has been given a place that meets the child's needs. This year could be even harder for families. The fact is that many children are being offered places that do not meet their needs or, in some cases, have no offer at all. Some children with special educational needs in mainstream schools can end up on reduced timetables or can miss school altogether owing to transport issues. All children deserve the best possible education, and I thank all the school leaders, teachers and classroom assistants who work tirelessly for children with special educational needs while under immense pressures themselves.

Early intervention is key. Parents understand that, but the long waiting lists and the lack of cross-departmental working make it almost impossible. Parents do everything in their power to support their children, but many have to come out of work because the system is failing them. A cross-departmental approach would be a step in the right direction and a welcome change in the process. With the Health and Education Departments working in tandem, we can make a real change to the lives

of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Educational teams, supported by health experts, will give those children the best possible start in life, because delays in early intervention have a clear knock-on effect on the next stage of their development. If there is delayed intervention in the early years of a child's development, families struggle to get their child statemented in time, thus impacting on their support in a mainstream school or their place in a special school.

The Children's Law Centre rightly takes the view that the majority of issues faced by families have been caused by the unlawful operation of the SEN legal framework and by process failings driven by chronic underfunding. Education in the North has been underfunded by a cruel Tory Government for far too long. There needs to be proper investment in our education system to ensure a needs-based delivery of services to children and families. Sinn Féin wants an education system that delivers for all. Our education system should, at its core, operate on principles of equality and fairness, regardless of background or ability. We are at a critical meltdown point, and there are shelves filled with evidence from reports stating what needs to be done.

Let us work together to make sure that Alana and the many parents and children out there know that their voices are heard loud and clear. Most importantly, we should deliver the change that they deserve, ensuring that children have free and easy access to supports and that they can flourish and reach their full potential.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Diane Dodds.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, and I hope that I have got your title right this time.

The mission statement of the Minister's Department states that all pupils should be "happy, learning and succeeding." That applies equally to all young people, including those who have special educational needs. For those young children to be "happy, learning and succeeding", they require the right support from the right people at the right time and in the right place. We need to measure that and take remedial action where we are failing. The Minister has said that the reform of special educational needs is a priority, and we thank him for that. At the moment, however, we cannot say, hand on heart, that we are delivering all those things for young children with special educational needs.

I welcome the tone of the debate. If we are, as the Member for Lagan Valley said, to be an inclusive, compassionate society, we must show that inclusivity and compassion to children and young people with special educational needs and their families. There have been some well coordinated speeches today, but I want to reflect on some of the issues that have come to my attention as I have spoken to families and teachers and visited schools.

First, let me talk about staff. Teachers in special education schools tell me that they are under more pressure than ever before. Many feel the impact of that pressure and that crisis, and many of the children are presenting with more complex emotional and behavioural needs. There is a constant pressure on staff and family. Our support staff are the backbone of everything that happens in a special educational needs setting. I know that the Minister is working on the business case for the pay and grading review. I hope that it can come to a fair conclusion relatively soon.

I turn to access to special educational needs places. We in the Chamber all know that the chaos of last year cannot be repeated. As I said to some of the Minister's departmental officials whom I met a couple of months ago — they are here today — we cannot be surprised twice by the number of children who require a place in a special educational setting. I heard some talk on the radio this morning that we would need over 1,000 places. If that is so, it indicates some degree of planning, which is different from where we were last year. I am glad to hear that, but our children need to be appropriately placed in the right setting with the right support and the right teachers.

Last year, we created over 100 additional classrooms for children with special educational needs. We created them in a hurry. We created them in a state of panic, and, this year, I am told that we might need another 75 classrooms. Our children deserve the right support and the right setting, but they also require it at the right time. They need to know at an appropriate time that they will have a place in school and know where that school is. This year, some of the children who required placements in special educational schools had a place but did not get to attend school until this January, when the special provision was opened at Saintfield for Oakwood School and Assessment Centre. That is simply not where we need to be, and we cannot have that happen again. We need to explore how those special provision units are inspected to ensure that the quality of education

is appropriate for children with special educational needs.

I turn briefly to the capital needs programme. We need to separate that from the general capital needs programme, so that special educational needs schools are constantly monitored and having their needs met.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. Minister, I know that you know this, but it is not just an Education issue; it is a cross-departmental issue, and it is a matter for the Department of Health. I hope that you are able to work with the Health Minister in that respect.

Ms Armstrong: When we think about education and children with special educational needs, we need to bear equity in mind. To get equality for all pupils, we need to think about how we can encourage and increase the investment in the children who need more help in order to be treated equally.

I support the Alliance motion and confirm my support for the Ulster Unionist amendment. I absolutely agree with Mr Butler on that one. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on learning disabilities and vice chair of the all-party group on disabilities. In those roles, I have heard from pupils and parents that the current system for supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities is failing them and their schools.

I will use my time to discuss the failure of the system to work appropriately at the time of transition. Every year, children with special educational needs are notified about the school that they are to attend weeks, if not months, after their peers. Why? The Assembly has been calling on the Department of Education to stop that unfair and discriminatory treatment of children with disabilities since I came into the House in 2016. It did not just happen last year: it happened the year before that, the year before that and the year before that. Indeed, the Children's Law Centre has said that SEND provision has been allowed to degenerate into critical failure. I appreciate that the Minister has talked about the strategic placement board. If we are investing that money now, I fully expect that children with special educational needs will not be left in that situation this coming summer. It is time that we ensure that every child, irrespective of whether they have a disability, finds out what their next school will be at the same time.

I do not want to have to sit in another meeting room with parents in tears, frustrated that their child is the only child in a primary school without a school place. Minister, as a parent, it breaks my heart when I hear a child with a disability asking why they do not have a school place: have they done something wrong, or is it because they are disabled that they cannot get a school place? That is a disgrace.

5.00 pm

I appreciate that a period of transition is complex, so I ask the Minister to confirm whether any learning has been taken from the experience of the special educational needs and disability tribunal. If the members of that tribunal had been consulted, many of the repeated errors and continuing mistreatment of children with disabilities and their parents would have been dealt with and would no longer be part of the system. I demand that the use of the term "supernumerary" when referring to children with disabilities stop today. Treating children with disabilities as separate and not counting them in a school's intake says much about a system that is based on division and difference; it should be a child-centred and inclusive approach. The Department of Education decided to place children with disabilities in mainstream schools. It is for the Department of Education to stop using outdated and segregating language. I will say nothing about the fact that there is very little provision for after-school facilities for children with disabilities.

I am very fortunate to know Killard House School, a moderate learning difficulties (MLD) school that has helped children to achieve GCSEs and develop their skills to the very best that they can achieve. Many children leave school with qualifications enabling them to enter the workplace. The system currently moves MLD children into mainstream, where children with disabilities are separate and not even counted as part of the school intake or exam result achievements. Is this system working to develop children with disabilities, or is it further segregating children with disabilities?

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I am loath to jump in here, because I think that you are making great headway, but I want to pay credit to you as the chair of the all-party group on learning disability and the former chair of the all-party group on disability. We have shared roles there. The Member mentioned that children with a learning disability or a disability face discrimination at nursery. They then move into education, and then, as my motion speaks

to, they move into the workplace and further education. Does she agree that they face discrimination throughout their lives?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I think that I might need it.

I was about to move on to part of what the all-party group on disability heard from Fleming Fulton School, whose representatives talked about the Careers Service and how they felt that their school was a poor relation in comparison with the grammar schools only a few miles away from them. Some 27% of people with disabilities are not in employment. The statistics for Northern Ireland are the worst in the UK. The careers advice that these schools receive is limited compared with that received by other schools. For example, as part of the careers system, children from Fleming Fulton School have been asked to go to work placements that they cannot get to because the public transport system requires them to phone 24 hours in advance to book a wheelchair place. Two children from the same school cannot go to the same work placement because they need two wheelchairs on a bus, and no buses have two wheelchair places. While that is an infrastructure issue, it comes back to careers people not giving children the appropriate advice or support. The children already believe that it is too difficult to get to work, so what is education providing for those young people? I have to ask the Minister to clarify whether basic disability awareness is built into all transition services, including careers advice.

I am also very aware that much has been made about the amount spent on special educational needs, particularly on the workforce.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Ms Armstrong: It is time that we bring workforce pay issues together and put forward a case, because they are not second-class workers; they are key to our children's well-being.

Mr Frew: Principal Deputy Speaker, everybody struggles with these titles. I think that we should go back to referring to Mr or Mrs Speaker.

"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."

This quote is used very often by many Members, including me, but it is attributed to Gandhi. It is absolutely right. Here we have a number of boxes ticked: children; our most vulnerable in society; and children with special educational needs. Yet, we fail them, and we fail them badly. Not only do we fail the children but we fail the parents and all the other family members who then struggle, either with education, social issues or pressure at home. What will we do about it? What will the Assembly do about it?

I am sure that every one of us deals daily with those issues in our constituencies. I can tell many stories about work that I have completed, and they are heartbreaking. One family that moved into my area of North Antrim from another part of the Province struggled to get their child into a special educational school.

I pay tribute to the special educational facilities that we have — the schools that we have. In my constituency, we have the first-class Castle Tower School, which is one of the most modern schools in our stock in Northern Ireland. Yet, it had to open a second campus in the old, disused Ballee High School building, where I was educated. Other schools outside my area cater well for the educational needs of some of my constituents. Those include Riverside School in Antrim town; Roddensvale School in Larne; Kilronan School in Magherafelt; and Sandelford School in Coleraine. The list goes on and on. Those schools do sterling work in really challenging environments, and they do their very best for the children. I hear nothing but good reports when we get children placed in those settings. They deserve to be in those settings, because every child deserves an education. Can we say that we are delivering that at the present time? No, we cannot. That is why the debate is so important. It is one thing debating these things and talking about them, but when are we going to see action on catering for those children?

There are 149 children who are not being placed, and they are not being placed because of their needs. It is not because there is no provision or no places; it is because of their needs. That is absolutely and totally wrong. Are we catering for and looking after our most vulnerable? No, we are not. We are failing so many people, and that has to stop because we are failing not only those children but their wider family.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for his comments. They are very passionate, and I agree with his passion. As he said, we are failing those children. If we keep throwing the same money and more money at a system that is not delivering, we have to ask this question: is what we are spending our money on us spending it well?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: The Member makes a valid point, because I preach in this place about reform and about how, if we just worry about budget lines and are asking for, requesting and demanding more money to throw at a system that is failing, we will throw that money down the pan. I assure you that those parents of special needs children, for whom that pound in their pocket is just as valuable as anybody else's, will be giving that money into taxation and it will not serve their purposes one bit. In fact, it will be wasted money. They would be able to spend the money far better than any Department.

One of the issues about the Programme for Government that I keep going on about is that we have a classic example of where a Programme for Government can pick up something like this and actually make a real difference. It is not a matter just for Education. Health has massive issues in this in that it can pick up these children when they are very young and identify their needs before they even get anywhere near the school path. Yet, we go for years with children not being statemented.

A statement is a very important thing nowadays. What if we gave those children support before they are statemented, so that they do not need to push and battle so hard to get a statement? Why is the support not there at the earliest stage? Of course, the pressure on schools to statement children in P1, P2, P6 and P7 becomes a completely different equation. That is not fair on the school, and it is certainly not fair on the child. We need to do this better.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Frew: Thank you very much.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that, Paul.

Mr McCrossan: This is a critical and important issue, but nothing we have heard today is new. The reality is that, behind all the examples and

numbers that have been given, there are families and children who are suffering in terrible situations. They are all unique.

There is a wider problem that we need to look at. We have multiple reports. There are 200 recommendations that outline how we could move to resolve the problem. The previous Education Committee spent months looking at the issue. The previous Public Accounts Committee spent months looking at the issue. The NIAO spent months looking at the issue. We know what the problems are. The reality is that parents watching today will ask — I am sorry about the tone — "Is this just more lip service?". They want action. We know what the problems are. I am sorry to say it but, if there was ever an example of how not to do something in that area, this place would top the charts, because it has been disastrous.

We have all heard it. My door is knocked as much as everyone else's, my phones ring and my inbox is filled with emails: all of that comes from parents who are absolutely desperate for help. They are desperate to the extent that their mental health has deteriorated significantly and they have had to leave their jobs. There are families with no wider family network or support who are in crisis. When those families and children needed us, this place was silent — not once but twice, for five years in total. We knew five years ago what we know today, because all the reports point to the exact same things. What we need is action.

I will not stand in the way of the Minister if he moves to implement the various recommendations that have been laid out, but we need to move now. Motions are grand — they draw attention to and shine a light on the issue — but people want action. We cannot delay it and delay it and delay it.

I read the briefing paper that came through today from the Children's Law Centre, which points to things that we have discussed today. It says that the problems parents and children are experiencing have been:

"caused by unlawful operation of that framework and process failings ... driven in part by chronic under-resourcing and poverty of service provision, relative to growing need."

That is a shocking statement. The briefing paper goes on to claim:

"The SEND system has been allowed to degenerate into critical failure, with even basic legal entitlements, such as a school

place, being unavailable to children most in need".

The body that I have most questions for is the Education Authority. There has been a mountain of disastrous mismanagement by the Education Authority in this area, and our children have been failed. When I raised complaints and concerns and reported it continually to the permanent secretary and the departmental officials — in the absence of this place, when we could not hold a Minister to account — nothing was done. The Children's Law Centre is highly critical of the role of the Education Authority, stating:

"there is a complete lack of clarity about what transformation processes are taking place 'on the ground' within EA pupil support services."

That is a disaster. I am not going to stand today and say, "Let us all be cosy and work together". We need to implement the recommendations that are there. The House has talked about the importance of early intervention, and, yes, that is it in a nutshell.

However, for God's sake, let us ensure, first and foremost, that we listen to the parents who are affected, the teachers at the coalface, the classroom assistants and all of those who are struggling.

5.15 pm

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I really admire his passion for the subject, and I served on the Committee with him. Does the Member agree that, while funding is one avenue of concern, the under-use of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 has been a singular failure by most of the Departments to exercise efficiencies and direct transformation?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCrossan: Absolutely. That is a key point. The importance of Departments working together is also pointed to in the Children's Law Centre documents today. That does not happen. I sincerely hope that, with the Ministers in place in the new Executive, that will happen. I hope that, for the sake of those children and all of the other people who are struggling in our society, the House never falls again. For the sake of those children and the future of our society, which those kids are, we need Ministers to work together to put them first.

Enough of the suffering and struggling: let us take action now. Let those families and young people know that we have heard them, that we are responding to them, that we will take action, and that, most importantly, no child will be left behind again.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next two Members to speak have moved into the grace period, so Justin McNulty and Gerry Carroll will have five minutes each and, if they take an intervention, will not get an extra minute.

Mr McNulty: I am glad to see that the motion has been moved today. Issues with support and resources for special educational needs bring the highest volume of cases through my constituency offices. Prior to commencing my remarks, I acknowledge the sterling work being undertaken by so many schools across the North. In difficult and challenging circumstances, they stand as strong advocates for students with special educational needs and their families. Rathore School and Lisanally School in my constituency have done unbelievable work, but teachers and assistants across all schools who see every day the challenges that children face know how little help and support there is for them. I pay tribute to them. St Paul's High School in my constituency, where both of my parents were teachers, stands as an industry leader in inclusivity and championing the needs of children with additional needs. The principal of St Paul's, Mr Jarlath Burns, deserves credit for his leadership on those issues. I congratulate Jarlath on the impact that his teaching team has made for children with special educational needs and their families. I hope that, as his term as Uachtarán Chumann Lúthchleas Gael [*Translation: President of the Gaelic Athletic Association*] commences, the impact that he makes in that regard will be as positive as the impact that he and his teaching team have made for children with special educational needs.

Since 2009, the number of pupils with special educational needs in the North has been growing at a pace faster than the general population. Approximately 20% of the school population in the North has special educational needs. The issues with the provision of special educational needs support are well documented: poor communication between families and statutory agencies; inadequately resourced services and support provision; poor coordination between health and education agencies with respect to early identification and intervention; and delays in statementing. Delays, delays, delays. The issues are well

documented, but central to the debate should be the human impact of the shortcomings of statutory bodies. One small example of those impacts sits prominently in my mind today. I was contacted by a mother of three children, two of whom have special educational needs. Due to administrative issues, applications for free school meals for those children were not processed in time. Despite extensive lobbying efforts, it took almost six weeks for the Education Authority to correctly process those applications. In that intervening period, their despairing mother was forced to give up her own meals so that her children could bring lunches to school. That is an insight into the human impact of the profound failures in our special educational needs system.

Without adequate support and timely interventions, children with special educational needs will suffer poorer outcomes with respect to mental wellness, social isolation, bullying and delays in school development and academic progression. It is important to remember that governmental and bureaucratic failures with respect to special educational needs have a permanently negative effect on the lives of children and their families. That is time that they will never get back and ground that can never be made up. Reform and the transformation of the systems and processes are desperately needed, but it is critical that we ensure that those reforms are undertaken with the needs of children and young people at their heart.

I finish by paying tribute to under-resourced and overburdened teachers and assistants who help children with special educational needs to navigate the challenges they face. I pay tribute to the parents who are fighting with all their might and every ounce of their being for the support that their children need and deserve. I pay tribute to the children with special educational needs and disabilities, present and past. You are and should have been entitled to support to shine a light on your path through the education system in order to allow you to reach your full potential. If that has not happened or it is not happening, you are being failed, and you deserve better. No child should be left behind.

Mr Carroll: Just three weeks: that is how long it took for the families of children with special educational needs and disabilities to protest outside the newly restored Assembly. Along with other Members, I was with Colin autism group today. I also stood alongside and in support of Unite the union members. I commend them both for taking a stand for all those affected by our broken education system. Politicians and sections of the media have tried to pit those people against one another in the

past, and they are not falling for it. The Executive parties here should be ashamed for failing our most vulnerable children, putting countless families through the wringer and treating education workers with absolute contempt.

Almost every day, I speak to parents who have to go through the torture of navigating the pitfalls in the SEND sector: being unable to have their child assessed; being unable to get a statement of need; or even being unable to get a school place. Last year, we had the appalling situation where hundreds of children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families were left in limbo, not knowing where they would go when September came around. Unfortunately, officials have warned me and my party that there will likely be a repeat of that unforgivable situation this year.

That is not to mention, of course, the impact on and constant disruption of the education of vulnerable children in schools that are under-resourced, understaffed and, seemingly, uncared for by the Stormont Executive. It is as simple as this: the state is failing to meet its legal and statutory obligations to children with special educational needs and disabilities. It is denying them their right to a full and fruitful education and stymieing their potential. If that is not discrimination, I do not know what is.

Families should not have to persevere, but persevere they have. I pay tribute to all those who have campaigned and taken the fight to those in power to demand investment in the SEND sector. Not only have they helped to pick up the pieces when the state has failed but they have been absolutely determined to ensure that the farce does not continue.

I also want to mention all the education workers who have taken to picket lines to strike for a pay and grading review and for investment in reform — proper reform — of the SEND sector. I submitted an amendment to today's motion in support of those workers. It was not selected for debate, unfortunately, but I will summarise it here. It commended the efforts of the education workers in the SEND sector who go above and beyond for the vulnerable children they care for and educate. It asked the Assembly to recognise the incredibly difficult circumstances that they work in daily and noted that declining real-terms pay has compounded the recruitment and retention crisis facing the sector. It asked the Assembly to recognise that education support staff have not had their right to a 52-week contract honoured and further commended the education workers who took strike action in pursuit of investment in our

children's education. Finally, it asked the Assembly to commit to meeting the pay and grading demands of those workers, which brings us to the nub of the matter.

The refusal of the new Executive to undertake the pay and grading review demanded by workers and families reminds us that the failures that we speak of are not just historical; they are current. Three weeks in, families and trade unions are knocking at the door of the new Executive, because they have immediately continued down the path of their blundering predecessors. The pay and grading review has been outstanding since 2019. The Executive parties, which include the Members who tabled the motion and those who will endorse it, are, at this moment, refusing to invest properly in those workers and the SEND sector. It is utter hypocrisy, and it should tell those outside where the Government's priorities lie.

Finally, I will read out some demands that have been sent to me by constituents. They are calling for equity in education; timely, early intervention; accountability for the Education Authority; and proper reform that involves the voices of parents and workers. The time for lip service is over. Children with special educational needs and disabilities demand investment in their education. They demand action, and that is the very least that they deserve.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Education. Minister, you have 15 minutes in which to respond to the debate.

Mr Givan: I thank the Members who tabled the motion — the Chairman of the Education Committee supported by his colleagues — who are all here and have been present throughout. It is a hugely important motion, and I am pleased that it has been brought to the Floor of the Assembly so early in the mandate.

I thank all Members for their contributions. Everyone has spoken passionately. I do not think that there is anybody who has not had to assist constituents, at times in distressing circumstances, to get them the support that they need. It is important to recognise that we come to the issue with that shared experience and a shared desire to make things better, while recognising the problems. It is too easy at times to point the finger and seek people to blame. Everybody is trying to get the system to a better place. Undoubtedly, there are failings and systemic issues that need to be addressed. I think, however, that we all come to the issue from the same position of wanting to get the

best possible outcomes in the challenging environment of special educational needs.

I will single out the two maiden speeches, and I commend those Members for their contribution. First, I thank Mr Brooks from East Belfast for the points that he made. I have no doubt that he will represent that constituency well, and I know that he is already making an impact. I also commend Cathy Mason for her contribution and for sharing her personal story about the loss of her brother. I have no doubt that Peter would be immensely proud of his sister and of what she is doing here representing her constituents in South Down.

As Education Minister, I have made transformation of the existing special educational needs system one of my key early priorities, and I reaffirm that commitment today. Colleagues around the Executive table have also emphasised the need for decisive and robust action, recognising that collective action will be required to ensure that we intervene from the early stages of a child's life and that the right pathways are in place to enable young people with SEN to have appropriate destinations after leaving school. A number of Members made that point. It is not just a matter for the Department of Education. It cuts across a number of Departments, and the Department of Health has a hugely important role to play in providing solutions to the issues.

Regrettably, the data evidences the continuing gap between our children and young people with special educational needs and their peers and demands that we improve outcomes for our more vulnerable learners. The parents of children with special educational needs want the same as any parents do for their child: for their child to be happy and thriving in a school that meets their needs; to enjoy the benefits of a full and enriching curriculum; and to be supported by staff who are appropriately skilled and resourced. Those are reasonable expectations, yet, all too often, I have heard from families and spoken to teachers who have little confidence in the current system's ability to meet the needs of children.

My vision for every child is that they are "happy, learning and succeeding." That vision is no different for children and young people with special educational needs and/or a disability. Over the past 12 months, the Department has been leading an end-to-end review of special educational needs in collaboration with the Education Authority. The purpose of the review is to consider special educational needs from policy intention through to operational delivery

in schools and to bring forward an implementation plan to support transformation.

The intention is to design a system that consistently delivers for children and young people with special educational needs, through the provision of high-quality and cost-effective services. This review represents a significant and transformational reform agenda, drawing on the recommendations that the Department has received through a range of scrutiny reports focusing on special educational needs provision.

5.30 pm

The weaknesses in our existing system have been well documented. We need to move beyond diagnosis of the problems to action that is aimed at making things better for children with special educational needs. The Chairman of the Education Committee referenced that and Daniel McCrossan said that now is the time for action. Our goal for children and young people with special educational needs is to have a system in which their needs are met with, as Diane Dodds quoted, "the right support from the right people, at the right time and in the right place." A parent should be able to have confidence that their child's needs will be identified early, that support will be provided promptly without necessarily requiring a statement of special educational needs, and that, as far as possible, their child will be placed at the same time as their non-special educational needs peers in a school that meets their needs. I am acutely aware that that is not the case for many children and young people with special educational needs.

We are seeing a changing profile in our children, with increasing prevalence of special educational needs across our system and increasing complexity of need.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for giving way. There was a piece of that that registered with me. We talk about complexity of need. Does the Minister agree that it may be that there is just a better understanding of the complexity of need and that, as opposed to thinking about the individuals and the changing profile of children, we are just getting better at understanding their needs?

Mr Givan: I agree about the greater awareness, but there are also greater health complexities for people who need additional support. They are able to go into educational settings, but their health needs are becoming more complex. As Minister, it is being

presented to me that there is a need for more support in that area.

The current system of provision was designed and established for a very different context and is no longer sustainable against the backdrop of the changing profile of need. I will give Members some figures. Between 2017-18 and 2022-23, expenditure on providing support for children and young people who have or may have special educational needs increased from £254 million to £480 million, with a forecast expenditure of around £544 million for the current year, 2023-24. That is a projected increase of 114% in just six years.

Despite the rising trajectory of spend, the increased investment has all too often not resulted in improved outcomes for all children with special educational needs. As Minister, I want to ensure appropriate and timely educational placements for children with SEN. We have a continuum of education provision for children and young people with special educational needs. That graduated response provides a flexible framework that allows for a range of interventions to be implemented in the classroom, with teachers being encouraged and empowered to use their professional judgement in relation to a pupil's presenting needs in the classroom, supported by adequate resources and special advice or training, as required.

In line with our current policy, just over 84% of children with SEN are educated in mainstream classes; 5% are educated in specialist provision in mainstream schools, which provide smaller classes with targeted support in an inclusive mainstream environment; and just over 10% are educated in special schools. Of those children with special educational needs, 63% do not have a statement of special educational need. That cohort will receive notification of their school placement in line with the general admissions process in April and May.

The 37% of children with special educational needs who have a statement follow a different process for admission to schools. That process is based on consultation between the EA, the school and the parents and seeks to ensure that the school placement is appropriate to the needs of the child, as set out in their statement, which is subject to change at the annual review of the statement. So, there is a continual flow of children being referred for special educational needs assessments, which creates challenges in aligning the notification of placements of all children with the general admissions process. In recent years, specifically in the context of the challenges that it experienced last year, the system has struggled to keep up with the

growing number of children and young people for whom specialist education provision has been deemed appropriate. In response, we need to build capacity urgently across our education system to ensure sufficient places in special schools and in specialist provision in mainstream schools and classes. That is an immediate priority for my Department and the EA. It is a key aspect of my Department's capital bid in the Budget process, and I trust that it will have Members' support.

The issues are not solely about physical accommodation. We must also ensure that children are placed in settings where they are supported by appropriately skilled staff who have access to the necessary range of resources and supports. My goal is that the majority of children and young people with a statement of special educational need, who require a change of placement at key transition points in primary 7, primary 1 and preschool, receive notification of their place at the same time as other children so that they can look forward to new educational experiences and destinations in the same way as their peers. That has not been the case in recent years. I assure colleagues that my Department is leading a strategic response, supported by a significant programme of ongoing work in the Education Authority, to address that. It involves getting ahead of the numbers — the children — having a good understanding at an early point of the educational needs of children who are approaching transition years and ensuring that the capacity to meet that need is there.

For now, the immediate priority is to create more capacity in the system to ensure that we have sufficient places this September. The current estimated shortfall is just over 1,000 places. The support of schools will be essential to meet the demand, and the EA recently wrote to all schools to seek their support in the creation of new specialist provision classes to alleviate the pressures. In turn, we must ensure that schools are supported appropriately to effectively meet the needs of children placed with them.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Minister for giving way. There is a lot of concern that children who were placed in specialist provision in mainstream schools, particularly in the new units that sprang up in large numbers last year in our preschool settings, were not able to access their full place, or they were not able to fulfil a full week because the facilities were not properly completed. Will the Minister give an assurance that any new classes that are established will allow the children who are placed in them to access the full provision, as

their peers in mainstream education would expect?

Mr Givan: The Chairman of the Education Committee makes what should be an obvious point: when these children are placed, they should get the same support and experience as other children. That is what should be achieved, but, as he said, it clearly has not been the case in the past, and there needs to be learning from that. Ms Armstrong mentioned learning from the tribunal, and she is right to raise that. Officials engage with the tribunal, and that is due to take place again within the next number of weeks so that we understand the issues that are emerging and can feed that knowledge into the planning process to recognise it.

I recognise that I will not be able to conclude all my remarks, but I want to touch on another issue. Members mentioned the 200 recommendations from the various reviews, including the recently published independent review of education emphasising the urgent need for change. Although the independent review indicates numerous deficiencies across the wider special educational needs system, it is encouraging that its recommendations on SEN broadly align with the extensive programme of work that is being undertaken as part of the end-to-end review of special educational needs.

Improving the quality of educational experience for our children with special educational needs is imperative for my Department. However, that can be fully achieved only through strong partnerships across government, ensuring that children receive access to health and therapeutic supports when they need them and to appropriate pathways to training and employment. Investing in our children with special educational needs is not just beneficial to them, their families or my Department; the long-term benefits will be across all Departments and to society at large. The children in our schools today are the adults of tomorrow, and the opportunities presented to us right now to ensure that every child receives investment in their future will benefit our society and economy in the longer term.

I look forward to continuing to engage with Members on the issue. No doubt, the Education Committee will want to take the matter up with me in detail. I will be more than happy to engage on it in the days and weeks ahead.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next Member to speak is Tom Elliott. Tom, you have five minutes to make a winding-up speech on the amendment.

Mr Elliott: I thank those Members who tabled this very important motion and my colleague Robbie Butler for tabling what seems to be a simple but important amendment about the transition to post-education settings.

Meeting special educational needs is complex and difficult, and, I have to say, it appears that parents almost give up on the situation at times. As someone who has been through the process, I understand those difficulties. I absolutely understand how you can sometimes feel that it is going nowhere. Sometimes the difficulty is the statement. I was interested to hear the Minister say that 63% of children with special educational needs do not have a statement. I was not aware of that figure, but, thinking it through, it seems reasonable that that is the case, simply because the resources are not there to address the difficulties.

I pay tribute to the education centres, mainstream schools and, indeed, special schools that have provided for young people with special needs. Under very challenging and difficult circumstances, many of them have carried out tremendous work. I put on record that it is not all negative and that there are positives. Sometimes it is easy to do nothing but criticise and say, "All this is wrong", but it is not. I have seen schools, teachers, classroom assistants and support workers go above and beyond what is reasonably required of them to make life better for those young people and give them the education experience that they would not normally have. It is important that we say that.

Mr Mathison opened the debate and outlined the need for change in the special educational needs process and for appropriate pay for non-teaching staff. Mr Butler said that priorities should focus on the most vulnerable young people, some of whom are missing out on important days and milestones in their education journey. That has happened throughout the process, but, again, the education centres that provide for young people with special educational needs try to resolve it and make it better for them.

Mr Sheehan, Mr Baker and Diane Dodds gave examples of important constituency issues. We all get those in our inboxes. Mr Brooks and Ms Mason made their maiden speeches, and I congratulate them on that. Maybe there is a difference between East Belfast and South Down, but the complexities in special educational needs are probably very similar. I understand the circumstances of Ms Mason's personal tragedy, and she has my sympathy.

Cara Hunter provided information on the vast range of complex issues that is involved and the limited resources that there are. I suppose that a lot of it comes down to limited resources. We do not have an open pot of money here, and it is for the Minister to try to juggle that pot to do what he can with the limited resources that he has.

Cheryl Brownlee spoke of her personal circumstances, which is never an easy process. Sian Mulholland emphasised the underinvestment in processes. Kellie Armstrong spoke about workforce and funding in her normal positive way, if I may say, and Mr Frew spoke about how society treats, or, rather, does not treat the most vulnerable. Daniel McCrossan, Justin McNulty and Gerry Carroll highlighted individual aspects.

5.45 pm

I will round up by saying again that this is about a lack of resources. The processes have changed dramatically over the years. The Minister highlighted that the processes that we have were for something that was in place a number of years ago. However, I say to parents, in particular: please do not give up on your young people, because they are the future of our society.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Kate Nicholl will make the winding-up speech on the motion. Kate, you have 10 minutes.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker.

Thank you so much to everyone who has contributed. Everyone has said that it is such an important topic. All the speeches were delivered with real feeling, so it has been a privilege to listen to them. I want to pay particular tribute to the SEN Reform NI parents, who are here, particularly my new friends Isla and Tom, and all the parents who are fighting, some of whom are in the Chamber.

I first became aware of the extent of the issues in September, when I met parents who could not find places for their children to go to nursery and primary schools. I heard about that time and time again. My son was just starting nursery school, and I realised how unfair and how different it was for those parents. They told me that it is a constant fight and a battle, and Members have reiterated that today. The energy that parents should be putting into their child who has additional needs is being spent trying to fight the system, and that is wrong.

My colleague Nick Mathison started by talking about how it is a priority for him as Chair of the Education Committee. It was made clear by all the members of that Committee how support for learners with special educational needs should be embedded in all schools. Nick Mathison recognised the end-to-end review and the ongoing work that is happening, but also the need for a clear action plan that will deliver reform. He said that there can be no more recommendations; parents have waited long enough. As we all know, they are so anxious about September. We keep hearing from parents who are really worried that they will have to go through that again. They are exhausted. I met a parent outside the Chamber who was in tears: that is what the system has driven them to, and they are already dealing with so much as it is. Nick Mathison also said that the crisis is now the norm, and that we have to invest in action.

Robbie Butler spoke to the amendment and highlighted how parenting is not easy. He said that some young people and their families need additional support, and that there are more children who are not getting even adequate help. He talked about the education challenges and how most of them are fiscal, but did say that we get it right sometimes. He namechecked some brilliant schools, including Fleming Fulton School, Harberton Special School and Glenveagh School, as well as Mencap, which is doing fantastic work. He said that the capacity is there, but the ability to meet demand is not. I completely agree with the contention that the failure to have government has not improved things. When it comes to casework, we all support people in our day-to-day lives and we all see the human impact of the failing system. Robbie Butler also mentioned young people missing out on the first day of school, and he asked for a timeline for delivery.

Pat Sheehan, the Deputy Chair of the Education Committee, talked about how every child has a human right to education and that, too often, that right is only partially upheld or not upheld at all. He related the very poignant case of a four-year-old who was out of school for six months, and was able to get a place only after his intervention as an MLA. That is shocking. He also highlighted how the Irish-medium sector suffers from a lack of special provision in Irish and the need for the review to take that into account.

David Brooks made an excellent maiden speech; East Belfast can be as proud of him as he is of his constituency. He talked about his

admiration for staff, who are too often in unfit buildings, and about the Minister's commitment to addressing that. The Minister has very graciously sat through the whole debate, and it is clear that he is committed.

Cara Hunter used the words "angry" and "heartbreaking". Heartbreak has been a continual theme in the debate. She talked about her constituency and the challenges that people face, and how that is causing stress. She was also the first to talk about transport issues, which are a massive concern. She spoke about the long waiting list for allied health professionals and the lack of after-school provision. She thanked ADD-NI as well.

Cathy Mason made another excellent maiden speech. I echo what the Minister said: your brother Peter would be very proud of you. You talked about the systemic failure and the need to get to grips with that and said that it is not just about funding but about policy and that there are issues within the EA and the SEN policies.

Cheryl Brownlee very generously talked about how she is going through this, and it is a reminder of how this is impacting people. She spoke as an MLA and a parent, and she mentioned the need to invest in reform and how parental engagement is really key. She said that the process is complex and time-consuming and that we need a simpler way to deal with it. She also said that the number of tribunal cases shows that the initial assessment is flawed.

My colleague Sian Mulholland focused on early intervention, which I was very glad to hear, the need for planning and how critical it is that children receive the support that they require in order to live their best life. She also said that there is an economic argument to this too, which we know, and that we should not be waiting until P1 to plan for a child's education journey; it needs to start earlier. She touched on health and the role of health visitors, and I saw that when I went to visit Sólás and Mencap. If the Minister ever wants to come with me to see those brilliant examples of amazing education and how the lack of a joined-up approach between Health and Education is really failing children, you will see that. In one pre-preschool classroom, the children have access to allied health professionals, and then they move next door into the preschool room and they have to go out. The community therapists in that building cannot help them; they have to go back out. It really needs a joined-up approach. That is loud and clear from the providers.

I wrote so many notes. I need to turn over, sorry; there is a lot. Danny Baker then said "a battle a day" — that that is what parents say, that they are exhausted and that children deserve better. Again, he used the word "heartbreaking", talked about Alana's personal story, mentioned how early intervention is key and said how a cross-departmental approach is needed. He also referenced the Children's Law Centre's work, and that research was mentioned quite a few times by Members. He also talked about the critical impact of the underfunding.

Diane Dodds mentioned the Minister's vision for all young people to be happy, learning and succeeding and that we need to measure that and take remedial action where we are failing. She welcomed the tone of inclusivity and compassion, and I echo that. I thought that the tone today was excellent and really hopeful, especially for the people who are listening in, but we cannot afford to go through the chaos that we had last year. It is just not acceptable. It cannot happen again. Again, it is not just Education; it is Health.

My colleague Kellie Armstrong, who has been such a champion and inspiration in our party on these matters, reminded us to keep in mind equity. As chair of the all-party group, she has heard first-hand how we are failing young people. She focused on transition, mentioned the Children's Law Centre work and said that she is very concerned about the summer and how every child should find out at the same time what school they are going to. That just seems basic; of course they should. If you already feel like you are different or separate, then all these things add up and have an impact. It is complex. She wanted to know what learning is being taken. She said that use of the word "supernumerary" needs to stop because it is not child-centred. She said that the lack of after-school provision is an issue as well. She also wanted to clarify whether basic disability awareness is being brought in, and she thanked the key workers.

Paul Frew said that it is not just about children but that the whole network and the whole family and community are being failed. He asked what we are going to do. He talked about heartbreaking cases in North Antrim and mentioned all the schools that are doing excellent work and how every child deserves an education. He said that children are not being placed because of their needs and that that is wrong. He also said that it should be in the Programme for Government.

Daniel McCrossan said that this is critical and important but that it is not new and nothing we have not heard before. He said that it is something that the Education Committee and the PAC looked at, that we know what the issues are and that what we need is action. That is a clear message that came through today. He also said that we should listen to parents and teachers and that Departments are not working together, even though they need to.

Justin McNulty welcomed the motion, acknowledged sterling work, mentioned the human impact of the failings here and said that reform is really needed.

Gerry Carroll made the excellent point that, within three weeks, we had a protest. He talked about the Colin autism advice and support group. Nick and I went to meet that group today as well, and those representatives personally highlighted the torture of what they are going through. It is discrimination, he said.

The Minister then spoke about how he is committed and thanked Members for their passion. He talked about early intervention and transition. He said that 63% of children with SEN do not have a statement. He said that the current estimated shortfall is 1,000 places but that additional places will be created. He said that improving the quality of education for children with SEND will be a priority.

Tom Elliott made a much more succinct winding-up speech than the one that I am making. He shared that he has been through the process himself.

Everyone has highlighted a really important issue. We are committed to taking action on this and working with the Minister. The Minister is committed to working across Departments. Hopefully, we will be able to see changes for children who really have been failed. They need the Assembly to step up. We can do that now.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly commits to prioritising the needs of our most vulnerable children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); notes that the current system for supporting children with SEND has failed to deliver appropriate and timely support for parents, pupils and schools; and calls on the

Minister of Education to prioritise and invest in SEND transformation, to ensure that the end-to-end review of special educational needs produces an action plan that will be implemented urgently, and to make a commitment that all children with SEND in key transition years are notified of a school placement that meets their needs no later than children without special educational needs; and to work with Executive colleagues to provide a clear pathway for children with SEND to transition from education to post-education settings.

Adjourned at 5.56 pm.