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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 27 February 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Fishing Industry: Capital Investment

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the need to safeguard and build on the success of Northern Ireland's fishing industry; notes with concern the impact of rising input costs for many local fishermen; supports the delivery of adequate and ongoing practical and financial support to those affected; further notes the importance of ensuring the local fishing industry is in a position to take advantage of new fishing opportunities and contribute to green growth, including through investment in modernising its vessels and gear; urges the UK Government to ensure their policies, in respect of the allocation of fishing quotas and access to labour, reflect the particular needs of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to reiterate his Department's commitment to providing capital funding to redevelop Northern Ireland's harbour infrastructure at Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie.

Mr 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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. An amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List, so the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for the debate.

Miss McIlveen: The commercial fishing industry is hugely important to the Northern Ireland economy. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has identified that the industry supports nearly 400 businesses and around 1,850 full-time-equivalent jobs, generating £169 million in turnover. It is fundamental to the communities

of Portavogie in my constituency, Kilkeel and Ardglass.

At the outset, I pay tribute to the fishermen who bravely set out in the oldest fishing fleet in Europe to land their catch in a grossly underfunded harbour infrastructure. Despite the challenges faced, the local fishing industry has proven to be incredibly resilient, but it has huge potential to grow and expand. That is vital for its sustainability and for attracting future generations into the industry. The Minister visited Portavogie harbour in advance of this debate, and he will have seen how the estate there, along with that of the other two commercial harbours, constrains operational capacity. As a result, Northern Ireland lags behind other regions.

The fishing and seafood development programme (FSDP), which was commissioned in 2019, laid out a direction of travel for significant public investment in harbour infrastructure, including plans to allocate £73 million for a new harbour, the Irish Sea marine hub, at Kilkeel; £20 million for deepening the approach channel at Ardglass; and £5 million to develop the existing harbour and abandoned buildings in Portavogie.

One of the final instructions by the Minister's immediate predecessor, my colleague Edwin Poots, was to progress the technical and environmental studies for Ardglass and Kilkeel. Even that initial preparatory work, however, has been beset with delay, due to competing pressures on the public purse. Such investments are essential, not simply aspirational. It is vital that communities and industry representatives are provided with a clear indication from the Minister on the current state of those plans and on when work will be undertaken to complete the relevant technical studies. Subject to those studies having favourable outcomes, can we expect the Minister to commit to full implementation of the FSDP's recommendations?

Conversations need to begin immediately on the necessary finance for the construction

phase of those programmes. Given the recognition of the need for investment by the Minister after last week's visit, can he confirm that he has raised the matter with the Finance Minister? If he has not, will he commit to doing so? As the Minister will be aware, there was a provisional commencement date of spring 2026. Will he advise whether that start date is still achievable? If it is not, has a revised timetable been developed?

The Minister likes to promote his environmental credentials. Continued delay in pressing forward with that major investment will only hamper efforts to transition to more efficient and safer fishing vessels and technology with a decreased carbon footprint. Our current harbours cannot facilitate more modern vessels, which are larger, deeper and wider than the existing fleet. Our fish producers and processors require greater capacity to adapt and evolve in order to tap into fresh opportunities and new markets.

Turning specifically to our largest fishing harbour at Kilkeel, it is well recognised that having a new economic and marine activity centre there would bring far-reaching and lasting social and economic benefits. The hub would facilitate aquaculture, leisure boating and boat repair and decommissioning, and, with a deeper approach channel, would allow larger vessels to land.

In the Minister's press release, he said that he looked forward:

"to engaging with the Northern Ireland fishing industry to explore options for fleet modernisation, sustainability and achieving net zero targets."

There are, however, even more pressing concerns. While those capital plans are incredibly important for the industry's medium- to long-term viability, immediate and medium-term grant support is critical to ensuring that fishing opportunities and operations are adequately supported.

The industry is rolling towards potential crisis, and I urge the Minister to act. The first area relates to labour shortages and the proposed increase to the skilled worker visa salary threshold. The catching sector is already struggling to address labour shortages, particularly among UK residents, and the processing sector faces the same difficulties. As a result, the seafood sector is massively reliant on non-UK labour in the catching and processing sectors, with 82% of the nephrops fleet relying on non-UK labour compared with

75% of the static-gear fleet and 52% of the demersal bream trawl fleet.

The new salary threshold would have a devastating impact on those fleets, particularly the nephrops fleet. It is estimated that the new threshold could result in operating losses of between £41,500 and £83,500, which would inevitably lead to business closures and increased prices for the consumer. The price paid to nephrops vessel operators would need to be increased by 33%; the price that processors charge retailers could increase by 14.5%; and the price paid to food service sector buyers would need to increase by 15.6%. The quayside price for whitefish would need to increase by 9%. All that would impact on international competitiveness. It is estimated that the change in the salary threshold would see a reduction in operating and net-profit margins of 12 percentage points across the UK processing industry, meaning that the corresponding net-profit margin would be too low to provide an acceptable return, which would drive processing businesses away.

Of course, that is in addition to other pressures, including energy price rises, minimum wage increases and raw material price increases. While our fishermen are skilled, the crews do not live in the UK permanently.

They do not want to bring their families, and they do not want accommodation onshore. They want to come to work and then return home to their families until the next fishing season. Attempting to shoehorn them into an expensive skill visa system presents an unachievable financial burden for the fishing vessel and, in a number of cases, an unachievable requirement for the fishermen to pass a written English exam. Disappointingly, the migration advisory committee (MAC) has not recommended that trawlermen be placed on the immigration salary list. Will the Minister seek to meet the Home Office to express these concerns and show his support for the fishing industry by advocating an immigration system for fishing crews modelled on the seasonal worker visa?

Over and above these cost pressures, there is serious concern in the fishing industry in Northern Ireland about the reduction in the fishing grounds brought about by ineffective marine protection areas, offshore energy constructions, which have been seen to eradicate stocks of prawns and other crustaceans, and the proposed closing of huge swathes of waters by the Manx Government. The shrinking and closing of grounds will result in the overfishing of open territories and the

ultimate decimation of our industry as the catch deteriorates. This would not be the case if the current waters were kept open, as they had been sustainably fished for over 70 years. The actions by the Manx Government are purportedly to protect carbon sequestration on mudbanks, but there is considerable doubt about that in the industry and a concern that these actions may relate more to the Isle of Man's plans to develop its own industry. I urge the Minister to engage urgently with DEFRA and the Isle of Man Minister to develop a sensible and proportionate solution that protects Northern Ireland's interests while allowing the Isle of Man to develop its own industry. The next challenge is the Irish Republic's proposals to ban bottom trawling in its 0-6-mile zone. Again, this is claimed to be in the name of environmentalism. Fishermen are responsible environmentalists. It is in their interests to fish sustainably, and the exclusion of bottom trawlers will disproportionately impact on our fishing industry. The industry is crying out for the Minister to advocate on its behalf to challenge these blanket bans.

In conclusion, the industry needs the Maritime and Fisheries Fund reopened to allow it to innovate, grow and move towards net zero. It needs measures to address the labour shortage and an immigration system for fishing crews modelled on the seasonal worker visa. It needs the fulfilment of FSDP's harbours recommendations, the moving forward of the technical and environmental studies and the securing of the necessary finance. It needs immediate and medium-term grant support. It needs future policies and schemes of support that are co-designed with the industry. It needs a lasting solution that respects the status of Northern Ireland vessels fishing in UK waters. This will be key to providing the industry with the confidence, certainty and competitiveness to fulfil its potential and maximise the benefits of access to markets. Most of all, the industry needs this Minister and this Department to fight for it and have its best interests at heart as it meets the challenges that I outlined.

Mr McGrath: I beg to move the following amendment:

After "access to labour," insert:

"including the extension of the seasonal worker route scheme to include the fish-processing sector,"

Mr Speaker: 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 McGrath: Getting this opportunity to have a conversation about the infrastructure and capital investment around our ports is exceptionally important, given that there has not been a substantial investment in them in such a long time. Also, this programme that we are talking about has been kicking about for quite a number of years, and there is a lot of uncertainty in the sector as it tries to get the information about where we are.

Before speaking to the amendment, I extend to you, Mr Speaker, the appreciation of many in the sector of the work that you did previously as an agriculture and fisheries Minister. They felt that you understood the sector and tried to progress it, and we hope that we can build on that going forward. You will know, Mr Speaker, the importance of the fishing and seafood development programme report, but there are many who do not. They do not realise how big and how important a sector this is and that we have to do what we can to ensure investment, harbour development and job sustainability. The report identified that development could take place in Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie, as referenced today. We are talking about a multi, multi, multimillion-pound development for those ports.

10.45 am

We know the important and valuable contribution that our fishing industry makes to our local and wider community. For example, in 2021 alone, the Northern Ireland fleet landed some 46 kilotons of fish, which was worth £52 million. That is around 6% of the total UK value. It is a very important and large sector. Delivery of the programme could see that being enhanced and developed and more jobs being delivered into those fishing ports. There are then the spin-offs that come into the communities if you have a thriving port, and many other industries will develop as a result.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate the motion that is before us. The motion refers to Northern Ireland's fishing industry. It would be a useful marker — I am sure that the Minister is well aware of it — to say that Lough Neagh also has a significant fishing industry that will require support and some recognition that, over the last year, in particular, the worst manifestations of the algae bloom has had an effect on the zebra mussels and on the fishing industry itself. I ask that the

Minister and the proposer of the motion also take cognisance of that fact.

Mr McGrath: Thank you for highlighting the fact that it extends beyond the three ports for the fishing industry. Many inland fishery opportunities are available and are facing their own crises, and it is important that we recognise that today.

The fishery and seafood development programme has twice fallen victim to political failure. The first failure is the fact that these institutions have been collapsed for five of the last seven years. That really speaks to the uncertainty that I mentioned in the sector. To those in the sector, it feels as though it has been stop-go, stop-go, stop-go. Will the money come; how much will it be; who will deliver it? Just when they feel that they are getting close to having some answers, one or other of the parties here collapses the institutions, and we go into deep freeze for a couple of years. It is worth noting that having stability in these institutions will allow stability and delivery of programmes such as this, which will help our communities.

The second failure, of course, that continues to linger over this place is Brexit. That has had a serious impact. The fishing industry is a great example of where Brexit went wrong. They were promised that there would be some sort of panacea for them and that their future would be golden because Brexit would help them to take back control. Of course, that has not happened; in fact, there has been a downturn in some of the capacity in fishing as a result of Brexit. The uncertainty that Brexit has brought to all industries has had a massive impact.

I genuinely mean this and not in a manner to shame people, but you have to be able to draw a connection: you went out to fishing communities and asked them to vote for Brexit and then Brexit had a massive impact on their ability to do their job and they are now suffering. They look to these institutions to try to get some support, but the institutions were collapsed. For people in the fishing industry, it has been blow after blow. I hope that, through the programme, we will hear from the Minister that there will be certainty going forward and that there will be speed in going forward with these programmes, so that the fishing communities and those who have their businesses in the industry are able to progress their work.

We have also referenced — our amendment speaks to it — the fish-processing sector. There are difficulties there because the fish-processing sector has not been added to the

Home Office list of seasonal workers. That means that, to attract staff into the processing sector, they have to navigate the new immigration laws. Again, why do we have new immigration laws? It is because of Brexit. Brexit resulted in new immigration laws, and those immigration laws are punishing our fish-processing sector. I hope that the Minister will speak to that in his remarks later, but we have to try our best to impress upon the Home Office the fact that there is seasonality to the fish-processing sector. People in that sector do not go out and fish 365 days a year across all the various fish that are available; they pick specific elements of the market and work with that. There is seasonality in the sector that they choose. An argument can be made to the Home Office that the fish-processing sector is seasonal and should be added to that list so that the immigration exemptions can be put in place and the staff can be drawn down. For some in the fish-processing sector, that will be the difference between surviving or not. As was highlighted at the start of the debate, we have a thriving sector. We want to support the sector. We want to encourage and grow it, but fishing processors cannot do that, if they have one hand tied behind their back.

I hope that the Minister will accept the amendment and that he will be able to have direct interaction with Home Office officials to see whether we can get fishing processors added to that list of seasonal workers. The motion talks about the development of fishing infrastructure and sites. We will support that, and I hope that the amendment, which will help with fish-processing staffing, will also be accepted today.

Mr Speaker: I now call Cathy Mason. As it is Mrs Mason's maiden speech — no?

Mrs Mason: No.

Mr Speaker: No. I thought that it was. OK. Go ahead, Mrs Mason.

Mrs Mason: I am pleased to speak on the motion and amendment today. As ours is an all-island nation, our fishing industry plays not just a vital economic role but an important cultural and historical one. From speaking to our local fishermen in Ardglass, it is clear to me that fishing is much more than a job — it is a way of life, an identity and, for many, the continuation of many long and proud family traditions. Irish seafood is renowned for its quality and is a significant driver of tourism and a key export around the world, being popular across Europe and as far away as China. It is not just a moral

imperative but an economic necessity that we protect, support and promote our fisheries in South Down and across Ireland as best we can. Unfortunately, our fishing industry is still struggling to recover from the double blows of Brexit and COVID, both of which have had a profound effect on the livelihood of our fishermen and our coastal and island communities.

I commend those who tabled the motion for acknowledging the strain that rising costs are putting on the industry, and I echo their call for long-needed harbour infrastructure improvements at Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie to ensure long-term sustainability and a bright future for our fishing industry and heritage. Something that is evident from our fishermen in Ardglass as they speak with passion about their struggles with skilled labour is that, in addition to financial and material support, greater recognition of fishing as a skilled profession is a must and a programme of training and learning for local fishing apprenticeships that can help future-proof the local industry is necessary.

I was also pleased to see the industry's potential for green growth singled out for mention. As we transition to net zero emissions and place a greater emphasis on conservation and biodiversity, our fishermen will have a key role to play in protecting our waters. Just as with agriculture and the environment, our fishing industry and our marine ecosystem are not adversarial; they are complementary and rely on one another. There is a reasonable balance to be found between marine conservation and maintaining a sustainable fishing resource.

One of the most crucial aspects of our fishing industry is the all-Ireland dimension. Our waters and marine life, just like our flora and fauna, do not abide by political boundaries. In order for our fishing industry to thrive and thrive sustainably, we must work as closely as possible with all Departments, as well as with fishing bodies and communities in the rest of Ireland, to maintain and strengthen ties —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Mason: No, thanks.

Those include reciprocal rights; access to waters; expediting the permit process; equal access to piers, harbours and ports for fishermen who are resident on the island; and working towards the harmonisation of fishery licensing and regulation on the island.

We must also present a united front in our efforts to have environmentally and economically destructive super-trawlers banned from Irish waters and to implement the strict monitoring of factory trawlers to eliminate destructive overfishing practices and the extremely damaging discards of small and juvenile fish species. Irish waters are the envy of Europe. If we work —

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Mason: No, thank you.

If we work together to support local fishermen and coastal communities, promote sustainable fishing practice and develop our infrastructure, our fishing industry and local harbours can be the envy of Europe as well. I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Blair: The importance of our fishing industry has been clearly illustrated by the Members who have spoken. I thank the proposers of the motion and the amendment for bringing the matter to the Assembly today.

The Northern Ireland fishing industry has been a vital contributor to the country's economy, providing employment and opportunity and sustaining local communities. However, the industry continues to face significant challenges that are causing concerns among local fishermen and their families, such as rising input costs and fishing quota strains. Those of us who have engaged with the sector over the years will have been briefed on that to some extent and will be well aware of those challenges, so it is all the more important that we address them today.

There is no doubt that the fishing industry needs investment to modernise its vessels and gear not just to improve efficiency and safety but, importantly, to contribute to green growth. The new Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, my colleague Andrew Muir, recently met the sector, including the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA) and the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation (NIFF), to discuss those issues and the necessary steps for meaningful action. During his visit to Portavogie harbour, the Minister highlighted the significant opportunities for decarbonisation and his intention to pursue those issues. That is welcome news.

Decarbonising the sector is vital if we are to achieve our climate action targets, particularly the net zero target laid out in the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. In order to

make that work, our fishing industry must take an ecosystem-based approach, whereby climate-friendly fishing is championed across the region. That is crucial for ocean conservation and health. Thriving biodiversity is needed for a productive and healthy marine environment, which is, ultimately, vital for good stock management. Therefore, it helps both marine life and the fishing industry to flourish.

Furthermore, it is essential to cooperate with other jurisdictions, including North/South and east-west bodies, to ensure that there is a coordinated approach to those matters. We must remember that, when it comes down to it, our waterways and marine life do not recognise borders and boundaries, so our responses must reflect that.

I stress that it would be advantageous for the industry to witness the implementation of the future marine and fisheries support strategy. The strategy is expected to facilitate the growth of green practices and decarbonisation in the sector. The consultation on the strategy was conducted in late 2022 and early 2023 and proposed a five-year financial support plan for the fishing industry. However, delivery of the strategy is still pending and, of course, requires adequate and additional funding.

Overall, it is essential to safeguard and build on the success of the Northern Ireland fishing industry. It is also imperative that we invest in sustainable and economically viable fisheries while taking steps to protect the marine environment on which it depends. I have focused mainly on environmental and marine matters this morning. Alliance colleagues will speak soon in the debate on other matters, including the economy, the industry's importance to local communities and access to seasonal workers. In the meantime, I express our support for the motion and the amendment.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the debate and discussion about the fishing industry. While it is limited to areas that can land fish, in that they have to be beside the sea, I appreciate Mr McGlone's comments about Lough Neagh. I do not know whether he spelled out the eel-fishing sector, but it is a long way from the issue that we are discussing, which is investment in the harbours of Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie. He made a good point, but it is for a debate on another day.

11.00 am

I noticed that, in 2021, the fishing industry had an annual turnover of £135 million and supports

1,550 jobs. That should not be taken lightly in today's society. The industry is important and strategic to those areas. I have regularly visited the harbours in the three areas, although maybe not so much in the last couple of years. To say that they need investment is probably an understatement. I know, Mr Speaker, that, when you were Minister, you recognised that we cannot have an industry of that size without some central support. The industry itself puts in a huge amount of investment.

It is an industry that has been racked with uncertainty for generations. Certainly, over the last number of decades, uncertainty has been embedded in the industry. First, the EU quotas caused great difficulty for the fishing industry, because, every year, it had to go and look for its quota from the European Union, and it was not sure what quota it would get. Mr Speaker, I am sure that you remember that from your time as Minister. Then there was the uncertainty around which waters it could fish in. I know that sometimes fishermen were not allowed to fish in waters that they naturally thought the Northern Ireland fishing industry should have been able to fish in, and that caused a great deal of frustration. Also, we had the uncertainty around Brexit, the Northern Ireland protocol and the Windsor framework. The industry keeps facing those uncertainties. It cannot seem to get to a stable position, and that causes a huge amount of difficulty.

We cannot expect an industry of such economic importance to Northern Ireland to survive without central support. I appreciate that there was a commitment to support investment in those harbours to bring them up to a sustainable level. It would be good to hear from the Minister about whether that commitment will continue or whether they will have to start afresh. I certainly support the fishing industry and want to see it progress. We have a uniqueness because of our location. Those three great locations can provide support for the fishing industry and huge employment. I heard Members mention the particular difficulties for workers who come into Northern Ireland from other countries. I hope that that can be managed and progressed. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on that and what discussions he has had with the Home Office on ensuring that people can have jobs in Northern Ireland.

I and the Ulster Unionist Party support the motion and the amendment.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the motion and the amendment and the opportunity to speak to them. As a representative of South Down, I

have had the pleasure of meeting and listening to many of our local fishermen from across the constituency. The passion and dedication that they show proves, as many have said, that fishing is more than just a job. Our fishing industry is a key part of our society. Harbours in Kilkeel and Ardglass are the heartbeat of those communities and are economic engines for South Down, but they have faced huge challenges over the last number of years. As many Members have said, they have tackled the worst effects of Brexit and have grappled with the COVID pandemic and with workforce pressures.

Along with my constituency colleagues Chris Hazzard, Cathy Mason and others, I have visited Kilkeel and Ardglass harbours many times. We have spoken to the local fishing crews. We support the redevelopment of Kilkeel harbour, along with those at Ardglass and Portavogie. However, there will be no point in ploughing money into the development of Kilkeel harbour or anywhere else if we cannot get the crews to work out of them. With limited crew availability and a shortage of new members, the industry faces huge labour difficulties. Harsh measures facing foreign nationals and the 12-mile offshore requirement are proving virtually impossible for local fleets to deal with. We know that many are now forced to go through the sponsorship route. That route requires applicants to be successful in a stringent language exam that many of our migrant workers fail repeatedly. Those barriers only add more layers to what appears to be an already bleak picture for the local fishing industry. This is not just an issue for our local fishing crews; it is also an issue for the Scottish industry, which has been impacted hugely by all those issues as well.

We need to see an all-island approach to help the industry to thrive, the recognition of fishing as a skilled profession and a programme of training for local fishing apprentices that can help with recruitment and future-proof the industry across our island. We also need to look at diversification. At present, a few areas are prohibited to commercial fishing yet hold millions in potential revenue. Areas such as aquaculture or algaculture should be promoted and explored as a matter of urgency to provide alternatives to a mortally wounded fishing industry.

We have spoken in the Chamber in recent days and weeks about apprentices. Fishing is in dire need of a fresh approach in terms of encouraging young people to take up the trade. Fishing in areas such as Kilkeel is often a family business, with generations following one

another into the industry, but that is simply not happening any more. We need to see cross-departmental working with the Department for the Economy to encourage local further and higher education colleges to provide courses for young people so that we can reinvigorate and repopulate the industry.

I commend the motion, and we will support the amendment. We welcome the calls around the Chamber for continued investment in the harbours at Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie. Investment in the regeneration of our harbours and fishing industry is vital to develop, protect and sustain our coastal and rural communities in south Down. It will help to modernise and build more efficient fishing operations that will grow in the future. I urge the Minister to prioritise investment for Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie harbours and to deliver the funding needed to upgrade our harbours in south Down.

Mr Irwin: This is an important debate for those in the fishing industry in Northern Ireland. I welcome the opportunity to make my contribution on the matter.

The fishing industry in Northern Ireland is a resilient sector. One only has to look at the seas to see what fishermen experience. Being out on the high seas, often in unsettled weather, is worthy of our utmost respect, given the many dangers that they face when carrying out their work. I suspect that many of us who enjoy a fish supper from the local chippy or sit down to a fish dish at home or in a restaurant may not give much thought to how the fish ended up in the wrapper or on the plate. That deserves consideration, given the perils that fishermen face and the significant cost and risk they must absorb before making any reasonable profits for their efforts. Our fishermen deserve support in the broadest possible terms, and the industry deserves a strategy backed and funded by the Assembly and by Westminster that would meet the key requests set out in the motion.

Mention was made of the fishing and seafood development programme, commissioned in 2019. That was an important piece of work as it laid out a course of much-needed public investment in Northern Ireland's harbour infrastructure. It included a plan for investment in Kilkeel to the tune of £73 million for a new harbour — an Irish fishing marine hub. It also included a proposed £20 million investment to improve access at Ardglass and a £5 million investment at Portavogie.

My party was successful in securing permission for an outline business case to progress the

vital technical and environmental studies that would have paved the way to moving the project forward. It is regrettable that even that preparatory work has been delayed due to the pressures on the public finances. It is easy to see why our industry is frustrated by that lack of progress when so much is at stake for it. It is vital that the work around that important project is stepped up and progressed at speed. I ask the Agriculture Minister for an urgent update on the matter and for clarity on the timelines and the funding that will be made available under that programme of work.

The proposal for a £73 million spend at Kilkeel to create a new harbour and the fact that that would see it become an Irish Sea marine hub, is exciting. It is very much needed and will undoubtedly be a game changer for fishing into the future. It will also be important for tourism, aquaculture and the capacity for boat repair and decommissioning.

Given that the Executive have been reformed and an AERA Minister is in place, there is a clear need now for conversations on the financing of the harbours project and for clear direction on the consultations and technical studies. There was an indication that September 2026 would be the start date. That is not far away in the calendar, so it is vital that the Minister gets to grips with his time frames and sets out clearly the direction for the industry for that project.

The fishing industry is an important part of the economy in the coastal areas in which it is based. Estimates show that the industry has an annual turnover of approximately £135 million and supports around 1,500 jobs. With that firmly in mind and taking into account the existing proposals to move the industry forward, it is within reason to state that that outlook could easily be improved on. It would be good and positive for the local communities, who have a direct economic connection to the fishing industry, to see progress made on the fishing and seafood development programme. The industry does not want to stand still and should be supported to move forward.

The motion refers to green growth, and it is clear that progress on green growth is directly related to the necessary improvements to our harbours, as I outlined.

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

Mr Irwin: Creating support for and a pathway to new fishing opportunities —

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

Mr Irwin: — goes hand in hand — I look forward to that happening.

Ms Armstrong: Probably unlike a lot of Members in the House — maybe I am in the wrong place to say that — I live 3 miles from Portavogie harbour. When I was growing up, my summers were spent in Isobel Piper's prawn factory, peeling prawns. The fishing industry is local to my heart and local to the Ards peninsula. To be honest, apart from tourism, fishing is the key industry on the peninsula. We have lost a lot of construction workers, who have disappeared off around the world, but our fishing industry remains, and the boats come back in every day. If it were not for our fishing industry, we would not have the New Quays, Bestie's cafe or many of the other businesses in Portavogie.

As the previous Member to speak said, 1,500 jobs come out of the fishing industry. Many of them are in my constituency of Strangford. I take the opportunity to thank the Minister for prioritising the fishing industry in his first few weeks as Minister. I greatly appreciate the fact that he met members of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA) and local fishermen during his recent visit to Portavogie harbour, as well as his meeting the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation (NIFF).

During his visit to Portavogie, the Minister congratulated NIFHA on securing an offer from the UK Seafood Fund of 75% of the £3.6 million cost of an upgrade to the current slipway facilities at Portavogie, confirming that DAERA has already provided financial assistance towards the development costs associated with the UK Seafood Fund application by providing the 25% match funding that is required to complete the investment by 31 March 2025. That investment provides a huge opportunity for Portavogie and will potentially enable the delivery of work that will complement fishing, such as realigning and securing the existing crane rails along the length of the existing slipway, which would ensure the smooth running of a boat cradle that can slip large vessels of up to 400 tons in weight. What complementary options do we have? At a meeting in Portavogie with a prospective offshore wind farm group, its representatives explained that there was potential for the local fishing fleet to transport wind turbine blades and other equipment to their proposed site. Having that additional weight of crane to lift equipment makes such a difference to the harbour's potential.

I listened to the proposer of the motion, my fellow Strangford MLA Michelle McIlveen, discuss the need for capital investment in order to bring in larger vehicles. Like the Minister, many in the fishing industry and all Members, I want to see improvements to the fishing fleet also meet environmental targets.

I note with more than a passing interest the progressive actions being taken in Iceland, where the Minister of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries is incentivising investment in new and modified boats that run on electricity. Tests on an all-electric longline handling system are providing very interesting and positive findings. I ask the Minister to take the opportunity to outline some of the solutions that he aims to bring forward in order to assist our fishing industry and my constituents, working out of Portavogie, to move forward with their environmental targets.

11.15 am

Sadly, the Minister's job will be made ever more difficult due to the outworkings of Brexit, limited access to funds and Northern Ireland's Budget situation. I will not speak for much longer. Following the motion, what positive words can the Minister provide to the House and to our local fishing industry on how he will be able to help the industry in the time ahead?

Ms Forsythe: Mr Speaker, I thank you for your work in your previous role as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

I welcome the motion. The Northern Ireland fishing industry has enjoyed success for generations, and, like the previous Member to speak, I have close experience of it, having grown up in the Mourne fishing town of Kilkeel. I have always appreciated the industry and how the harbour formed the heart of our town. The crews on fishing boats large and small worked so hard throughout the year, often through extreme weather and the difficult process of professionally navigating the Kilkeel pier. It is not just the fishermen but the entire harbour community that supports the fishing industry and benefits from investment in it, including a number of fish factories, fish markets and shops, as well as the local seafood cookery school and successful boat-building businesses.

Our fishing industry is incredibly important. I am in agreement with my party colleagues Michelle McIlveen and William Irwin and support the motion to safeguard and build on the success of Northern Ireland's fishing industry. The industry

needs our support as it faces significant challenges. As with so many businesses and homes, the cost of fuel and rising input costs for many of our local fishermen cause great concern, but the biggest concern raised with me, week in, week out, is, as has been mentioned, about the workforce. The introduction of the £38,700 salary threshold for workers on skilled worker visas will be devastating for the fishing industry. Even the uncertainty at the moment is taking its toll, as fishermen are struggling to get seafarers with the required English qualifications. I have asked the AERA Minister about his plans for that, and his response was that he would liaise with and write to different bodies. I urge him to raise the issue as a matter of urgency, as the fishing industry is suffering critically and is in daily contact with me on the issue. While decisions are not being taken to safeguard the industry and reflect the particular needs of the fishing sector in Northern Ireland and its ability to access labour, it is suffering.

The capital and running costs of fishing boats are high, as mentioned by my colleague Michelle McIlveen. The Maritime and Fisheries Fund provided funding for a range of critical things across the fishing industry, and fishermen rely on a lot of them. That support was available for projects that delivered on sustainable economic growth in the sea fisheries and aquaculture sectors. The purpose of the scheme was to continue to provide Northern Ireland with a financial support mechanism for the fisheries, inland waters, aquaculture and maritime sectors. The fund closed in 2023 and has not reopened. I urge the Minister to reinstate that fund to support the delivery of adequate and ongoing practical and financial support to those who need it.

We have seen ambitious plans for significant investment in the Kilkeel outer harbour come and go. Those plans moved through different Departments but never progressed, to great disappointment locally. We need to secure investment. We want to see the local fishing industry being in a position to take advantage of new fishing opportunities. As my colleague Michelle McIlveen outlined, Northern Ireland has fallen behind in that area. I call on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to stand up for the Northern Ireland fishing industry, reiterate his Department's commitment to providing the capital funding necessary to redevelop Northern Ireland's harbour infrastructure across Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie, and commit to a time frame for the delivery of that.

Mr Brown: I thank the proposers of the motion for tabling it today, and I agree with them that we must recognise the need to safeguard and build our fishing industry in Northern Ireland. As a representative of South Down, home to the two largest fishing fleets, at Kilkeel and Ardglass, I know at first hand the challenges facing the industry, as clearly outlined by the Members who spoke previously.

Fishing and coastal communities have a rich and important history and are integral to the wider economy and life in rural communities. We are blessed in Northern Ireland with some of the most beautiful coastline in the world, and, in South Down, we are doubly blessed to be in close proximity to some of the most productive fishing grounds in Europe. With that, though, comes a great responsibility, as those grounds are also some of the most biologically sensitive in Europe. At all times, we must balance the demands of the economy and food security with those of sustainability and safeguarding the marine environment.

All the fishermen and women whom I know are proud custodians of the sea, and I have great respect for the highly skilled and hard work that they do, which is often passed down through generations. We must do all that we can to ensure that the culture and heritage of fishing are protected for future generations, but hard work alone will not overcome the significant and serious challenges that the fishing industry has faced in recent times. UK Government changes to unskilled worker visa rules, combined with our exit from the European Union, have resulted in labour shortages, and the rising cost of fuel as a result of the war in Ukraine has left many vessels unable to reap any economic benefit that may have come from increased quotas.

I welcome the AERA Minister's commitment during the most recent ministerial Question Time to write to the UK Government outlining the impact that those visa changes are having on the fishing industry in Northern Ireland. Whilst the cost of fuel is beyond the control of this place, I know that the Minister has been a champion for the decarbonisation of our fishing fleet, with Northern Ireland having an old fleet compared with those of GB and EU nations. I welcome his commitment to work with other Departments to ensure a just transition to more environmentally friendly vessels.

It was also great to see the Minister prioritise a visit to Portavogie harbour during his first weeks in office, meeting Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO) representatives and other local stakeholders. I

very much look forward to welcoming him to Kilkeel and Ardglass harbours. The fishing and seafood development programme represents a huge opportunity for those three harbours, which collectively generate an annual turnover of £135 million, support 1,550 jobs and produce an estimated gross value added (GVA) of £55.5 million per annum for the Northern Ireland economy.

The capital investment outlined in the fishing and seafood development programme will significantly boost that economic dividend, with ambitious plans to expand and deepen Kilkeel harbour, creating an Irish Sea marine hub that will offer expertise in vessel repair and offshore services. Growing the capacity of Ardglass harbour will secure the vital fishing and processing industries there, and investment in Portavogie will help it to maintain its fishing industry and explore blue economy opportunities, as my colleague Kellie Armstrong said.

Whilst the discussion of the motion has focused on sea fisheries, and rightly so, the Member for Mid Ulster was right to draw attention to inland fisheries. It would be remiss of me not to reflect on the challenges facing inland fisheries, commercial and recreational. We are all well aware of the threats facing fishing businesses operating on Lough Neagh, and, in my area, rivers once internationally popular for coarse fishing, such as the River Quoile, are shadows of what they used to be, as a result of decades of ecological neglect and harm.

The act of fishing is intrinsically linked to the care and custodianship of our environment. One cannot thrive without the other, and I wish the Minister well as he works in partnership with the fishing industry to maximise its economic potential, realise new opportunities and —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brown: Yes, certainly.

Mr McGlone: Coarse fishing is also a big booster for Northern Ireland tourism, given the number of people who come here for coarse fishing competitions. Will the Member take that point?

Mr Brown: Absolutely, and, for a number of years, I have worked closely with local coarse anglers in my constituency to try to get the Quoile river restocked, recognising that potential tourism draw.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brown: Certainly.

Mr Speaker: Members should resume their place when giving way.

Mr Elliott: I apologise for asking the Member to give way again so quickly, but he is talking about coarse fishing, and I do not want that to get mixed up with sea fishing. Is he aware that quite a number of salmon and eels have stopped coming up to Lough Erne because of the ESB hydro station in Ballyshannon?

Mr Brown: I admit to the Member that I am not overly familiar with that area. However, our member on the AERA Committee has just advised me that he is aware of that serious issue.

I also point out that the motion, as worded, was not exclusive to sea fisheries, and that is why I raised the matter of inland fisheries. I was also on my final sentence before those two interventions, which, of course, I welcome.

To recap, I wish the Minister well as he works in partnership with the fishing industry to maximise its economic potential, realise new opportunities and chart a course for sustainability in fishing.

Ms Eastwood: I feel like a fish out of water here, speaking about coastal matters, being a Lagan Valley girl. Nonetheless, we will continue.

Mr Allister: Watch you do not make a cod of yourself.

Ms Eastwood: That is a good one, Jim.

I support the motion and thank those who tabled it. It is about much more than the fishing industry. It is about showcasing the best of Northern Ireland. We have heard from various Members about the spin-off benefits for skills and tourism. We need to encourage and enable a truly sustainable industry going forward: sustainable in every sense of the word. The industry needs to be sustainable in protecting fish stocks, as my colleagues have mentioned. It needs to adapt to climate change, achieving our net zero targets, and it needs to offer a fair living wage to those who work in it, ensuring that future generations enter the vocation and way of life.

I will focus particularly on the sustainable fishing economy and skills. From the outset, however, let me say that without decisive action to protect against the worst of climate change

and to adapt to the impact that we are already witnessing, the fishing industry is facing dire consequences.

Much like the Northern Ireland economy, the fishing industry is made up of microenterprises and SMEs, but they are central to our coastal communities. Indeed, they are the beating heart of those communities, as many other Members have mentioned. In 2021, the FSDP report noted that nearly 400 companies contribute to the fishing, seafood and fishing-port sectors here. Therefore, although we often look purely at the economic output and productivity, we need to acknowledge that those industries are a key part of our communities.

I commend the Minister for meeting the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority, and I know that the Department has a range of actions in the pipeline to support the fishing industry. As with other major policy areas, however, there is huge scope for cross-departmental working, as other Members have mentioned. For example, the Department for the Economy has responsibility, with delivery partners including DFI, for the energy strategy. Enabling businesses, including those in processing, to invest in renewables is crucial, and that relies on things such as upgrading the grid and business support schemes.

DFE, as Ms Ennis mentioned, has responsibility for skills development. I urge the Economy Minister to work in collaboration with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to give young people the opportunity to have numerous routes into the fishing industry. I agree with Ms Ennis about apprenticeships: she knows that I am very passionate about that. When those apprenticeships come along, they can lead to a job for life for many people, providing stability and a wage. It also provides them with a crucial link to their community where they can be part of their heritage and feel that they are playing a key role.

We also need to enable people currently with jobs in the fishing industry to have the opportunity to upskill, diversify and specialise. My colleague, Kellie Armstrong, has already mentioned the cross-seeding of various transferable skills that exist. A consultation for a five-year proposal on financial support for the fishing industry was carried out in late 2022, and it has wide-ranging proposals, including around training, which would be hugely beneficial were it to be delivered. However, that will require adequate funding.

While we speak about the need to support people into the industry, as many Members

have mentioned, migration also plays a crucial role for our fishing industry, as it does for health and social care and many other areas of our society. However, the current Conservative Government are pursuing an extreme ideological policy that, clearly, does not have the best interests of Northern Ireland or the wider UK at heart. The increase of the minimum salary, as Ms Forsythe pointed out, is unworkable in Northern Ireland, as is the shameful proposal not to allow care workers to bring their families here.

Although it is a reserved matter, we urgently need to have more say on migration policy in order to ensure that it adequately reflects the needs of our society and economy and to further protect workers who come to work here. I know that the Minister is writing to the Home Office in that regard.

11.30 am

The fishing industry deserves wide-ranging support, and I am heartened to hear the various contributions from across the House on that. One of the things that we can be really proud of in Northern Ireland is that food heritage, and the provenance of our seafood is peerless; indeed, we often say about Northern Ireland, "Our Food. Power of Good". I stand here ready, with every Member, especially the Minister, to play my part in helping the fishing industry.

Mr Allister: The sad truth is that our fishing industry has not been able to attain its full potential for over 50 years. It is no coincidence that those 50 years have, essentially, been the period of our membership of the EU. The EU's common fisheries policy has crucified our fishing industry with punitive quotas and needless bureaucracy and is constantly on the back of fishermen. I am told and have no reason to doubt that, before we joined the EU, in Kilkeel harbour, when the fishing fleet was in, you could walk from one side of the harbour to the other across the decks of the boats. Today, when the fishing fleet is in, it is a few boats straggling up each side. That is a clear manifestation of how much our fishing industry has been denuded by the common fisheries policy.

Now that we have left the EU, we still have the problem of the protocol, because, historically, a lot of fishing boats fishing in the Irish Sea out of Kilkeel, Portavogie or Ardglass would have landed their catch at, say, Whitehaven, and carried on fishing. When they do that today, they now transport the catch back by lorry and have to pass through the Irish Sea border,

further impeding the free passage, free commerce and free trade that catching fish in British waters should give rise to. That is a continuing hurdle and burden. We also have —

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McGrath: Does the Member agree then that, before Brexit, things were better?

Mr Allister: If the Member had been listening, he would have heard, "Before EU membership, things were so much better". If he would take off his rose-tinted glasses —

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: — he would see that it was the common fisheries policy that crucified our fishing industry and left it in the poor state that it is in. That is indisputable when you compare how we were then with what we are now.

Other matters affect our fishing industry. We have had the voisinage agreement for some years. It was unimplemented for many years in respect of our rights to fish in Irish waters. I heard the Sinn Féin representative talk about our all-Ireland fishing. Sorry, but we still have a prohibition on boats from Northern Ireland fishing in the six to 12 miles of Irish waters. Why? Because of that agreement and the failure to fully address those issues. Recently, we had DEFRA make an agreement to allow Irish fishing vessels into the Rockall waters, which is to their advantage, but we did not have a quid pro quo of arguing and attaining access for Northern Ireland fishing boats into the six to 12 miles of Irish-controlled waters. That is another failure in respect of our fishing industry.

We are in a situation where, if ever an industry needed to be liberated to find growth and the potential to expand in the way that it could, fishing is that industry. However, I fear that, instead, the latest threat to our industry will come under the banner of the green agenda. I heard Mr Blair talk about all the things that need to be done, but I do not hear any talk about the costs of doing that in the industry. Who will pay those bills? Will it, again, be the hapless fishermen who is put upon by further needless bureaucracy? Will it be the fishermen and boat owners who will be impeded in that way?

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Certainly.

Ms Armstrong: I am delighted that the Member has brought up the pressures that would be added to our fishing fleet. I use the example of Iceland, where improving the environmental outputs of vehicles has resulted in its fishing fleet being able to land heavier catches. There is a benefit to being more environmental in the fishing industry.

Mr Allister: Of course, Iceland has had the great advantage of not being in the EU for the past 50 years and being able to grow its industry. Indeed, I served on the Fisheries Committee in the European Parliament for many years. I happen to know that the fishing industries in Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland, all of which are outside the EU, flourished and grew because they were not subject to the crucifying restraints of the common fisheries policy. Now is the time to liberate our fishing industry and give it the growth and momentum that it has been starved of for so long, so that we can have the full benefit of what that industry can do.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Andrew Muir. You will have 15 minutes, Mr Muir.

Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I will start by thanking Members for bringing the issues to the Floor for discussion. A number of points have been raised in the debate. I will seek to pick them up in my ministerial response.

As Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, it is my strong desire to work with Members and the fisheries sector to safeguard and advance a sustainable fishing industry for years to come. I earnestly believe that that will be best achieved by collective action, direct liaison and partnership with industry stakeholders and their dependants. I am acutely aware of the risks faced by fishermen and fisherwomen every day at sea, navigating the vast expanse of the ocean, with its unpredictable weather patterns and formidable challenges, which serves as both their arena and their livelihood. Crews embark on their vessels each day not knowing what trials they may encounter, yet, despite those challenges, they persevere.

I assure all Members that I recognise the vital role that the fishing industry plays in Northern Ireland's economy, cultural heritage and rural communities. In advance of the debate, I made a deliberate effort to engage. Last week, I went to Portavogie harbour, as Members have outlined. I also met the Northern Ireland

Fishermen's Federation. I am conscious of the invite that I received last week from Diane Forsythe and other Members to visit Ardglass and Kilkeel harbours. I am keen to do that, and we are looking at how we can facilitate it. It is important that I contribute here but also that I engage with communities when I get out of Parliament Buildings.

There is no doubt that the local fishing industry has experienced challenging times, especially over the past five years. The COVID pandemic impacted on fishing opportunities and markets and therefore profitability. More recently, increased input costs, especially the price of fuel, which rose significantly during 2022, has again impacted on the profitability of the fleet. I am pleased that, during the COVID pandemic, my Department was able to provide six schemes of financial assistance to assist the sea-fishing, inland-fishing and aquaculture sectors to remain viable during those challenging times.

The industry must be commended for continuing to operate, especially during 2022, when the cost of fuel soared to over £1.10 per litre, and for successfully negotiating and securing an increase in market price for their landings, which, if they had not been covered, would have been devastating for the industry. While the current cost of red diesel for the fleet ranges between 70p and 80p per litre, that does not include the rebate provided annually by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, called the marine voyages relief, which returns just under 10p per litre to vessel owners.

There are limitations to securing an immediate uplift of fishing opportunities from quota species, given that quotas and rights are based, rightly, on the best scientific evidence. Industry and government must ensure that non-quota species are harvested at a sustainable level. We all have a duty to recognise that. However, we can support industry in taking measures that will help reinforce the long-term viability of our fisheries and ensure that they are economically and environmentally sustainable for the next generation. I say that they go hand in hand.

My officials will continue to engage at a national and international level to ensure that Northern Ireland's fisheries interests are represented. They will continue to work with all stakeholders to bring forward policy that promotes positive change for the industry. It is reassuring to learn that the industry promotes itself as guardians of the marine environment: I saw that last week. That is not surprising, as healthy fish stocks are dependent on healthy ecosystems and restoring our seas to good environmental status

will maximise longer-term opportunities and, ultimately, revenues and profits.

Over the last few years, industry and my officials have worked well together to promote sustainability and reduce the impacts of fishing on the marine environment. A large number of industry-led schemes have been supported by my Department to underpin a sustainable industry. They include the appointment of a Northern Ireland gear technician to identify, in partnership with fishermen and fisherwomen and science providers, and trial more selective fishing gears and practices. The appointment of an industry sustainability officer has also been fully funded in order to progress issues which may impact on the current and future sustainability of the fleet and its operating environment. I encourage industry to continue on that path of co-management; indeed, it is pleasing to note that the industry itself, for stock sustainability reasons, has encouraged the introduction of two increases in the minimum landing size for brown crab that have been successfully introduced.

I am committed to continuing the stakeholder engagement to ensure that the UK 'Joint Fisheries Statement' policies are implemented effectively and deliver a thriving, sustainable fishing industry for Northern Ireland whilst improving the marine environment. The development of fisheries management plans provides an important opportunity for Northern Ireland fisheries management, by enabling us to draw on the best available science and the expertise of our fishers and other stakeholders, to ensure that our fish stocks are healthy and sustainable into the long term. Officials from my Department are working closely with stakeholders and other UK Administrations to develop fishery management plans for our key fishing stocks. The fishery management plans will set out policies for maintaining stocks at sustainable levels or restoring them to those levels, if needed.

I acknowledge the importance of fishing, recreational sea fishing and aquaculture in Northern Ireland to many of our coastal communities. That is highlighted in the 'Joint Fisheries Statement', which also emphasises the importance of working with the catching and processing sectors, along with their supply chains, on succession planning, training, access to domestic labour and fair remuneration to encourage new entrants. My Department is committed to promoting the consumption of locally sourced seafood as a healthy, high-quality protein source and supporting prosperous and resilient UK and international markets.

In ongoing practical and financial support, I will shortly consider a draft five-year strategic plan for the support of the marine and fisheries sectors that, as well as offering support consistent with those themes available through previous EU funding programmes, should provide incentives to enable the industry to become more economically and environmentally resilient. Should the funding be secured to deliver the proposed scheme, there would be significantly more support available for industry annually over the next five years than was available under the recent European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. It all depends on the budgets that my Department is awarded.

The emerging funding strategy was developed through initial engagement with and listening to industry on what the key issues were going to be over the next five years. I will seek to provide support on issues such as crewing, reducing input costs and the age of Northern Ireland's fishing fleet. The strategy will also consider the provision of financial support for industry-led initiatives that aim to encourage a career in fishing for new entrants, training and gaining of relevant qualifications. In addition, the strategy should include funding to reflect the age of many of the vessels in our fleet and the need to modernise or replace vessels with more modern equipment and technologies, including propulsion systems that will either reduce diesel fuel consumption or replace diesel as the primary means of power.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Muir: Yes, I am happy to.

Mr Allister: Those are all fine words, Minister. In terms of renewing the fleet, in times past we had a decommissioning scheme: is that part of your thinking?

11.45 am

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his contribution. I listened to his speech. The Member spoke about the cost of dealing with the challenges associated with climate change and with taking those opportunities. I ask the Member to also recognise that there is a cost of not doing anything on those issues. In the time ahead, we need to look at climate change as an opportunity for us to re-energise our economy and support industries. Other Members outlined that. We need to focus our minds differently in that area.

Any new propulsion systems—.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Muir: I am going to continue.

Mr Allister: You did not answer my question.

Mr Muir: I am going to continue.

Any new propulsion systems need to be practical and safe for our vessels and fishers and will require extensive research to identify what will work best for our fleet. I am delighted that industry and government in Northern Ireland have already started work on that issue over the past two years, aiming to develop options to deliver a net zero fishing vessel for the local fleet. A working group meets regularly to progress that objective and is drawing expertise from Queen's University Belfast, local engineers and boatbuilders. It has established links with Norwegian stakeholders, who are considered to be world leaders in that field.

Naturally, safety remains one of our key objectives — I argue that it is the top objective — for fishers and fishing vessels in what is generally recognised as one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. We will continue to support the industry in making improvements to safety on board fishing vessels through education and training to gain skills and professional qualifications, newer and more modern vessels, and improved operational and living conditions on board vessels.

Members raised the subject of green growth. I am pleased to advise that the proposed funding strategy will focus extensively on providing support for projects that are aligned with the principles of green growth. That includes the objective of the fishery sector contributing to the achievement of net zero commitments; promoting the circular economy through initiatives, such as addressing end-of-life fishing vessels and gear; the disposal of environmental waste at and around ports; and the provision of clean power around the three primary fishing ports at Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie.

The draft strategy will also recognise the need for innovative initiatives on energy efficiency, mitigation of climate change and delivery of a blue-carbon action plan, which will require continuing collaboration between the industry, NGOs, science providers and governments. Members are asked to note that the funding strategy will cover more than sea fisheries stakeholders. It will provide support for developmental green-growth-focused initiatives and investments by inland fisheries, the

aquaculture and processing sectors, port authorities and service providers that directly support the operation of the fisheries sector across Northern Ireland.

In parallel to the initiatives that I will consider in the funding strategy, I will continue to progress the recommendations from the fishing and seafood development programme to prepare an outline business case for the infrastructural improvements at Kilkeel and Ardglass harbours. Members may be aware that the investment proposed as part of the harbour development programme is currently estimated to cost around £120 million to deliver, and that estimate was made before the recent inflationary rises.

Due to the scale of the investment and these challenging times for the public purse, there needs to be a robust and comprehensive business case to allow a final decision on the viability of such an investment to be taken. To progress the matter, I am pleased that my Department secured approval from the Department of Finance to spend £1.47 million on the environmental and technical studies that are needed to inform the outline business case for the harbour development works at Kilkeel and Ardglass. In the coming weeks, Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) will advertise the invitation to tender for integrated consultant teams to progress those studies.

In addition, my Department supported the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority in making a successful application to the UK Seafood Fund to deliver a £3.6 million upgrade to the current slipway facilities at Portavogie harbour. I hope that Members can gain reassurance that plans are in place to continue and, indeed, extend the support available to the industry in a manner that, as far as possible, takes on board the concerns that were expressed when the new funding strategy started to be developed. The proposals also cater for the need to increase focus on green growth, net zero and environmental protection and restoration.

I have already been privileged to meet many people in my time as Minister — this is week 4 — and I look forward to engaging with more over the term ahead. I assure Members that I am supportive of all sectors of our fishing industry and appreciate the work undertaken by the industry, often in partnership and with full support, financial or otherwise, from my officials to date. I am content to record my support for the fishing industry through continued and

extended financial support, should the funding be secured.

I will respond to some issues that were raised. The most key issue for me is labour access and migration. A letter has gone to the Home Secretary, and it is very clear and direct about my concerns and the concerns of the sector and Members about what the Government are proposing. I have a concern that their proposals are driven more by ideological motivations and with an eye to an election rather than by the concerns of Northern Ireland or of the sectors that are affected as a result. I again urge the UK Government to reflect on that and to abandon what, to me, are devastating proposals.

The issue of the 12-mile zone around the Isle of Man was raised, as were the concerns about fisheries in the Republic of Ireland. I met officials yesterday, and I am looking to convene a meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) so that we can discuss those issues in that forum. Patsy McGlone raised issues concerning Lough Neagh. I have engaged with people around Lough Neagh and have further engagements, particularly about fisheries, planned over the time ahead. Michelle McIlveen, in her opening remarks, raised the issue of whether the timetable of 2026 is viable for the commencement of the harbour development programme. As Members will be aware, the Assembly and the Executive did not sit for two years, so, given the absence of Ministers and the budgetary challenges, that has now been delayed for commencement until 2027.

I will not shy away from my ministerial responsibilities to assist the industry in tackling key issues that may prevent a more economically and environmentally resilient industry from developing over time and being one of which we can be proud. I recognise that that will take a significant amount of time, investment and commitment and will mean working in partnership —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Muir: — to make the adjustments that are needed, but I wish to see delivery for the industry.

Mr Speaker: I call Patsy McGlone to make a winding-up speech on the amendment.

Mr McGlone: I thank all Members who have contributed well to the debate and, indeed, for their support for the motion and the

amendment. Initially, Michelle McIlveen asked whether the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs had raised the issues of the departmental budget and the need for investment with the Minister of Finance. The Minister mentioned that in his response. Miss McIlveen referred to labour shortages, price increases and problems with the visa system, which my colleague, in speaking to the amendment, sought to highlight in particular. It is not an area that I know very well, but I am reliant on good people such as the representatives of fishing areas to highlight the issues as they see them and as they pan out.

The consequences of Brexit, rising fuel prices and UK Government immigration policies were raised. Those immigration policies were referred to as being extreme, and, in fact, they are, with people not being able to bring their families over with them. All those issues contribute to the problems facing the sector and, indeed, other sectors. It is not just the fishing sector but the home care sector, the nursing home sector, the nursing sector and the health service that are affected. In all those sectors, those vicious migration policies are having an impact on how we go about our care and our economy. I thank Members for raising those issues.

My colleague Colin McGrath referred to the effects of Brexit on the fishing industry, how Brexit went wrong, the capacity in the fishing sector and the uncertainty that has been brought about by the various factors that have been raised multiple times by Members around the Chamber. He also referred to the migration laws that I have already spoken about.

During the debate, we heard Cathy Mason refer to marine conservation; the need for sustainability of our flora and fauna; the requirement for, and the importance of, regulation; and the need to prevent overfishing. John Blair spoke about the importance of the fishing industry to the economy and about the importance to the industry and, indeed, all of us of the climate change targets that are on us now to meet. He also referred to the need for the green environment, stock management and the importance of North/South and east-west bodies to ensuring a coordinated approach to the entire fishing industry and that economy. Tom Elliott made good points about Lough Neagh and, during an intervention, some more local points about the ESB substation in Ballyshannon. He referred to the European Union quotas and to Brexit, the NI protocol, the Windsor framework and the need for support for fishing.

Sinéad Ennis spoke about the number of occasions on which she and her party colleagues have met fishermen from the local industry. She referred to workforce issues, the importance of resolving labour difficulties, the need for training and the need to encourage young people to take up the trade. That need is not confined to the one industry but is reflected in many cases across our rural workforce. William Irwin referred to the tremendous respect that he had for people who go out to fish in dangerous seas and the work that they do. He also referred to people not being as aware as they should be of where their fish suppers come from. William, the next time you are travelling through Cookstown, I recommend the Brewery Lane Grill, which does a great fish supper. The fish there is delivered every week from Ardglass, and it is a top fish supper. Thank you for drawing attention to that.

Kellie Armstrong mentioned fishing in Portavogie. She also mentioned the problems with Brexit and access to funding and asked how the Minister can help in that regard. The Minister outlined that, hopefully, there will soon be proposals in that regard.

Diane Forsythe gave a very local perspective as someone who grew up in Kilkeel. She provided local knowledge of how the markets, the factories and the subsidiary businesses there need the local fishing industry. She called for capital funding for the ports, as reflected in the motion.

Patrick Brown referred to the hard-working people, UK immigration rules, the problems with the UK's exit from Europe and, indeed, decarbonisation —.

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

Mr McGlone: That is just some of the synopsis. I am sorry that I have not got around everyone: if I had more time, I would do that. I thank Members for their input to the debate and their support for our amendment.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Tom Buchanan to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank all Members who took part in today's debate on much-needed capital investment in the fishing industry in Northern Ireland. The motion sets out the important part that the fishing industry plays in the economy and highlights the impact that rising costs are having on the industry and the fishermen and their respective families. It also outlines the

practical and financial support that is required to enable the industry to continue to develop by being in a position where it can take advantage of new fishing opportunities, including through investment in the modernisation of its vessels.

A vision was set out in the fishing and seafood development programme report of May 2021, which was first commissioned in 2019. Page 30 of that report sets out very clearly the vision of the programme and its objectives and recommendations. I will remind the House of some of issues in that report. The vision is:

"Northern Ireland's fishing & seafood industry is fit for the 21st Century. It will be prosperous and sustainable; able to take advantage of new fishing opportunities and green growth. It will be supported by improved fishing infrastructure that also enables growth in the Blue Economy and contributes to thriving coastal communities."

That vision is still in the document, but it has not yet been realised.

There are three objectives. The fishing objective is:

"Fishing operations are sustainable in economic, environmental and social terms: sufficiently profitable to invest in a fleet that can operate efficiently, attract crew and reduce its carbon emissions."

The blue economy objective is:

"Northern Ireland grasps future opportunities in the existing and emerging sectors of the Blue Economy."

The harbour objective is:

"Northern Ireland's fishing harbours are developed to support the needs of the fishing industry".

Those objectives are in the document, but they have not been delivered.

The recommendations were to enhance the capacity of Ardglass to provide security for fishing and processing businesses; develop Kilkeel as a potential Irish Sea hub for the fishing and maritime economy by increasing port capacity and shoreside facilities; and invest in Portavogie harbour estate to allow it to take advantage of future blue economy opportunities. The proposed investment was £73 million for Kilkeel, £20 million for Ardglass and £5 million for Portavogie. However, to date,

the vision, the objectives, the recommendations and the proposed financial spend still form part of a paper exercise that not been delivered for the hard-pressed fishing industry in Northern Ireland today.

While my colleague the previous AERA Minister successfully sought permission for an outline business case to move forward the important work of carrying out the technical and environmental studies to unlock that investment and get construction under way, it is regrettable that, due to budgetary and other pressures, that preparatory work was delayed and could not be taken forward.

Let us hope that the restoration of the Executive is not another false dawn for an industry that depends so much on investment as it seeks to move forward. The representatives of the fishing industry must get a clear understanding from the Minister on the current state of those plans, and they need to know whether integrated consultant teams have been or will now be able to complete the relevant technical studies and whether proper investment will be in place to allow the development work to commence.

12.00 noon

The long-term ambition of the Department and the Minister must be to release the major capital investment that is required for the development of our harbours, with a multi-year budget cycle that will enable our fishing and seafood industry, like all other businesses in different sectors, to have certainty and be able to plan as they go forward.

I will mention some comments from Members who took part in the debate. I know that the Member who made the winding-up speech on the amendment covered a number of those. My colleagues mentioned that the fishing industry is a thriving sector. They said that there was a concern about the labour shortages and spoke of the need for the Minister and the Department to fight for the industry. That is the important issue: the Minister must take on this battle and fight for the industry. The resilience of the sector was mentioned, as was its frustration at the lack of progress. It is an industry that does not want to stand still; it wants and needs to move forward.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr T Buchanan: We heard that harbours are at the heart of the towns and that the present

uncertainty is taking its toll on the industry. I give way.

Mr McGrath: I completely echo the Member's comments about the need for the Minister to fight for this. I politely say to the Minister that I do not think that firing a letter off to the Home Secretary will cut it. A letter will be dealt with in a correspondence department in the Home Office, may not even be seen by the Home Secretary, and it may well be responded to by a junior Minister who will sign a letter. I hope that the Minister will take on board how passionate all parties are about this and make a phone call to try to get a meeting with the Home Secretary to push the issue. It is a major issue, and a letter will be batted away. Most of us have already written letters, and the responses have not been up to much.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Member for his intervention. Indeed, he is correct in what he says.

Sinn Féin Members raised the issue that fishing is much more than a job; it is a way of life for the communities in those areas. They also mentioned that the redevelopment of our harbours will require more crew to work in the sector and that there is a need for educational courses to be provided in our colleges to help to develop the industry.

The UUP's Tom Elliot spoke about the industry's turnover of £135 million and 1,550 jobs. He mentioned that any industry of that size would be unable to move forward without investment from government circles. He referred to the uncertainty in the past about quotas and which waters could be fished in, saying that a sustainable position going forward is now required.

The Alliance Party spoke about the importance of the fishing industry, the importance of improvements to the fishing fleet while meeting environmental targets, the importance of showcasing the best that we have in Northern Ireland and, of course, it said that this is not a single Department issue but requires a cross-departmental working group. The Alliance Party also spoke of the need to safeguard the marine environment and protect the culture and heritage of the fishing industry for future generations.

The SDLP referred to how vast a sector the fishing industry in Northern Ireland is, its benefit to the economy and the need for certainty and speed in the delivery of programmes to help the sector to move forward.

Jim Allister spoke about EU bureaucracy. He said that the fishing industry has been prevented from reaching its full potential for over 50 years by the common fisheries policy.

The Minister spoke about the vital role that the fishing industry plays in the economy. He said that the fishing industry faces very difficult times and has done over the past year due to increases in fuel and other costs. He said that the long-term viability and sustainability of the fishing industry go hand in hand. He gave a commitment to continue stakeholder engagement to ensure that the industry thrives. He mentioned that he will shortly be considering a five-year plan for the industry. We welcome the Minister's commitment to the fishing industry.

I thank everyone who took part in the debate, and I commend the motion to the House.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the need to safeguard and build on the success of Northern Ireland's fishing industry; notes with concern the impact of rising input costs for many local fishermen; supports the delivery of adequate and ongoing practical and financial support to those affected; further notes the importance of ensuring the local fishing industry is in a position to take advantage of new fishing opportunities and contribute to green growth, including through investment in modernising its vessels and gear; urges the UK Government to ensure their policies, in respect of the allocation of fishing quotas and access to labour, including the extension of the seasonal worker route scheme to include the fish-processing sector, reflect the particular needs of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to reiterate his Department's commitment to providing capital funding to redevelop Northern Ireland's harbour infrastructure at Kilkeel, Ardglass and Portavogie.

Mr Speaker: Members should take their ease as we move to the next item of business.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Dr Aiken] in the Chair)

All-island Rail Network

Mr Durkan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the transformative impact that expansion of an all-island rail network will have on communities across Ireland; welcomes the commitment to the all-island strategic rail review from the Executive and the Irish Government; acknowledges that the delivery of accessible, sustainable and modern rail infrastructure is a key driver of economic growth, enhances our tourism industry and will drive regionally balanced investment in left-behind communities; further acknowledges that investing in high-quality rail is critical to reaching net zero carbon emissions targets by 2050; calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to provide an immediate update on the phase 3 Derry to Coleraine feasibility study; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Irish Government to produce a costed implementation plan this year, to deliver rail options to every county in Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): 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 make a winding-up speech. 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 the debate. Mark, please open the debate.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the opportunity to raise this issue and recommit to the SDLP's long-term vision to deliver an all-island rail network that not only is fit for modern society but abolishes historical regional disparities. Enhancing connectivity between communities will instigate the modal shift that is needed to reach climate goals and will deliver fairness in economic growth for historically neglected regions.

In the Government, the SDLP led the way in securing the all-island strategic rail review, alongside the Irish Government. That €30 billion plan to connect communities across borders, decarbonise public transport and deliver new opportunities set out the scale of our ambition. In opposition, we will hold the Executive to account over whether they do or do not hold up their end and deliver on that ambition.

We have consistently extolled the many virtues of all-island rail. While there have been some gains, the failure to grasp the full, huge potential that an expanded rail network would yield has stifled the island as a whole but particularly the north-west. A quick glance at the map shows the blatant disparity in rail provision between east and west. That gap on the map is an indelible mark on the collective consciousness and suggests that the north-west is a place shut off, isolated and unsuitable for prospective visitors and investors. The stark gap is a microcosm of the wider gaps that the west faces.

Mr Elliott: I appreciate the Member giving way at this stage. He talks quite fluently about the north-west being out of reach, almost. Does he accept that at least Londonderry has a train service to it, whereas Fermanagh and Tyrone do not?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not sure of the logic behind it. He will clearly see, if he looks at the map that I am holding, the north-west, and Fermanagh is clearly in the north-west and the west of the map.

That gap would have become a complete abyss had the then Department for Regional Development (DRD) and Translink had their way over a decade ago when they signalled that it was to be the end of the line for the Derry line. However, thanks to the monumental efforts of the lobby group Into the West, the wider Derry public, politicians in the SDLP and others, including Mr Elliott's past colleague Minister Danny Kennedy, the real potential of that Derry to Belfast line was recognised. Now we want it realised.

My colleague the late John Dallat spoke, I remember, in great detail and at great length many times in the Chamber on the virtues of rail. Many Members thought that he was harking back to the past when it is evident now that he was looking back to the future — where he was going, "we don't need roads".
[Laughter.] In recent years, we have seen incremental improvements, including an hourly service and the delivery of the award-winning north-west transport hub. Those modest but transformational changes have all but eliminated any doubt that the naysayers cast about the viability of the line. Since the hourly Belfast service was introduced in 2017, we have witnessed, year-on-year, record-breaking passenger numbers for Derry rail. That is the living embodiment of the phrase:

"If you build it, he will come."

Therefore, it stands to reason that, if and when we build more, even more will come. The motion calls on the Minister to get his Department working on how that will be built and how the building of it will be paid for. There remains, however, blatant discrimination in timetabling, with fewer trains and less frequent services than elsewhere. Derry and Fermanagh — the west — deserve accessible rail provision, hourly Sunday services and stops at City of Derry Airport, Ballykelly and Strathfoyle.

Minister Mallon expanded on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to have high-speed, cross-border connectivity including the north-west, but, bizarrely, the draft report that came forward excluded the Derry to Portadown line from the 200 kph rail speeds, condemning the route to the lowest rail speed on the island. That needs to be addressed in the final strategy. High-speed rail is the key to durability and success, making it a more attractive mode of transport for everyone. Why should we settle for less than everywhere else? It is simply not good enough. The days of us in the west being second-class passengers are over.

Similarly, there has been drawn-out wrangling around phase 3 to Coleraine, which needs commencement and completion.

We have remained consistent and persistent in our desire to see delivery on these perpetually postponed rail improvements to the North's second city. Nichola Mallon put the project back on track after it hit a Hazzard, shall we say. She secured the feasibility study.

12.15 pm

It is long past the time that we end Derry's status as the most isolated station on the Northern Ireland rail network. That will help to tackle regional imbalance, and will steer the whole region on a course towards a brighter future. I call on the Minister to give immediate sign-off on the feasibility study and the funding required — and promised — to see its delivery. It is due to start in 2025 for completion in 2027. We cannot afford more slippage.

Mr Stewart: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly; briefly.

Mr Stewart: On the extension of phase 3, do you share, as I do, the concerns raised in the Translink-commissioned report from EirGrid late last year about the rise in sea levels and the

impact that that will have on not only the Derry line but the Carrickfergus to Larne line? By 2040, six locations on that line and my line will be under water due to rising sea levels. Should that be a priority for the Minister and Translink?

Mr Durkan: One would certainly hope that it is. That is in the public domain, so it should be factored into the costing and forward planning for implementation of the final strategy.

Derry — you will be glad to hear me say — cannot be the end of the line, however. We recognise the huge potential for infrastructure infill along the north and west coasts, connecting rural, isolated areas and advancing tourism. That will rely on the restoration of rail in Tyrone, and an expansion into Donegal and beyond. Connecting border regions will open up prospects right across the island. Ensuring a thriving rail network means that no county can be left behind. Fermanagh should not be the only county on this island without access to rail. An Omagh-Enniskillen-Sligo link is just common sense, and must be in the strategy. It cannot be set aside to a later date that never comes. That is why we included "every county" as a goal in the motion. We fear that the amendment reduces that ambition.

It has taken decades to get the wheels in motion for all-island rail. It is time now to build upon the foundation blocks and recent investment from the Irish Government. I have no doubt that we can work collectively, across the Chamber and across these islands, to deliver the much-needed and much-demanded services.

On the amendment, of course we would welcome collaboration with and between the Irish and British Governments to produce a cost-implemented plan to provide expertise. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) report shows that we could do with much more expertise in the delivery of major infrastructure projects. We would welcome funding from anywhere. We will not turn our noses up at that. It is quite likely that this could draw funding from Europe as well given the trans-frontier nature of what we are discussing. However, we have to get moving now. Too much time has already been squandered.

Without question, rail is the most environmentally friendly transport option. A success is at the core of achieving a greener future. Getting people out of their cars and into trains will reduce congestion and pollution —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Durkan: Certainly, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This needs to be prioritised because, in our view — well, certainly in my view — this is the single most important project in the economic and environmental opportunities for the island.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you.

Mrs Erskine: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "2050;" and insert:

"believes the UK Government should provide funding and major project expertise to support the work of the all-island strategic rail review, as recommended by the Department for Transport's Union connectivity review; calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to provide an immediate update on the phase 3 Derry to Coleraine feasibility study; and further calls on the Minister, following publication of the final all-island strategic rail review report, to work with the Executive and the UK and Irish Governments to produce a costed implementation plan."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): 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.

Mrs Erskine: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also thank those who tabled the motion. I will forgive Mark Durkan for the puns during his speech; I did enjoy them. I thank those Members for pointing to an ambitious plan that will have a transformative impact and provide a sustainable and modern rail infrastructure that will help us to meet our net zero targets and will aid connectivity.

I am making my comments in my capacity as DUP MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. We believe that the motion could and should go further. We need to ensure that there is expertise to deliver this project and adequate funding in place to deliver it. That will require UK Government input, given that the report on the Union connectivity review points to the need to increase the provision of rail network in Northern Ireland. With that in mind, it is important that the strategy that is developed between both regions matches up and is strategic.

This motion is timely. As Members are aware, a public consultation on the draft report of the

review was completed in 2023, and it is anticipated that the report will be presented to the Executive and the Irish Government for approval and publication in late spring 2024. Hopefully the Minister can add to that and confirm that that timescale is correct. In July 2023, the draft report of the all-island rail review was published. There were some 30 recommendations in it. The vision of the review set out six high-level goals: contributing to decarbonisation, improving all-island connectivity between major cities, ensuring regional accessibility, stimulating economic activity, encouraging sustainable mobility and achieving economic and financial feasibility.

On 27 October 2022, the Infrastructure Minister welcomed progress on the rail review and noted that he had asked officials to explore funding opportunities for the feasibility studies into the following areas: a new rail line between Londonderry and Portadown; reopening the Knockmore line, with a connection to Belfast International Airport; electrification of the Belfast to Newry line; and better connections at the rail halt for Belfast City Airport. The recommendations that have been produced can be grouped into four categories: new lines, infrastructure enhancements to existing lines, new stations and frequency improvements on the lines. Those are all very noble and worthy recommendations, but where is Fermanagh? The county that I represent is set to miss out. At present, where Fermanagh is situated on the map, there is a blank space; there is not one dot of rail provision for Fermanagh in the all-island strategic rail review. My constituency includes one of the only counties in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland, that will lose out should the report still stand as it is after the consultation.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. Without wishing to be facetious, I ask her where Fermanagh is in the tabled amendment.

Mrs Erskine: I am simply pointing out that I want to see Fermanagh included. That is important. I do not want to take away from it, but I think that all of us in the Chamber should agree, today, that every county in Northern Ireland should have rail provision. The report states:

"anticipated demand ... fell below the threshold for rail on some routes, such as from Clones to Sligo via Enniskillen".

Another section of the all-island strategic rail review report states:

"Given the relatively low population density and lack of larger towns across the region, the Review has found that expansion of rail is difficult to justify in much of the region within the horizon of the Review."

Thinking of Northern Ireland and the fact that one county is not included, that is totally disingenuous. I hope that every Member will reject that. To me, those comments say that my constituency is hard to reach and easy to forget about. We have talked about regional imbalance. Surely Fermanagh should be the starting point. There is not a single piece of rail track — I thank my constituency colleague Tom Elliott for pointing that out in his intervention — not to mention the fact that it will mean a gap of 30 years in infrastructure progression for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. It will mean that the local economy in my constituency will get left behind. I am not prepared to see that happen, and neither should anybody sitting in the Chamber or at the Executive table.

True levelling up and true commitment to decarbonisation mean including every county in Northern Ireland. I and others from my area made the case for Fermanagh and South Tyrone in the public consultation. I pay tribute to organisations such as Into the West that have fought for many years to see rail brought to areas such as Fermanagh.

In 2021, the capital costs of the review recommendations were estimated to be approximately £26.5 billion. If inflation indicators are applied, the costs could be in the region of £29.2 billion to £30.7 billion. The 'Union Connectivity Review: Final Report' of November 2021 notes the opportunity of the all-island strategic rail review and very clearly states:

"The UK Government should support the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver transport infrastructure recommendations resulting from this work."

I therefore believe that the inclusion of the UK Government in the motion would strengthen our case, particularly given the recommendations from the Union connectivity review, and recommendation 12 in particular, which states that the UK Government should:

"provide funding and major project expertise to the Northern Ireland Executive to support their work with the Republic of Ireland relating to the ... implementation".

We have the opportunity. When considering the transport needs of Northern Ireland, we have to

give cognisance to the fact that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and that, as a result, a greater part of our economic activity is with the UK rather than the Republic. It is natural that the UK Government want to see levelling up in that regard. Furthermore, the UK Government contain Fermanagh in their plans. They see Enniskillen as a place of need for rail.

The all-island strategic rail review and the Union connectivity review present a clear vision for better connectivity throughout the British Isles. Their full delivery stands to unlock opportunities for economic growth and job creation in our communities. We will work constructively with the Executive and the UK and Irish Governments to that end. We must have a robust plan in place for delivery. We have seen from the Northern Ireland Audit Office report and the failure to deliver key projects that there is an impetus to move away from the ideas phase and from aspiration to delivery. I commend our amendment to the Chamber.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and amendment. The previous Member to speak did not say that she was speaking in her capacity as Chair of the Infrastructure Committee. No doubt the issue will raise its head at the Committee over the next while.

Sinn Féin firmly believes in the untapped potential of rail to contribute towards sustainable social, environmental and economic development across the island of Ireland. By providing efficient, reliable and more frequent connectivity, we can connect more people, cities, towns, regions and communities and tackle the climate emergency by providing viable transport options, in which rail has a significant role to play.

Our island's rail network has suffered from decades of neglect and underinvestment. Significant areas of the island are still not served by rail, and adequate public transport options are not available in many areas. We need to invest in a proper transport network. One hundred years of partition have severely damaged North/South connectivity. We need to look at how we can rebuild our rail network on an all-island basis.

12.30 pm

The publication of the draft rail review last year was a step in the right direction and highlights the need for increased investment in rail

infrastructure. I very much welcome the funding that the Irish Government announced last week in order to make the Belfast to Dublin rail line an hourly service. Sinn Féin has constantly called for the improvement of that crucial rail service, which workers and students use every day and on which people depend for connectivity. An hourly service will double the frequency of trains on that line. It is incredibly popular, and the investment will help connect communities further, tackle the climate emergency and, no doubt, bolster North/South links.

The announcement last year that £3.3 million will be made available for examining the cost and feasibility of electrifying the rail line from Belfast to the border is welcome. I also welcome the investment of £800,000 that was made available for Translink to conduct a feasibility study of the Armagh to Portadown rail link. That followed positive findings from a council-commissioned technical study, which stated that the rail line would promote sustainable transport in the region. Such a rail link would improve connectivity, create greater access to jobs and opportunities and enhance the economic development of the wider area.

It was, of course, frustrating for our comrades to my right when the west of the Bann and the north-west were not mentioned in the funding programme. We need to improve our rail network in the North, particularly in the west and north-west, to unlock economic opportunities and ensure that workers and families have better access to public transport. If we are serious about tackling carbon emissions and getting people out of cars, we need a reliable, affordable, fit-for-purpose public transport system. Rail will play a major role in that.

Mr McReynolds: I welcome today's motion on the all-island rail network, and I thank the proposer for tabling it. Although I am an MLA for East Belfast, I had the great sense and wisdom, as my wife regularly tells me, to marry someone from Strabane —

Mr McCrossan: Hear, hear.

Mr McReynolds: — and I always hear complaints about rail infrastructure and public transport when I make the journey to the north-west. As Alliance Party infrastructure spokesperson, I have called for the Assembly to start thinking progressively about our infrastructure and about how sustained investment in our public transport network can improve our connectivity, stimulate economic

growth and tackle the all-too-real climate emergency.

A new, greatly enhanced and ambitious rail network carries significant benefits not just for communities across the island but for our shared environment. A key commitment under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, the all-island rail review reflects the strategic objective to mitigate the impacts of climate change, which have been and should continue to be a priority in the Assembly.

Transportation is essential for the social, economic and environmental well-being of Northern Ireland, and it is essential that we take steps to transform public transport networks by investing in our existing rail assets and delivering more connections. We are, sadly, well known for our reliance on private car usage and our poor road network, with 70% of all journeys and 87% of journeys of over 1 mile being made by car. Transportation here is tailored to car usage, and that is reflected in the length of our public road network, which is over 25,000 kilometres, compared with 350 kilometres for our rail network. Before preparing my thoughts and speech ahead of today and to allude to what Mr Durkan said, I looked at graphics of our existing network to compare them with what the all-island rail network seeks to achieve over the next few decades. As someone who has lived in France, I find Northern Ireland's lack of rail in comparison with that of many European countries nothing short of a disgrace in 2024. It needs to change.

If we continue to build and maintain a system that favours car usage, the cycle of car dominance will just continue, as is shown by the number of young drivers on our roads, which has not diminished but rather almost doubled over the past 10 years. We will not break the monopoly on private car use, because there are limited options for travel that suit the needs of our citizens. That is where an improved and enhanced rail offering comes in. Rail has no appeal as an option when end-to-end journey times are faster, more reliable and more cost-effective by car. The delivery of an all-Ireland rail network could see rail passenger numbers double: nearly three quarters of a million people would live within 5 kilometres of a railway station, and some journey times between towns and cities could be halved.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the key issues here is that we do not have connectivity to our airports. Rail could be a game changer: we could open up the International Airport, for example, and improve the tourism offering as a result.

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

Mr McReynolds: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree: when I was reading through the proposal yesterday, I noted the significant impact that it would have on the City Airport in East Belfast as well.

Better-connected cities and towns by rail is precisely the type of policy that the Assembly should advocate in order to promote a modal shift in how people move and decarbonise the transport sector, which is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the United Kingdom. In previous years, the expansion of the public transport network has been in line with population growth. The inadequacy of investment over the last decade means that commuters are less likely to use public transport than they were 10 years earlier. That is a step backwards during a climate crisis and when there is a requirement to move towards low-carbon mobility.

This is an acknowledgement of the threat that climate change brings to our transport network, as was mentioned by Mr Stewart. Sustained increases in temperature, as well as heavy rainfall, test the resilience of roads, bridges and our rail network by damaging their structural integrity. Yet, there is no strategy for adapting transport infrastructure to a changing climate. It is, therefore, crucial that we start to invest in other modes of transport for the climate benefit but also to relieve the pressure on the current network.

As we head towards 2030, green infrastructure that facilitates sustainable connectivity between major cities and regions across the island must be a priority. Historically, infrastructure planning has suffered from our inconsistent politics, which ensures that the vision and ambition of potentially transformative projects are rarely delivered on. We can no longer afford to let stop-start politics limit our efforts to move towards a low-emission transport network to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Alliance is happy to support the motion and the amendment. The plans, as we know, are ambitious and significant in cost. The more contributors who are willing to dig deep to fund them, the better.

Mr Stewart: I thank the proposers of the motion and the amendment. We will support both.

Our rail network has been the victim of chronic underinvestment over many years in terms of the existing infrastructure and diversification

away from a carbon-emitting fleet but particularly in terms of a lack of network in the west of the Province. To be clear, the Ulster Unionist Party is fully supportive of the ambitious plans set out in the all-island strategic rail review, particularly on how the rail network can be developed sustainably to improve connectivity between major cities and towns, enhance regional accessibility, including to the north-west, enhance transport integration, reduce carbon emissions and support balanced economic growth and development.

If delivered, the recommendations will help to achieve a greener economy, including a modal shift towards public and sustainable forms of transport. They will support decarbonisation of the rail network here, including a gradual shift to electrification of the network and the use of hydrogen-powered trains. I note that Northern Ireland is the only part of Europe without any form of electrification of its rail lines. That is something that we definitely need to look at. Further, the recommendations have the ability to deliver an accessible, efficient, safe and sustainable transport system that supports communities, households and businesses here.

The proposals for additional stations throughout the country, particularly in the west, could be a game changer for connectivity, tourism and economic development, as would the long-term proposals for a 125 mph line between Newry and Lisburn and the one-hourly service between Belfast and Dublin. As has been said, ultimately, were the proposals to be followed through, up to 700,000 people across Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic would live within 5 kilometres of a railway station.

The expansion, as I have said, would need to include access to our airports. The cost of airport car parking is significant and prohibitive, and a monopoly has been established because of the lack of connectivity, particularly to Belfast International Airport but also to Belfast City Airport. As part of the Union connectivity review, we might see additional routes to mainland UK. There might also be an all-island tourism benefit from that if people are able to travel up from Dublin and fly out from Belfast to further afield. That could be a game changer.

I want to touch on a few of the issues. Mrs Erskine talked about the cost of the proposals and how prohibitive that would be. At this stage, the assessment of the cost stands at £31 billion, with a contribution of upwards of 25% from the Executive. It is essential that the proposals are properly costed in order to assess their overall viability, particularly in light of the additional costs that were highlighted

today by the Audit Office in relation to how infrastructure projects are run. I would also welcome input, as has already been said, regarding the Union connectivity review and input from His Majesty's Government, which has a key role to play.

Secondly, it is about deliverability. The entire project is likely to span in excess of 25 years, and, in order to do that, we need to see a commitment that extends over five mandates and at least five Ministers from several parties. We therefore need to see a maturity of government that we have struggled to find in the past, if we are to see truly transformative services. That is the same across all Departments. Whether it is the transformation of care in Health or the massive infrastructure projects, there needs to be a grown-up approach to how we do this over a series of years.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Absolutely.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with a lot of what the Member has said and with his point about the fact that we need institutional political stability to deliver big things, whether health reform or growth of the rail network. Will he agree that it would be helpful if the First Minister and deputy First Minister would confirm that they will not resign for the rest of the mandate? Will he support us and others in the Chamber who want to work towards reform?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): The Minister has an extra minute. When Members are making an intervention, it should be about the topic of rail, please.

Mr Stewart: Thank you for that promotion, Mr Deputy Speaker; I will take the pay cheque as well, if I can have it. *[Laughter.]* I am not quite there yet.

I absolutely agree with the Member. Sustainability is key. Whatever we are looking at, but particularly the massive infrastructure projects over a number of years, we will undoubtedly need consistency and continuity of government, and that will be vital in achieving that.

Thirdly, as already mentioned, the absence of Fermanagh from the all-island rail review is totally unacceptable and needs to be corrected. The extension of a rail line to Fermanagh is imperative for sustained economic growth and connectivity and will be vital in alleviating

congestion on Fermanagh roads, allowing fabricators and manufacturers to use rail freight instead of roads to aid in transportation. I would welcome a commitment from the Minister on that issue.

Finally, the motion — we agree with this — calls for an update on phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine feasibility study. We have no problem with that, and that will be vital in securing faster, more reliable journeys to the north-west. However, it would be remiss, as I pointed out, not to factor in the serious and concerning revelations from a recent assessment and report carried out for Translink. It says that seven areas, including the Carrickfergus to Larne line in my constituency and the Londonderry line, will, by 2040, be under water as a result of rising sea levels and coastal change. I hope that all Members in the House and the Minister will agree that that will happen within the lifetime of this proposed strategic review, and it is vital that we look at how we will assess that impact on our infrastructure network so that we can tackle that. The last thing that we want to see is those key services — as in, we need to hold what we have — going under water without a strategic plan to address that.

Mr Delargy: I will address the motion by making three separate points. The first issue that I want to deal with is the all-Ireland rail review. My party and I welcome that as a key strategic part of putting things in the right direction here and looking at rail across the island on a strategic platform. It is also an opportunity to work together. We have all seen the comparison map between 1920 and 2020 and the decrease in rail over that time, and we have to look at partition as having been essential in making that happen. Partition decreased not only the quality of rail on our island but the quantity of rail on our island. We have the opportunity now to work together to advance that and to move in the right direction on this.

Secondly, I want to touch on the Union connectivity review. I have to say that, contrary to what other Members have said today, I was disappointed by that. I was disappointed to see that the west was neglected in it, and that really reinforced the two-tier system that we have at the minute, which is rail east of the Bann being strengthened and rail west of the Bann continuing to be ignored. I expected to see phase 3 of the Derry to Belfast line on that, and I expected to see greater detail.

That really emphasises the third point for me, which is about having local Ministers in place,

people who understand rail here, get the geography of this place and really want to change that for the better. It is good for us to have a Minister in place, but it is better for us to have a Sinn Féin Minister in place, because, particularly for Derry and the north-west, a Sinn Féin Infrastructure Minister means delivery. When we look to 2016, we see Chris Hazzard, whose day-1 priority was to get the A6 built. That has now happened. John O'Dowd has made it clear that his day-1 priority is to get the A5 built, and I really welcome the fact that we have seen great progress on that this week, with continued funding — it has been increased — and continued commitment from the Irish Government.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Delargy: No, I will not, sorry.

It is important that we see that continuing, and a Minister is now in place who is committed to increasing connectivity, committed to improving public transport and committed to investment and increasing opportunity for Derry and the north-west. We all have to welcome that as a positive step.

12.45 pm

Mr Dunne: There is no doubt that transport connectivity and a modern and accessible rail network are vital to economic growth, job creation, developing tourism, building houses and social cohesion. That connectivity is crucial, whether that be east-west or, indeed, North/South. I very much welcome the commitment in the Union connectivity review report, which was published in late 2021 by the UK Government. It stated that a key priority is:

"improving connectivity with Northern Ireland through better transport infrastructure, better rail capacity and journey times, better rail connections to airports and participation in the All-Island Strategic Rail Review".

The connectivity report also recommends that the UK Government look at providing:

"funding and major project expertise to the Northern Ireland Executive to support their work with the Republic of Ireland relating to the All Island Strategic Rail Review",

which is, indeed, welcome.

It is clear that the current rail network is outdated, as quite a number of Members have said, and is in real need of investment. I

welcome the opportunity to support the motion as amended, as we look to ensure that the public transport system is fit for purpose for today and the future.

Improvements to connectivity with our single largest trade market in Great Britain is just as important as investing in cross-border rail projects. Indeed, that is why, in our agreement with the Government, my party ensured that there were commitments to improve the physical connections that link Northern Ireland to Great Britain, including delivery of the A75 improvements and a new £10 million fund to boost investment in ports.

Today's report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which my colleague Mrs Erskine mentioned, states, after analysing 77 projects across various Northern Ireland Departments, that delivery of major public infrastructure projects here will cost almost £2.5 billion more than planned. That is a real and stark reminder of the very real fiscal challenges that exist for major infrastructure projects such as the ones that we have been discussing.

As we move, hopefully, closer to the delivery stage of those potential improvements, it is imperative that contributions from the UK Treasury are discussed before bringing forward a costed implementation plan. With a rough cost estimate for NI-related projects recommended by the draft review report equating to over £5 billion at 2021 prices, it would be foolish to believe that the Executive could support those projects without the aid of the UK Government. It is in that respect that the absence of any reference to the UK Government in the SDLP motion is peculiar, to say the least.

As an MLA for North Down, I see the very real value and importance to the economy of having a rail link that is used every day by thousands of commuters to and from Belfast city centre and beyond. Figures that I received from Translink this week show that, during the year 2021-22, there were over 320,000 journeys on the Bangor to Belfast rail line. In 2022-23, that figure increased to over 540,000 journeys, confirming the demand that exists for rail travel into the city centre and beyond.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way. I am conscious that it is the same for the Carrickfergus line as it is for the Bangor line. One key aspect that we need to see is an increase in the night-time economy. There is limited access to trains and buses. Does the Member agree that we should see an increase

to those services in the evening time to try to boost the city economy?

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

Mr Dunne: I thank Mr Stewart for that intervention. I agree with him. There is great potential to do more, even with the rail links that exist, and to build on that, including by providing greater frequency of trains and, indeed, more routes and stops.

That ties in with my next point about how it is alarming that, since the 1950s, our rail network has been cut by almost 450 miles. That is an alarming statistic, indeed. We have suffered historical underinvestment in the rail network compared with the Republic of Ireland and other regions of the United Kingdom.

I very much welcome the focus on improving connectivity to the three airports, including the George Best Belfast City Airport, which neighbours my constituency and is a vital part of our connectivity to the rest of the UK and beyond into Europe.

Through the all-island strategic rail review, we have an opportunity to address decades of underinvestment in the rail network. I trust that the Minister will take action on that and support bringing the public transport system into line with that of the rest of the UK.

I will support the motion if amended. as we seek to improve our rail infrastructure and make it fit for purpose for the future. It is my hope that those improvements will be accompanied by similar investment in our roads network, ports and airports as we seek to make Northern Ireland an even more attractive place to live, work and invest in.

Mr Brown: As an Alliance infrastructure spokesperson, I take the opportunity to welcome the motion and the amendment. Rail services are an important driver of our economy and are key to enhancing connectivity and social capital, particularly in those rural towns and villages that are under-served by public transport options.

Oxford Economics estimates that, for every £1 that is spent on rail in the UK, £2.50 is generated in the wider economy. It is a fact that the expansion of new lines can bring a significant boost and breathe life into previously declining urban centres. Investing in our public rail infrastructure is also a vital step in reducing our carbon footprint and achieving our

decarbonisation goals by 2050. It is particularly positive that the all-island rail review sets out plans for the electrification of new and existing lines. It is also vital that we continue to work with our colleagues in the Irish Government to deliver cross-border schemes and leverage the value of that North/South partnership, which was demonstrated clearly through last week's positive announcements on the A5, Casement Park, Narrow Water bridge and other projects.

With no offence whatsoever to buses and other forms of public transport, there is nothing quite like rail travel for efficiency, comfort and seeing beautiful parts of the world zip by the window. Indeed, the rail network on the island of Ireland runs —.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brown: Yes, certainly.

Mr Elliott: I fully understand and appreciate what the Member is saying, but does he accept that if you do not have a rail line, it is very difficult to enjoy the benefits of rail travel?

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

Mr Brown: The Member will enjoy the next part of my paragraph as I come to that very issue. *[Laughter.]* Alas, growing up in South Down, I was not able to enjoy those things on a regular basis, with my constituency lacking any active public railway. I believe that, along with Strangford and Mid Ulster, we are the only constituencies that are not included in or touched by the all-island review. I can therefore empathise with our —.

Mr Elliott: Clarification? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Brown: I said "constituencies".

However, I can empathise with our friends in Fermanagh, as that is the only county that is excluded from the review.

While we may lack a public rail network, my constituency is home to Ireland's only full-size heritage railway, the Downpatrick and County Down Railway, a volunteer-led organisation that does incredible work to promote the history and heritage of rail. It is important, given this opportunity, to recognise it in the debate, in addition to other heritage railways at Foyle Valley and Bushmills, because the motion references the role that rail plays in enhancing tourism. We must recognise the fact that, in and of themselves, railways are a draw for tourists,

and not just as a means of transport. While I understand the need for the review to focus on connectivity between main towns and cities, it is important that we do not forget about heritage railways and the forgotten trackbeds that are scattered across our countryside, in many cases, grown over, divided by new roads and housing or repurposed for greenways and cycle paths. Whilst there is no problem in principle with those developments, it is somewhat sad that no statutory protections exist for disused railway lines and the important heritage that they represent. A worthy spin-off of the all-island review could be a look at how we better utilise and care for those important historical assets. The Department for Infrastructure could perhaps begin by looking at how, in partnership with councils, it adequately supports the operation of heritage railway associations, for example.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion and those who tabled the amendment. I am happy to give the subject my full support.

Ms Á Murphy: I take the opportunity to speak on the motion, and I thank those who tabled it.

Over the past number of weeks in the Chamber, I have heard a lot about regional imbalance in the north-west. For decades, our local economy in Fermanagh has been stifled due to lack of investment and infrastructure. Tourism is a key economic driver for many businesses in our towns and villages, from Lisnaskea to Enniskillen and Belcoo to Rosslea. With the right type of investment, we could truly unlock their full potential. I am incredibly lucky to have grown up beside the beautiful shores of Lough Erne. I would be delighted for our local tourism economy to grow so that people could experience our beautiful part of the island and see what we have to offer.

It is clear that we need to improve our public transport network, particularly in the north-west, in order to unlock economic opportunities and improve connectivity for workers and families. We also need to improve our road infrastructure, and I warmly welcome Minister O'Dowd's announcement last week to deliver the long-awaited A4 Enniskillen bypass. That investment will make a significant impact by cutting down journey times as well as traffic and pollution in Enniskillen's town centre. It will be an economic driver for Enniskillen and, indeed, Fermanagh more generally.

There has been much frustration and disappointment in Fermanagh that the draft all-island strategic rail review did not recommend

connections for the county. It is the only county for which rail provision is not recommended.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Á Murphy: No, not at the minute.

Improving public transport in Fermanagh is vital to allow communities and towns in the county to thrive and prosper and to address regional imbalance. We also need to invest in our public transport to help to tackle the climate emergency, as it will have a very important role in tackling emissions and pollution. I appreciate that the Minister will take time to fully consider the all-island rail review, and I am confident that, in developing his departmental plan for the future delivery of rail in the North and across the island, he will look to ensure that the rail service works for and benefits everyone, including the people of Fermanagh.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Gary Middleton.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn

Fiscal Framework/Revenue Raising: Treasury Engagement

1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on negotiations with the UK Government on the fiscal framework and revenue raising in Northern Ireland. (AQO 76/22-27)

7. **Miss McAllister** asked the Minister of Finance to outline what engagement she has had with Treasury to ensure Northern Ireland is funded according to need. (AQO 82/22-27)

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): With the Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 1 and 7 together. I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury setting out my significant concerns in relation to elements of the financial package, including the stipulations on revenue raising. I am meeting the Chief Secretary to the Treasury tomorrow, when I will be pressing for a substantive engagement on how we develop and implement a new fiscal framework. I view that very much as the start of the engagement with Treasury on these matters. The immediate priority is for the British Government to put in place a fair needs-based fiscal floor with an appropriate baseline that recognises our underfunding for the start of the next spending review. It is essential that the right level of funding is provided by Treasury to ensure that we have a sustainable foundation for our public finances going forward.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, Executive Ministers have said various contradictory things about revenue raising, some in print and some verbally. As a constructive Opposition, we have said that we do not think that it would be appropriate to impose punishing new rises on the people of Northern Ireland this year. The Executive will meet this week to discuss the regional rate rise. Can the Minister confirm whether she will be recommending an above- or below-inflation rise in the regional rate?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will know, we have quite a tight time frame within which we

need to set the rate to ensure that rates bills go out for the beginning of April. Hopefully, I will discuss with Executive colleagues this week the rate for the incoming financial year. It would not be appropriate for me to have those discussions in advance of having them with Executive colleagues.

Miss McAllister: I am sure that the Minister will agree that integrated education can be truly transformative for society as a whole. At your meeting with the Treasury tomorrow, will you urge it to reverse its decision to remove ring-fenced funding, and, if it refuses to do so, will you work with the Education Minister to ensure that the capital funding for integrated schools can move ahead?

Dr Archibald: I am still awaiting clarity from Treasury as to what funding has been re-profiled, so I will raise that with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury tomorrow. I share the concerns that the Education Minister has set out. These are important projects. As the Member will know, no Executive parties had anything to do with the re-profiling of the money, but obviously we will have to now deal with the outworkings of whatever comes next.

Mr Kearney: Minister, there is a widely shared view that one effect of Tory economic policy towards the North over the past 14 years has been to turn this region into an economic backwater. Do you agree that the transfer of maximum fiscal powers is essential to economic growth and stability here, and will you press that case at your meeting in London tomorrow and going forward?

Dr Archibald: I think that we all share the view that a decade of Tory austerity has done huge damage to our public services, and I certainly agree that it is vital that we have all the fiscal levers that we can at our disposal. That is why we included additional fiscal powers in the joint Executive letter that was sent to the British Government on 4 February. On fiscal powers, the Member will know that my predecessor, Conor Murphy, had set up the Fiscal Commission to look at the devolution of additional powers. Subsequently, the report of the Fiscal Commission went out for consultation. I will consider the Fiscal Commission's recommendations across a full range of taxes and will then bring proposals to the Executive on additional fiscal powers that we might seek. The fiscal framework is something that I will be raising with Treasury.

Banking Hubs

2. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Finance to outline what discussions she has had with the banking sector to promote banking hubs in towns impacted by bank closures. (AQO 77/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I am deeply concerned about the impact of bank branch closures on local communities, particularly in our rural towns and villages. I have written to the main local banks that operate here, calling for a meeting to discuss how access to vital banking services can be maintained. Increasing the roll-out of banking hubs at pace is a matter that I will raise when I meet with the banks and their industry representatives. I will also, separately, meet the Financial Services Union to discuss the direction of travel with the banking industry.

Mr Harvey: I wish you well on your recent appointment, Minister. The current criteria for assessing the need for banking hubs are quite rigid. Does the Minister have any plans to review the criteria for banking hub eligibility?

Dr Archibald: As I understand it, banking hubs are owned by Cash Access UK, which is a company set up by banks and others and operated by the Post Office. The location of banking hubs is established following an assessment of need by Link, which runs the main cash machine network, and people will be familiar with it. How Link assesses need and the criteria used is an issue that I will raise when I meet the banks and their industry representatives. I will test, with the industry, the assessment process to qualify a community for a banking hub and whether that is suitable.

The Consumer Council has worked in partnership with Link to identify areas that could be considered for banking hubs. By using Link's criteria, the Consumer Council submitted eight community requests, but only four areas qualified, so I very much want to understand that process.

Ms Á Murphy: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Minister, how can we increase the number of banking hubs here?

Dr Archibald: Similar to what I have just set out for Mr Harvey, I very much want to understand the process so that, when towns and villages are left without a bank, they know how to benefit from these hubs. I am very keen to explore what can be done to drive this forward with the banks and their representatives when I have the opportunity to meet them.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her remarks so far. Will the Minister have a conversation with the chief executives of the banks around whether there should be some public service obligation on them to make sure that banking services are retained in our rural and hard-to-reach communities, rather than what seems to be their full-speed attempt to get rid of banking structures just for the sake of saving some money?

Dr Archibald: The Member may be aware that my predecessor, Conor Murphy, convened a banking round table in February 2022. He raised some issues coming out of that around ensuring access to cash and services and stakeholder engagement on managing the change in services. They set those out in a report that was formally presented to Treasury and other regulatory authorities in London, including the Financial Conduct Authority, for consideration. The Member may be aware that the Financial Conduct Authority has made some recommendations around access to cash, and that is something on which I will be keen to engage with it further.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí go nuige seo. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for her responses so far.*] I just noticed that the Bank of Ireland profits this year are up by 92%. That is absolutely incredible. Given that the UK Treasury currently owns over a third of NatWest, will the Minister appeal to the Treasury to intervene to prevent Ulster Bank closures of various branches, particularly in rural areas, as previously referred to by Mr Aiken?

Dr Archibald: The Member will know that my Department and the Assembly have very limited legislative authority in relation to banking and finance. There is a limited role that my Department can play in directly influencing the decisions that are made by local banks, which are, for the most part, commercial. I will be pressing local banks for change where it is needed, and I want to highlight that we are a society that is much more reliant than others on cash — that has been shown in some of the research that has been done — and, in particular, to highlight the needs of the most vulnerable. The round-table discussion highlighted some of the issues, and we have shared those with the Treasury. It is something that I will be keen to engage on further.

Ms Egan: In the constituency that I represent, Barclays has recently announced that it will be vacating its premises on Main Street in Bangor. That follows the loss of several other bank

branches. What will you do to ensure that my constituents who do not feel confident using online banking can access services in person?

Dr Archibald: As I said to Mr McGlone, we have limited powers to direct what the banks do. The decisions that they take are largely made for commercial reasons. Access to cash hubs, and I believe that there is one in Bangor, is a good model when there is a lack of banking services. That is important, and when banks close in my constituency, I am keen to ensure that those leaving our high streets ensure that facilities are available to people. When I meet the banks and their representatives, I will be keen to understand how they ensure that that happens and what the criteria are for access to cash hubs.

Fiscal Devolution/Budget Stability

3. **Ms Ferguson** asked the Minister of Finance for her assessment of the relationship between fiscal devolution and long-term Budget sustainability. (AQO 78/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The immediate priority for Budget sustainability must be to get the British Government to put in place a fair and appropriately baselined needs-based fiscal floor. That must recognise our underfunding for the start of the next spending review. Increased fiscal devolution would allow an Executive increased control over managing their finances and priorities locally. It is not just about raising revenue but about aligning economic and social policy with our tax and spend. Doing that would allow us to make different choices, to change behaviours, to spur economic activity and to raise revenue for public services in a fairer and more progressive way.

As the Independent Fiscal Commission stated in its final report from May 2022:

"Fiscal devolution could help local citizens, through their politicians, make those choices which suit them best."

It would also support long-term Budget sustainability.

Ms Ferguson: Why are our public services unsustainable at present?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will know, we have been underfunded for a number of years, and the British Government recognised that when they recognised that we had a level of need and thus put in place the financial

package. We are the only devolved Administration that are asked to deliver public services while funded below the level of need. It is clear that the current financial package proposed by the British Government does not address that underfunding in a long-term way. It does not provide the basis for the Executive to deliver sustainable public services in the medium to long term, and that is not just my assessment or the assessment of my Executive colleagues but supported by Fiscal Council analysis.

The additional funding is, of course, welcome, but it will provide only a short-term solution to the pressing issues that we now face. We have effectively been asked to accept a lower quality of public services for our people, and that is absolutely untenable. The British Government must provide the foundation on which we can build and deliver sustainable public finances and sustainable public services.

Mr Tennyson: Does the Minister agree that stop-go government is not conducive to the effective fiscal devolution to which many in the Chamber aspire? Will she therefore agree with my party's view that reform of the institutions is necessary in order to deliver the political stability that is required to underpin financial sustainability?

Dr Archibald: The Member will know that we are very much up for being here. We want to be here to do the jobs that we have been elected to do and to represent collectively the people whom we have been elected to represent. We have been very clear that we are very much up for having that conversation about reform. We have the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and that is a forum that we would like to see used to discuss the reform of the institutions.

Mr Allister: The Minister will not exercise the revenue-raising powers that she has at present, yet she demands more fiscal powers. In that rush to spend other people's money, should she not reflect today on the Audit Office's report and its damning indictment of the local incapacity to control expenditure, particularly the incapacity of her predecessor to do so?

Dr Archibald: The Audit Office report highlighted a number of things, including the point that increased costs are not unique to here. Inflationary price rises and the issues across the world that have impacted on supply chains and logistics have had a global effect. There are clearly issues that need to be

addressed on the delivery of major capital projects.

I understand that the head of the Civil Service has set up a cross-departmental working group to look at the issues that have been raised and how we can better deliver capital projects.

2.15 pm

Mr McCrossan: The SDLP would absolutely welcome more fiscal powers for the Assembly, which surely would alleviate some of the pressures that we face. Does the Minister agree that a key plank in ensuring the stability of the Assembly and attracting further powers is to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister not to resign from their positions?

Dr Archibald: I think that I have already addressed that in response to Mr Tennyson. We are very much up for the conversation about the reform of the institutions. As Michelle O'Neill has made clear when responding to such questions, we are in the Executive to deliver for people. That is our intention for the rest of the mandate.

Mr Frew: The Minister talks about fiscal devolution. Will she outline to the House the taxes that she will invent and the taxes that she will raise?

Dr Archibald: The Fiscal Commission made recommendations on potential powers to devolve. Officials are analysing the subsequent consultation. I will look at the full range of powers, consider the recommendations that come back through the consultation and present them to the Executive for their consideration.

Derry City and Strabane District Council: City Deal

4. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Derry City and Strabane District Council city deal. (AQO 79/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The Derry City and Strabane District Council city deal is nearing the end of its business case process and should be signed in the spring or summer of this year. The deal's signing will, obviously, mark the stage at which the funding can be released.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her response. One of the frustrations that the council has highlighted with me is the speed with which the business cases have been

approved. There is frustration that heads of terms could not be signed at an earlier opportunity to draw down funding and allow the projects to make the necessary progress. Will the Minister commit to working with the Economy Minister to bring the city deal projects further forward?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will know, city and growth deals are long-term capital investment programmes. The process requires detailed business case development and approval for each constituent project to ensure the proper use of funds. My officials and those in other Departments have been regularly engaging with deal partners, and they continue to work through the relevant approvals process for the numerous business cases involved in the deal.

I know the views that the Member expresses: they have been expressed to me as well, those concerns around the bureaucracy of the process. I have discussed that with my officials, and they have assured me that they are working at pace to progress business cases. I am certainly up for the conversation with the Economy Minister to ensure that the city and growth deals for Derry and Strabane and the other council areas can all proceed as quickly as possible.

Mr Delargy: Will the Minister provide an update on the medical school and personalised medicine?

Dr Archibald: I understand that work is under way by the Economy and Health Departments, in conjunction with Ulster University, to develop the business case for phase 2, which will see the expansion of the medical school. I know that the Member is supportive of that and has been working on it. I am sure that he will also engage with those Ministers on the expansion of the medical school.

Ms Eastwood: I ask the Minister for an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on public procurement in Northern Ireland, with particular reference to the reforms that were made to the Procurement Board in 2020.

Mr Speaker: That question has no relevance to the initial question, so we will move on.

Ms McLaughlin: Will the Minister commit to allocating all of the required funding to ensure that the city deal project can be pursued in full, rather than being scaled down because of

inflationary pressures and the delay in bringing forward the cases?

Dr Archibald: The Member will be aware that £210 million has been allocated from government: £100 million of city deal funding and £110 million from the inclusive future fund, which will be equally funded by the Executive and the British Government. Derry City and Strabane District Council and project delivery partners are expected to contribute an additional £52 million investment. That speaks to the point that I discussed with Mr Middleton: the business case process has to proceed as quickly as possible. That is something on which I am keen to work with Executive colleagues.

Children's Hospice: Financial Support

5. **Mr Brett** asked the Minister of Finance to outline what support her Department can provide to the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice. (AQO 80/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I very much appreciate the important role that hospices play in delivering specialist care to people with palliative and end-of-life care needs. I welcome the Health Minister's reinstatement of the £85,000 in funding to the Children's Hospice for this year, which had been withdrawn. I know that the Member has been raising the issue. I assure him that I am committed to working with the Health Minister to consider any proposals from the Department of Health to support the Children's Hospice.

Mr Brett: The Minister will be aware of the huge public concern about the reduction in services at the Children's Hospice. I pay tribute to local campaigners, including the 1,200 who have signed my parliamentary petition on the issue. Will the Minister put it on the record that she would welcome a bid from the Health Minister to fully reinstate the services at the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice?

Dr Archibald: I have recently begun the process of setting the Budget for the Executive for the incoming financial year. As part of that, Departments have been invited to make bids for the available funding on the basis of their priorities and needs. It will then be for the Executive to decide how the funding is shared out among Departments and for individual Ministers to decide how to allocate funding in their Departments. I have written to the Health Minister to say that, if services are not considered affordable within the Department of

Health baseline, I would encourage him to make a bid for the additional funding as part of the 2024-25 Budget exercise.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank my colleague from North Belfast for raising the issue. I am glad that the Minister mentioned that she would welcome a bid from the Minister of Health for a more secure funding model for the hospice. Will she raise with him the fact that there is a need for a business case for more sustainable funding not just for the Children's Hospice but for the adult hospices, rather than relying on end-of-year bids to get some sustainability?

Dr Archibald: I received a letter from the Minister of Health asking for assistance in supporting hospices in any way possible. No specific bid for additional funding for hospices was made to the Department. Obviously, the Executive have now agreed the final allocations for the 2023-24 Budget. However, I have written to the Health Minister to say that, if the services are not considered affordable within the Department's baseline, I would encourage him to bid for additional funding. I am keen to discuss that position with the Health Minister when I have one-to-ones with each of my Executive colleagues in the 2024-25 Budget-setting process.

Budget Stability/Revenue Raising

6. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the status of the consultations on measures to support Budget sustainability and raise additional revenue. (AQO 81/22-27)

Dr Archibald: On 20 September, the Secretary of State wrote to permanent secretaries, directing them to launch public consultations on measures to support budget sustainability by raising additional revenue. Those consultations were at various stages when the Executive returned, and it will now be for individual Ministers to consider the outcome of the consultations carried out by their Departments, should they wish to do so.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for your remarks about the ongoing consultations on revenue raising. Other Ministers seem to have taken those off the table. If that is the case, can you give us a status update on which consultations are running and which are not?

Dr Archibald: The consultations are at various stages. They were launched on different dates between October and early January this year, so the consultation periods also varied. There is

a range of closing dates. Those that have closed relate to the overarching financial context, rates relief and hospital car parking charges. As the Member rightly reflected, I am keen to consider the outcome of those and the responses. Over 1,400 responses were submitted to the consultation on rates, and I am keen to understand what people had to say about rates.

Miss Brogan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister also.]* Minister, can you provide an update on the Department's rates revenue-raising consultation, le do thoil *[Translation: please]*?

Dr Archibald: The Department of Finance's rates revenue-raising consultation opened on 7 November and concluded on 13 February. As I have just said to Mr Aiken, 1,400 responses were received. My officials are analysing those with a view to providing me with an initial findings report in March. I am keen to understand what those who responded to the consultation had to say about the rates system. I will consider the analysis from officials in due course.

Mr Durkan: Minister, you await the findings of the rates relief review. Should such findings include an assessment of the impact of getting rid of each relief on household budgets, rent costs and small businesses?

Dr Archibald: The rates revenue-raising consultation was limited in the questions that were asked. However, I understand from officials that a considerable number of responses were received, some of which were lengthy and provided a lot of detailed information in relation to particular sectors.

There is a range of rates relief measures for domestic and non-domestic properties. Some are really important rate reliefs, for example, for people on lower incomes or people who have disabilities and have adaptations to their houses. Others may be a little outdated. We will look at the rates system as a whole, and I am keen to analyse the responses to the rates revenue-raising consultation.

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn. The Member is not in her place to ask question 9.

Non-domestic Rates: Consultation

10. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Finance to outline timescales in relation to the consultation on non-domestic rating measures issued in November 2023. (AQO 85/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The consultation opened on 7 November and concluded on 13 February. A total of 1,400 responses were received on domestic and non-domestic rating measures. My officials are analysing the responses with a view to providing me with the initial findings report in March.

Mr Buckley: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You will be aware of the huge concern in manufacturing regarding the non-domestic rates measures, particularly that of industrial derating. Many in our manufacturing sector have suffered greatly due to rising energy and staff costs and, indeed, post-Brexit trading conditions. Is the Minister aware of those concerns, and what can she do to mitigate them?

Dr Archibald: As I mentioned, we had over 1,400 consultation responses from various sectors. Obviously, the manufacturing sector will be represented in those. I am aware of the concerns that have been raised. I am also aware of the importance of that rates relief to the manufacturing sector, which is successful here. We have a thriving manufacturing sector, and I will carefully consider the responses to the consultation before taking any further steps.

Mr O'Toole: Does the Minister agree that any change, particularly any reduction, in our industrial derating regime would damage the ability to attract investment based on our dual-market access and manufacturing export?

Dr Archibald: I am clear that our rating system should be fair, equitable and progressive, but it should be very much aligned to our economic vision. It should be about creating jobs and supporting businesses. It is important to note that what we are trying to achieve with our rating system is growing the tax base so that more businesses contribute to the rates revenue rather than putting more burden on individual businesses at the minute.

I am very much aware of the concerns that have been raised. I am also very aware of the importance of the manufacturing sector, as I have said, and I will carefully consider the consultation responses.

Budget Stability/Revenue Raising

11. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Finance to outline how much the consultation process on measures to support Budget sustainability and raise additional revenue has cost to date. (AQO 86/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The consultation process on measures to support Budget sustainability and raise additional revenue that my Department was directed to undertake by the Secretary of State cost £2,906-80. That included costs for newspaper advertising and a stakeholder engagement event on 9 November.

Mr Chambers: Minister, thank you for your response. Has the Minister had to issue any ministerial directions to the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance, as there does not appear to be any resolution to the issue of revenue raising?

Dr Archibald: I have not made any ministerial direction to the permanent secretary. If the Member would like to write to me to ask for more detail, I will be happy to provide him with any information that he wishes.

2.30 pm

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

12. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Finance whether she intends to extend the small business rate relief scheme beyond this financial year. (AQO 87/22-27)

Dr Archibald: My Department has extended the small business rate relief scheme in legislation for the forthcoming financial year. That will automatically provide in the region of £20-million worth of assistance to 29,000 small businesses that benefit from a reduction of between 20% and 50% in their rates.

Mr Durkan: Does the Minister have any intention to change the scheme once we reach the year end given the challenges that small businesses in particular have faced over the past few years?

Mr Speaker: Briefly, Minister.

Dr Archibald: I very much recognise the challenges that have faced all businesses, particularly small businesses. As I have said previously, I will consider the responses to the consultation on revenue raising and assess the findings of that exercise. I will look at a number of strategic areas of policy in the weighting system in the weeks ahead.

Mr Speaker: We now move to topical questions.

Shared and Integrated Education: Fresh Start Funding Withdrawal

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance when she and other Ministers found out about the withdrawal of the ring-fenced £150 million for shared and integrated education, given that he found out that it had been hacked away when he got an email from the principal of his son's primary school to say that they would not be able to proceed with the long-planned construction of a new school. (AQT 51/22-27)

Dr Archibald: I have already reflected in my responses that I am still waiting for clarity from Treasury about what money of that £708 million that is loosely earmarked for transformation has been repackaged. As I said, I share the concerns that the Education Minister outlined about those projects. The Executive did not sign up to this; we were very clear in the talks in Hillsborough that we understood that some money was being repackaged. We have yet to receive details of that. We will be left with picking up the tab and trying to deal with the outworkings of that.

Mr O'Toole: I am afraid that people watching will find it absolutely astounding that no Minister has any idea what has been agreed in relation to reallocating existing money. Can she, or any other Minister, — *[Interruption.]* There is chuntering from the sidelines from parties that would rather not wait for questions about important issues.

Can she, or any other Minister, give a guarantee to public-sector bodies and voluntary organisations that are worried about what the other £400 million of potentially reallocated funding by the UK Treasury will be?

Mr Speaker: I will do the rebukes, Mr O'Toole.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for that question. As I have stated, I am awaiting clarity from the Treasury about what exactly has been repackaged. We understand from officials that there are a number of funding streams. Fresh Start is one, and there are things that the British Government is responsible for, like the Levelling Up Fund and the new deal.

I will await clarity from the Treasury. I will raise it with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury tomorrow, making it clear that we need to have an understanding of it. It will then be for the

Executive, as part of the Budget-setting process for 2024-25, to deal with bids from the other Ministers and to make decisions about how to allocate that funding.

Office Estate Review: Consultation Update

T2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the office estate review consultation that was launched in 2022. (AQT 52/22-27)

Dr Archibald: The Department is responsible for the management and strategic planning of the NICS office estate, which includes ensuring that the estate meets the changing needs of the Civil Service. In 2023, the Department of Finance commenced a programme of work to reduce the in-scope office estate footprint by about 40% over the next five years. That will help to reduce the Department's carbon footprint and support the journey towards decarbonisation. The Department of Finance exited 12 owned and leased buildings during 2023-24 and plans to exit a number of leased buildings at the earliest opportunity. The Member is probably aware that a number of significant sites are for sale, including Netherleigh House, Clarence Court and Victoria Hall.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. I note that the consultation says that 70% of the estate cost is in the greater Belfast area, which means that only 30% is in the wider parts of Northern Ireland. Is there any indication that that will be rebalanced so that more of those estates are based in the remainder of Northern Ireland?

Dr Archibald: As I stated, there is a plan to reduce our footprint by 40%. That very much reflects not only the changing needs of the Civil Service but people's changing work patterns. The Member will be aware that a number of Connect2 hubs were established by the previous Finance Minister. There has been poor uptake of those. I want to understand the use of our office estate across the North and to look at how we can best use that footprint.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Justice: Effective Funding

T4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance, after wishing her well in her new role, whether she will commit to funding the Department of Justice effectively to deliver the

Police Service and number of officers required to manage the current threat, particularly in light of the recent security alert in her constituency that reflected the pressure and threat that the PSNI is under. (AQT 54/22-27)

Dr Archibald: We are about to embark on the Budget-setting process for 2024-25. As part of that, I will meet each Minister with responsibility. I will engage with the Justice Minister on her needs and those of her Department and the bodies in it. I am sure that she will make the case for what she requires to deliver services.

Mr K Buchanan: So the Justice Minister has not communicated with you to reflect my concerns?

Dr Archibald: The Budget-setting process is ongoing. Departments were asked to come back to the Department of Finance by the end of February with their initial pressures for the incoming year. I will then embark on a one-to-one process of engagement with Ministers on the pressures facing their Department and their bids and priorities for the incoming financial year. It will then be for the Executive to decide the overall Budget.

Mr Speaker: I call Danny Baker.

Mr Baker: My question was asked and answered. Thank you.

County Hall, Coleraine

T6. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance, after welcoming her in her new role, whether she has considered the future of Coleraine's County Hall within the office estate review and to state whether a building survey has been carried out recently. (AQT 56/22-27)

Dr Archibald: That issue has not come up with me yet. I will be happy to write to the Member with further details.

Mr Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer and her commitment to replying. County Hall has a capacity of 700, but only a fraction of it is occupied. Would it be feasible to move the small number of staff from County Hall to Jubilee House in Ballykelly, which is also under-occupied? Will the Department enter discussions with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council to promote an office establishment there or, better still, give the building to the council and let it maintain it?

Dr Archibald: I will be happy to engage with the Member further on that. I am familiar with the buildings that he talked about, as they are in my constituency. The Department of Finance's vision is to be able to move between different Departments' buildings so that we maximise the potential of the office space to which we have access and make best use of it. We also want to ensure that our office space is as carbon-friendly as it can be so that we contribute to our climate targets.

Unpaid Rates: Collection

T7. **Mr Honeyford** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the action that she is taking to collect the £174 million of unpaid rates from last year, which was reported in the media earlier this week. (AQT 57/22-27)

Dr Archibald: Over £1.5 billion of rates have been collected in this financial year. That is the largest amount collected by Land and Property Services (LPS) in a rating year, and over £140 million more than last year. Rating debt has increased since 2020. The Member will not be surprised that a number of factors were responsible, including the COVID pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and the cost-of-doing-business crisis.

LPS proactively addresses rating debt through the rates billing, collection and recovery cycle. As at 4 February 2024, almost 11,000 ratepayers have an agreed payment plan and pay their rates over a longer period. Those people are reflected in the £174 million worth of debt. Legal debt recovery actions are taken by LPS for persistent non-payment and when ratepayers fail to engage with LPS on their rating debt. Approximately 40% of all rating debt prior to 31 March 2023 has been subject to legal proceedings. The Member will know that there were difficulties with legal proceedings during the pandemic.

LPS has been robustly implementing its debt recovery strategy, which aims to reduce rating debt year-on-year.

Mr Honeyford: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she agree that an overly punitive rates increase this year would set back efforts to recoup the money?

Dr Archibald: Obviously, a number of figures have been quoted in the media. Some of them would, from my perspective, be incredibly punitive on households and businesses. It will be for the Executive to decide what rate will be set, and I will have that discussion with

Executive colleagues later this week. We have to get the balance right and be able to deliver high-quality public services without putting the burden on the hard-working workers, families and businesses who are already struggling with the costs of living and doing business.

not get too excited. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while there is a change at the top Table.

Irish Government Funding

T9. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance, after welcoming her meeting last week with Minister McGrath, on the day on which the Irish Government announced their funding package for the North, to state how the €800 million package will help the Executive to carry out their work. (AQT 59/22-27)

Dr Archibald: It was really positive to have that engagement with the Irish Finance Minister. The investment by the Irish Government of €800 million is significant. For me, it very much demonstrates the power of joint working to deliver benefits for people across the island. It will make a significant contribution to the development of our economy and infrastructure, particularly in the north-west, where the A5 project is, and in border areas. It will also support the redevelopment of Casement Park and will create jobs, connect communities and unlock economic benefit. The investment includes funding for very positive things — tackling educational underachievement; female entrepreneurship — that we share a view on, North and South. Tomorrow, I will meet the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Paschal Donohoe, and I very much look forward to similar engagement with him.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I agree with her about working across the island for the betterment of citizens here. When is the North/South Ministerial Council next due to meet?

Dr Archibald: Unless I have received notification while I have been in the Chamber, we do not have a date for the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. It is important that that engagement and those regular meetings, in plenary and other forms, begins to take place again. That will, hopefully, happen in the very near future.

Mr Speaker: The next question was tabled by Mr Stewart. He is not in his place, so that was the last question. Minister, you are relieved of your duties.

We have a delegation from the Maldives in the Gallery, which is very welcome. There are no plans for a reciprocal visit for Members, so do

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Dr Aiken] in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

All-island Rail Network

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the transformative impact that expansion of an all-island rail network will have on communities across Ireland; welcomes the commitment to the all-island strategic rail review from the Executive and the Irish Government; acknowledges that the delivery of accessible, sustainable and modern rail infrastructure is a key driver of economic growth, enhances our tourism industry and will drive regionally balanced investment in left-behind communities; further acknowledges that investing in high-quality rail is critical to reaching net zero carbon emissions targets by 2050; calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to provide an immediate update on the phase 3 Derry to Coleraine feasibility study; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Irish Government to produce a costed implementation plan this year, to deliver rail options to every county in Ireland. — [Mr Durkan.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "2050;" and insert:

"believes the UK Government should provide funding and major project expertise to support the work of the all-island strategic rail review, as recommended by the Department for Transport's Union connectivity review; calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to provide an immediate update on the phase 3 Derry to Coleraine feasibility study; and further calls on the Minister, following publication of the final all-island strategic rail review report, to work with the Executive and the UK and Irish Governments to produce a costed implementation plan." — [Mrs Erskine.]

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the amendment tabled by members of our party. Since the 1950s, the Northern Ireland rail network has been cut by some 450 miles. It is evident that we have suffered historical underinvestment in our rail network and services in comparison with regions across the United Kingdom. We do not have any railway electrification, and there are clear disparities in access to services in specific areas, particularly the north-west and

Fermanagh. There is no doubt that it is unacceptable that such a disparity in services exists across Northern Ireland, in the rail network and across our infrastructure network in general.

For that reason, the DUP recognises that the Union connectivity review and the all-island strategic rail review present a real opportunity and a vision to improve connectivity throughout the British Isles, benefiting our economies and unlocking growth and job opportunities that should benefit all our communities.

2.45 pm

The motion does little to reflect the importance of the Union connectivity review and the all-island strategic rail review, nor does it make any reference at all to the UK Government and the need for funding investment. As my Fermanagh colleague Mrs Erskine said, we need to move beyond the ideas phase and ambitions and on to delivery. Despite its absence from the motion, there also needs to be a recognition of available Executive allocations, going forward.

The DUP has long championed the full implementation of the Union connectivity review, recognising the effect that good transport and connectivity across the United Kingdom can have on economic growth, jobs and all aspects of our society. The 'Union Connectivity Review: Final Report' welcomed the all-island strategic rail review, and it is important to see that in the context of a British Isles-wide approach. The £5 million that was allocated by the Government in response to the Union connectivity review is welcome, but it goes nowhere near far enough to fund the progress and preparation that is needed for real change.

The previous Infrastructure Minister's ambivalence to that review may go some way to explaining the lack of progress on the north-west and Enniskillen projects. As a party, we will commit to work closely with the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Minister for Infrastructure in order to ensure that those projects get off the ground as soon as possible and are able to deliver the infrastructure that Northern Ireland needs and deserves.

Since I first entered politics, back in 2010, the change in the city that I represent has been incredible, with the building of the Peace Bridge, the new greenways and the first fully electric metro bus service in the UK. Those are

positive changes, and now we need to see greater progress on rail connectivity. We need an urgent update on the phase 3 Londonderry to Coleraine feasibility study. It is encouraging to see the delivery of the north-west transport hub, but more can and should be done.

We also need better connectivity between our airports and our sea ports. That can be done with investment that will deliver long-term economic and environmental benefits. The restoration of the railway line from Londonderry to Portadown would link the towns of Strabane, Omagh and Dungannon, providing an opportunity for greater connectivity across the Province. There is also an acceptance in the draft report from the all-island rail review that individual projects will need further feasibility studies and environmental assessments. There is no doubt that significant amounts of funding will be required to move things along, but we must invest in order to reap the future benefits.

In closing, I would like to pay tribute to all of the many campaigners who, over the years, have put in the effort and voiced their concerns. I include Into the West in that, which has been at the forefront with its campaigns. We look forward to working with the Minister and to seeing some of this stuff becoming a reality.

Mr Gildernew: I was listening in earlier, and I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate. It was extremely foolhardy that rail was taken out of parts of Tyrone. In the south Tyrone part of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, we had a connection through Dungannon and the Moy, as well as a connection through Caledon, but that is all gone. That left our county bereft of any rail whatsoever. I know that Fermanagh was left out of the all-island strategic rail review, and all those issues need to be addressed.

I ask the Minister to comment on the fact that those rail connections are not just an economic driver but provide a social connection, and they link communities in a way that, we now realise, is much more environmentally and economically beneficial than was recognised, perhaps, in other times.

Mr Honeyford: As Alliance economy spokesperson, I welcome the motion and the amendment, and I will speak to the motion from an economic point of view, in terms of delivering connectivity across this island, which is needed to renew and reshape our economy, provide growth and create jobs here in the North of the island. Good connectivity and infrastructure enables the economy to grow, and it sets the platform on which our economic growth can be built. The Belfast to Dublin

economic corridor is vital to that expansion, and, as a Member for Lagan Valley, I also want to see that growth happen in my constituency with the development of new economic zones in Blaris and into the Maze/Long Kesh site, which are connected on the island and would support achieving economic regional balance.

The all-island review, if realised, will help deliver vital strategic economic growth here and, importantly, help encourage further tourism to come north, building on the 70% of our tourists who fly into Dublin Airport. A rail connection at Belfast International Airport is also vital for the connectivity of the business community, for tourism and for my constituents in the village through which the line passes. Given that Dublin Airport is practically at capacity with passenger numbers, there is also an opportunity for both Belfast airports to capture the significant growth in numbers and to realign passenger numbers across the island. That would create an opportunity for new routes and new markets locally. The hourly service between Belfast and Dublin is also key to our having a frequent, reliable service that will attract more growth and boost our economy, and that is absolutely vital if we are to change how people travel and are to create modal shift. Connectivity is therefore absolutely key.

Ultimately, what I am saying is that public transport is a driver of economic opportunity. I say that not solely in environmental terms, but our climate change commitments for 2030 and beyond are critical, and there is a critical need for the Minister to focus on that modal shift across Northern Ireland. Government investment in transport over a sustained period has been seriously lacking, but I hope that the new Grand Central station development that is under way marks the first phase of delivery and leads to a change of direction.

Although the review is welcome, it is a pity that it is limited solely to rail and does not include a rapid transit system once people reach each city. That could have been included, as could the development of further linkage systems, such as the expansion of the Glider network in Belfast and looking at having a similar network in other towns and cities, where it would improve the existing network, increase connectivity and encourage economic growth. Again, that would support economic regional rebalancing.

It is not just about linking towns and cities but about linking places of learning, places of work and medical centres. It is also about how people, when they arrive somewhere, complete

their journey, so let us be ambitious, be confident in our ability and be open to opportunities to grow. That is something that I feel has been missed and something that the Minister should look at seriously. For example, for my constituency of Lagan Valley, a simple route like the Glider route in Belfast — it can be replicated in other places where train links end — could, in Lisburn, connect the train station to major industry, the health centre, schools and retail centres, thus allowing people to move quickly across the area.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. I am just wondering to where the Glider route would go in Fermanagh. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): The Member has another minute and still no Glider.

Mr Honeyford: I thank the Member for the extra minute. I absolutely recognise that Fermanagh has been missed out and that we should be looking to see how doing that can be configured. I take the point about the Glider: it is something that we could use. Rather than a bus service, which is from centre to source, the Glider crosses a town or city, and I have no doubt that that model could be used in the Member's area in Enniskillen.

The year 2028 is marked in our diaries, and hosting the Euros gives us the focus of mind to deliver at least the low-hanging fruit of this all-island plan in time for the tournament, and it should focus our minds. The Knockmore line — the proposed circle line — from Lisburn to Antrim that connects the airport should be reopened, and that should happen in time for the Euros. The delivery of the new fleet of Enterprise trains and the announcement that those trains will run hourly is another element that should allow visiting fans who come to this island to travel between Belfast and Dublin very simply and very quickly. That would be a start, and we could at least begin to move towards delivery of this transport policy, meaning that the legacy of the Euros would be felt for generations to come.

Mr Robinson: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on what I and many others see as a vital public service. Our rail and bus networks throughout Northern Ireland are a lifeline to thousands of people, especially those who avail themselves of a SmartPass. As an MLA who represents the north-west, I know that we have been largely left behind in investment per head of population on public transport. Since the 1950s, the Northern Ireland rail network has been cut from 754 miles to 297

miles. Many areas have been cut off from the rail network since the closure of their local railway line or station more than five decades ago.

Some 6% of workers travel using public transport, whilst 82% travel to work by car, which is the highest number for any UK region. In the rest of the United Kingdom, public transport is used by 18% of workers to travel to work, and just 68% of workers commute by car. I pay tribute to previous Ministers who had the foresight to save the Londonderry to Belfast line. In the not-too-distant past, there was pressure to close the line between Coleraine and Londonderry. I am very glad that that did not happen, and that, since then, we have seen an uptake in the number of people using the rail network. The fact that passengers can travel from Belfast to Dublin by train in just over two hours, while it takes around the same time to travel between Belfast and Londonderry, despite its being a significantly shorter distance, highlights the significant regional imbalance. It is almost twice as fast to travel by road between Belfast and Londonderry as it is by rail. Over three million journeys were made on the Londonderry railway line in 2019, showing that there is a clear demand for good transport links to and from that region.

The motion's sponsors fail to mention in the body of the motion another important report: the Union connectivity review report. That report was published a while back, and it should be embraced by the Executive and the Minister. It highlighted the huge task at hand for public transport, and that, in 2017-18, local transport and rail received funding of £84 per head, which was the lowest amount of all the regions of the UK and 27% of the UK average expenditure. Public transport in Northern Ireland has experienced decades of underinvestment, leaving some elements of public transportation unable to adequately meet current and potential user needs. That contributes to the reliance on private, rather than public, transport.

Northern Ireland has a less extensive rail network than many regions and nations of the UK. In addition to long-term planning and funding, people will need to feel that public transport options are fast, affordable, safe, modern and, more importantly, available for the journeys that they make. That will require the Executive to have a long-term transport infrastructure plan, with the backing of the UK Government to provide confidence that funding will be available to deliver it.

I would like to state, from an East Londonderry point of view, that there should be a new railway halt in the north-west to promote its role as an economic hub — specifically, to Londonderry airport — and that, as part of the future investment that is being considered from Londonderry to Belfast and beyond, a Limavady spur should be examined. The success of the Bellarena halt investment has shown that the "Build it and they will come" approach has paid off. I implore the Minister to get on with providing the long-awaited new upgrade to car parking facilities at Bellarena.

Mr O'Toole: I thank my colleague Mark Durkan for bringing the motion to the Assembly. We can hear the engagement, breadth of interest and passion that there is about our rail network, its past, its, at times frustrating, present, and its huge potential. We are debating a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to look again at how we move people and goods — the goods part is important — across the island. We can all look back, and it is important that we do, at a century of, frankly, devastation of the rail network on the island, particularly in the North and, particularly but not exclusively, to cross-border lines.

We can all regret that.

3.00 pm

We cannot get the train from here. The old Downpatrick and County Down Railway, which runs to my home town of Downpatrick — it was mentioned earlier — is now the Comber greenway. If we drive down the dual carriageway, we get to the Ulster Transport Museum in Cultra. We can look at the map and see how lines, connections and opportunity slowly wither, dry up and drop off over the 20th century. To my knowledge, this is the first time in over a century that a Chamber on these islands has discussed a strategic investment plan for the rail network on this island. As well as looking back, it is important that we look forward to a 21st-century of, I hope, new connections and possibilities.

In the last century, as I said, we saw decades of scaling back the network. As recently as 20 years ago, we closed the line from Lisburn to Antrim, which was mentioned by Mr Honeyford. As others have said, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan have lost their rail networks entirely. I will come on to the Fermanagh point, because it is an important one, and it is one of the reasons why we have some difficulty with the amendment. In the past 20 years, we have seen the tide begin to turn. The Belfast to Derry line, referenced multiple

times, has seen passenger numbers grow, and people have regularly used the famous phrase from 'Field of Dreams': "Build it, and they will come."

In the most recent stats available, the NI Railways network saw almost 13 million passengers use its service, while the pre-COVID high of 15 million also marked a high in NI Railways' 50 years of existence. However, as an island, we are among the most car-dependent regions in western Europe, with almost 70% of journeys in the North made by car, while only 2% of journeys are made by public transport. That is, bluntly, shameful. It is our fault, as legislators, as the people who do public policy, for not providing that option for our people. Between 2005 and 2015, capital spending on the railway network amounted to just £22 a head, far behind Great Britain, which spent five times as much over the same period. Our railways have thrived in spite of some of the underfunding by previous generations. They have thrived not just because people wanted to use them but because of the dedicated work of campaigners, including Into the West, which was mentioned.

I am proud that it was an SDLP Minister, Nichola Mallon, who, when in the previous Executive, announced and drove forward — no pun intended; perhaps I should not use the verb to drive — moved forward the all-island rail review. The Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Transport in the South published their draft report last year, which estimated a £31 billion investment over the next few decades.

Our motion is not about saying that this will all be done today, this week or next year; it is about saying that we need to start the work now. You and your officials, Minister, need — I hope that you will — to start the work of planning and costing the plan. That is what the motion is all about. The deep, profound, structural challenges of regional imbalance and climate change that we have talked about today demand no less. That vision in the all-island strategic rail review is one that can inspire us across the island.

I will speak briefly about the amendment because it has come up a couple of times. The difficulty that we have with it is nothing to do with the text of the amendment, which is pretty unobjectionable. The difficulty is in what it takes out of our original motion. A critical few words in our motion are "every county in Ireland", which includes the wonderful, glorious lakeland county of Fermanagh. Your amendment, Mrs Erskine, removes Fermanagh, I am afraid — through the

Speaker. That is why we have some difficulty with it, not because of any views that we have on the Union connectivity review. There are some positive things in that. I am happy to give way, if the Member wants me to.

Mrs Erskine: Dramatic pause. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Go ahead.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Member for giving way. It should be a given that we will promote every county in Northern Ireland. The Member should understand that it is a given that we would want to do that, as we have indicated. The UK connectivity report includes County Fermanagh.

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

Mr O'Toole: Thank you very much, Deputy Speaker. It is not a given, I am afraid, and it is important that our original motion is clear. I do not dispute much of what is in the amendment. Most of what is in the amendment is sensible, but it removes the reference to "every county in Ireland." This is an all-island rail review, not just Northern Ireland, and that matters to us and others. This is in an all-island context. There is a both-islands context, which we acknowledge, but I am afraid that the change that the amendment makes to our motion means that we have difficulty with it.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I want to say that this is inspirational. It should allow our people, particularly our young people, to look beyond the horizon and see not just anxiety about the climate emergency and frustration at the limitations of politics here. It is something we can do that is transformational, not just a modal shift out of cars and into transport or connecting the island in a way that we have not seen before but something transformational and hopeful that politics can do. It is long-term stuff, and why else do we seek office? Why else do we get into politics other than to do things such as this?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Toole: I urge Members to support our motion. We spend a lot of time on the past in this place; let us start building the future.

Mr McNulty: I am pleased to have the opportunity to support the motion. I thank those who tabled it: my SDLP party colleagues

Matthew O'Toole, Mark Durkan, Sinéad McLaughlin and Daniel McCrossan. The all-island strategic rail review commissioned by our former Infrastructure Minister Nichola Mallon presented a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform rail infrastructure on the island. It is heartening that the groundwork laid by former Minister Mallon is now taking shape.

The spectrum of opportunities in the all-island strategic rail review will provide a huge social, environmental and economic uplift for communities throughout the length and breadth of the island. For people in my constituency, the re-establishment of rail connectivity to Armagh city will be a game changer for commuters travelling to Belfast and Dublin, and the enhancement of capacity for services from Newry will help to close the gap of disadvantage that commuters in Newry currently face relative to their counterparts in other parts of the North.

Beyond enhancing commuter connectivity, full implementation of the report would mark a quantum leap forward, empowering ordinary people to push back against the climate crisis. Full implementation of the report would forge an unprecedented partnership approach between the Government and ordinary people in decarbonising our society and transitioning away from unsustainable transport practices.

Every one of us has heard ad infinitum of the pressing need to take individual responsibility for the environmental challenges that we face, but, often, ordinary people are left uncertain as to how behavioural changes on their part can have a meaningful impact on the crisis. Therein lies the fundamental challenge in meaningfully combating the climate crisis: the fact that there is a responsibility on the Government to provide citizens with the tools to play their part in addressing that climate crisis. The review provides transformative investment to make sustainable practices accessible to all.

In addition to the environmental impact of the transformation, the potential for profound social and economic uplift must be seized. Let us take tourism as an example. International tourists who travel to this island overwhelmingly arrive at Dublin Airport as their point of entry. Without adequate infrastructure to access areas such as the Ring of Gullion, the Mourne Mountains, the glens of Antrim, and the ancient city of Armagh, the size of the economic footprint left by international tourists will inevitably be diminished. In that respect, implementation of the review serves to facilitate regional equity and ensure that every nook and cranny of our

island, not just the urban centres, is accessible to overseas visitors.

The tangible social impact of implementation is also to be welcomed. Implementation of the review will bring jobs and investment to parts of the North that are crying out for them through laying new lines, building new stations, manufacturing new equipment and transport infrastructure. Beyond that, it will address the significant and stubborn issues in respect of rural isolation. At present, transport infrastructure for people in places such as Derrynoose in rural County Armagh does not provide reliable access to urban centres. It leaves people with no option but to use their car to get from A to B. I think particularly of our elderly generation and the social isolation that that reality causes, especially if they have limited or no access to private transport. Whether it is visiting friends and family, travelling to a theatre, going on a family trip to the zoo or undertaking a trip to have dinner with grandchildren who are at university, the cost of a taxi is prohibitive. If someone has a car of their own, more often than not, driving to the nearest train station seems pointless, because, by the time that they get there, they are already 60% of the way to their destination. The real and tangible difference that an overhaul of rail connectivity could bring for people in isolated rural areas would be immeasurable.

I have acknowledged the sterling work of former Infrastructure Minister, my SDLP colleague Nichola Mallon, in her leadership in commissioning the review. The recommendations in it are far-reaching and transformational. The investment required to realise its full potential is significant, but, with 75% of the capital commitment coming from the Irish Government, it is truly a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restore Ireland's rail infrastructure.

If I have one message for the Infrastructure Minister today, it is this: grasp the opportunity with both hands and progress the report and the project at pace and ensure that the transformational impact of the strategic rail review is felt in communities in every part of the North. Like you, Minister, I may not see it, but we must build a legacy for the future. I will take a line from my predecessor Séamus Mallon's book, 'A Shared Home Place':

"A society grows great when old men"

— and women —

"plant trees in whose shade they know they will never sit."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): As it is indicated that there is only one remaining Member to speak, I have decided to exercise the grace period in accordance with Standing Order 17(4).

Mr Carroll: I hope that that trend continues. Thank you.

The state of Ireland's rail network is the perfect representation of the ruling-class delusion that spending cuts and the managed decline of public services is not only financially prudent but necessary to inspire confidence in business elites and stimulate economic growth. People will no doubt be familiar with, as was referred to earlier, the British civil servant Richard Beeching, who led the charge in cutting railway services in Britain. The same cuts were then imposed on people in the North. Like much else emanating from London's political elite, that has been an unmitigated disaster for working-class communities. If you look at the experience of the north-west and of rural communities, which have been virtually cut off from the rail network, you can see the effects of those nonsensical policies.

First, it must be said that public spending cuts, including cuts to public transport, have been absolutely devastating for deprived areas across the island. Secondly, the impact of a broken public transport network wreaks havoc on people's health and on our environment on a daily basis. Members will know that air pollution is one of the biggest killers worldwide and is responsible for over seven million deaths every year. Not only is it slashing years off people's lives but it is costing the NHS billions of pounds every year to treat people — often poor people — who have been impacted by respiratory diseases and cancer. Therefore, when Governments across these islands, including the Executive, cut public transport spending, they cost the public purse more money in the long run, not to mention the cost to people's health.

The Tories have spent around £4 billion a year on fuel duty cuts, incentivising the use of private cars whilst privatising the public transport network. However, it is not just the Tories. Time and again, we have seen Translink fares hiked and services reduced in real terms. Last year, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis — one of the worst ever — Translink fares were disgracefully hiked. The decline of public transport is happening on Stormont's watch, and, as we speak, the Department for Infrastructure is considering ending, limiting or restricting free travel for the over-60s. I call on the Minister today to bin that proposal. People

have made clear their opposition to it through protests and thousands of submissions to the permanent secretary before the Minister came into office, so he should bin that proposal.

All the science tells us that we should encourage more people to use public transport to cut emissions, as Members have said, and avert a climate catastrophe, yet Stormont seems to be heading in the completely opposite direction. Where other countries are moving to totally free public transport — heavily, in some cases — we are hurtling towards disaster in the opposite direction. Analysis shows that Belfast is the most car-dependent city in the UK, with more than 70% of all journeys in Belfast taken by car. We need to urgently turn the tide if we are to meet our climate emission targets.

We will support the motion today, obviously. The need for an all-Ireland railway system could not be more stark, but such expansion cannot be coupled with austerity measures, where we take with one hand and cut with the other, that will simultaneously discourage the use of public transport and impact on people's health and on our environment. We need to address all those issues if we are to move towards a public transport network that is free at the point of service and paid for through progressive taxation.

On the amendment, I generally support putting more demands on the British Government. They have underfunded this place for decades, and any pressure on them is good. However, the amendment takes the pressure and the focus off the Department for Infrastructure. Maybe that is a tactic by Executive parties, or maybe it is a mistake: I do not know. From our end, it is problematic for that reason, and we cannot support it. We are happy to support the motion unamended.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Minister, you have 15 minutes.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank the SDLP for tabling the motion on the all-island strategic rail review and the future of rail services across the island, and I thank the DUP for tabling its amendment.

3.15 pm

I am keen that we are ambitious around our rail network, and that we maximise the potential of rail to support social and economic development and the environmental sustainability of our transport system. The rail review is an ambitious piece of work that has

the potential to transform our rail network. It offers an opportunity to deliver real and lasting change for people, communities and our island economy through faster speeds; greatly improved frequency; new routes, particularly across the west and north; and widened accessibility and connectivity across the island.

The benefits of enhanced rail connections are many. Investment in the railway drives jobs and growth, stimulates development and regeneration, and unlocks housing supply by creating better transport links. Those links can bring communities previously cut off from public transport within easy reach of towns and cities, boosting access to services, jobs and education, and helping to address regional imbalance.

Rail also has an important role to play in tackling the climate emergency: it has a lower environmental impact than any other mode of transport as it emits less carbon and consumes less energy. Decarbonisation of the rail network will further enhance the benefits and is a key objective of the review. An improved, expanded and accessible rail network across the island will also deliver environmental benefits by encouraging modal shift, and, in the process, reducing congestion and emissions and improving safety.

Some of the key recommendations and interventions in respect of the North include: decarbonisation of the rail network, including electrification of the Belfast to Dublin line; frequency, speed and capacity improvements on the Belfast to Dublin and Belfast to Derry lines; and new lines from Belfast to Newry and Portadown to Derry. On Mr Durkan's comment about the speed of the Portadown to Derry connection, to clarify, it is planned for that rail network to have a 200 km per hour speed, so it is a high-speed connection. There will also be cross-border routes from Derry to Letterkenny and Portadown to Mullingar; reinstatement of the railway line between Lisburn and Antrim, which will enable Belfast International Airport to be connected to the rail network; and improvement of existing rail connections at George Best Belfast City Airport.

I am conscious that concerns have been raised about the proposed lack of connection to City of Derry Airport. That is something to be looked at as the review moves on. We are talking about an investment over 25 or 30 years. As has been said, there will be a number of Ministers in position before this comes to its conclusion. Now that we have opened up the debate about improving our railway services, there are huge

opportunities for connections, particularly to our ports and airports.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr O'Dowd: A very quick one.

Mr O'Toole: I have a couple of quick low-hanging fruit questions. As regards Casement Park for 2028, will the Minister work with his officials on Balmoral station, which could be upgraded with better signage to get people to Casement Park, and Sydenham station, which has very poor signage to direct people to Belfast City Airport?

Mr O'Dowd: I note that, in the past hour and a half in the Chamber, we have spent a few billion pounds. A few billion pounds was also spent in the previous debate. I would like to prioritise everything but, in fairness to Members, you will have to start prioritising, because we do not have billions to spend.

Mr O'Toole: You are the Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: You are the Opposition. You draw me up a list of things that you do not want me to spend money on and leave me with the things that I can spend money on.

Finalising the rail review that puts us on the path to delivering these interventions is one of my key priorities as the Infrastructure Minister.

While the recommendations, which will grow and enhance our rail network, are to be welcomed, I recognise that many are disappointed by the omission of rail connections in Fermanagh. Several Members have raised that point today. The provision of rail services to Fermanagh and, in particular, Enniskillen was considered as part of the review. However, the review reported that the proposed railway line did not appear to stimulate sufficient demand to support a rail service within the time frame for the review. Therefore, in the view of the report's authors, a rail service to Enniskillen would be unlikely to represent good value for money at this time. The review, instead, found that a higher-frequency integrated bus link between Enniskillen and rail stations, such as Omagh and Dungannon, may provide a better public transport option. However, my officials continue to explore with the appointed review consultants the viability of rail services to Fermanagh, and will report back to me on that matter in the coming weeks. I am keen to extend the rail network to as many parts of the country as possible. While the review extends

to 2050, the intention is to build in review points over that time period. Should the latest analysis continue to report that rail services to Fermanagh are not viable in the time frame of the review, those review periods will allow for consideration of the decision at a later stage.

The review is an excellent example of joint collaborative working on cross-border priorities. I am committed to continuing that partnership by working with southern colleagues to realise the extent of the ambitions of the review. Discussions between my officials and their southern counterparts continued even while the Assembly was down, and I will engage with Minister Ryan next week on this and a number of other matters.

If the review's recommendations are implemented in full in the coming decades, the capital cost is estimated to be over £30 billion in 2023 prices. For the North, the total cost estimate is £7.7 billion, which is approximately £0.31 billion per annum over a 25-year period.

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for giving way. He has just talked about the costs, and I welcome what he has said about officials engaging, particularly with regard to Fermanagh. That will also increase cost. Will he accept that engaging with the Department for Transport in Westminster is also needed in relation to that cost?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no difficulty in engaging with the Department for Transport, and I will come to the connectivity review in my remarks shortly.

There is a responsibility on the British Government to help fund this project and other transport projects in the North. We pay taxes to the Treasury, so we have all invested in the tax regime, and we expect a better return on it. As was noted by the Finance Minister earlier, it has now been accepted that we are underfunded. I will certainly engage with the Department for Transport on this project and other projects that I believe the British Government should be investing in.

This is a significant investment that can deliver multiple benefits for our people, our economy and our environment. Given the scale of the interventions and the magnitude of transformation involved, delivering those benefits will undoubtedly be challenging and require support from my Executive colleagues and the necessary resources being made available to my Department. We will also look at all avenues of funding available, given the

importance of the work for economic activity and connectivity.

The review was released for public consultation from July to September last year. My officials are working closely with their southern colleagues to address the issues raised through the consultation and finalise the review. However, the finalisation of the review is only the starting point. The review's recommendations provide policymakers and Ministers in both jurisdictions with an evidence-based framework to inform future investment decisions. More detailed work will be needed to test the feasibility and affordability of the recommendations and guide future investment decisions. One of the key initial steps will be the prioritisation of the review's recommendations and the development of an implementation plan. My officials are already engaging with their southern colleagues on those matters.

On ongoing rail developments, my Department has in recent years invested over £100 million in major rail projects in the north-west. That includes phases 1 and 2 of the Coleraine to Derry track relay project, totalling over £70 million, as well as the north-west multi-modal transport hub, which amounts to over £27 million. However, I accept that more can be done, and that is why my Department approved the business case for phase 3 of the Coleraine to Derry project in November 2022 and made available over £97 million to Translink to take that project forward.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for giving way and appreciate those figures. Can the Minister commit to ruling out any changes in the concessionary fares scheme that would restrict, limit or stop free travel for people aged over 60?

Mr O'Dowd: My officials and I are discussing the consultation responses to that document. My intent is to retain the services as they are. I will have to engage, most likely, with my Executive colleagues about how we secure the budget for that, but my intention is to secure the services as they are.

A separate feasibility study that will examine the introduction of a half-hourly service between Derry and Belfast and consider the possibility of additional rail halts on the Coleraine to Derry line, including at Derry City Airport, is also being progressed and will inform future investment in that area.

We all are aware that transport is the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gas. The decarbonisation of transport is vital if we are to meet the targets set out in the Climate Change

Act. The rail network will play an increasingly important role as we seek to encourage people to move to more sustainable transport options. At the same time, we must seek to reduce the emissions from our rolling stock as part of that process. A first step is the procurement of a new Enterprise fleet that will operate on battery and electric power.

Members will be aware, however, that, given the many competing budget priorities that my Department faces, funding our public transport services remains challenging. I assure you that I will continue to seek funding for our public transport network with my Executive colleagues, especially given the clear role of public transport in helping to address the climate emergency, alongside providing support for many of the Executive's other priorities, including health, education and the economy. The benefits of public transport services, particularly rail, do not end at the rail station. I think that Mr Honeyford pointed that out. As part of the proposals, we will ensure that there is connectivity from our rail stations to public services. That is important for our economy.

Mr Gildernew pointed out the economic benefits of investment in rail services. Decisions that were made in this place 60 years ago need to be reversed. At that time, the growth of the private car drove decision-making processes. Mr Carroll referred to austerity measures. That is not a new thing; they were introduced at that time as well. There were proposals to move away from public transport in a bid to save money. Those people were mistaken. We have 60 years of hindsight, but, with the report, we now have an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past. There are huge opportunities for all our people across these islands, including ensuring that no one is left behind.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I call Keith Buchanan to wind up the debate on the amendment. You have five minutes.

Mr K Buchanan: I think that I have written too many notes, so, if I omit anybody, I apologise in advance. I will cover Members' comments broadly. Mark Durkan referred to the SDLP's commitment to all-island rail, the decarbonisation of public transport and the north-west — of Ireland, Northern Ireland, or whatever — being isolated. I appreciate that. He also referred to the year-on-year increase in journeys to Londonderry. Obviously, the number of people taking public transport increased, year-on-year. He said that train travel is the environmentally friendly option.

Deborah Erskine made several points. She asked whether the expertise is there to deliver the project. She also referred to the report that should be out in the late spring. She said that there are 30 recommendations in the report, one of which is the connection to Belfast International Airport and other airports. She and several other Members — I will touch on them individually — made the point about Fermanagh and the regional imbalance when it comes to the west or south-west of Northern Ireland. She asked why it is not part of the 32 counties. As we all know, 26 and six is 32. Why is it not there? She also referred to the Northern Ireland Audit Office report and the issues with delivery and costs that are associated with such infrastructure projects.

Cathal Boylan referred to frequent, reliable travel by train, and to underinvestment and neglect over the years. He welcomed the recent funding from the Irish Government for additional North/South travel. He also talked about unlocking opportunities. Peter McReynolds referred to stimulating economic growth. There were a few differences of opinion in respect of journeys, but he referred to broadly 70% of journeys being by car. He also talked about the climate change threat and the low-emissions transport network.

John Stewart referred to the lack of transport in the west of the Province, which, again, is the point about Fermanagh. He mentioned hydrogen-powered trains etc, and airport access, as others did. He talked about costing the project and referenced the timeline: 25 years to complete over five mandates, which will involve several different Ministers. He also mentioned some issues with rail lines in his area and asked whether, in future, they would be under water, which, obviously, is a big issue.

Pádraig Delargy referred to the Union connectivity review report. He said that, in it, the east was strengthened while the west was neglected. He referred to the committed Minister whom we have in front of us.

3.30 pm

Stephen Dunne referred to the airport connections and, more broadly, to the fiscal challenges that exist. He mentioned the demand that exists for rail travel and the increasing numbers on the Bangor to Belfast service. Patrick Brown said that every £1 spent generates £2.50 in income. He mentioned the electrification of new and existing lines. He also mentioned the Fermanagh issue, to which we referred. He said that there is no statutory

protection for unused rail tracks. He also mentioned the importance of heritage railways.

Áine Murphy mentioned the tourism potential of Fermanagh. She referred to the traffic in Enniskillen town centre and the reduction in that that will occur if the planned bypass is built. She also referred to the climate emergency. Gary Middleton referred to the suffering caused by historical underinvestment and the available Executive allocations for the project. He also referred to the positive changes made in the past 10 years in the city that he represents. Colm Gildernew referred to the lack of connections in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, now and for the future.

David Honeyford referred to renewing and reshaping the economy through having good infrastructure and building on current tourism. He said that public transport is a driver of change. He talked about the Glider and about connecting its route to train stations and industry. I think that that was the point. I do not think that there has been mention of a Glider for Fermanagh at this stage, Tom. Alan Robinson referred to those who use the SmartPass to travel on public transport. He said that 82% of workers travel by car to work. He mentioned wanting a new railway halt in the north-west near the airport.

Matthew O'Toole said, "Build it, and they will come." He also referred to the movement of people and goods. That was a good point. It is about not just people but goods across these islands. He mentioned the £31 billion investment and said that it is inspirational. Justin McNulty said that the review is a "once-in-a-generation opportunity". He mentioned rail connectivity to Armagh city. He said that we are individually responsible for the environment. He also said that the Minister must grasp this opportunity.

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

Mr K Buchanan: I will finish with the Minister. Sorry, Gerry. He said that he is keen to support the rail network, which will stimulate development and jobs. He said that the debate has now opened up and that the conversation can start at this point.

Mr McCrossan: If today's debate shows us one thing, it is that we all feel strongly about the issue. Being from Tyrone, I, in particular, know more than most about the real infrastructure deficit that exists. This map, which my colleague Mark Durkan held up earlier, tells a

story in itself. No words are needed. There is a clear problem with this picture. Generations of people have suffered as a result of a lack of investment in the west. The lack of connectivity has plagued the west and places across Ireland for many years. Decades ago, rail services were stripped away from Tyrone, Fermanagh, Donegal and right into Derry, as was touched on by Members across the Chamber, effectively cutting the west out of the rail transportation picture. That short-sighted decision, as the Minister rightly pointed out, has exacerbated the already blatant disregard for the west, leaving us feeling — I can say this strongly, because it is feedback that I receive a lot from people — like second-class citizens when it comes to infrastructure and rail connectivity. It is time to acknowledge the past neglect and advocate for change. I think that there is a united voice in recognition of that, but there are Members in the House today who have had the luxury of enjoying rail connectivity all their life. All that we have is the treacherous, dangerous A5 road.

The SDLP has taken a proactive stance by spearheading the consultation on the all-island rail review, which was led by Nichola Mallon. That comprehensive review aims to rectify the decades of neglect in rail infrastructure that the north-west and west have endured. Rail is not just about transportation but about safety, the environment, the economy and, most importantly, connecting communities across this island. A well-developed rail network fosters growth, reduces carbon emissions and enhances social cohesion by bridging the physical gaps between our regions, and numerous Members pointed that out today.

Imagine the potential transformation that awaits us, and I speak selfishly here, when Strabane and Omagh are seamlessly connected to Donegal, Derry, Fermanagh and the rest of the island through a reliable rail system. That connectivity will not only enhance the quality of life of our people but unlock new opportunities for economic development and cultural change. Let us not overlook the practicality and value of investing in rail infrastructure. It makes sense on so many levels. By prioritising rail connectivity in the west and across this island, we are making a commitment to a sustainable and prosperous future for all our citizens.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will indeed.

Mr O'Toole: Rather than this being about writing a cheque for billions or asking for a

cheque for billions, as was said previously to the Minister, all we are asking for is for a costed plan. We realise that this is going to take more than years; it will take decades. Does the Member agree with me that the Executive now have increased borrowing power under RRI and could look to invest some of that in expanding rail?

Mr McCrossan: Absolutely. I agree with my colleague. The first step to ensuring change in relation to rail is to make your first move. I hope that the Minister will do that in ensuring that we take a step forward collectively towards achieving that and rectifying the deficit.

For over a century, trains rattled across the land, linking towns to cities. That came to a halt in 1965, which was a decision that ended a century of rail access for Tyrone and Donegal and stripped the west of most of its infrastructure. The decline began just after partition, which was touched on earlier. Partition disrupted trade on many natural routes. The closure also severed a vital link between the north-west and the west of the island and Dublin. Since those closures, two whole generations have been raised in Tyrone and Donegal without access to a mode of transport that much of the rest of the island takes for granted.

Mr Elliott: I appreciate the Member giving way. Does he also accept that the Troubles in Northern Ireland caused a huge problem for the rail network, particularly the Belfast to Dublin route, which was plagued with bomb scares and, indeed, bombs on the railway line?

Mr McCrossan: The biggest act of self-harm to all aspects of our infrastructure was the Troubles. Much disruption was caused to our infrastructure, and much was destroyed that we have never properly been able to replace, so I thank the Member for the intervention.

The public's desire to see rail return and expand across the west has remained strong ever since it was removed. That was shown when the public consultation, held as part of the cross-border all-island strategic rail review, received its highest number of contributions from the Fermanagh and Omagh and Derry and Strabane districts. That confirmed the huge interest that exists across the west of Northern Ireland for the return and expansion of a rail network.

I must admit that my favourite paragraph in the whole report was that the restoration of a line

from Derry to Portadown and on to Letterkenny in County Donegal:

"would link the large towns of Strabane, Omagh, and Dungannon to the rail network and greatly improve intercity connectivity"

from the north-west to Belfast and Dublin. That is a paragraph that gives great hope to the people in my area who have been deprived of decent infrastructure links for a generation. People in West Tyrone and many areas across the North have been let down by substandard rail and public transport links for far too long.

Like many others, I am reminded constantly of our railway heritage by abandoned tracks and station houses across our constituencies, many of which have become greenways. One opened in Strabane just this week, which is a fantastic investment in the local area, but, now that we are talking about this, we are seeing a need to ensure that we protect those routes. Those abandoned tracks and station houses are cruel reminder of the railways that were available to past generations for hundreds of years.

When it was launched by former Minister Nichola Mallon and Minister Eamon Ryan, I said that the all-island rail review was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address the lack of rail infrastructure in my constituency and in many others. That is the theme that has come across in the House today. There is a great sense of hope and excitement about this conversation.

The review provided us with a unique opportunity to completely reimagine our rail network and devise a fit-for-purpose, cross-border service, hugely expanding the number of routes available and getting people to where they need to be in a timely, efficient and safe manner. I used the word "safe" because, I say again as a Member for West Tyrone, we take for granted every day that many people go out the door to go to work, to carry out their duties or to take their children to school and, unfortunately, do not come home because of the treacherous infrastructure issues in my constituency and in others.

I argued in my submission to the review that West Tyrone must form an important part of these plans as a dedicated hub that serves the North and South. If we are to address historical issues around the lack of jobs and investment needed to improve people's standard of living, we need modern transport links that meet the needs of our population.

As pointed out by Mr Stewart in relation to some airports, connecting three of the island's main airports to the rail network — Dublin, Belfast International and Shannon — would give 90% of commercial aviation passengers access by train. I welcome Minister O'Dowd's comments on Derry. Direct access would truly add to the sustainability of the City of Derry Airport. That would be transformative for the economy in that part of the island. Two thirds of the island's freight tonnage would pass through ports served by the railway network. If all the review report's recommendations were to be delivered, its authors suggest that 700,000 more people across the island of Ireland would live within 5 km of a train station, boosting rail catchment by 25% on today's totals.

We will never be able to improve our economy unless we offer adequate transport to all major towns and cities on the island, including places such as Enniskillen and Fermanagh that have been left out of the review. We need the Infrastructure Minister to bring back a costed implementation plan this year, and we need to deliver real options for my constituency, for Fermanagh and for every county on the island. Together, let us advocate for a comprehensive and inclusive rail network that serves the needs of every community, including those in the west.

The time for change is now. We must work together towards a brighter and better-connected future for all our children. This debate is about much more than rail. As was rightly pointed out, it is about addressing a historical deficit — a wrong from many years ago. We have an opportunity to step forward together to offer all our people a much better future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you to all Members who spoke in the debate.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 25; Noes 44.

AYES

Mr Allen, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Harvey and Mr Middleton

NOES

Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Brown, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Egan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Mr Honeyford, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Miss McAllister, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Durkan and Ms McLaughlin

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the transformative impact that expansion of an all-island rail network will have on communities across Ireland; welcomes the commitment to the all-island strategic rail review from the Executive and the Irish Government; acknowledges that the delivery of accessible, sustainable and modern rail infrastructure is a key driver of economic growth, enhances our tourism industry and will drive regionally balanced investment in left-behind communities; further acknowledges that investing in high-quality rail is critical to reaching net zero carbon emissions targets by 2050; calls on the Minister for Infrastructure to provide an immediate update on the phase 3 Derry to Coleraine feasibility study; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Irish Government to produce a costed implementation plan this year, to deliver rail options to every county in Ireland.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken).]

Adjournment

Flooding in South Down: Economic Recovery

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Patrick Brown to raise the matter of economic recovery from flooding in South Down. Patrick, you have up to 15 minutes.

Mr Brown: I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss the economic recovery of businesses in South Down following the devastating flooding across the south-east of Northern Ireland last year. I thank the Minister for his attendance. I know that he has first-hand experience of the issue, being a representative for Newry city, which was also badly affected by last year's floods. I am delighted that, just this afternoon, he oversaw the opening of the second phase of flood-recovery funding, which represents a substantial package of funding schemes to help businesses to recover and rebuild. I am particularly pleased that that has coincided perfectly with this debate.

Unprecedented levels of rainfall across Northern Ireland during Halloween week last year resulted in historic flooding across the country, most severely in parts of Downpatrick, Newcastle, Newry and Portadown. As the debate is focused on economic recovery in South Down, most of my comments will be focused on the impact that the floods had on businesses in Downpatrick. None of that should take away from the real impact that the floods had on many businesses in Newry and Portadown, on fishing vessels in Kilkeel or on hundreds of residents in Newcastle.

The relative impact on Downpatrick and its economy cannot be overstated. The two main commercial streets in the town are Market Street and St Patrick's Avenue. For the best part of three days, half of the business premises on those streets were under four to five feet of water. Many watched in slow motion as water levels slowly crept up throughout the Thursday and Friday of that week. Some were able to remove stock and property from their stores. Some were told incorrectly by public agencies that the water levels probably would not get any higher and that they did not need to worry, and not a single business received any

warning or alert that flooding was likely, despite the near full week of rain that preceded it.

4.00 pm

I can see colleagues in the Chamber from all parties who were on the ground as that was happening in real time. We were watching the water level rise and scrambling to do whatever we could to help, whether that was lifting sandbags, coordinating with agencies and the public, helping people move belongings and much more. It was a surreal week, full of tragedy for those who experienced significant damage to their homes and livelihoods. However, it was also one that brought out the best in people, as everyone, including politicians, business owners, residents, council workers, the Fire Service, DFI employees and local farmers, banded together to help each other through an unprecedented natural disaster.

I have particular memories of standing waist-deep in dirty, oil-filled water with the Minister's colleague Chris Hazzard MP, helping a local business, Making Memories for You, which sells communion dresses, carry their precious stock out of the shop to safety. I worked with DUP councillor Alan Lewis, who, despite not representing Downpatrick district electoral area, travelled to help clear out debris and rescue what stock we could from JJ Donnelly Menswear after the floodwater had receded. Indeed, together with SDLP colleagues, I helped Tom's Wine Barrel move its stock to a safer location. Local politicians were not immune from the impact of the floods, with my constituency office flooding. However, any damage there paled in comparison with what many others experienced.

I watched our local community come together in the clean-up effort and beyond to support and rally around our local business community and saw first-hand the trauma experienced by those who, in a matter of hours, had seen their livelihoods literally washed away, with no idea whether they would get any support to help them rebuild. The mental health impact of that cannot be overstated. Whilst we are talking today about economic recovery, many people have rightly compared the loss of a family business to the loss of a friend or relative. Regardless of any financial package, the trauma experienced during those few days will stay with many people for a long time.

Incredible resilience has been shown by the entire Downpatrick community, but that resilience has been tested time and time again as people have had to wait almost four months

for the latest funding round to open. I know that that is not the Minister's fault and that he has moved to realise the second phase as quickly as possible since coming into office. It is a fact, however, that businesses in my constituency and in the Minister's should never have had to go with a begging bowl to a Tory Secretary of State asking for bits and pieces of reappropriated funding to be packaged together as a flood relief fund. Instead, we should have had locally accountable Ministers on the ground on day 1 of the flooding, working together to develop an adequate and urgent flood relief fund. I have no doubt that the absence of an Executive contributed to the insecurity and worry experienced by many during and after the floods. Now that the Executive have been restored, we can ensure that that never happens again.

We are, at any time, just a few days of heavy rainfall away from the same disaster as we saw last year, which represents an existential and ever-present threat to our local economy. Our flood defences in Downpatrick are still inadequate. Our main river, the Quoile, remains choked and blocked with toxic sludge and silt from years of neglect and mismanagement. Our storm water infrastructure is totally insufficient, and nothing tangible has been done to establish local flood resilience networks or an early warning system. With the constant threat of climate change, we must prepare our communities, our economy and our infrastructure for more natural disasters like this and ensure that those who have already spent hundreds of thousands of pounds rebuilding their businesses have not done so in vain.

Wider questions must also be asked about how flooding this severe happened. Could we have done anything to stop it or minimise its impact? I know that, in Newry, there are questions over how the canal flooded, given that it is basically impossible for canals to flood if managed properly. Could targeted clearance and dredging of the River Quoile have increased its capacity, reducing the amount of water that flowed into the town? I appreciate that those are questions for another day and another Minister, and I welcome the commitment from DFI Rivers to lead a review of what happened and review the adequacy of flood defences in the area.

I turn to the announcement from the Minister last week and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council opening applications for the next round of funding today. I know that there will be many businesses in my constituency breathing a deep sigh of relief that further help is on its way. The fund is generous — up to

£100,000, based on an assessment of losses — and I know from having personally surveyed all businesses impacted by flooding in Downpatrick that that will be adequate to cover losses in the vast majority of cases. There will always be exceptions, however, and it is incredibly difficult to develop a one-size-fits-all scheme of that nature.

I hope that the Minister will remain flexible and open-minded when criteria, well intentioned as they may be, do not always align with realities on the ground. Unfortunately, that was the case with the first phase of £7,500 grants that were developed by departmental officials soon after the flooding. While they provided a valuable cash injection for some, many were left exasperated and upset when they were declined for that grant for a variety of reasons, without any appeals process. I will give just a few examples from Downpatrick. Flooded businesses that had just taken on a premises, were paying rates and had planned to open literally the next week did not qualify. Businesses that had not received a rates bill due to a Land and Property Services (LPS) administrative error and were therefore judged as not having paid rates did not qualify for the grant, nor did businesses that had flood insurance but faced huge excesses, deductions or gaps in cover. Most sports and non-trading charities did not get a penny either.

There was a significant underspend in that first phase, which perhaps reflected the overly conservative and rigid criteria set out by the Department. That is why I asked the Minister yesterday about his plans for any underspend in the next phase. I welcome his response that he intends to see the full £15 million invested in economic recovery, and, indeed, I agree with him that we could use much more.

It must be recognised that, in a small number of cases, even £100,000 will be insufficient to cover losses. I can think, for example, of a pub and a dentist in Downpatrick that have several hundred thousand pounds' worth of documented losses and no insurance and, indeed, of the well-publicised case of Downpatrick and County Down Railway, which has estimated losses of £2.3 million but is insured only for £250,000. Going by the criteria and the announcement last week, all that the railway will receive now is £5,000, which is a drop in the ocean, all things considered.

I welcome, however, the fact that the second phase of funding seeks to address a number of the issues that have been raised consistently by the business community and elected representatives regarding previous exclusions,

not least the provision of two new hardship schemes, including a £2,500 grant for businesses that did not flood but were forced to close or lost out on income due to flood-related disruption and a new £5,000 grant for businesses and non-domestic properties previously excluded from funding. Whilst, in some cases, those schemes will not go far enough, they are a good start and will provide a much-needed cash injection for Downpatrick and other impacted areas.

I know that, today, many businesses will be pulling together their paperwork to apply for the £100,000 grants and that, as elected representatives, we will all stand ready to support them through that process. I note that the deadline for applications is 22 March, which is, hopefully, a suitable deadline to give businesses enough time to apply, whilst ensuring that funding can be distributed quickly and efficiently. On that point, I would take the opportunity to ask the Minister for indicative time frames on when he expects the first payments under the £100,000 scheme to be made and when the parallel £5,000 and £2,500 schemes are likely to open for applications.

In addition to support for individual businesses, there remains an urgent need to invest in wider regeneration and recovery across flood-hit towns. Many of the larger chain stores that help to drive footfall have closed permanently or have not given a date for reopening.

Downpatrick has long suffered from underinvestment, with the council planning to spend tens of millions on regeneration and capital projects in Newry and Newcastle but having delivered no major investment in recent times for Downpatrick. Often, Downpatrick feels like a forgotten town and rightly so. Take, for example, the £180,000 that was given to the council by the Department for Communities immediately after the flooding to aid recovery in Downpatrick and Newry. Most of it is being spent on St Patrick's Day parades, events that the council has, until this year, funded itself. Nothing new is being done to help to support businesses to bounce back. More must be done by the Minister's Department and others if we are to avoid the existential collapse of the local economy in the county town of Down. We must ensure that departmental funding is being spent where it is needed most. Therefore, I kindly ask the Minister to outline his Department's plans to ensure the medium-to-long-term recovery and regeneration of towns that have been devastated by flooding.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I will get the button to work this time. I call Cathy Mason. All

Members who wish to speak will have five minutes, with the exception of the Minister.

Mrs Mason: Go raibh maith agat, [*Translation: Thank you*] Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the flooding in South Down: in Newcastle, Downpatrick, the Mourne and other rural areas. The flooding in Downpatrick was particularly devastating for the town. Despite extremely challenging circumstances, the resilience of our small and family-run local businesses and the community spirit in Downpatrick shone through. Everyone stood shoulder to shoulder and worked together to mitigate the worst effects of the flooding.

Sincere thanks must be delivered to those who went above and beyond their role in order to intervene: the Fire Service, council workers, business owners, volunteers and statutory agencies alike. They all came out, united in their efforts to support their town. Our small and family-run businesses have been under severe pressure because of the extensive damage done by the flooding. Despite the very limited interventions by the British Government, it is welcome that the Economy Minister has announced the flood support scheme that opened today. I wholeheartedly thank the Minister, Conor Murphy, who has listened to the voices of local businesses and acted quickly to ensure that they have access to proper funding and support after what has been a challenging time. The announcement comes as a huge relief to business owners in Downpatrick and will hopefully assist them to restore their businesses and continue to open their doors to the community. Our small and family-run traders are the heartbeat of Downpatrick. They have been there for decades, some for generations. Much more work needs to be done, however, to ensure that Downpatrick continues to thrive.

I take the opportunity to give credit to the Downpatrick regeneration working group. It has painstakingly created the 'Downpatrick Living High Streets Framework', which outlines a real vision for revitalising the town and the whole community. It is imperative that the council now work diligently and proactively to ensure that applications are processed efficiently and that the funding, worth up to £100,000, can go straight to helping repair damage from the flooding.

We also need to see a multi-agency approach to a flood mitigation strategy for Downpatrick town and a flood defence strategy to prevent such instances becoming a living reality. We need interventions to protect the Quoile from bursting its banks again and to prevent further

large-scale flooding. We also need to see the Quoile live up to its true potential ecologically and economically. We need the Department for Communities to commit to a regeneration plan for the town, one that focuses on future-proofing Downpatrick, on promoting sustainable tourism product and on long-term economic regeneration. We also need to see interventions for our local sports clubs, which were impacted on by the flooding as well. We want to see a more ambitious emergency flood payment scheme for residents in the likes of Newcastle who have been affected.

Along with my Sinn Féin team in South Down, I will continue to work with all parties on behalf of our local businesses to keep Downpatrick thriving. I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to highlight the topic today.

Ms Forsythe: I thank the Alliance Member for South Down for bringing the issue to the Chamber. The severity of the flooding in South Down last October and November was the worst that the area has experienced. Impacts have been devastating and significant, both in the short term and the longer term. The short-term impacts were heartbreaking. The operation to clean up lost stock was huge. In so many cases, additional seasonal stock had been bought in for Christmas at significant cost. The damage and loss of shop and business machinery, furniture and equipment was immediately apparent. It was incredibly clear that it would not be a simple case of moving a business and setting up elsewhere. Any relocation required significant set-up costs and was not just a simple move. Meeting such costs at a time of devastation and with no income coming in was unachievable for many businesses. The short-term support at the time was neither clear enough nor quick enough to assist people in their time of dire need.

In the longer term, many businesses have struggled and have taken the difficult decision to close. The moving of businesses temporarily has displaced the town centre and confused shoppers who are not regular visitors to the area. The temporary closure of the large Asda store in Downpatrick saw a huge drop in footfall to the town, and I am grateful to those in Asda management who so quickly constructed and opened a restored large store in Downpatrick, which helped with footfall.

The longer-term impact of the flooding is still very much being felt.

Before the flooding, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council had invested much time, money and effort into the Downpatrick living high street

scheme, which was an energetic initiative that was created to give hope and revitalise the town. I know that many Members from around the Chamber were actively involved in that. Right before the flooding, that had generated great hope, and I was quite energised to go down and join some of the meetings. It is very sad to see where we have ended up.

4.15 pm

Mr Harvey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Forsythe: Yes.

Mr Harvey: Does the Member agree that it is vital that we take the opportunity to consider the need for a long-term solution to the flooding issues in Downpatrick?

Ms Forsythe: Absolutely.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): The Member gets an extra minute.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you very much. The long term is very important. I welcome the Economy Minister's announcement that the remaining £10 million from the flood recovery scheme is being made available, and I hope that that aids the longer-term recovery. However, as I mentioned, it is disappointing that that money may be too late to save many businesses. It is disappointing that, despite united and repeated calls at the time by local MLAs from all parties, the Secretary of State did not make enough money available when people were in crisis and needed it most.

There needs to be learning from this incident across many areas, but I specifically refer to the need to learn and develop plans that make us capable of rolling out financial support efficiently and effectively in response to emergency situations. Obviously, we do not want to see such situations recurring, but when they do, we need to have learned from previous occasions. We need to see the prompt roll-out of the money, and I welcome the confirmation from councillors on Newry, Mourne and Down District Council that, last night, its strategy, policy and resources committee committed to the prompt roll-out of that. I record my thanks to the council members for their response and support throughout the crisis. They stepped up and took the lead in many areas, even though the issues with the floods, rivers and roads were not their responsibility; they were the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure.

The economic recovery also requires a restoration of public confidence. There is huge concern throughout the area, to which other contributors referred, that we might see such flooding again. For a long time, local rivers have experienced significant issues that have never been resolved and have worn away areas, which have compromised the road network. In the Kilkeel area, that was most evident when the main road into the town collapsed and the area was completely cut off until repairs were completed.

Also, localised flooding on a smaller scale has been a problem for a long time, with many issues failing to be addressed time and time again. That, alongside gullies not being emptied regularly, contributed to the issues that arose when we experienced severe weather and extreme rainfall. The cumulative effect of all those deficiencies was the absolute devastation that we faced. I call on the Department for Infrastructure to reassure the public by urgently publishing information about all the work that it has completed following the flood to assess the risk of repeat flooding; the measures that it has put in place to prevent future flooding; and its assessment of the integrity of the local roads system, including bridges, that details where rivers and floods have repeatedly compromised roads and the Department's actions on that. The Department needs to build public confidence that their infrastructure is safe and sufficient and that they are protected from future flooding. While the debate is focused on South Down, I also note the devastation that flooding caused to businesses in Newry, Portadown and Comber. We do not want to see that anywhere in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, there is a lot to be done to support the economic recovery from flooding. The immediate priority needs to be getting the support to those who are most affected and in need. It will be a long recovery process. It will require a joined-up effort with central Government, the local council and our community groups. We cannot take our eyes off the ball, and it is critical that the Department for Infrastructure takes urgent steps to ensure that it will not happen again and to reassure us of that. I thank the Economy Minister for attending this afternoon and for his prompt action in making funds available before the end of March. I call on him to support economic recovery programmes for the South Down area.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Adjournment debate. What we saw last November was horrendous. It was devastation. At the time, we used the term "apocalyptic", because that is what it felt like.

Many parts of South Down and beyond were impacted, but, when you have spent nearly 50 years growing up in a town, it is terrible to see it being absolutely wrecked in front of your eyes. It was terrible mostly because of the pain that you could see in the eyes of the town's business people, because they could see their futures being ruined in front of them. Being powerless as we stood alongside them, because there was nothing much that we could physically do at that time, was very difficult. What we do get is an opportunity afterwards to reflect and ask what things could be done differently to help people much more quickly. Like others in the Chamber who stood in those streets over those days, I know that, for the first couple of days, it was lonely, because no officials from any Department or agency were there to help us. That, I feel, contributed to the additional impact.

Although we have the Economy Minister here, we need to see a whole-Executive response so that if flooding recurs in the future, there will be a much quicker response that helps people in their time of need. We are looking for financial resources, and it might be unpopular to say this, but it is about time. For four months, businesses have been left with very little help. They are losing their entire livelihood, and, to date, four months later, they have been given £7.5 grand. They are trying to get their businesses open and running again on £7.5 grand. They had to try to get through the Christmas period on £7.5 grand. They are trying to pay wages on £7.5 grand. They are trying to take some money themselves on £7.5 grand. Four months later, we are opening a scheme.

The British Government — the Northern Ireland Office — announced £15 million back in December. The Civil Service announced £10 million in December. It then appeared that the £10 million was part of that £15 million. Then the scheme was about to be announced by the Northern Ireland Office at the end of January or the start of February. That was delayed, and here we are at the end of February announcing the scheme that will open, hopefully, and be sorted out in the next few weeks. These businesses have been waiting and waiting and waiting, and we are where we are. We need to get that money out to them, but we also need to do a review so that, in the future, if these things happen again in other places, it will not take four or five months before a pound goes into somebody's pocket to try to help them to be able to get over something that has completely wrecked their business or their home.

We also have the scheme where money can be released automatically from councils to help

people in their homes, but there is no similar scheme for businesses. That was rejected when my colleague brought it to the Executive a number of years ago. In places such as Downpatrick, we know that there is the potential for the flooding to happen again. As already referenced, we are only a couple of heavy rain days away from floods again in the future, so we need to see that review that is being carried out by the Department for Infrastructure, and we need to see it ASAP. If there are changes to be made to the tidal bridge, to the banks or to dredging, those need to happen before businesses are left next autumn or winter in exactly the same position of being left for months and months and months with no help or assistance. Do we welcome this money? Yes. Is it timely? No, it is too late, but let us get it out to the businesses that need it.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for being here to respond to the debate. As many Members have outlined and as people will be well aware, the storms that hit South Down and parts of Newry last November were absolutely devastating for homes and businesses, many of which were ruined. As well as that, our road network and infrastructure around South Down have not fully recovered from the devastation that they experienced last November. A number of landslides in South Down caused massive disruption in Kilkeel and Hilltown, and I want to focus my attention on the worrying, for me and the people whom I represent in that area, collapse of the A2 Shore Road between Rostrevor and Killowen. It coincided with another flood at Ballyedmond, meaning that the people living in and around the Killowen area were completely stranded, isolated and cut off from the greater Newry area. Whole communities were locked out from accessing vital services, and I think that that highlights once again how our rural communities can be left behind in the worst of circumstances.

We often talk about regional balance in the Assembly. We often think of the west of the Bann when we talk about regional balance and imbalance; very often, South Down and the Newry area are forgotten about. The floods highlighted years of underinvestment or no investment in our infrastructure and road network. That left us completely exposed to the flooding and the unprecedented weather event that we had last November. I spoke to local residents who were unable to get to work; some of them were forced to take days off, unpaid. That obviously had a negative economic impact on workers who were already struggling and added to the pressure that our local businesses were facing.

It is hugely welcome that the Economy Minister, Conor Murphy, has announced the additional support for businesses damaged by the recent floods and the financial support grants available to help those businesses to get moving. I thank the Minister for listening to the concerns of those business owners and acting as quickly as he could to get that support out the door. I hope that Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will work proactively to ensure that applications are processed as soon as possible.

As I said, it is worrying that, months on from the collapse of the Shore Road, it remains only partially open. We are still dealing with the impact of that today. We are still seeing long delays on the Shore Road and the congestion and the headache that that brings for people who live in the Mournes and the Killowen area. They are still feeling the impact. Although I appreciate that Conor Murphy is here in his capacity as the Economy Minister, DFI also has a role to play, and we have been proactively engaging with the Minister for Infrastructure to find a resolution.

We need to understand that the potential for further landslides and further subsidence on the A2 Rostrevor Road still exists. We need a joined-up approach between DFI and the Forest Service, and we need it to be sorted out ASAP. Our weather and climate are constantly changing and are unpredictable, and all that it will take is another — mild, perhaps — weather event for those people in the Mournes and Killowen to be cut off again. It is not good enough. We need to get it sorted, and we need to get it sorted ASAP. Extended delays and closures are causing significant disruption, and it is not fair on people who live in the Mournes, the greater Mournes area and the Killowen area. We need to see the Department for Infrastructure working with different agencies, as I said, in particular, the Forest Service. I have written to the Minister for Infrastructure to ask him to liaise with the Forest Service to find a resolution to the landslide and subsidence issues at the A2 Rostrevor Road.

I pay tribute to the businesses that were impacted for their resilience, to all our local representatives and to everybody who was on the ground getting stuck in and being there for our constituents. That is what we are there to do. As I said, we are still dealing with its impact in South Down, and we need to see a swift resolution, particularly for those people in the Mournes, and to reinforce the subsidence issues on the A2 Rostrevor Road.

Mr Stewart: As you will be aware, I do not represent South Down, but I want to thank the

Member for securing today's debate and all the Members for their passionate contributions on behalf of their constituents.

I chair the all-party group on micro and small business. We had the privilege of being hosted at Down Business Centre in December, and I heard first-hand from the businesses there, the regeneration group and all those in the local enterprise agency about the amount of work that had been done by the community, councils, volunteers and elected representatives from across the parties who came together to react to the horrendous scenes that they had witnessed in the days and weeks leading up to that meeting. It was truly impactful. We stand here today addressing the Adjournment debate on South Down, but it could easily have been about constituents in East Antrim, the north-west or Belfast, who have all been affected before. Many business owners said, "There but for the grace of God go I", on this occasion.

Mr McGrath talked about the reaction of businesses and how they would have felt totally abandoned in the absence of the individuals who turned out to support them. That is one thing that, hopefully, will come out of today. I welcome the fact that the Minister is here and the announcement of the funding, but there needs to be an automatic response that kicks in when such occasions happen. Yes, we can talk about cross-departmental resources and councils having their roles and responsibilities, but, when a crisis of this nature hits, whether it is in my constituency of East Antrim or the constituencies of South Down or East Belfast or in the north-west — wherever it may be — there needs to be an assurance for businesses, the next morning, when they go in and wipe away the tears from the impact that it has had on their livelihoods. These are businesses that have no reserves and cannot wait a week, never mind a month or three months, to get the money.

They do not have the reserves. They are not multinationals. They are the backbone of our economy in Northern Ireland. They had two or three days leading up to Christmas, and they do not have the money to absorb that time. Insurance has not paid out, because they cannot get insurance as they are in a flood area. They are totally abandoned.

4.30 pm

Businesses need to know that, the next time that this happens, wherever they are in the country, somebody will be there for them. They need to know that the Executive will have their back; the council will have a statutory

responsibility to kick in; rates will be automatically alleviated for the period that they are affected; and money will be in their account in the days following the incident. It cannot be the case that they have to hold their breath and pray, because it will happen again. Undoubtedly, it will happen again, and we know that, Minister. We have seen it time and time again over many years. Sadly, on this occasion, it was the business owners of South Down, but it will inevitably be business owners elsewhere.

We also need to look at the criteria. When I spoke to affected businesses, they felt that, while the Civil Service and NIO identified a pot of money, some were not eligible for it, even though they had no insurance in place and could not tap into that type of funding. Quite frankly, they went under, because they did not have the resources and the financial backbone to get by. Like so many businesses in our economy, they are one-person or two-people bands. That is the type of business that they run. They run to stand still, and they often run on a deficit, but they are the backbone of our economy. They want to know that we have their back.

I will touch on the block to insurance. Minister, can we look at tapping into the scheme that the UK Government are running? That is called Flood Re and is an initiative between the UK Government and insurers for flood cover in areas that are particularly affected. We need to look at that, because insurance companies make, effectively, billions of pounds of profit every year but will never insure an area where they think that there is the slightest risk. To me, that sounds quite stark. If you are hit and have insurance, it takes months to get the payment, even after you have gone through the rigmarole of trying to get paid. We need to find a way to streamline that process so that affected businesses have easier access to insurance and to affordable insurance.

That is my twopence worth. I again thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate, everyone for contributing and the Minister for coming today.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. Like the previous Member to speak, South Down is not my constituency, but Newry and Armagh were particularly badly hit as well by this unprecedented event. Others will agree that it was something that we have never seen before. Parts of Newry city centre and south Armagh saw unforeseen devastation, and they are dealing with it to this day. It will be a long time before they fully recover.

It is important to pay tribute to the significant community response that we saw. It was definitely a case of all hands on deck. I was on the ground from the morning of the flooding, and it was incredible to see the community come together. I want to particularly mention Newry business improvement district (BID) in the city centre, which made a Trojan effort to support all the businesses across our city. Many of those businesses are still closed. As recently as this afternoon, I spoke to some of the businesses in Newry that do not know when they will be able to open due to the damage. That damage is sometimes not only directly in their premises but in adjoining premises, impacting access.

It is clear, as others said, that we need a cross-departmental approach for dealing with the situation, because we need to look at so many elements of it. We need to find out why it happened. We need to find out what worked well and what did not, but that will require all relevant Departments to put their shoulder to the wheel and to make sure that we learn the lessons and deliver to ensure that it does not happen again.

I thank my colleague Conor Murphy, the Economy Minister, for bringing forward the scheme. It is important to note that it is now three weeks since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly, and the turnaround in the scheme has been fairly efficient. Many of the businesses in my constituency have been waiting four months for something to be brought forward. I feel that the Minister has listened to the businesses; he has certainly listened to those that he and I have engaged with on the ground from day 1 and that made very clear what their needs are and how they could be addressed. I thank him for that.

One conversation is missing from the whole debate, and it is about the houses and homes that were affected by the flooding. They are part of the economic recovery, so it is pertinent to the debate. A very small number of homes across South Down and Newry and Armagh have been impacted, and they have been absolutely devastated. I have been dealing with a small number of families in my area who have been completely forgotten about. Yes, the nuts and bolts and fixtures and fittings of a home are so important, but, in some situations, it was life and death. I dealt with a family who were right beside Newry canal but were left to get themselves out in the pitch black at 4.00 am, with no response coming to them. The fear that that family, including the children, experienced,

and how that has impacted them every day ever since, is just untold.

I am so pleased that my colleague has brought the scheme forward, but I hope that the Minister for Communities is listening and watching. We need to see something to support those families. A £1,000 payment does not cut it. I have heard sympathy being expressed from right across the Chamber, and from the different officials to whom I have spoken over the past four months, but sympathy is not going to pay their bills or put a roof over their head, because they are still out of their home. Those children are absolutely traumatised every time that they hear heavy rainfall. They wonder whether their house, or where they are living at the minute, is going to be flooded and whether they will survive. I do not say that flippantly; that is the reality of what we are dealing with on the ground. We need to see delivery. The flooding impacted not just businesses but so many families in our area. Their livelihoods have been impacted. They are now worrying about how they are going to pay their mortgage and all the other bills that everyone else worries about every day, on top of worrying about how they are going to rebuild their homes and lives.

I hope that the Communities Minister will listen to the plight of those families whose lives have been turned upside down. They watch on while other Departments fulfil their responsibilities to deliver for businesses within their remit. It is unprecedented, but we now have an opportunity to put the wrongs right and try to find a way forward that will provide long-term sustainable solutions. We need effective flood defences and a robust flood response. We also need the insurance system to be looked at, because all those affected have been impacted by the inability to get flood cover. I hope that we will be able to deliver for those people. I thank the Member for bringing forward this topic this afternoon.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you, Ms Kimmins, for keeping to time. Minister, you have 10 minutes.

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for bringing forward the Adjournment topic this afternoon. It is very timely, given the movement that we have just had in getting the scheme up and running. I thank all the Members who contributed to the discussion. In my address, I will answer some of the points that were raised, and, at the end, I will try to pick up some of the other points that Members raised.

I shared the experience of every one of you who was involved. I was with Liz in Newry: we were on the ground, trying to assist people. Households were also flooded in Camlough, and we tried to assist. I commend the effort of business organisations, the community and voluntary sector, individuals and business owners, who all pulled together at a time of enormous crisis to try to assist those most in need, and to try to protect their homes and businesses. They are due huge commendation.

As Members have said, October 2023 was the wettest October in living history in Counties Down and Armagh. As a result of that unprecedented rainfall, we had significant flooding in the council areas there. Around 245 businesses that employ around 700 people were directly flooded, with the cost of restitution, repair and restoration estimated at over £100 million.

In the aftermath of the flooding, the British Secretary of State announced that unused capital DEL would be converted to resource DEL to fund the response. Initial support included the provision of rate relief to around 245 flooded premises, which cost around £1 million, and the provision of a £7,500 flood damage support grant to help businesses to reopen as soon as possible. That scheme was delivered by district councils, and 143 businesses received support totalling just over £1 million. While the one-off grant payment of £7,500 was welcome, it was not sufficient for many businesses, as has been outlined here today. There is a risk that, in the absence of further support, some businesses could struggle to continue to trade, which, in turn, would impact on the economic future of the areas that were impacted by flooding.

Since taking up post, I have been working with my officials to provide more support within the envelope of money that we have available. Last week, I announced a support package of up to £10 million to provide further assistance to businesses and local economies that have been impacted by the flooding. The support package consists of an enhanced flood support scheme and two hardship schemes. District councils will control and administer the three schemes within the broad policy parameters set by my Department. The councils will be reimbursed for the grant payments using the powers in the Local Government Act 2014, specifically section 29. Councils will engage with the Local Government Auditor to test their processes and ensure that they are compliant in managing public money.

The enhanced flood support scheme opened at noon today. Although each council will administer its own applications, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has agreed to accept applications on behalf of the other councils. The application form and guidance notes for businesses, which will set out the eligibility criteria and the evidence to be submitted with an application, will be available on council websites. This scheme will provide up to £100,000 to flooded small and medium-sized businesses that, through no fault of their own, could not get insurance that covered flood damage. In response to feedback from concerned businesses, the enhanced scheme will be open to those businesses that had flood damage insurance in place but have subsequently found that insurance companies are refusing to pay out on some or all of the costs of the flood damage. It will also be open to flooded businesses that were temporarily closed or that had not yet opened but were due to open imminently. That addresses the rates point that Patrick Brown raised. Those are the types of businesses that were unable to access the £7,500 grant. The grant will provide businesses with funding for refitting costs and replacing damaged or destroyed equipment. Again, after listening to feedback from businesses that suffered significant stock damage, I have agreed to include stock damage as an eligible cost.

The level of support being offered to businesses through the enhanced flood support scheme is unprecedented and far surpasses the support provided to businesses impacted by flooding in England, Scotland and Wales. I know that councils will endeavour to pay out grants to businesses as quickly as possible. However, the scheme is complicated to administer, so I ask businesses to be patient. Given the large sums of money involved, a loss assessor will be appointed by the councils to verify costs. That process is under way. I know that you will understand that due diligence is necessary to protect the public purse against fraud and error. As soon as applications have been approved, councils will ensure that payments follow swiftly.

While the enhanced flood support scheme will provide much-needed support to many businesses, there are others impacted by the flooding who did not receive the £7,500 grant and who will not be eligible for the enhanced scheme. To help address the gaps, I have announced two new hardship schemes that will be delivered by the councils and will open to applications in March. The first of those is a £5,000 hardship payment to occupants of flooded premises that are not eligible for other

supports. These include SME businesses that had flood insurance and were adversely impacted by the flooding. For example, in addition to losing revenue due to being unable to trade, some businesses are still waiting for their insurance provider to pay out, and some will face steep excess payments. I have also agreed to open up the £5,000 hardship payment to non-trading charities, community groups, churches and non-trading sports clubs whose premises were flooded and which have faced significant disruption as a result.

I have also recognised that disruption and financial loss have not been limited to the businesses that were flooded. Many businesses that were not directly flooded have suffered financial loss because of the flooding. For example, some businesses had no access to their premises, equipment or stock as a result of the flooding, or customers, suppliers and staff were unable to access the businesses. To assist those businesses, I have agreed to a second hardship scheme. This scheme will provide a £2,500 payment to SME businesses that were not directly flooded but were unable to access their premises and, hence, unable to trade as a result of the flooding. That includes businesses that are located on the upper floors of flooded premises and businesses that were unable to access their premises due to the clean-up in the area.

I am committed to providing £10 million to the councils impacted by the flooding in order to deliver support to businesses and help secure the economic future of local economies. A total of £1.1 million capital DEL and £1 million resource DEL has been allocated to my Department for 2023-24. Given that the majority of costs will fall into the next financial year, I have asked the Minister of Finance that funding of around £8 million be prioritised by the Executive in setting the next Budget. She has responded to say that, while she is content to approve the spend for the scheme, it will be for the Executive to decide on funding allocations as part of their consideration of that Budget. It has been a difficult and worrying time for the businesses that were affected by the flooding. This support package will go some way towards helping many of those businesses continue to trade.

Some of the points have been answered in my contribution so far. A number of Members referenced the fact that there was not an Executive on the ground to respond, and I agree that that undoubtedly caused additional stress as people tried to find someone to have their back at that time. I am glad that we now have an Executive. I take Colin McGrath's point

about the lateness of all this, but I have been in office for three weeks, and we have the scheme turned around, approved, out the door and ready for councils to take applications from today. That proves that when a response is needed, an Executive being in place is the best outcome for our people.

4.45 pm

Issues around town-centre recovery and regeneration were raised by Patrick Brown and Cathy Mason. That will take many Departments coming together, but certainly the Department for the Economy will play its role in relation to that, and with the district councils as well. Some Members referred to long-term learning. Flood alleviation and prevention are going to be critical in the time ahead. Again, those will be cross-departmental matters for the Executive. I am glad that we have an Executive back in place to put together plans.

One issue that was not mentioned was climate change. Flooding is no longer unprecedented; it has become a regular pattern of our weather. We will continue to suffer from that, right across the country, until such times as we start to meet targets to reduce carbon emissions and try to address climate change.

Others raised points about underinvestment in infrastructure. We continue to suffer from a lack of the finances that we actually need to provide the basic services that we need. I hope that that will be addressed by the Executive's approach to the Treasury to try to secure the necessary finances for public services.

John Stewart raised the issue of insurance. We do not have responsibility for insurance. Financial regulation is a reserved matter, but I would hope that we can make collective approaches, through the Executive, to the Treasury and through the authorities in London to get insurance. Insurance is highly costly and insurers very reluctant to pay out for any damage. Flooding is increasingly going to push insurance beyond the ability of businesses to meet that cost. We then find people trading with no insurance cover, and that can be disastrous for them.

I take Liz Kimmins' point about households. That has been the forgotten element in all this. I recognise that the funding, which I think was set in 2007, is clearly inadequate in today's circumstances. I would hope that the Department for Communities and the Executive will be able to do something to address that.

I thank the Member for bringing the debate, and I was happy to respond. I hope that the scheme that opened today for applications will go some way to undo some of the economic damage of the flooding.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you, Minister, and thank you to all who took part in the debate.

Adjourned at 4.47 pm.