



# Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 28 May 2024  
Volume 160, No 2

# Contents

## Assembly Business

Committee Deputy Chairperson Appointment..... 1

Ministerial Appointments: Mr C Murphy and Mr Nesbitt..... 1

## Members' Statements

Gaza War: Rafah Attack..... 1

Animal Cruelty ..... 2

Gaza War: Rafah Attack..... 2

Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, Strabane ..... 3

Seaview Primary School: 90th Anniversary ..... 3

General Election 2024: Executive Ministers..... 4

STEPS Mental Health Charity ..... 4

Gaza War: Rafah Attack..... 5

Mental Health in Farming Communities ..... 5

Sinn Féin: Westminster Abstentionism..... 6

General Election 2024 ..... 6

## Assembly Business

Public Petition: Dean Maguirc College — Enrolment Cap ..... 7

Committee Membership ..... 8

## Executive Committee Business

The draft Period Products (Department for Infrastructure Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 ..... 8

The Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 ..... 10

Human Medicines (Amendments relating to Registered Dental Hygienists, Registered Dental Therapists and Registered Pharmacy Technicians) Regulations 2024 ..... 13

Budget 2024-25 ..... 14

## Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office ..... 32

## Executive Committee Business

Budget 2024-25 (Continued) ..... 43

## Adjournment

# Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)  
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)  
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)  
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)  
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)  
Baker, Danny (West Belfast)  
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)  
Blair, John (South Antrim)  
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)  
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)  
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)  
Brett, Phillip (North Belfast)  
Brogan, Miss Nicola (West Tyrone)  
Brooks, David (East Belfast)  
Brownlee, Ms Cheryl (East Antrim)  
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)  
Buchanan, Tom (West Tyrone)  
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)  
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)  
Chambers, Alan (North Down)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Delargy, Pádraig (Foyle)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
Dillon, Mrs Linda (Mid Ulster)  
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)  
Dolan, Miss Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Donnelly, Danny (East Antrim)  
Dunne, Stephen (North Down)  
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)  
Easton, Alex (North Down)  
Eastwood, Ms Sorcha (Lagan Valley)  
Egan, Ms Connie (North Down)  
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Ennis, Mrs Sinéad (South Down)  
Erskine, Mrs Deborah (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Ferguson, Mrs Ciara (Foyle)  
Flynn, Miss Órlaithí (West Belfast)  
Forsythe, Ms Diane (South Down)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)  
Hargey, Miss Deirdre (South Belfast)  
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)  
Honeyford, David (Lagan Valley)  
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)  
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)  
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)  
Kingston, Brian (North Belfast)  
Little-Pengelly, Mrs Emma (Lagan Valley)  
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)  
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)  
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)  
McAllister, Miss Nuala (North Belfast)  
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)  
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)  
McGrath, Colin (South Down)  
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)  
McHugh, Maolíosa (West Tyrone)  
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)  
McLaughlin, Ms Sinéad (Foyle)  
McMurray, Andrew (South Down)  
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)  
McReynolds, Peter (East Belfast)  
Mason, Mrs Cathy (South Down)  
Mathison, Nick (Strangford)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Muir, Andrew (North Down)  
Mulholland, Ms Sian (North Antrim)  
Murphy, Miss Áine (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)  
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)  
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)  
Nicholl, Ms Kate (South Belfast)  
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)  
O'Neill, Ms Michelle (Mid Ulster)  
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)  
Poots, Edwin (Speaker)  
Reilly, Ms Aisling (West Belfast)  
Robinson, Alan (East Londonderry)  
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)  
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)  
Stewart, John (East Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Tennyson, Eóin (Upper Bann)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 28 May 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

### Committee Deputy Chairperson Appointment

**Mr Speaker:** I received correspondence from Ms Sinéad Ennis this morning advising of her resignation as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Justice. I have been notified by the nominating officer for Sinn Féin that Miss Deirdre Hargey has been nominated as the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Justice, taking effect from today, 28 May 2024.

### Ministerial Appointments: Mr C Murphy and Mr Nesbitt

**Mr Speaker:** I further advise the Assembly that the nominating officer for Sinn Féin has reappointed Mr Conor Murphy as Minister for the Economy. Mr Murphy accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly this morning. I welcome him back to the role.

I have also been notified by the nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party that Mr Mike Nesbitt will replace Mr Robin Swann as Minister of Health at 23.59 tonight.

## Members' Statements

**Mr Speaker:** The first item in the Order Paper is Members' statements. The usual rules apply. Members have up to three minutes each.

### Gaza War: Rafah Attack

**Mr Kearney:** Today, Dáil Éireann finally recognises the state of Palestine. Whilst it happens 10 years after an Dáil unanimously adopted a Sinn Féin motion to do so, it is a hugely significant occasion. The right to Palestinian self-determination, sovereignty and statehood, which has now been affirmed by the Norwegian, Irish and Spanish states, stands in defiance of Israel's apartheid system in, and occupation of, Palestine.

This is day 235 of Netanyahu's genocidal war in Gaza. On Sunday night, a fireball caused by Israeli missiles fired at tents in Rafah, incinerating over 45 displaced Palestinians alive and decapitating children, was an unparalleled atrocity. It was Israel's latest response to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) order for an end to the slaughter in Gaza and the announcements by Ireland, Spain and Norway. The Western Governments that have refused to stop arming and funding that murder machine are complicit in the massacre. Sunday's atrocity was the action of an Administration that is out of control. It is beyond the pale of humanity. The denial of Palestinian national and human rights is, however, now centre stage.

The moral courage of South Africa at the ICJ has been a catalyst for turning world popular opinion. Other states in Europe will now follow Ireland's lead, but more must be done to maximise international pressure. Comprehensive political and economic sanctions must be applied, and arms embargoes must be imposed. International law must be actively enforced against Netanyahu's Government.

Every citizen, business, community group and public body can play a part by using legitimate

boycott and divestment policies against Israel's war economy. Every single opportunity must be used to demand a permanent ceasefire, a complete withdrawal of all Israeli forces from Gaza and the West Bank, unimpeded humanitarian access into the Gaza Strip and an end to settler colonial expansions. This Netanyahu Government have put themselves beyond all accepted international and diplomatic legal norms, and they must be totally isolated.

## Animal Cruelty

**Mr Middleton:** Today, I want to address a deeply troubling issue that has, once again, surfaced on social media: a video showing an appalling attack on an innocent dog in the north-west. The disgusting acts in the video are too graphic to describe. Sadly, however, the dog did not survive. This heartbreaking incident has not only shocked us but, once again, brought into focus the need for immediate and decisive action.

Animal cruelty is a heinous act that reflects the darkest aspects of human behaviour. When we witness such violence against a defenceless animal, it is a stark reminder of the cruelty that can exist in our society. Animals like the dog in that video trust us and depend on us for their well-being. Betraying that trust through abuse is morally and legally unacceptable.

The current penalties for animal cruelty are clearly insufficient to deter such acts. Too many perpetrators receive minimal punishment, which sends the wrong message that animal lives are not valued. We need to change that. The justice system must treat animal cruelty with the seriousness that it deserves, reflecting the profound emotional and social impact that those acts have in our communities.

I call on the Justice and AERA Ministers to urgently come together and act on this growing injustice in our society. Stricter sentencing for animal cruelty is essential. It will serve as a strong deterrent to potential abusers and provide a measure of justice for the victims: the animals and the communities that are affected by those crimes. Harsher penalties will also reflect our society's commitment to protect all living beings and uphold humane values.

I commend all the organisations that provide support and shelter for animals; the many groups, such as Justice for Luna, that have used their voices to speak up for innocent animals; and the overwhelming number of responsible owners who love and cherish their

animals. We need Ministers across the Executive to work together to bring about tougher sentencing laws for animal cruelty. By doing so, we can help to ensure that those who commit such abhorrent acts are held accountable and that no animal has to endure such suffering again.

## Gaza War: Rafah Attack

**Ms Bradshaw:** I add my voice to the international community's condemnation of the murder and maiming of innocent civilians in Rafah over the past few days. The Israeli Government's pursuit of a so-called total victory in Rafah is nothing more than an attempt to annihilate the Palestinian people and everything that they hold dear. Babies, children and the elderly — all innocent, defenceless and, no doubt, extremely scared — are being caught up in the Israeli Defence Force's deadly pursuit of Hamas.

My colleague Kate Nicholl recently held a meeting in Parliament Buildings with members of the Palestinian community who live here, and I know that some Members who are in the Chamber also attended. Among the delegation was a man named Zac, who had got out of Palestine just eight days previously. He told us of the trauma that his family had to experience: first, in being displaced from their family home; and, secondly, through being moved time and time again and, on foot, having to carry children for miles from one refugee camp to another. In the camps, resources are so scarce that electricity supplies have been cut off, and even access to water is extremely limited, so, amid the fear and sadness, people seeking shelter also face starvation and acute dehydration. For the Israelis to use their prized precision munitions to target those people is beyond barbaric. Even the Palestinian Red Crescent said that the air strike on Sunday evening had targeted tents for displaced people in an area that is supposed to be a safe zone. How very tragic. It is clear that the Israeli Government are defying the International Court of Justice, which recently ordered an immediate halt to their military offensive in the Rafah area.

The UK Government must continue to exert whatever pressure they can on the Israeli Government and convince them that a path must be created towards Palestinian statehood. A meaningful ceasefire must be agreed and the exchange of hostages secured without any further delay. There is no other way forward for the Middle East.

## Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, Strabane

**Mr McHugh:** I mí Mheán Fómhair 2024, osclófar Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, scoil nua shaincheaptha ar an tSraith Bhán. Beidh breis agus 170 dalta ag freastal uirthi. Éacht atá ann.

Cuireadh náiscoil ar bun sa cheantar sa bhliain 1994. As an náiscoil sin a tháinig an chéad bhunscoil in 1997 agus ní raibh ar an bhunscoil chéanna ach múinteoir amháin, ceathrar daltaí agus ní bhfuair sí cistiú ar bith. Rinne pobal tiomanta, díograiseach na Gaeilge ar an tSraith Bhán, rinne sin an Ghaelscolaíocht a chothú agus a chistiú. Is de thairbhe a n-iarrachtaí a thug Martin McGuinness, nach maireann, a bhí ina Aire Oideachais san am, thug sé aitheantas oifigiúil do Ghaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh sa bhliain 2000.

De réir mar a bhí an ráchairt ar an Ghaelscolaíocht ag fás bliain i ndiaidh bliana, agus de réir mar a chonacthas nár leor ar chor ar bith an chóiríocht a bhí á cur ar fáil i seomraí sealadacha ranga, d'fhógair John O'Dowd, Aire, in 2013 go mbeadh foirgneamh nua de dhíth agus go ndéanfaí an Roinn Oideachais sin a sholáthar. Beidh toradh na hoibre sin ag muintir an tSraitha Báin agus an cheantair máguaird i mí Mheán Fómhair 2024 nuair a bheidh scoil nua acu a riarfaidh ar riachtanais na dtuismitheoirí sin ar mian leo scoil trí Ghaeilge a bheith curtha roimh a gcuid páistí.

Tá tuismitheoirí, múinteoirí agus an pobal i gcoitinne tiomanta le 26 bliana anuas le soláthar don Ghaeilge a fhorbairt ar an tSraith Bhán agus is de bharr na ndaoine sin a tháinig an tionscadal seo i gcrích.

Scéal an tSraitha Báin, scéal Thuaisceart na hÉireann ar mórán dóigheanna. Tá an ráchairt ar an Ghaelscolaíocht ag fás ach tá bac á chur uirthi ag an easpa cistithe don earnáil sa chóras oideachais, ní hé amháin easpa foirgneamh ach easpa sainsoláthair don dalta atá ar Ghaelscoil agus a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta oideachais air. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go gcoinneodh an Roinn buiséad cuí leis an earnáil oideachais seo atá ag fás, ionas go mbeidh cistiú cóir, cothrom ann don Ghaelscolaíocht.

Tá mé cinnte go bhfuil Gearóid Ó Dochartaigh, Gael go smior atá ar shlí na fírinne anois, agus ar ainmníodh an scoil as, tá mé cinnte de go bhfuil sé ag amharc anuas ar an méid atá bainte amach ag muintir a bhaile le 26 bliain anuas lenár dteanga dhúchais a chur chun cinn.

*[Translation: In September 2024, a new, purpose-built Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh will open its doors to in excess of 170 pupils in Strabane. This is indeed a great achievement.*

*A nursery school was established in the area in 1994, out of which grew the first primary school in 1997 with one teacher, four pupils and no funding. The dedicated and committed Irish language community in Strabane funded and promoted Irish-medium education (IME). It was because of their efforts that, in the year 2000, the late Martin McGuinness, Minister of Education, awarded official recognition to Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh.*

*As demand for IME increased year-on-year and accommodation in temporary classrooms became totally inadequate, Minister John O'Dowd, in 2013, confirmed that a new build was necessary and would be provided by the Department of Education. The fruits of that labour will be felt by the Irish language community of Strabane and the surrounding area in September 2024 with the new build meeting the needs of those parents who wish to have their children educated through the medium of Irish.*

*Parents, teachers and the wider community have been committed to the development of Irish language provision in Strabane for this past 26 years, and it is to their credit that this project has come to fruition.*

*In many ways, Strabane is an example of what continues to happen throughout the North of Ireland. The demand for IME is on the increase but is hampered by the systemic lack of funding to this sector, not only in terms of buildings but in the lack of specialist provision in meeting the needs of those with special needs who attend Irish-medium schools. It is imperative that the Department maintain budgets to this growing sector of education to ensure fair and equitable funding for Irish-medium education.*

*The late Gearóid Ó Dochartaigh was a Gael through and through. Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh is named after Gearóid, and I am sure he is looking down with pride on his native town and what its people have achieved in the past 26 years in promoting our native tongue.]*

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

## Seaview Primary School: 90th Anniversary

**Mr Brett:** First, Mr Speaker, I welcome you back to the Chamber. It is good to see you back in good health, sir.

I congratulate Seaview Primary School in my constituency of North Belfast, which, last week, celebrated its 90th anniversary, representing 90 years of excellent education provision to the community of lower north Belfast. Communities across north Belfast came together, rightly, to celebrate the school and all that it has achieved in the past 90 years. It was a beacon of hope and a sanctuary of safety for pupils during many of the darkest days in the history of north Belfast.

The school has produced some wonderful people who continue to live, work and dedicate their lives to improving the lives of all those who call north Belfast "home".

#### 10.45 am

A fitting tribute for the 90th anniversary would be the advancement of the new-build primary school at the site, and I know that my colleague Minister Givan continues to advance those proposals. For many years, the school has continued to operate in suboptimal conditions, and it is vital that, in this 90th year and to mark the special anniversary, we deliver a school that is fit for purpose and fits the needs of the entire community of north Belfast. I take the opportunity to congratulate Mrs Latham, the principal, and the staff, parents and pupils for this wonderful achievement, and we look forward to celebrating an even better anniversary at the new school facilities.

### General Election 2024: Executive Ministers

**Mr O'Toole:** Mr Speaker, I welcome you back to the Chair, as Mr Brett did. I also associate myself with the remarks that were made about the abhorrent and appalling actions of the Netanyahu regime in Rafah over the past few days and endorse what was said about Palestinian statehood and Ireland recognising it. That is a huge step forward, but, sadly, it is not enough at the minute for the innocent people cowering in Gaza.

We know that the public of Northern Ireland do not think very much of this institution, and they do not think very much of politics or politicians here in general. We have been back in the Chamber and around the Executive table for less than four months. In that time, we have debated motion after motion, most of which have acknowledged the collapsing state of our

public services. All of the parties that entered into the Executive and, indeed, the Opposition have acknowledged the parlous state of our finances and our public services. The public, in that context, rightly and understandably expected their politicians at a devolved level to be 100% focused on dealing with those issues, particularly those who were fortunate enough to take up ministerial office and sign the Pledge of Office. Therefore, it is profoundly disappointing, to say the least, that, in the past few days, after the election was called, we have found out that at least two Executive Ministers will run for office. Three and a half months into the Executive's being restored, with our public finances in a state of utter collapse and our public services in ruin, Ministers who solemnly took the Pledge of Office are running to leave office.

We wonder why people distrust politics. We wonder why people have contempt for Stormont. Then, the Health Minister, with the NHS among the worst health services in western Europe, resigns, as we found out, at midnight tonight, and the Justice Minister, days after telling us of the parlous state of our justice system, says that she will resign to run for a Back-Bench position.

My party will always acknowledge the importance of Westminster. We hope to send as many SDLP MPs back as possible to stand up for this place and, hopefully, get rid of the Tory regime. However, when leaders who have carved out a niche, including, it has to be said, the leader of the Alliance Party, in calling out others for walking away from devolution at the first opportunity walk away or seek to walk away from devolution, that, I am afraid, has to be called out. We can all play party political games, but, when we came back here in February, we said that our priority was public services. It is a shame that —

**Mr Speaker:** Mr O'Toole, your time has gone.

**Mr O'Toole:** — certain Executive Ministers are not standing by that.

### STEPS Mental Health Charity

**Ms Sheerin:** I rise on a somewhat bittersweet note to congratulate STEPS, a mental health charity in my area, on its 12th anniversary. STEPS was founded almost 12 years ago — it is having a celebration at the end of this week — to address the epidemic that we have in our area. At that time, Draperstown was the suicide capital of mid-Ulster, and the community, including some concerned families and people

who had been affected, came together to try to break the stigma of suicide; to raise support for those affected by it, including those who had lost loved ones; to tell people that it was OK not to be OK; and to help people with mental ill health.

It is particularly poignant that STEPS's 12th anniversary occurs at the end of this week, given that our community has recently been affected by the tragedy of suicide once again, the second in just over two months.

It is an important conversation to have, and it is something that we need to speak about in order to break the stigma of suicide and to support one another. I congratulate all those who volunteer for STEPS on the various initiatives that they run, from hillwalking to yoga and Pilates, and the counselling that they provide, but there is still an awful lot for us to do.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the incident over the weekend in Cookstown. I tell the migrant worker population that has made its home there and in the surrounding areas across mid-Ulster that we do not tolerate or condone the racist graffiti that we saw daubed on shopfronts across Cookstown at the weekend and that the people of mid-Ulster stand in solidarity with all who have made their home there, welcome them and recognise the contribution that they have made. The negativity that surrounds those sorts of incidents and the impact that they have on people's mental health cannot be ignored, given the week that is in it.

## Gaza War: Rafah Attack

**Mr Carroll:** A "tragic mistake" is what chief terrorist Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the bombing of a collection of refugee tents in Gaza just a few days ago. That is not true. It is a complete fabrication once again from him and Israel. The Israeli state has some of the most deadly but precise and sophisticated weaponry in the world. It knew exactly what it was doing and knows exactly what it is doing. As recent revelations about its AI weaponry have shown, it knows exactly how many people are in buildings and tents and how many Palestinians it will kill with each and every missile fired and bomb dropped.

The Israeli Government and state simply do not care. They do not care when building illegal settlements, stealing the land of Palestinians. They do not care when tens of thousands are killed by their bombs. To Israel and its backers, they are simply collateral. To Israel, the

Palestinians whom they kill are nameless, but we know that they have names, families, hopes, dreams and desires, all of which are wiped out in seconds by Israel's deadly bombs.

We have heard for months butcher Joe Biden repeat the lie about beheaded babies, referring to Israeli children. We then see over the weekend actual beheaded and mutilated Palestinian babies. No pictures are held up by Biden, von der Leyen, Sunak or Starmer. Once again to those in power who fund the murder machine, Palestinian lives do not matter. They matter to us in this city and across this island, however.

In response to the recent events, we need to see urgent and swift action. The Israeli ambassador to Ireland has been recalled by Tel Aviv. Our message is, "Don't come back. You're not welcome on this island". Rishi Sunak needs to stop sending weapons, money and aid to Israel, and Keir Starmer needs to grow a spine and commit to that as well. We need to see the Irish Government suspend all trade with Israel. We need to see sanctions and sanctions and sanctions on Israel to stop the terror. Despite the actions of Israel, the Palestinian people and Palestine will never die.

## Mental Health in Farming Communities

**Mr Frew:** Mr Speaker, I, too, wish you well on your return after a spate of illness.

This Friday and Saturday, those who attend the Ballymoney show will enjoy a really good show, as will those who attend the Ballymena show on Saturday 15 June. In the farming community, however, there are many stresses and strains: the isolation of the work and the associated loneliness; worries about the crop and livestock; the risks and dangers on the farm; and stress about the weather. All have an impact on the mental health not only of the farmer who works the land but of the wider family.

Today, in the week before the Ballymoney show, I want to raise awareness about mental health in our farming communities. No matter where you are, there is the same stress and strain. I worry about members of the North Antrim farming community and the impact that all those conditions have on the lives and health of its members. We know that the health service is not in any fit state to help anyone with their mental health. It is so unfortunate that, at this time, we have a Health Minister who, instead of looking towards the farming community in North Antrim, is looking towards



South Antrim. Instead of having a Health Minister who is prepared to tackle mental health waiting lists, we have a Health Minister who is looking towards a Westminster election. That is regrettable. I wish it were not so. We need all the help that we can get for the farming community in North Antrim, so that is regrettable.

## **Sinn Féin: Westminster Abstentionism**

**Mr McCrossan:** I, too, share the comments of my colleagues in the House in welcoming you back to the Chair, Mr Speaker.

A very drenched Tory Prime Minister called an election in recent days. It was a solemn reminder of the chaos that has lingered at the fingertips of this Government for well over a decade. I can happily say that we will be happy to see the back of the Tory Administration at Number 10 and will welcome the new, incoming Government.

At this time, we have major challenges in Northern Ireland and major hurdles to overcome, particularly with the health service, education and the state of our roads etc, as well as with how the Assembly is funded. We have heard from the First Minister and deputy First Minister since the return of the Assembly and from other colleagues, particularly those from Sinn Féin, about how underfunded this place is and how much the Tories are to blame. I do not dispute that the Tories are to blame for quite a lot of the financial issues that we face. It is, however, more important than ever, now that we will, hopefully, see a new Administration — although there could be a hung Parliament — that we have MPs from across the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland who actually show up.

We talked about the importance of showing up to this House to get the work done and deliver for people on the ground, but what about showing up to Westminster? In the absence of this institution for the past number of years, my constituents in West Tyrone were left completely voiceless, because we were not able to speak up for them in this House and no one was speaking up for them in London. If Sinn Féin is serious about wanting to see this place being better resourced and better funded, it is surely better to be there rather than being outside shouting in. That really does not benefit anybody — certainly not my constituents in West Tyrone or those in any other constituencies where that policy is in place. Over the past few days, we have heard the First

Minister and, indeed, the MP for my constituency saying that now is the time for change. What will change? Is Sinn Féin going to change its abstentionist policy? Will it review its approach?

The truth is that abstentionism does not serve our constituents well. It only serves the selfish, narrow political interests of Sinn Féin. SDLP MPs have shown for decades that they can deliver at Westminster, their votes count and people's voices can be heard in that Chamber. That is why we have two outstanding MPs, Colum Eastwood and Claire Hanna. It is a great pity that my constituents have been deprived of that for the past 23 years, and I hope that, if Sinn Féin really cares about the state of our finances in Northern Ireland, its MPs will take up their seats, go to Westminster and demand better for people, instead of standing outside huffing about it.

## **General Election 2024**

**Mr Allister:** I join others in welcoming you back, Mr Speaker.

The calling of the general election puts a fresh focus on the degree to which the people of Northern Ireland have been disenfranchised by the protocol. As MLAs, we already know, although some do not care, about the fact that 300 areas of law that should be disposed of mostly in this House are, instead, in the hands of a foreign Parliament, courtesy of the EU protocol. Now, we will elect a Parliament that, amazingly, is proclaimed to be the Mother of Parliaments, the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom, yet it will be unable, as we have seen, to legislate in certain areas for all parts of the United Kingdom.

We saw, when it passed the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, and would have seen, had it had time to pass the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, that none of that legislation could be applied to Northern Ireland. Why? Because sovereignty over key areas had been surrendered to a foreign Parliament and jurisdiction. Is it not ironic that, when we come to elect to a Westminster Parliament, we will be electing MPs who, just as we in this place and their people are, are disenfranchised when it comes to the extent of the legislation they can pass?

### **11.00 am**

The other major impact of the calling of an election is that the DUP's 'Safeguarding the

Union' document falls flat on its face in terms of its delivery. We were initially told that it abolished the Irish Sea border and led to our being fully restored within the United Kingdom, but, after those lies fell to the ground, the assurance was, "Oh, it is a work in progress". Now we discover that the deliverer of that progress has cut and run and that there will be no delivery. First, the DUP jumped, and then there was the fact that the Prime Minister knew perfectly well when he would go to the polls and that he would never deliver on the promises that he was making, and so 'Safeguarding the Union', for what it was worth, has been left marooned and undelivered. Such is the consequence when you surrender sovereignty over your nation.

## Assembly Business

### Public Petition: Dean Maguirc College — Enrolment Cap

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Declan McAleer has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

**Mr McAleer:** Dean Maguirc College in Carrickmore, County Tyrone, is a thriving college at the heart of our community. It is oversubscribed every year but is capped at 80 places a year, with a total enrolment cap of 440 places. That unfair cap is holding back the Dean and restricting pupils' choice to attend a thriving, rural, all-ability school. The college has sought to get an increase to those numbers on many occasions, but those attempts have been met with resistance from the employing authority, namely the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The college continues to be oversubscribed by up to 50% each year for year 8 places, and this September will see the pupil population reach approximately 670.

The Department of Education identified Dean Maguirc as a college that has to continue to seek temporary variations to enable it to meet the demand for places. The Department's recent pilot exercise gave hope that the cap on numbers could be increased to 100 a year and 600 overall, which would be more indicative of the present numbers. The college did not, however, get its numbers increased through that normalisation process, which was disappointing, especially given that 21 other schools were given the go-ahead to increase their enrolment cap. That decision triggered a huge local reaction, and the whole community rallied round to support the call for the Dean by signing a petition to lift the cap. A huge number — 7,000 people — have signed the petition, which I have here, over the past number of weeks. That is a huge vote of confidence in Dean Maguirc. I especially want to thank the young people — the pupils — who led on the petition, brought it home to their families, friends and neighbours to get them to sign it and put it in local shops, youth clubs, churches and other places for people to sign it over the past weeks. That huge response is testament to the high standard of education and learning in Dean Maguirc.

I proudly declare an interest as a past pupil of Dean Maguirc, a parent of two children who are

pupils there and a parent of our eldest son, who finished his studies there a couple of years ago.

I recently attended a constructive meeting with the Minister, CCMS, representatives of the school and Órfhlaith Begley MP. We are hopeful that the enrolment cap at Dean Maguirc can be raised to reflect the school's actual numbers. As such, I bring the petition to the House and will present it to the Education Minister this afternoon. I take this opportunity to call on the CCMS and the Department of Education to move at pace on the development proposal to lift the enrolment cap, acknowledging Dean Maguirc as a growing post-primary school that is at the heart of our community.

*Mr McAleer moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.*

**Mr Speaker:** I will forward the petition to the Minister of Education and send a copy to the Committee.

## Committee Membership

*Resolved:*

*That Mr Patsy McGlone replace Ms Cara Hunter as a member of the Business Committee; that Ms Cara Hunter replace Mr Matthew O'Toole as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Mr Matthew O'Toole replace Ms Cara Hunter as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [Mr McGrath.]*

## Executive Committee Business

### The draft Period Products (Department for Infrastructure Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):** I beg to move

*That the draft Period Products (Department for Infrastructure Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker.]* I am pleased to bring the statutory rule before the Assembly for approval. The Period Products (Department for Infrastructure Specified Public Bodies) Regulations (NI) 2024 will be made under powers conferred by the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (NI) 2022. The regulations were laid before the Assembly on 24 April 2024 and are subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure, which is the purpose of our debate today. The regulations will come into operation if approved by the Assembly.

Members will be aware that the Act, which creates a legal right of free access to period products across the North, came about as a result of a private Member's Bill brought forward by former SDLP MLA Pat Catney. I commend the vision and drive that he and fellow MLAs brought to the debate and the legislation.

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

The purpose of the Act and the DFI regulations is to provide vital support to tackle period poverty and dignity by recognising that period products are necessary and essential items that should be made available free of charge and accessible for all persons who need to use them. Under section 2 of the Act, all Departments must specify by regulation which of their public service bodies must establish and maintain arrangements to ensure that period products are obtainable free of charge on their premises. My Department proposes to specify two public service bodies: NI Water and the

Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, which is known better under the trading name of Translink. The regulations will, in effect, require NI Water and Translink to provide free period products for members of the public, staff and visitors on their premises. They also provide descriptions of "premises" and "persons" for the purpose of the Act.

Products will have to be made available in all staff buildings that are used to deliver services to the public and are normally open to the public. That will comprise all 37 Translink bus and train stations, including the new Belfast Grand Central station, which will open later this year, and NI Water's Silent Valley visitor and education centre. Provision for staff and visitors will also have to be made in all Translink and NI Water administrative accommodation. My Department has liaised with Translink and NI Water as to how the regulations will be implemented on their premises. Both organisations must also carry out, in due course after the regulations come into operation, consultation exercises with product users on the specific arrangements for the free provision of period products on their individual premises.

I am pleased with how my Department will contribute to the successful delivery of the House's vision of how period poverty can be addressed, giving those who need to use period products the respect they deserve. I thank Translink and NI Water for their cooperation in introducing this important new service. I also thank the Infrastructure Committee for its prompt scrutiny of the policy and the draft regulations. I commend the motion to the Assembly and ask that the statutory rule be approved.

**Mrs Erskine (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee for Infrastructure. As we have heard during similar debates over recent weeks, the regulations before us seek to deliver on the requirements of the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. Initially, the Committee, at its first meeting, on 14 February, considered a statutory rule on the matter that had been laid by the Department for Infrastructure in June 2023. However, the Department informed the Committee that it was necessary to update the rule to correct the year and to address some typographical errors. The policy proposals reflecting those changes were subsequently considered at the Committee meeting on 10 April.

As the Minister indicated, the Act requires the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments to

specify public bodies within their remit that will be required to establish and maintain arrangements to ensure that period products are obtainable free of charge on their premises. The rule will specify the provision by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company — Translink — and Northern Ireland Water of the products in all of their administrative accommodation and in all staff buildings that are used for the delivery of services to the public and are open to the public.

On 10 April, the Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the statutory rule. The draft statutory rule was subsequently considered at the Committee's meeting on 8 May, when it was noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had raised no concerns regarding the technical aspects of the rule. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Assembly approve the draft statutory rule. I therefore support the motion on behalf of the Committee for Infrastructure.

**Mr Durkan:** I am pleased to welcome free access to period products in all public buildings. Today, we deal with those belonging specifically to DFI and its public bodies. It is a necessary step forward to ensuring equality and dignity, combating period poverty and reducing the existing stigma around menstruation. I am pleased with the role that the SDLP has played, and I commend my party colleague Pat Catney for bringing forward this progressive and transformative legislation. Access to menstrual products is a basic human right and an essential aspect of public health. It empowers individuals to participate fully in society without the burden of financial or social barriers.

This is a shining example of what can be achieved when this place works: when politicians, parties and dedicated campaign groups, such as Menstruation Matters, work together for the betterment of lives and society. The Executive must focus on social justice-driven policy and delivery that eliminates barriers from marginalised groups. As the Minister outlined, DFI, through Northern Ireland Water and, in particular, Translink, owns a healthy suite of public buildings and administrative accommodation. There is a lot of footfall, particularly in our train stations and bus depots — or "transport hubs", as they seem to be called now. When the Minister is responding, will he elaborate on whether any consideration has been given to how provision might be made on the train fleet, as, I suppose, it would not apply as much to buses? I welcome today's positive step.

**Mr Boylan:** I welcome the motion and the progressive and positive change that it represents. The aim of the policy is to ensure that period products are available free of charge on the premises of the specified public service bodies within the remit of the Department for Infrastructure. The regulation will replace the 2023 regulations, due to technical reasons.

According to research by Plan International UK, one in seven has struggled to afford sanitary products. That should simply not be the case. We are committed to tackling period poverty and bringing about positive social change. The motion and the Period Products (Free Provision) Act aim to remove financial barriers to accessing period products.

Such essential items should be free and accessible; access to them should not place stress or a burden on those who need them. I welcome this positive change. We are committed to improving lives and helping people, families and communities.

**11.15 am**

**Mr McReynolds:** I will keep my remarks brief. It is with no doubt that I welcome the introduction of the regulations from an Infrastructure perspective. I remember my colleague Sian Mulholland leading the charge on this while we were councillors together in Belfast, alongside Katrina McDonnell from The Homeless Period Belfast.

Equitable access to period products in public spaces is long overdue, and I give thanks to former MLA Pat Catney for bringing this much-needed legislation forward in the Assembly. It will go some way to relieving period poverty, tackling the taboo around periods and ensuring that women and girls will not have to go without basic sanitary provision in 2024. Period products are essential items, and it is time that we started treating them as such. Today's changes will go some way to achieving that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call the Minister to conclude and wind up the debate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the members and Chair of the Committee for their work on bringing this legislation before the House. It is an important piece of legislation, as a number of Members pointed out, and it is about ensuring that we make life that bit easier for everyone. If the Assembly can achieve that simple task, we will have achieved success. The legislation will bring benefits, each and every day, to many people by improving access to period products.

In answer to Mr Durkan's question about availability on the train fleet, under the legislation a train is not defined as a "premises". However, in the spirit of the legislation, we will continue to work with Translink to see how we can provide free period products on our trains.

In conclusion, I commend the statutory rule to the Assembly and ask that it be approved.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Thank you, Minister.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Period Products (Department for Infrastructure Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

## **The Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):** I beg to move

*That the Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved.*

This rule is the current replacement —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Please resume your seat.

**Mr Lyons:** Sorry.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Thank you. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I call the Minister to open the debate.

**Mr Lyons:** This rule is the replacement for the original regulations that came into operation on 12 December 2022. As the regulations require the approval of the Assembly, they have been revoked and replaced on a couple of occasions, otherwise they would have expired at the end of the six-month period from the date that they came into operation.

The rule provides the framework within which pensions dashboards will operate. Pensions dashboard services are an electronic communications service that will allow individuals to see their pensions information, including the state pension, in one place online.

One of the impacts of changing work patterns and automatic enrolment is that there has been an increase in the number of people with multiple pension pots. With the passage of time, those people can lose track of one or more of their pensions.

The regulations introduce requirements that will bring the pensions dashboard services into operation. The aim is to make it easier for people to access their pensions information, which will help to improve individuals' awareness and understanding of their pension and estimated retirement income. Organisations that wish to provide a pensions dashboard service will have their pensions dashboard service exist alongside the pensions dashboard service that is to be provided by the Money and Pensions Service.

The regulations introduce provisions that providers of dashboard services are required to abide by in order to be considered a qualifying pensions dashboard service. Providers must also have permission from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) to operate in that capacity. The regulations require relevant occupational pension schemes to connect to the dashboards ecosystem and be ready to respond to data requests by the connection deadline of 31 October 2026 and in the correct data format. They also set out the requirements for organisations that wish to provide a pensions dashboard service.

They will help to ensure that pensions dashboard services can be introduced safely and within a reasonable time frame.

The delivery of pensions dashboards needs to be both timely and operationally manageable. Pensions dashboard guidance on the staged timetable for relevant occupational pension schemes to connect to the pensions dashboards ecosystem by 31 October 2026 is available on my Department's website.

By prioritising the largest pension schemes for connection to the Money and Pensions Service architecture before smaller schemes, the aim is for a comprehensive dashboard service to be available to the public at the earliest opportunity, whilst ensuring that the requirements are achievable for the pensions industry. The regulations provide that qualifying pensions dashboard services are to be made available to the general public from the dashboard's available point. That will be the date specified in a notice issued in accordance with the regulations.

The regulations also set out the various requirements that pensions dashboard services and the providers of those services will need to meet and continue to meet to be qualifying pensions dashboard services. For example, the requirements will include adherence to standards set by the Money and Pensions Service. Failure to comply with certain standards will result in a qualifying pensions dashboard service being disconnected from the dashboards ecosystem. The regulations set out the requirements that are imposed on trustees or managers of relevant occupational pensions systems. For example, they outline how schemes must cooperate with and connect to the Money and Pensions Service architecture to fulfil their duties in relation to matching an individual with their data. The regulations also set out what schemes must do to provide an individual with their pension information when requested.

Dashboards will present individuals with relatively high-level pension information. It will not be possible, for example, to transact, transfer or consolidate through the digital architecture. On receiving an individual's request to find their pension information from the dashboard's digital architecture, schemes must provide administrative data to the individual. That includes basic information about the pension, including how an individual can contact their scheme. The individual will then see information about the value of their pension both as an accrued value and as an illustration of a projected retirement income. State pension information will also be displayed, giving individuals a full picture of their pensions. Contextual information and signpost data will sit alongside those values to help users to understand the information that is displayed.

The regulations also set out a robust and effective enforcement regime that allows the Pensions Regulator to take appropriate enforcement action in the case of a failure to adhere to any of the proposed requirements and provides a significant deterrent to non-compliance. The regulations enable the Money and Pensions Service to share information with the Pensions Regulator in connection with its function under the regulations. That will support the Money and Pensions Service and the regulator in their pensions dashboard programme and compliance roles respectively and support the secure delivery of the ecosystem and pensions dashboard services. The Data Protection Act 2018 and UK general data protection duties continue to apply to the sharing of information about an individual.

The aim of the pension dashboard is to make it easier for people to access their pension information, including their state pension, which will help to improve individuals' awareness and understanding of their pension and their estimated retirement income.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** I support the Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations 2023. I thank the Minister for setting out the detail of the regulations.

The Committee considered the regulations at our meeting on 22 February, when we received a briefing from officials from the Department, who explained to members the continuity and enhancement that the regulations would bring to the pension system. Members recognised that pensions dashboards are a pivotal advancement in our pension system. They are electronic communication services that allow individuals to view all of their pension information, including the state pension, in one online location. That service is crucial in helping people to reconnect with lost pensions and for supporting better retirement planning.

It was clear to the Committee that changing work patterns and automatic enrolment have led to an increase in individuals with multiple pension pots. Over time, many people lose track of their pensions. The introduction of the pensions dashboard aims to address that issue by making it easier for people to access their pension information. It will significantly improve individuals' awareness and understanding of their pension and estimated retirement income.

I will now speak about the key provisions. The regulations will require all occupational pension schemes within their scope to connect to the pensions dashboards by the deadline of 31 October 2026. Pension schemes must be prepared to respond to data requests in the correct format in order to ensure a comprehensive and reliable service for the public at the earliest opportunity. The regulations also stipulate that any organisation wishing to provide a pensions dashboard service must meet specific criteria in order to be deemed a qualifying pensions dashboard service. That includes obtaining permission from the Financial Conduct Authority and adhering to standards set by the Money and Pensions Service.

The Committee welcomed the fact that the regulations set out a robust and effective enforcement regime that will allow the Pensions Regulator to take appropriate enforcement action in the case of a failure to adhere to any

of the proposed requirements. That provision will provide a significant deterrent to non-compliance. The Committee wrote to the Department with some queries about the regulations. We asked whether all government pensions will be available on the dashboards well in advance of the connection deadline of 31 October 2026. Members were pleased to note that the state pension will be one of the first to connect to pensions dashboards and that guidance will be published setting out a staged timetable for connection. The Committee also asked whether work can be done for people who work in the EU but reside here in the North to ensure that their pension schemes will also be accessible on the dashboards. We were informed, however, that there are currently no plans to incorporate pensions based outside of here or Britain.

Finally, the Committee asked the Department to publicise the availability and location of the dashboards to ensure that anyone who is a member of an occupational pension scheme is aware of the service. It is fair to say that it is important to get that information to young people in particular in a way that is accessible. The Department informed us that access to free and impartial pensions guidance is available through MoneyHelper. Members were pleased to hear that dashboards will be launched to the public as soon as they are available, that the Money and Pensions Service will provide a MoneyHelper dashboard for those who wish to use it and that a campaign to publicise dashboards will be launched in due course.

Overall, the Committee recognised that the aim of the regulations is to provide a comprehensive and user-friendly service to help individuals understand and manage their retirement savings better. It was therefore content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

**Ms Mulholland:** I welcome the regulations. As the Minister mentioned, gone are the days when people had one job for life and one pension pot. The regulations have to be welcomed, particularly as we look at potentially lowering the age of auto-enrolment in pension schemes and at the need for better retirement planning. Demystifying pensions by allowing people to access and see theirs will be really important in the piece of work done on dashboards so that pensions are not just an intangible concept, where people pay money every month into a pot. I urge the Minister to look at the communication plan for the roll-out, however. It is important to make sure that the dashboards are accessible for everyone, particularly those in the later stages of

retirement planning, so that they can utilise the service to its fullest. I welcome the legislation.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call the Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons, to conclude and wind on the debate.

**Mr Lyons:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Committee for Communities for its support for the passing of the regulations. I also thank the Chair and the Member for North Antrim Ms Mulholland for their comments. It is fair to say that pensions are not always the most exhilarating topic of conversation, and that is because, so often, people do not really understand how they work and what their pension will mean for them. Ms Mulholland was right to highlight the fact that many people do not stay in a job for life any more. People will have various different pension pots, as is the case for many in the Chamber today. Pensions dashboards will be a really useful tool that will help people plan and prepare for their retirement and help them understand what retirement will mean for them. The process is ongoing, but today is an important step on the journey, and I am grateful to the House for its support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved.*

**11.30 am**

## **Human Medicines (Amendments relating to Registered Dental Hygienists, Registered Dental Therapists and Registered Pharmacy Technicians) Regulations 2024**

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** I beg to move

*That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments relating to Registered Dental Hygienists, Registered Dental Therapists and Registered Pharmacy Technicians) Regulations 2024 be approved.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate.

**Mr Swann:** I seek the Assembly's approval for the making of the draft statutory instrument (SI), which will amend the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 or "HMRs", as they are commonly known, to allow dental hygienists and dental therapists to supply and administer specified prescription-only medicines, pharmacy or general sales list medicines in the practitioner's scope of practice, under exemption, without the use of a patient-specific direction or a patient group direction or without obtaining a prescription. The statutory instrument will also enable registered pharmacy technicians to supply and administer medicines using patient group directions in any setting, including the health service and the independent and voluntary sectors.

The HMRs are a set of UK laws that regulate the use of medicinal products for human use. They set out a comprehensive regime for the authorisation of products for their manufacture, import, distribution, sale and supply, for their labelling and advertising and for pharmacovigilance. Members will note that the amendments follow the completion of two UK-wide consultations to extend medicine responsibilities to the two regulated health professions.

The consultation to enable dental hygienists and dental therapists to supply and administer specific medicines under the exemptions received over 2,700 responses, with 97% of respondents agreeing with the proposals. It was highlighted that the proposals will support dental hygienists and dental therapists in providing the right care to patients to reduce unnecessary delays, where it is safe and appropriate to do so. The amendments will also improve the use of a skills mix in health service dentistry to ensure that the full dental team can be utilised to deliver care to patients, which is an important element in improving access to health service dentistry. The job satisfaction of the professionals should also be improved by enabling them to work to the full scope of their practice.

The second consultation, on proposals to amend the HMRs to enable the use by pharmacy technicians of patient group directions, received over 2,200 responses, and 84% of respondents agreed with the proposals. The amendments will enable registered pharmacy technicians to use patient group directions across England, Wales and Scotland in any setting, including the health service and the independent and voluntary sectors. They will be able to provide direct care to their patients, freeing up capacity in other parts of the healthcare system by supporting community



pharmacy to provide more clinical services. I point out that the role of pharmacy technician is not currently a regulated and registered healthcare profession in Northern Ireland, so these amendments to the HMRs will not enable pharmacy technicians in Northern Ireland to use the patient group directions. However, once pharmacy technicians in Northern Ireland become a regulated and registered healthcare profession, a further amendment to the HMRs may be made to permit that.

My officials attended the Health Committee on 2 May to outline the full policy intent of the draft statutory instrument and to respond to any questions that the Committee might have on the proposals. I am pleased to confirm that the Committee was content with the policy intent and agreed to the draft regulations being approved. It is with the Committee's support that I bring the statutory instrument before the wider Assembly and its Members. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

**Ms Kimmins (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I welcome the opportunity to confirm the Health Committee's support for the motion. As the Minister said, the statutory instrument amends the Human Medicines Regulations 2012, which govern the arrangements across the UK:

*"for the licensing, manufacture, wholesale dealing and sale or supply of medicines for human use."*

The SI introduces amendments that enable qualified registered dental therapists and hygienists and registered pharmacy technicians to sell, supply and administer certain medicines relevant to their professional practice.

The Committee was briefed by departmental officials on the proposed SI on 2 May 2024. At the briefing, the Committee sought further information about the consultation that was undertaken by the British Government, the type of medications that dental hygienists and pharmacy technicians would be allowed to prescribe and how training would be provided. At the meeting, the Committee agreed that it was content with the merits of the policy. The Committee then considered the statutory instrument at its meeting on 16 May and agreed to recommend that it be approved by the Assembly.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Chair of the Health Committee and its members for their contribution.

I firmly believe that the introduction of the legislative provisions will benefit patients, the profession and the wider health service from the perspective that they share a common goal or aim to make it more convenient for all UK patients to get the medicines that they need at the time when and place where they need them. The provisions will reduce the need for appointments with additional health professionals just to receive the medicines needed, which often results in unnecessary delays to the start of treatment. I therefore commend the motion on the regulations to the Assembly.

Before I finish, this may be the last occasion on which I address the Assembly as Health Minister, so I take the opportunity to thank Members for the support that they have given me in the role. I thank both Chairs of the Health Committee who served during my tenure, the officers and officials of the House and the Department officials who have supported me in this role. However, most of all, I thank the members of the healthcare profession, no matter where they worked across Northern Ireland or which role they were in, for the work and dedication that they gave the people of Northern Ireland throughout challenging times during the pandemic and especially in the last few months. Thank you, Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to make those few personal comments.

I commend the motion on the regulations to the Assembly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Minister, thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments relating to Registered Dental Hygienists, Registered Dental Therapists and Registered Pharmacy Technicians) Regulations 2024 be approved.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Members, take your ease for a moment.

## Budget 2024-25

**Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance):** I beg to move

*That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2024-25 as announced by the Minister of Finance on 25 April 2024 and set out in the Budget document laid before the Assembly on 20 May 2024.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate at her discretion between proposing and making a winding-up speech. A Member from the Opposition will be called first and will have 10 minutes to speak. A representative of the Finance Committee will be called second and will have 10 minutes to speak. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

**Dr Archibald:** The restoration of the Executive on 3 February meant that there was an exceptionally tight time frame in which to develop the Budget. Despite the financial package that accompanied restoration, it was always clear that this was going to be an incredibly challenging Budget. The time frame for this Budget process did not allow for the full level of engagement that I would have wanted. My strong preference would have been to publish a draft Budget and put it out for a full 12-week consultation, and the results of that consultation would then have informed the Executive's decisions on their final Budget. Unfortunately, that was not an option; there was simply not enough time to do that. However, that is the approach that I intend to take going forward.

One-year Budgets do not create the circumstances and conditions to strategically plan the delivery of public services. To deliver the necessary change in how our services are funded and operated, we need multi-year Budgets. That was not possible though, as this is the last year of the current spending review period.

Ideally, a Finance Minister would present a Budget to the Assembly before the start of the financial year on 1 April. From a practical perspective, it was imperative that Ministers were given time to consider their Departments' priorities and financial position before considering Budget proposals. To allow for that, after discussion, the Executive agreed a short

extension to the end of April for the agreement of a Budget. That target was achieved by the Executive, with a Budget being agreed on 25 April. It was not easy, and everyone around the Table had to compromise, but it paved the way for this important debate to happen before summer recess.

Of course, time was not the only challenge that the Executive faced in setting the Budget. As has been widely publicised, demand outstripped the funding available many times over. For every pound we had to allocate to day-to-day spending on public services, we had three times as many demands. Similarly, for every one pound available to spend on capital, including money for hospitals, schools and roads, we had one and a half times as many demands. With increased demands on services and rising costs, the Executive simply do not have the Budget to do everything they wish to do to provide the public services that people expect and deserve.

Many in the Chamber can tell Executive Ministers where to spend money. However, they rarely provide a proposition outlining where they would take the money from to make that happen. Simply put, additional funding for one area means less funding for another. As Finance Minister, I have tried to build consensus and focus on what we can do together, and I will continue to work with all Ministers in the Executive to meet the challenges that we face. Articulating problems is easy. However, working together to address them is what we were elected to do. I will keep working in partnership with all Ministers in the Executive to meet the challenges that we face and to continue to make the case for better funding for public services.

For over a decade, the austerity agenda of the Tories has devastated public services. That will not be corrected or fixed simply by being funded at a level of relative need. What we need is more funding for public services. The Executive are united on that, and I will continue to fight for it. I will take the fight to whomever is elected as the next British Government that our public services need additional investment to deliver for those who rely on them: for people on waiting lists; to make childcare more affordable; to invest in special educational needs; and for much-needed investment in our schools, hospitals, roads and environment. I will have the backs of our hard-working public-sector workers and work to deliver for all our citizens.

I have established and developed relationships with Treasury, and it is acutely aware of our

position and our determination to ensure the best possible outcome for the Executive. Last Tuesday, I signed an interim fiscal framework with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that secured a number of concessions. A Joint Exchequer Committee has been established, which reflects arrangements in Scotland and Wales and is an important step towards agreeing a final fiscal framework. A commitment to review the Executive's funding approach before the 2026-27 Budget was agreed. Importantly, it recognises that the Executive will continue to plan on the basis that they will be funded at or above the 124% level of relative need in future financial years. That means that concerns over falling off a cliff edge once the financial package ends in 2025-26 can be tempered.

The interim fiscal framework will also see the 24% needs-based factor applied to new Barnett consequentials from the time that the Executive were restored, rather than from the beginning of the 2024-25 financial year. That means an additional £24 million for the Executive from the spring Budget announcement alone that will be available in June monitoring. Some might say that £24 million is a drop in the ocean, given the scale of the pressures that we face, but we operate in a system where every pound matters. The needs-based factor will also apply even if the financial package brings the Executive's funding level above the level of relative need. That means that additional funding will be available from any Barnett consequentials in 2024-25 and 2025-26.

I plan to bring recommendations on the June monitoring round to the Executive at the end of June. Although I cannot provide certainty until the Westminster Main Estimates process concludes, it is likely that significant additional funding will be provided to the Executive through that process. I had expected —

**11.45 am**

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dr Archibald:** I will come back to you.

I had expected — in fact, I was told — that the Westminster Main Estimates would be introduced before June monitoring, thereby providing certainty on the funding available. However, as per usual, the Tories prioritised self-interest by calling a general election, which has prevented that. We had initial indications from Treasury on the funding that was to be provided. While there is, of course, the potential that an incoming Government will make

different decisions, it is important that the additional funding is provided to Departments at an early stage to give them the ability to plan and make decisions. Therefore, the June monitoring round will proceed to the intended timescale and assumptions will be made on the funding available on the basis of previous Treasury indications.

I am aware that some believe that the Budget should be delayed to allow the additional allocations to be included. However, Assembly approval of the Budget cannot be delayed. Not only is such an approach not permitted under section 64 of the 1998 Act but it would carry real risks. There would be a risk of overspends, as Departments would be delayed in taking decisions to live within allocations, and, worse still, it might lead to decisions being made later in the year and having harsher impacts on citizens.

Any delay in agreeing a Budget would have a corresponding impact on the Budget Bill and Main Estimates. The 65% Vote on Account was based on Royal Assent being obtained in September. If the Bill could not be introduced until after the summer recess, it would bring a real risk that Departments would reach the limit of their Vote on Account. I cannot contemplate a situation where Departments could be unable to access cash to deliver services. I caution those who are minded to do that to think through the consequences of their actions. If a balanced Budget is not agreed, the write-off of £559 million that is provided in the financial package is potentially at risk. The repayment of such an amount would severely impact on our Budget for 2025-26. Therefore, we simply cannot delay Assembly approval.

Work on a Programme for Government is ongoing, but the Budget reflects the views and priorities of the Executive: for example, setting aside £25 million to support a childcare strategy. Affordable and accessible childcare is a priority for the Executive, and, despite the challenging context, it was important to reflect that in the Budget. Of the funding that was available for allocation to general pressures, over 90% went to three Departments: Health, Education and Justice. Indeed, the Executive demonstrated their commitment to Health by allocating it over half of the overall resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) available. That sees Health baseline funding increase by £1.6 billion over the three-year period of the spending review.

Public-sector workers deserve to be paid fairly for their dedication and the services that they deliver for citizens daily. The Executive

recognised that priority by agreeing a final Budget position for 2023-24 to allow pay negotiations to begin within two weeks of restoration. The Executive continue to recognise pay as a priority. Following the approach that I set out to my Executive colleagues, in order to allow pay to be settled more quickly than in recent years, my Department will now write to Departments to formally communicate that public-sector pay policy. Given the ongoing budgetary constraints, that policy will maintain that 2024-25 pay awards must be affordable within each Department's Budget settlement. It is also clear that the principle of fairness must apply to all workers. Consideration must be given to how awards can be targeted to address low pay and the payment of the real living wage.

The Budget also provides for £2.1 billion of capital expenditure by Departments, including funding for previous Executive commitments, such as flagship projects and city and growth deals.

Now that Ministers have their funding envelopes, it is for them to prioritise spending. That will undoubtedly mean difficult decisions for all Departments. In line with previous Equality Commission advice, the Executive were provided with departmental assessments of the potential equality impacts of Departments living within the baseline and of bids, if met, in considering Budget 2024-25. It is now for Departments to carry out equality impact screening and/or assessments in line with their equality schemes. The outcomes of those screenings and assessments should assist Ministers with their choices. It is my intention to bring the results of those screenings and assessments to the Executive as part of the October monitoring round. That will allow the Executive to give due regard to their section 75 duties by considering whether any changes to funding allocations are required.

Despite the challenges that the Executive faced in delivering Budget 2024-25, it provides certainty for Departments to allow them to plan and maintain the delivery of public services and to support local businesses, workers and families. I commend the Budget to the Assembly.

**Mr O'Toole:** Before I begin my remarks, I thank the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee, who will step into the breach. I had two statutory roles to perform today, and it would have been difficult to do full justice to both, given my role as leader of the Opposition. I thank the Deputy Chair for doing that.

It is good news that we finally have a Budget to debate. Here it is: the 2024-25 Budget. This is the first time in two or three years that we have had a Budget to debate and vote on. It happens in unique circumstances, because not only were the institutions restored three and a half months ago, but we have a UK general election coming up for which two Ministers in the Executive formed just a few months ago to restore devolution and rescue our collapsed public services have indicated that they will step down. At the core of government is taking responsibility, and it is frustrating for the people of Northern Ireland that some of us who were elected to take responsibility and then were trusted with ministerial office have already indicated that they will step down or will step down should they be successful.

We have passed Budget Bills and Supply resolutions, which are simply legal authorisations of spending, but the Budget statement is supposed to be a statement of priorities, of strategic intent and of the choices that the Executive wish to make to improve public services and make lives better for the people of Northern Ireland, the people whom we have collectively let down for most of the past decade by not being here. Being here is not enough. Simply marking time or seeking credit for being here is not enough. As I said, of course, two Ministers will not be here should they be successful in the election.

Today's Budget statement is not a statement of strategic priorities. Given the now dozens of motions that have been passed, particularly by Executive parties, promising action on everything from Lough Neagh to holiday hunger, waiting lists and a range of other things, we would expect to have seen a statement of strategic priorities. We are not seeing that in this document. No one expected miracles, but they did expect a plan for how we will rescue public services or, at least, a broad statement of priorities matched to Budget lines.

First, as we in the Opposition have said consistently, I acknowledge that we are not in a position that any of us would seek in terms of our allocations from the UK Government. I commend the work that the Finance Minister has done to engage with the UK Government and the Treasury in that regard. There is no reason, however, why the Budget statement could not have been a more strategic and forward-looking set of priorities for how the Executive were going to go about making decisions on the allocations that they wish to make over the next three years, what they wish to prioritise and, by extension, what they are not

prioritising. We have not had that yet, and the public were entitled to expect it.

Turning to the document, there is a foreword from the Minister that sets out a difficult context. It says:

*"The Executive recognises the need for transformation and reform. We need to look at options to deliver efficiencies, generate revenue, enhance borrowing powers, and explore the potential for more fiscal powers."*

I am not sure that too many people would disagree with that, but we have not yet seen any firm substance or clear statement of intent on any of those things. The Minister goes on to say:

*"Financial sustainability in the longer term will require brave decisions, collaborative working, and a relentless focus on innovative and efficiency"*

— there is a typo; it should say "innovation and efficiency" —

*"in service delivery. This can only be delivered through partnership working, a willingness to accept change, to challenge the status quo and to make long term strategic decisions."*

Well, we have not seen any of those long-term strategic decisions. The public in Northern Ireland have a right to expect them, given that, for most of the past decade, the institutions have been down. Indeed, for the two years or 18 months that followed the 2022 Assembly election, the Executive parties were meeting in private to discuss priorities and a Programme for Government. Not only do we not have a Programme for Government; we do not even have a strategically focused Budget.

I will come on to some of the details in the Budget. There are, of course, specific allocations that we welcome. We have acknowledged the progress that the Finance Minister has made on the fiscal framework. The fiscal framework in and of itself is welcome, but I want to wind back to what was said when the Executive financial restoration package happened. There were fevered denials from some Executive parties that they had agreed to any revenue raising; well, in plain black and white, in the new fiscal framework, there is a commitment to look at revenue raising. It would have been helpful if the Executive parties and Ministers had been upfront from the beginning with the public on that.

There is also an additional £24 million. Of course, I welcome that, to the extent that it was ever really in doubt, which is debatable. I also welcome and want to be constructive in acknowledging the fact that the Minister has said that, in the June monitoring round, she will allocate the money that has been indicated by the UK Government. I challenge the Minister to commit that if, in the months ahead, a new UK Government produce a comprehensive spending review (CSR), she will come back as soon as possible to the Chamber with a multi-year Budget and that it will be aligned to the Programme for Government that we have been promised by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

We need a multi-year Budget. We need a Programme for Government. We need a proper, strategic set of priorities. We have not got them yet, nor do we have clarity on some important priorities. We do not yet know how Casement Park, which is critical to delivering what could be a genuinely transformative international sporting spectacle for the city of Belfast and the whole region, will be paid for; we have no idea. It would have been helpful to have some clarity on that. We do not know about school buildings for integrated schools, which were promised funding but had it removed from them by the Executive. Despite some of the evasions that have come about on that money, Executive parties made those decisions: a ring fence was removed, and they then hastily called up the integrated schools affected and told them that they would not be getting the money. It would be helpful to have clarity on those points.

I agree with the Finance Minister that it is welcome that we are debating the Budget, despite its limitations, before the recess. I acknowledge that, but I say sincerely that the Budget is only as good as the statement of priorities that it contains, and it does not contain a serious statement of priorities. In her opening remarks, the Minister said that the people who stand up in the Chamber and suggest areas where money can be spent rarely provide solutions for where that money can be raised: that is a reasonable point. In our Opposition motions, we have consistently said where we would raise the money, and we did so in relation to ending the two-child limit. Presumably, the Minister would include Sinn Féin, DUP, Ulster Unionist and Alliance MLAs in that observation, because all those parties have tabled motions in the Chamber — motion after motion — promising action on everything, as I said, from Lough Neagh to holiday hunger to waiting lists but without specificity on how it will be paid for.

The public did not expect miracles, but they did expect a plan. This Budget is not a plan. It is not enough simply to be here. It is not enough simply to allocate money that has been granted by the Treasury, even if, as I acknowledge, the money coming is not enough of a financial settlement and austerity has had a pernicious effect on our public services. It is not enough simply to pass on those allocations and expect to be patted on the back by the public. The public expect real prioritisation and real choices. They also expect us to do our jobs. They did not expect miracles; they expected a plan. They have not got a plan.

Ministers who took the Pledge of Office just a few short months ago have spent the time since telling us how difficult public services are to run, about the fact that they are near or beyond collapse and about the fact that they are in a genuinely parlous state and that Ministers do not have enough money to improve them. The public expected those Ministers to be in office to implement this Budget and to be working hard on a Programme for Government. Instead, at the last count, more than 10% or 20% of the Executive are scurrying off to run for election. That, I am afraid, is the wrong priority, and the priorities in the Budget are the wrong ones.

## 12.00 noon

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Bring your remarks to a close, please.

**Mr O'Toole:** We should be setting priorities and delivering on them for the people of Northern Ireland, and I am afraid that this Budget does not do so.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Time is up.

**Mr O'Toole:** The Opposition will be voting against it.

**Ms Forsythe (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance):** I thank the Minister for her comments, and I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Finance Committee. As Members will be aware, the Finance Committee not only scrutinises the Department of Finance's budget but takes a strategic view of the Budget as a whole and, where and when possible, supports the other Statutory Committees in their scrutiny. In the short time available to it, the Committee undertook an engagement exercise to scrutinise the draft Executive Budget. The Committee's report was published last Friday, and Members received a link to it. We are grateful to the officials,

academics and stakeholders who provided the evidence on which the report is based.

The Committee took evidence from Department of Finance officials on 10 April and 22 May on the Department's own budget. The first briefing was based on a flat-cash position, and, at that point, Committee members noted the challenging position and the proposals to address a £25 million shortfall. Some proposals would have had a severe limiting impact on reform initiatives that could be seen as providing significant efficiencies in the long term. The Committee sought information on the specific costs and implications if NOVA and Integr8 were to be paused or stopped and information on new projects that could not be taken forward owing to budgetary constraints. A Budget update from the Department on 22 May confirmed its budget position, with funding for Integr8 and NOVA but an £18 million shortfall. In light of the work that the Department is required to do under the interim fiscal framework, Committee members strongly advocate appropriate resourcing being immediately forthcoming.

The Committee was able to identify a number of distinct themes in the 2024-25 draft Executive Budget. Those include the challenging nature of the Budget; the problems associated with having yet another single-year Budget; the need for a Programme for Government; the lack of scrutiny applied to this Budget; the need for strategic budgeting to support economic growth; the importance of childcare; reform and sustainability; and fiscal issues and revenue raising. There is no doubt that this is a challenging Budget. The limitations of the Budget envelope mean that a significant number of bids submitted by Departments could not be met. Indeed, resource bids amounted to three times the resource available for allocation. The Committee acknowledges that a significant part of the Executive restoration package settlement from the UK Government met pay pressures. Members are mindful, however, that a number of pay claims across a range of sectors that have not yet been settled or met need to be completed out of extremely limited resources. The Fiscal Council notes a real-terms fall in resource and capital in this Budget compared with the 2023-24 Budget as being a red flag. The council sees a further red flag in every Department having budgeted for a 3% wage growth, meaning that they start the fiscal year with an inbuilt wage-cost pressure. Although the Budget is 7% higher than the Secretary of State's Budget for 2023-24, it is 2% lower than the final plan that Departments were working to by the end of 2023-24.

This is our tenth single-year Budget in a row. Most contributors to the Committee's report advocate the position that multi-year Budgets offer significantly greater stability, certainty and sustainability for Departments and the economy more widely. The Committee acknowledges that the Executive's ability to set multi-year Budgets is constrained by what the UK Government do, but single-year Budgets see rash decisions being made by deploying funds should those need to be used before the cliff edge of the end of the financial year, and that is made worse by the Budget exchange scheme's being too limited in scope and size.

The necessity of a Programme for Government to facilitate good budgeting was raised by most contributors to the Committee's report, including Social Enterprise NI and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). A Programme for Government would make budgeting easier, thus mitigating some of the challenges that this Budget presents, with bids linked to and prioritised against it. In their evidence to the Committee, the Nevin Economic Research Institute and Pivotal highlighted a lack of any strategic goal setting underpinning the Budget. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) advocated for Budget stability and sustainability through a five- to 10-year Programme for Government, with strategic objectives to which all departmental and arm's-length bodies' business plans would align.

The Committee is greatly concerned about the lack of scrutiny of the Budget. Statutory Committees have had little opportunity to scrutinise the budgets brought forward by Departments. Committee scrutiny is a statutory role and should not, in any way, be seen as being at the discretion of the corresponding Department. In the absence of a public consultation, scrutiny by Statutory Committees becomes even more important.

In its evidence to the Committee, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre highlighted the need for strategic budgeting to support economic growth. It suggested that Departments should put much greater emphasis on aspects of their remit that drive economic growth through their budgeting. Indeed, that should have formed a key strand of the Programme for Government. The Construction Employers Federation (CEF) advocated an infrastructure commission and prioritised Budgets. It is vital that the Executive maximise their use of the reinvestment and reform initiative to ensure that the £220 million available, as highlighted in the Executive

restoration package settlement, is used in the current financial year.

Good quality childcare is a key element in creating a solid foundation for addressing our skills deficit and economic growth, as well as being a vital part of any forthcoming Programme for Government. The lack of affordable, readily available childcare creates a poverty trap, making some people unable to go to work and unable to access opportunities to acquire skills. Employers for Childcare provided evidence in support of that to the Committee.

Reform and sustainability were highlighted by a number of contributors to our report. The Committee was told that the issue for health was not resources but reform. The strong message from contributors to the report is that reform is now essential against a backdrop of a challenging Budget and the sustainability required by the Executive restoration package settlement. The Executive must improve their communication with the public about what "reform" or "transformation" mean, as they are almost always associated with closures in health and education rather than increased opportunities and services. The Executive need to emphasise that local provision does not always equate to the best provision. The scope of an Executive Budget sustainability plan was outlined in the interim fiscal framework.

Fiscal issues and revenue raising were brought into focus by the Executive restoration package settlement. The Fiscal Council highlighted that the settlement provided 5% of the Budget. The council believed that the level of in-year transfers to Departments in 2023-24 highlighted the underfunding that Northern Ireland faces, reinforcing the need for a fiscal floor needs adjustment that the interim fiscal framework confirms at 24%, subject to proof that it should change. All forthcoming Barnett consequentials will attract that adjustment. The Committee greatly welcomes that and will actively support the work that needs to be done around it.

The Nevin Economic Research Institute suggested that revenue raising is not the answer to our budgetary challenges; rather, the devolved Administrations need to be properly empowered by the UK Government to work. The Fiscal Council stated that an increase in the regional rate would need to be significant to make an impact on the Budget.

That was a brief account of the Committee's report. Full details are on the Committee's web pages.

I will now speak as the DUP's finance spokesperson. We recognise the incredible challenges of this Budget but welcome the progress on the improved and continuing improvements to the fiscal framework. Gavin Robinson MP started those conversations years ago and has been relentless in his campaign to deliver improved fiscal arrangements for Northern Ireland, alongside our DUP MPs and Lords. The DUP was the only party to come out of Hillsborough Castle last year stating clearly that the financial package on offer was nowhere near enough to give Northern Ireland the solutions and sustainable financial future that it needed and deserved. Our MP team continued the fight, unlike others who cheered and praised this great package but, when faced with it in the Executive, now proclaim that it is not enough, and some cannot even support adopting a Budget to enable Departments to function. Every Minister in the Executive pitched for significantly more than they were allocated.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Forsythe:** No, thank you.

Every Minister in the Executive was disappointed by their award, but every Minister, bar one, has put the interests of Northern Ireland first. The Budget is challenging, and we have two options. One is to take it as the best that we have right now and work hard to deliver the best outcomes whilst continuing the fight for more funding for services. The second option is to reject it, meaning that nobody gets anything: services come to a halt because the money stops; voluntary and community sector organisations immediately hit the cliff edge, as nothing can be approved beyond June; and the people of Northern Ireland have no public services and face despair.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve better. They deserve to have an Executive and Ministers committed to doing their best to maximise delivery where they can. Our DUP Ministers are doing that by delivering where they can. Our DUP Education Minister is working hard and delivering on childcare, teachers' pay, improved SEN provision and new special schools. He stands ready to deliver more at the next available opportunity. Our DUP Communities Minister worked hard to deliver on solutions for defective premises and a sign language Act —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

**Ms Forsythe:** The DUP is committed to delivering and moving forward whilst fighting for a better and sustainable financial package. We support the motion.

**Ms Kimmins (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):** I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee's consideration of the 2024-25 Budget. At the outset, I say that the Committee recognises the budgetary constraints and pressures that the Health Department is under in this financial year. Indeed, that goes across the wider Executive, with all Departments being under significant pressure. Over the past number of months, the Committee heard from a number of representative bodies and departmental officials about the pressures and stress that the health system is under. We heard from a number of medical professionals, including GPs, nurses, doctors, consultants and surgeons, that if improvements to the system are not made, it faces a catastrophic impact.

The Health budget makes up just over 50% of the total block grant and has significant implications for the health and well-being of the people here. It is crucial that we understand its impact and significance. We must acknowledge the importance of healthcare in our society. It is the cornerstone of a thriving and prosperous community. The allocation of funds in the Department directly affects the quality and accessibility of the healthcare services available to the citizens in our constituencies. We must therefore ensure that those funds are allocated wisely and efficiently. That is why it is important that we, as a Health Committee, undertake detailed scrutiny of the Department's spending plans and priorities for this year. It is disappointing that the Committee has not had sight of the detailed spending plans and the Minister's priorities for the incoming year. The Committee has been disappointed with the lack of detail provided to it by the Minister and the Department.

When the Budget allocations were announced, the Committee received a letter from the Minister that outlined his disappointment at the allocation that his Department received. In that letter, he advised of the possible consequences of his budget, including a halt to waiting list initiatives; no pay settlements; restrictions on the use of new drugs; suspending some vaccination programmes; and a reduction of 1.1 million hours of domiciliary care, 500 independent-sector care home beds and 140 acute hospital beds. So far, the Committee has not been advised about which of those services will be cut by the Minister.



The Committee was briefed on the Main Estimates by officials at its meeting last Thursday. Members were advised, however, that the detailed plans were still not ready, as the trusts had only just provided their plans to the Department the previous Tuesday. Committee members received correspondence from the Minister yesterday afternoon, providing an assessment of the 2024-25 Budget. Again, the paper does not provide information on prioritisation, just a number of options of what might be cut. There should be clarity on the shortfall that the Department says that there is. In a number of different letters received by the Committee, there has been some conflicting information on savings made and their impact on the shortfall. The Committee has not therefore had an opportunity to scrutinise the Department's spending plans and is unable to come to a position on the Department's plans for 2024-25.

The Committee remains committed to working with the Minister and the Department to ensure that additional funding is provided to the Department of Health throughout the year. It is important that the Department has detailed plans for how it will spend any additional allocations that it might receive during the year. As Chairperson, I am happy to support the Minister in discussions with the British Government about the additional funding for our health service. We must understand that there is little scope for transfer of funding from other Departments, and we must make the case to the British Government to support our health service workers before it is too late.

I will now speak in my role as health spokesperson for Sinn Féin. The Budget is yet another example of the harsh Tory Government austerity, the consequences of which we have borne for over a decade.

The people of the North pay their taxes to the British Government, just as the people of England, Scotland and Wales do, but we do not get the bang for our buck. We do not see a fair and equitable return for our contribution. That undoubtedly has and will continue to have a detrimental impact on our public services, particularly our health service. Even with a significant proportion of the Budget being allocated to the Department of Health, there is a major shortfall. We must get behind the Finance Minister and lobby for the funds that we need and deserve to get from the British Government.

12.15 pm

The stance that the current Health Minister has taken is extremely disappointing. Despite some of the points made about allocations and what has or has not been provided to date, that Department has been allocated £1.6 billion over the past three years.

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

**Ms Kimmins:** I will not.

As I said, I am conscious that, by this time tomorrow, we are likely to have a new Health Minister. I am at a loss as to what that incoming Minister intends to do. As I said, we are still without a plan. We have heard about all the things that the Minister cannot do, but, sadly, information on what will be done has been lacking. We need to give people strong leadership and hope, especially in relation to health. Those who are still on picket lines and waiting lists need to see leadership that not only takes on the huge challenges that our health service faces but gives them hope that we will fight for further funding to fix our health service.

I have heard voices across the Chamber continually reverting to the need for the Executive to allocate more money to the Health Department, but I have not heard what their alternative is. From which Department will they take the money? The outgoing Health Minister indicated that he needs at least £800 million out of just over £900 million in order to stand still. That is almost 90% of the funding that is available. How do we square that circle?

I commend my colleague the Finance Minister for her work in delivering this difficult Budget in the most challenging of circumstances. I encourage the incoming Health Minister to continue to work with all Executive colleagues to support the Finance Minister to secure additional funding to enable us to deliver high-quality public services for the people we represent. In my role as Chairperson, I give a commitment to continue to work with the Minister and support him in his endeavours to tackle the huge crisis that faces our health service.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Members are reminded that the time limit is now seven minutes per Member.

**Mr Tennyson:** It is an understatement that this is an extremely challenging Budget, set in the most turbulent of circumstances. The fact that we are only now in a position to have this debate, two months into the financial year, is testament enough to that. Like so many of our

Budget processes, this one has been upended by delay and disruption due to the absence of an Assembly. The constant stop-go cycle of government means that this is the tenth single-year Budget in a row, and the timing of the return of the Executive has placed us in an invidious position where the Budget must progress hastily, in the absence of a Programme for Government and without adequate consultation. Stalemate has robbed us of key opportunities to transform health and education and to negotiate a fair funding settlement with Treasury from a position of strength and stability.

That cycle of chaos and crisis is not good enough, but nor is it good enough for parties to come to the Chamber and bemoan the process that we are engaged in if they are not willing to advocate the reform that is necessary to ensure that it can never happen again. That is why Alliance has consistently and persistently led the charge to scrap the vetoes and remove the ability of any single party to hold the Assembly to ransom.

Today is not about whether we believe that the funding envelope available to the Executive is sufficient — it is clear, after a decade of Tory austerity, that it is not — but about whether we believe that the Budget before us is a fair attempt at allocating the insufficient available resources and enabling a process of further negotiation with Treasury on an improved settlement. We have heard criticism from the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists in the media, but I have not heard a single costed or credible alternative from either of those parties — not one.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Tennyson:** Of course I will.

**Mr O'Toole:** The Member will be aware that the SDLP produced a proposal on the two-child limit that had a specific costing.

Since the Member has given way, I ask him this: does he think that the cycle of collapse and resignations is helped by a Justice Minister who, three months in, wants to resign her post?

**Mr Tennyson:** For a start, that proposal would not close the £800 million gap in the Health budget.

I am glad that the Member has raised the matter of the Westminster election. It is an opportunity for us to send a message that we want to put an end to stop-start government

and legislate for the reform of these institutions. Westminster is also key to a fair funding settlement to ensure that our funding formula represents objective need. We need to send strong, progressive voices to Westminster that will stand against Tory austerity and advocate for the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I believe that the Westminster election is important, and I am proud that strong candidates from the Alliance Party are standing.

As I said, we have heard criticism, but not one alternative has been forthcoming. The Member has demonstrated that clearly.

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

**Mr Tennyson:** In a moment.

Indeed, the Ulster Unionist finance spokesperson has spent more time advocating a cut in corporation tax than fair funding for our public services, which would have left us in an even worse position. More than that, their approach risks upending the negotiations with Treasury and squandering the progress to date. The £3.3 billion financial package is contingent on a Budget being in place. The additional funding and flexibility in the interim fiscal framework would not have been possible without Executive agreement on a Budget, and any hope of an improved funding formula will be lost without Assembly agreement on a Budget.

It is utterly bizarre — in fact, it is plain reckless — for anyone in the Chamber to suggest that we simply roll the dice and cross our fingers. The stakes are far too high and the consequences far too serious. We have heard a suggestion that we delay the Budget. Not only would there be no practical benefit in doing so but it would be at odds with our legal responsibilities. However, it underlines a key point: this is simply the opening position. It is likely that significant additional funding will flow through June monitoring and a UK spending review later this year, hopefully under a new Government.

There are stark and difficult choices for all Departments — there is no doubt about that — but there is an onus on those of us in the Executive to stand up, show leadership and actually govern. Despite the challenges, the Executive have managed to prioritise an additional £25 million for early years and childcare, an issue that has been spearheaded by my colleague Kate Nicholl. When combined with the existing UK scheme, that will save parents with two children in full-time childcare about £8,000 a year.

Despite the spin, the Department of Health has received over 50% of the available funding. Health funding is up 6% on the opening position last year, and spending on health will increase by £2 billion in comparison with 2020. We must all recognise that, while health is undoubtedly a priority, it is bigger than the Department of Health. Investment in prevention and early intervention through education, quality housing and an effective justice system is essential for good public health.

We also have the highest spend per head on health in the UK but the worst outcomes. Therefore, it is about more than money, and the Finance Committee has consistently heard in evidence about the need for reform and transformation. Instead, key recommendations for reform gather dust on a shelf, and we have seen precious little by way of plans for reconfiguration or to tackle the spiralling locum and agency costs, which have been sitting at £400 million since the Executive returned.

It is hugely disappointing, however, that, despite assurances from the Finance and Education Ministers, there is no ring-fenced allocation for the pay and grading review of the Education Authority (EA). They have, in fairness, set out a strategy of seeking permission from the Treasury to reprofile money in the financial package. Failing to agree a Budget will set back those efforts. Therefore, we will support the Budget today.

I am also clear, however, that, should the flexibility not be forthcoming, the buck stops with the Education Minister to find the money in his allocation. Simply submitting bids and wringing your hands when the allocations are inevitably insufficient is not good enough. The Minister needs to prioritise, come to the table with proposals to tackle the cost of division and stop ignoring the independent review of education and the Audit Office when it comes to projects such as Strule.

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

**Mr Tennyson:** That brings me to some of the challenges with our capital projects and allocations. I will give way.

**Mr Butler:** The Member has nearly run out of time, and he said that he would give way.

The Member mentioned uncosted pressures, but the Alliance Party has brought multiple motions to the Floor about the increasing cost of health provision. Can the Member produce

the Alliance Party's costed options for those motions?

**Mr Tennyson:** The Minister has not provided the necessary information to the Committee for Health for any Member to bring forward a costed plan: therein lies the problem. We need to see prioritisation from the Department of Health, and we need to see priorities for the additional money that becomes available throughout the year, so that Members can prioritise them in terms of the available options.

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

**Mr Tennyson:** It is for the Department of Health and the Minister to bring forward those proposals.

We have led the way on a fair funding settlement, and we will continue to work with others to oppose Tory austerity and deliver the funding that —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Time is up.

**Mr Tennyson:** — Northern Ireland deserves.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Thank you. Time is up.

**Dr Aiken:** I will respond as the UUP's finance spokesperson to the Budget 2024-25 that has been presented today. Other members of my party will speak on their specific areas of responsibility.

At the outset, I thank those who gave evidence to the Finance Committee. In particular, I thank the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council for its 2024-25 Budget assessment report and Sir Robert Chote and his team for the evidence that they gave to our Committee. The Fiscal Council's 2024-25 Budget assessment is an exemplar of clarity and detail, and it is presented in a manner that is readily accessible and authoritative. Its 50-odd pages are probably the most concise budgetary and financial fiscal overview available. It should be compulsory reading for us all. I would like to report that the information from our own Government that was made available to me and my fellow MLAs on our scrutiny Committee was as detailed, but, regrettably, I cannot.

We are being invited to approve the programme for expenditure for 2024-25 without a Programme for Government, evidence of any prioritisation, any form of public consultations or impact assessments or any other normal

procedures. Some, including the Finance Minister, have alluded to the importance of passing the Budget quickly in order to prevent, yet again, our Departments running out of cash and the consequent cascade of public service collapse. Members will, of course, remember the Budget Bill that was before us on 19 February, which went through all of its stages in two days by accelerated passage. That was described at the time as a measure that would not be repeated and would give us, in exceptional circumstances, a Vote on Account of 65%. That was agreed to allow space for a Programme for Government to be agreed before the next Budget was brought forward. However, since February, there has been no Programme for Government or even a discussion on the prioritisation of budgets. If we look at the Fiscal Council's report, we can see clearly how that should have happened but has not. The question for the Northern Ireland Executive should be, "Why?". As we can see by the speed and haste of the previous Budget Bill, which was accelerated through its stages in 48 hours, the argument of legislative and time pressure does not hold.

That the Budget under discussion today is challenging is not in doubt. In real terms, compared with the out-turn from last year, it is a 2% reduction. The figures showing the Departments' pressures and priorities in light of that position, from an Executive direction, are all lacking. We have not seen reports from all our scrutiny Committees on their analyses of their Departments, probably because they are not in receipt of the information. That question is important, because most Departments are aware of the considerable adjustment — at least a quarter of a billion pounds — that is due in the June monitoring round. That is a point that I will come to later.

Sir Robert makes it clear in his report that there is, in real terms, a fall in resource and capital for Northern Ireland. He also makes it clear that, in Northern Ireland, unlike in the rest of our great nation, health has seen a below-level uplift; in fact, we have had a 2.3% cut in the Health budget. Members will be aware that, in the absence of a Programme for Government, even after 100-plus days back, it would be expected that prioritisation would be based on the parties' manifestos, as it would be in any normal democracy. On the basis of the commitment made by the Minister's party and the DUP to give an extra £1 billion to Health and the numerous commitments made around the negotiating table at Hillsborough Castle to prioritise Health, it could reasonably have been expected that Health's allocation of the Budget would reflect that across the rest of the United

Kingdom; instead, in Northern Ireland, we are taking a cut of 2.3%. We have heard much about Health being 50% of the Budget, but that is the same in the rest of our nation: it has always been 50% of the Budget. It is just not enough.

Our Health Minister has made it clear to our constituents and vital health workers the challenges that those substantive cuts will mean. No Minister could deliver on those unless there had been appropriate prioritisation, which there has not. That is a question that the electorate might ask when or if Sinn Féin, DUP or Alliance candidates knock on their doors. The Health Minister offered, at risk to delivery, to reduce what he needed to around an additional £2 million to £3 million on top of his allocation. That offer, as well my party leader's request for all parties to engage in intense closed-room negotiations with Departments to solve the Budget crisis, was rejected. That reminds us of how an Ulster Unionist Party Health Minister in a previous Assembly had his request rejected, yet, when a DUP Health Minister took over the role, the required funding was allocated immediately.

We were told to accept this Budget and the cut and to agree, even though no other party does, to collective responsibility in the Executive on the position that there was no more money. That was two weeks ago. Then we had last week's Finance Committee.

I am grateful to the senior officials from the Department of Finance who informed our Committee that a ballpark figure of around an extra £200 million, as well as ongoing Barnett consequential adjustments, would come into play in June monitoring. That is 30 days or less, Minister.

### **12.30 pm**

For the sake of argument, I have simplified this figure to around £0.25 billion, allocating funding in June monitoring. In response to questions at the Committee as to how this would be allocated, it was indicated that it would be bid for by Departments through the Executive. Some would argue that £0.25 billion is, in the overall context of a nearly £16 billion Budget, is small change. However, it would enable many of Health's challenges to be met, help bring Health's allocation more into line with the rest of our great nation and would, at least, fulfil a quarter of the commitment made by both Sinn Féin and the DUP in their manifestos.

That would require party negotiation, of which there has been none; a Programme for Government, which there is none; and adequate analysis, prioritisation, consultation and receipt of June monitoring, which of course, there has been none, especially as a Budget is again being fast-tracked through, without due diligence and full account of the likely funding envelope. Yet Sinn Féin, the DUP and Alliance would have you vote for a Budget that could, in all probability, as indicated by the Department of Finance, have an extra £0.25 billion allocated in less than 30 days. How can any self-respecting MLA support this Budget as it is?

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** I will speak as Chair of the Committee for Communities initially, and then I will make a short contribution in my capacity as Sinn Féin spokesperson for communities.

As Chair of the Committee that scrutinises the largest Department in government, employing almost half of the Civil Service, I would like to be able to say that the Committee has received advance notification of, and extensive briefing in relation to, the Budget allocated to the Department for Communities. Immediately after our most-recent Committee meeting, on Thursday afternoon, Committee members received a document containing an update on the financial position. We now know that DFC was allocated £856 million of resource DEL funding, £133.4 million of net capital DEL and £29.8 million of financial transactions capital.

At the outset, I acknowledge that all members of the Committee recognise a critical issue: the North is severely underfunded against objective need. That is a pressing concern that impacts on every aspect of public services in the North of Ireland. The Committee, however, has had insufficient time to meet and thoroughly consider as a group this Budget allocation. This delay is hampering our ability to perform our scrutiny role as effectively and diligently as we would like. Regrettably, I must inform the House that our Committee has been unable to reach a formal position on the Budget for 2024-25. That is not due to any lack of agreement or commitment from Committee members but because of a deficit in receiving timely information. As of our most-recent meeting, we have only received headline figures for the capital and resource allocations, as set out in the Budget 2024-25 document. These figures are not sufficient to make meaningful comparisons against the bids submitted by the Department for Communities. Based on correspondence provided in the past couple of days in relation to the Budget allocations, there

are significant gaps, and that leaves us with an incomplete picture. For instance, the £115.8 million shortfall in non-ring-fenced resource funding and the £167.3 million shortfall in capital DEL bids highlight the severe constraints and potential impacts on vital services and programmes, yet the specific implications and strategies to mitigate these shortfalls are not outlined. In fact, I can quote:

*"work is ongoing to consider options to live within the Department's 2024-25 Budget allocation".*

The Committee needs to receive all relevant documents and information in a timely manner, allowing it sufficient time to perform its duties comprehensively. Moreover, there should be clearer articulation of how each financial decision fits within the broader strategic framework of the Programme for Government. An updated in-person briefing for the Committee has now been confirmed for Thursday 6 June, which will hopefully provide some insight but which is too late to enable a substantive contribution to this debate, leaving the Committee unable to reach a position on the Budget.

In conclusion, although we recognise the difficult financial climate and the challenging decisions that must be made, it is imperative that every Statutory Committee be given the necessary time and information to perform its duties effectively.

I will now make some brief comments as the Sinn Féin spokesperson for communities. The Budget is vital for the Department, given the lack of time that there has been to agree a departmental response and the fact that there are several areas of significant importance that fall within the Department for Communities' portfolio. Those include primary responsibility for our community and voluntary sector; the anti-poverty strategy; language and social inclusion, right through to neighbourhood renewal; and sport, culture, arts and heritage.

As all of us across the Chamber know, the Department for Communities is also responsible for housing and for homelessness prevention. I will focus my remarks today on those areas. The number of households with homelessness status on the social housing waiting list has grown by 122% over the past decade to over 27,500 households in September 2023. Additionally, the number of people living in temporary accommodation more than doubled between 2018 and 2023. Housing Executive spending on temporary accommodation rose by £17.3 million over that

period. That is particularly concerning, as spiralling costs in that area consume any available budget that is meant to support homelessness prevention work.

New Decade, New Approach identified housing stress as an area that required prioritisation, so it would be remiss of me not to highlight a few areas of particular concern. Although a below-inflation increase to the baseline occurred in 2022-23 for Supporting People, it has not been guaranteed on a sustainable basis. If that funding is not achieved, the programme will undoubtedly see service reduction and contracts having to be returned.

I commend the Minister of Finance for undertaking what I understand was a very difficult task in particularly challenging financial circumstances. Across the Chamber, we recognise that the financial package that accompanied the restoration of the Executive was always going to fall far short of what was required, given the years of continued underfunding of this institution. On that basis —

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

**Mr Gildernew:** No, I will not give way today, thanks, Daniel.

On that basis, I also acknowledge the work that the Minister of Finance did to secure the commitments made to date as part of the interim fiscal framework.

Members, we need to look to have the further devolution of fiscal powers to allow for more long-term strategic planning and proper investment in people's lives and well-being and across our public services in the North.

**Mrs Erskine (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure):** I welcome the opportunity to speak — if I am able to — as Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure in today's debate. The Committee has undertaken significant engagement with the Department for Infrastructure to gain a broad overview of its role and functions and to get a sense of its financial position. Departmental officials provided an introductory high-level financial briefing on 20 March, at which they outlined the Department's capital and resource requirements for this financial year. The Committee heard that the Department's forecast resource requirement was £676.6 million, which comprised the rolled-forward baseline of £520.1 million and additional bids of £156.5 million. On the capital side, the

Department forecast that £1.4 billion would be required, but, given the capital funding available to the Executive, the bids submitted totalled £1.12 billion.

A high proportion of the resource and capital funding that the Department receives is allocated to Northern Ireland Water (NIW) and Translink. Both organisations were therefore invited to present oral evidence in order to allow the Committee to get a sense of the budgetary pressures that they are facing. The Committee gained a useful if somewhat worrying insight into the historical underfunding of Northern Ireland Water and the potential impact that that underinvestment is having on our economy to this day. From oral evidence taken on 21 February, the Committee learned that the water network lacks capacity in certain areas to facilitate new connections, meaning that new homes and businesses cannot be accommodated. Not only does that impact on our construction sector but it constrains businesses seeking to invest in Northern Ireland and is a barrier to those who are in desperate need of housing. Northern Ireland Water has highlighted that some 19,000 homes and 55 commercial developments are very unlikely to be built or progressed. Reduced investment over the next three years will exhaust capacity in the system, and it anticipates that, by 2030, large parts of Northern Ireland will be unable to meet the demand for connection to the network for homes, public buildings and businesses.

The Committee also heard from the Utility Regulator about its price control determination for NI Water for 2021-2027, or PC21, which looks at the capital investment required to meet need. It advised that we will find ourselves in a difficult situation with the lack of funding from DFI to achieve the PC21 goals. The Committee accepts that all Departments are operating under severe budgetary pressures. However, it is clear that, when setting policy, the Department needs to consider whether the funding it allocates to Northern Ireland Water is sufficient to deliver the intended policy outcomes.

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Erskine:** Sorry, I have a lot to get through.

Turning to Translink and its funding requirements, the Committee recognises the vital role that our public transport services play in helping users go about their daily life, with some 80 million passenger journeys each year. The Committee is looking forward to tomorrow's combined external meeting and site visit to the

new Grand Central station transport hub, which represents a large investment and is expected to be able to accommodate more than 20 million passenger journeys each year. Such investment is absolutely necessary to ensure that Translink can modernise its 14,000-strong bus fleet and play its part in reducing emissions from harmful greenhouse gases, if we are to achieve the commitments under the Climate Change Act. That investment will allow Translink to meet the demand for services, but it should be across Northern Ireland and take account of need to ensure the provision of accessible and timely services.

In addition, we need to offer a reliable and viable incentive for road users to switch to public transport for accessibility to greener forms of transport, which could also help grow our economy. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, I want to mention the recurring issue of the state of our road network, to which, I am sure, every Member can attest. The deterioration of our roads is a consequence of having an insufficient budget to maintain them at a normal level. The Committee recognises that the Department requires some £60 million per annum to maintain the road network. Over recent years, it has not received sufficient funding, and, as a result, only the highest-priority repairs can be undertaken, and temporary fixes have become more common.

Constrained funding has also led to a reduced winter service, leading to some roads not being gritted, particularly during cold weather. These factors all contribute to road safety on our network and are of particular concern to the Committee and all Members of the House. We have all heard about the tragic and unnecessary loss of life on our roads that has left too many families, friends and communities devastated at the loss of a loved one. Over the coming weeks, the Committee will be considering the road safety strategy and how it aims to deliver improved outcomes. It will seek to ensure that necessary resources are allocated to deliver those outcomes.

Having reviewed the capital and resource allocation of the draft Budget, I note that the Department, subject to Budget approval today, will receive £820.1 million capital and £559.5 million resource, which falls significantly short of the bid that was submitted. It is extremely disappointing that the Department advised that officials would not be in a position to give evidence to the Committee on how it intends to prioritise and allocate its funding until tomorrow. While a paper, which sets out indicative high-level resource and capital allocations, has now been received, it would have been beneficial

had members had the opportunity to discuss those allocations with officials before today's debate and vote. The Committee has written to the Minister to express its disappointment and to seek assurance that engagement for future Budget cycles will be timely, so as not to diminish our advisory and scrutiny roles.

I will now speak very briefly in my capacity as an MLA. We have heard a lot today about parties not voting on the Budget. That is mainly down to Health and its not receiving the full Budget allocation that it bid for. Every Department is in a similar situation.

I remind the Health Minister that, if we do not fund roads and do not fund our water system, that will mean problems in our health service: more people in hospital due to poor drinking water and more traffic incidents, which cause problems —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

**Mrs Erskine:** — in our already stretched and pressured emergency departments (EDs). This is not about just one Department; it is cross-departmental.

**12.45 pm**

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

**Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):** I will make some initial remarks on behalf of the Committee for The Executive Office. We are again in the position of having to debate matters on which there is insufficient time to receive the information that we need. That has a significant impact on effective scrutiny. Nevertheless, we need to move forward with a Budget to have clarity about spending plans and to continue to make the case to the Treasury that our current funding package does not meet objective need.

The Executive Office is to receive £183 million resource DEL and £17 million capital DEL, of which £7 million is financial transactions capital. The Department's conventional capital bid was for £14 million, so the allocation of £10 million means that a further £4 million would need to be found elsewhere. The Department received £181 million resource DEL in the previous Budget period, so there is a modest uplift of £2 million in this Budget. If last year's pattern is to be repeated, 58% of the total amount will be earmarked for things such as support for

victims and survivors of the conflict, historical institutional abuse and truth recovery. That leaves relatively little wriggle room for the Department to make savings. One of the challenges that we face, however, is that we do not know to what extent last year's pattern will be repeated.

The Department made bids for funding for the ending violence against women and girls strategy, Good Relations and support for public-sector reform. On 15 May, the Committee heard evidence from the Department on how it plans to tackle violence against women and girls. We also heard from stakeholders and women's centres about how we should be tackling violence against women and girls. We will need an adequate budget to do so, and that should, of course, be a priority for the Department. The Department made a bid for £500,000 to fund the strategy, added to £300,000 for baseline funds. Considering the scale of the challenge of achieving the aims of the strategy, the Committee will thus look closely at the adequacy of £800,000 to make an impact.

The Committee also heard from survivors of institutional child abuse. We heard last week that redress payments of £87 million have been paid out to date. In the past financial year, however, only £26 million was awarded by the redress board, while almost £1 million was paid in legal fees, £1.6 million in panel fees and almost £2 million in administration costs. We await updated expenditure figures from the Department, but the Committee is determined to ensure that public money, as scarce as it is, is well spent. There is clearly learning here.

It is a matter of some frustration that, due to a lack of information, the Committee cannot provide a more comprehensive contribution to the debate. However, the Committee looks forward to receiving a financial briefing from the Department on 12 June, when we will be in a better position to ascertain the facts of the Department's planned expenditure.

I will now make some comments as an Alliance MLA, albeit —.

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

**Ms Bradshaw:** Go ahead.

**Mr Frew:** Does the Member, in her Committee position, think that the date of 12 June is adequate for a briefing on a Budget that, really, she needed to know about now?

**Ms Bradshaw:** I totally agree — this is the first opportunity that the Department has taken to offer us that briefing — so thank you for that.

I will make my remarks on the Executive Office budget. In her foreword to the Budget document, the Finance Minister says that demands on the Budget amount to £1.50 for every £1 that she has available to spend. It should be emphasised that my colleagues and I fully support her case for an improved package from the UK Treasury.

I would like to correct the record. I am sure that the DUP Member for South Down did not mean to mislead the House when she said that parties other than her own championed and cheered on the financial package. My party leader, Naomi Long, said on 11 December:

*"It was important to see key issues Alliance has consistently raised form part of the paper we were all provided with today ... That includes the need for a fiscal floor for funding Northern Ireland, to ensure we are funded in line with need, a separate stabilisation fund to undo some of the harm created by cuts and to tackle backlogs, and also a transformation fund to allow us to improve public services."*

*Those three elements form part of the offer today, but we now need to look at the amount allocated to each and where from, as the current proposal just won't create financial sustainability."*

That is on the website, if anybody would like to read it.

Nevertheless, it should also be emphasised that we will always have more demands on the public purse than it can meet out of revenue raised. As one Chancellor put it, the queue of people telling you what they can spend money on will always be longer than the queue telling you what you should cut spending on. That brings us to the need to cut waste and to prioritise. The problem is that it is difficult to prioritise if we do not have a Programme for Government. We should also better define what "inescapable pressures" are. Today, we are essentially budgeting in the dark and setting spending limits assuming that we will want to do roughly the same as we did last year. That is not the route to efficient budgeting, nor is it the route to delivering real change and reform for the public.

The Executive Office's record after 100 days of restored devolution was not good. I will not repeat the details, but we have seen a failure to



appoint an array of commissioners and even the Executive Office's own permanent secretary. We have not seen any meaningful movement on key issues such as a memorial to victims and survivors of the historical institutional abuse of children. We have not seen any movement at all on issues such as the replacement of the international relations strategy, the current version of which dates from pre Brexit. The Executive Office also oversees a Strategic Investment Board that is under review but that, in the meantime, continues to support an educational campus that the independent review of education warned clearly against building and for which the budget is not yet secure. The Executive Office did that while supposedly supporting a stadium that the Minister refuses to put out to tender. It also supports, at considerable cost, a Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation that cannot demonstrate any meaningful outcomes over the past few years. That sort of thing matters. For example, without an up-to-date international relations strategy, how are we to define the purpose of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Beijing? What are we expecting it to deliver, and how do we assess its performance?

Speaking of budgeting in the dark, the truth is that we —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

**Ms Bradshaw:** OK. I will leave it there. I had plenty more to say. Thank you.

**Mr McAleer:** I speak in my capacity as Sinn Féin spokesperson for agriculture, and I welcome the opportunity to make some points on the Budget.

It is welcome that the Finance Minister has secured a Budget that was agreed by the majority of the Executive parties. That will bring some clarity and stability to our public services and allow Departments to plan ahead. The agreed Executive Budget is a very welcome step given that, over the past two years, the Budget was decided by the Tory Government without our consent.

DAERA has responsibility for food, farming, climate change, environmental matters, fisheries, forestry, sustainability policy and rural affairs. The overarching aim of the Department is to put sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape that is valued by everyone. We strongly believe that it is important that DAERA commits to working in

partnership with rural people to create a sustainable rural community where people want to live, work and be active.

Whilst I welcome the total funding allocation for DAERA, I want to highlight the detrimental effects of Brexit on agriculture and rural communities. The Tory Government created and delivered austerity and Brexit. The EU common agricultural policy — we are not suggesting that it was absolutely perfect — at least gave certainty to farming communities and provided a seven-year multi-annual budget so that they could plan ahead. However, Brexit has delivered a huge cut to rural funding, not only to agriculture but to the rural development programme. We had a ring-fenced budget for rural funding that ended in December 2023.

Rural communities must not be ignored. They face many challenges, and we are seeing the consequences of the Tory Government's overlooking rural votes, with their seats up for grabs at the next general election, if the polls are to be believed. Our rural communities need investment and support from government policy that is cross-departmental. The success of rural communities is central to our future. Rural dwellers should have equality of opportunity. All Departments have a responsibility for issues that affect rural areas, and we all must be mindful of our statutory obligations under the Rural Needs Act, which was passed in this House.

While most of the budget is ring-fenced for farm support payments — I welcome the fact, which I heard from DAERA officials, that the farm budget is £332.5 million for 2024-25 — the key thing is that there is no clarity beyond 2024-25. Without certainty beyond that date, how are farmers supposed to run their businesses and make plans? Farmers highlighted the problem that the prices that they get for their produce do not cover the cost of production. Budget certainty is critical. As one farmer said to us at the Balmoral show a couple of weeks ago, food does not come from the local supermarket; it just sells it. Food comes from farms, and that is a really important point to make.

Sinn Féin wants farm support and a rural development programme to continue as part of a multi-year, ring-fenced Budget. It is always worth remembering that when we were in the EU, the single farm payment and most of the rural development programme came as a separate ring-fenced budget from our block grant. When we exited the EU, we were promised by the UK Government that that lost funding would be replaced. We have not seen

the colour of that money, and that has had a serious impact on our rural communities.

Another issue of major financial concern is the TB programme. Officials highlighted to the Committee its increasing cost: TB compensation was £38 million in 2022-23, which was up from £19.5 million in 2019-2020, and the overall programme costs in the region of £50 million. If we can get to grips with that disease, it should free up money for other aspects of farming and rural communities.

As we look to the future, we need the required fiscal levers and multi-year Budgets to enable long-term planning and proper investment in agriculture and rural communities. I support the motion and commend the Minister for her achievements on the interim fiscal framework and achieving her first Budget.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. 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 first Member to speak will be Phillip Brett, the Chair of the Committee for the Economy. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.*

*On resuming (Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ní Chuilín] in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** It is time for questions to the Executive Office. We will start with listed questions. Question 1 has been withdrawn.

### Ebrington Square

2. **Mr Delargy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what actions they are taking to promote Ebrington Square as an event venue. (AQO 482/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister):** Ebrington has been transformed. Future developments, such as a new museum for Derry, will strengthen its economic, social, tourism and cultural impact and value to the city and the north-west. That potential will be enhanced by an inclusive and ambitious approach to creative and cultural events at Ebrington. Next month, the YES Festival will feature the creative work of women from 18 European cities and renowned female artists. Support from the Executive Office is enabling a major outdoor art installation and community activities on the square that will showcase the diverse creative opportunities for the site.

Good partnership working with Derry City and Strabane District Council has supported an events programme for 2024, including linkages to citywide events and festivals. We really want to help promoters and local groups to be ambitious, showcase local talent and attract major artists and visitors to the region. Soon, we will be calling for expressions of interest for large-scale events up to September 2026.

That level of ambition is enhanced by a focus on inclusion. Ebrington is used year round by local people and groups for community, sporting and charity events, large and small. We really want to support that also. Building on views expressed by political, community and business representatives during our recent engagement work, a series of public events will now take place in June to explore better ways of working together that will realise the full potential of the Ebrington site.

**Mr Delargy:** I thank the First Minister for her answer and her ongoing commitment to the site. As she is well aware, the people of Derry want concerts back in Ebrington Square. What can the council and the Executive Office do to work together to ensure that not only does that happen but the number of events increases to put our city back on the map as a world-class music venue?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his continued interest in and promotion of the site. As I mentioned, many types of community, arts-based, sporting and charity events occur there. It is really important that Ebrington continues to be well used to maximise its social and economic contribution to the city and the north-west, because we know that that comes with enormous benefits. Maximising the site's potential is best done in partnership with the council and local businesses. Where opportunities present themselves or even, indeed, where requests are made, we will, of course, consider them, especially where there is a significant benefit to the city.

**Mr Honeyford:** What specific work has been undertaken towards a similar goal for the Maze/Long Kesh site?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member will know that we had a debate in the Assembly when we talked about the enormous potential of the site. I am absolutely determined to ensure that we grab that with both hands and open up that site for all the tremendous economic, social and cultural benefits that can come from it. I look forward to working with the Member and other Members as we regenerate that site for the benefit of all the people whom we collectively serve.

**Mr Durkan:** I certainly welcome the progress on Ebrington Square and the commitment to attracting high-quality acts there. On the day-to-day management of Ebrington Square, will the Minister give a commitment to ensure that it is clean and safe? There has been a huge increase in vehicular traffic using the square, which had, until recently, been pedestrianised.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Is there a question there, Mark?

**Mr Durkan:** I have asked the Minister for a commitment.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** OK.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member. I know that he is passionate about the site. We want to work with the council and our partners to ensure that we maximise the site's potential. The deputy First Minister and I will be up there in June, and we will talk to partners about how we can progress some of the areas to which I have referred. If we are going to open up the site more, bring in more events and do so in partnership, it is important, obviously, that the site is inviting and is somewhere where people want to go and spend time, because the benefits that that will bring to the wider north-west, particularly the impact on local communities, are clear for us all to see.

## Legacy of the Past

3. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of their statutory obligation to represent the interests of victims, whether they intend to take action to address the legacy of the past, including condemning murders carried out by the Provisional IRA and other terrorist organisations. (AQO 483/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Our Department has been representing the interests of victims and survivors for many years. We remain committed to ensuring that their needs continue to be met. A consultation has recently closed on the new draft strategy for victims and survivors, and we will shortly be considering the findings. A key part of the strategy will be providing support for victims and survivors and their families as they move forward from experiences of the past. The draft strategy recognises the importance of truth and justice and the need to work together towards greater societal recognition of the hurt, loss and trauma of our past.

We will continue to provide support for victims and survivors in dealing with the legacy of the past and will take a flexible approach to dealing with changing needs and circumstances. That will include providing support through the advocacy support network, which is delivered by community organisations funded by the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) and is expected to be part of the forthcoming PEACE PLUS programme. As Ministers, we are wholeheartedly committed to continuing the work of reconciliation between all of our people.

**Mr Allister:** Now, First Minister, try my question, which you avoided. You oversee victims policy, but you still side with the victim-makers by refusing to condemn their murders and their other actions. How can you do that and expect to have any respect from those who

were made victims? Is that situation not an offensive illustration —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Have you a question there, Mr Allister?

**Mr Allister:** — of the obscenity of the position that you hold?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** First Minister, answer that in whatever way you feel fit.

**Mrs O'Neill:** This issue is far too serious for party politicking.

**Mr Allister:** Answer the question.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Who are you talking to?

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is most important that we do all that we can to support victims and survivors. In the Executive Office, we are absolutely committed to doing everything that we can through our two main programmes, particularly around the victim support programme and the individual needs programme. The best thing that we can do for our society, because we all have a leadership role to play in healing the wounds of the past and moving us into a better future for everybody, is to help people to move forward. That is the responsible thing to do, and that is what I am committed to doing.

**Ms Sheerin:** Minister, thank you again for your renewed commitment to ensuring the provision of services for victims and survivors. May I ask for an update on the victims' payments scheme, please?

**Mrs O'Neill:** As of the week commencing 13 May, over £40 million had been paid to victims since the scheme opened for applications on 31 August 2021. The Victims' Payments Board has made determinations on 1,356 cases, with 878 of those recommended for a payment. That figure includes determinations at first hearing and appeals. Four hundred and seventy-eight applications have been determined as ineligible for payment.

We are aware that there are some concerns about the time that it can take to process an application, and that is simply because each application is unique, with its own complexities. The Victims' Payments Board must consider each application on its own merits in order to provide the best outcome for applicants. The historical nature of much of the evidence, when

record-keeping may not have been to the same standard as that of today, means that gathering evidence can be challenging. The Victims' Payments Board has processes in place with a range of partners to assist in retrieving evidence on behalf of applicants. In addition, I urge those who feel that they may meet the criteria to make their application now.

**Ms Egan:** First Minister, can you provide us with an update on the appointment of a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I can. Ensuring that victims and survivors have a strong, independent voice is really important to us all collectively, particularly for the Executive. The appointment of a new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors is essential to inform the development of policies and to help to ensure that the longer-term needs of victims and survivors are addressed. The appointment plan for the recruitment competition to appoint the new commissioner is being reviewed, and the competition will launch very soon. The appointment process is regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and therefore it is estimated that the process may take approximately six months to complete.

**Mr Nesbitt:** In his capacity as head of Operation Kenova, Jon Boutcher was the last person to recommend an annual day of reflection. What are the First Minister's thoughts?

**Mrs O'Neill:** We do indeed have an annual day of reflection, and that is something that we should give consideration to collectively. The success of something like that is something that we all need to be part of. That would be the healing value of it. We will have to explore that a bit more. Certainly, it is important that we find the space to reflect and to do so together.

## **COVID-19 Inquiry: Lessons Learned**

4. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of lessons they have learned for their Department arising from the evidence presented to the Northern Ireland module of the COVID-19 inquiry. (AQO 484/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** We welcome the inquiry and its presence in Belfast from 30 April to 16 May 2024. We fully support the inquiry in its mission to learn lessons for the future, and we have engaged and continue to engage with it on that basis. It is right and proper that COVID-19

decision-making and other matters are being considered, and we will actively work through the lessons to be learned. That will be a combination of our own analysis and consideration of the recommendations from the inquiry, when they become available.

**Mr T Buchanan:** On the subject of learning lessons, has the First Minister's Department any contingency plans in place or is it considering putting any in place to deal with a similar pandemic, should one arise?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, the purpose of the inquiry is to learn lessons, and a number were learned as we travelled through the COVID pandemic. We have been able to update our civil contingencies framework. Again, that came out of lessons learned throughout the pandemic.

It is clear to us that we have to embrace the recommendations of the inquiry when it completes, because, unfortunately, it is inevitable that there will be another pandemic at some juncture. Given that COVID was an unprecedented global pandemic, there is no doubt that there are many lessons to be learned. We will be able to put them into effect. The inquiry has finished the module for here, and it will sit again to hear more evidence. We will then have the full report, and the Executive as a whole will have to take the recommendations on board.

**Mr O'Toole:** First Minister, after the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry report was published in March 2020, just as the COVID pandemic was spreading, you said:

*"We need open Government where decisions are properly scrutinised day and daily and with no hiding place for any risk of malpractice".*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Is there a question, Matthew?

**Mr O'Toole:** The —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Good stuff.

**Mr O'Toole:** — COVID inquiry was not able to get hold of key evidence because it was deleted from digital devices.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question?

**Mr O'Toole:** First Minister, will you confirm whether WhatsApp is still being used to do government business? If so, are you sharing a record in real time with civil servants so that they can keep that record and it cannot be deleted?

**Mrs O'Neill:** At the time, it was our understanding that the Department operated a robust records system detailing all the required information about decisions made and engagements and meetings about departmental business. We set that out fully to the inquiry. It was also understood that all that information was recorded and retained by departmental officials. As I said, however, there is no doubt that there are lessons to be learned. There is no doubt that the head of the Civil Service has set out to ensure that everybody fully understands best practice for the operation of Executive business and that everything is committed to the official record.

**Ms Kimmins:** Does the First Minister agree that the COVID inquiry is an important platform for the bereaved families, who lost loved ones during the pandemic, and that lessons must now be learned across all Departments?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, and that is at the heart of the inquiry. I absolutely agree with the Member. Our thoughts will always be with the loved ones during this most challenging, horrific and difficult period, because they lost so much. As I said, we fully supported the inquiry in its mission to learn lessons for the future, and we will continue to engage with it on that basis. It is absolutely right and proper that the COVID-19 decision-making and the other matters that are being considered be taken on board, and we will actively learn lessons that will complement what we have learnt from our analysis. Obviously, the inquiry will also have recommendations to make.

**Mr McReynolds:** Given the evidence that the absence of the institutions caused considerable harm to preparations for the pandemic, what steps will be taken in the coming weeks towards meaningful institutional reform?

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is not a shared position in the Executive Office. The Member will know that, personally and from a party point of view, we can always strive to look at how we can do things better and ensure that we have stability in the institutions. The public deserve that stability, and I want to provide leadership and stewardship in my role as First Minister. Through the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, we have an opportunity to see how

we can improve how we work together here. Let us do so with the good intention of making sure that the Assembly is a permanent fixture. Particularly in these times, as we enter an election contest, with the Westminster election having been called, I call for steadiness in the Assembly and the Executive. I want us to continue to do our job here. We have made good strides forward in the early days, and I want us to continue to make that progress.

**Dr Aiken:** Minister, you are probably aware of the statutory ministerial code, which talks particularly about accountability and openness. Will you and the deputy First Minister institute an independent review of the retention of data, which was raised by the RHI inquiry and now by the COVID inquiry?

**2.15 pm**

**Mrs O'Neill:** As I said, we have participated fully as an Executive with the inquiry. We have provided all the information. The Member may not know that an independent investigation was carried out by the head of the Civil Service, which looked at data retention, and that was reported to the inquiry. We are also still in the midst of the inquiry, so it has not reported yet. It has finished its three weeks here, but it will be looking also at the issue of care homes and at other elements of the pandemic response. We will then have a fulsome report, but, in the meantime, I am content that the head of the Civil Service conducted that independent review.

## International Relations Strategy

5. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the publication of a new international relations strategy. (AQO 485/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Since the publication of the international relations strategy in 2014, there have been major shifts in the geopolitical and the macroeconomic landscapes against a backdrop of issues arising from the global pandemic. As a result, local and international priorities have evolved. In parallel, international interest in all that we have to offer continues to grow. We have a reputation as one of the world's best business set-up partners and an investment destination of choice. To reflect the continuing focus on well-being outcomes and further changes in the international landscape, our officials have undertaken extensive preparatory work and engagement, and officials are now in the process of preparing a draft international relations strategy, which will form

the basis for further engagement, and also a public consultation.

We look forward to bringing a new international relations strategy for Executive consideration, and it is intended that this new Executive strategy will build upon our strengths, support the delivery of the Programme for Government, acknowledge emerging global challenges and opportunities and set out the optimal countries and regions for engagement to maximise delivery of our shared priorities. The strategy will be important in setting out our longer-term approach to international engagement, but we have already been working hard in our first few months to build relationships with strategic international partners who have a keen interest in our peace and prosperity.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, First Minister, for your answer. As you said, the world has moved on. Will the new strategy include a set of principles and human rights standards through which engagement with every nation in the world will be measured?

**Mrs O'Neill:** We do not have the draft yet — it is being developed — but there will certainly be an opportunity for the Committee for the Executive Office to scrutinise the work. On principle, from a personal perspective, engaging with countries on human rights compliance is very important. As we look towards a changing global picture — global events, conflict, a post-Brexit world and a post-pandemic world — we can see that a lot of things have changed. That has to be factored into the work that we are doing on our international strategy, but I am hopeful that we will be able to have Executive consideration of a fulsome strategy in the autumn.

**Mr McGuigan:** I note in the First Minister's comments the fact that the international interest in what we have to offer here continues to grow and that we are an investment destination of choice. Therefore, will the First Minister outline what international partners Ministers have met since taking office?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Since taking office, the deputy First Minister and I, along with the junior Ministers, have seen at first hand the level of interest and enthusiasm shown by our international partners, even from very early days. During that time, we and our officials have supported visits from more than 20 different countries. We have had the pleasure of welcoming the Prime Minister of Kosovo and ambassadors from the US, the EU, Germany, China and Japan, to name just a few.

Alongside that, the Member will be aware that the deputy First Minister and I led a delegation to the US during St Patrick's Day, again taking every opportunity when meeting business leaders to deliver a clear message that we are an attractive investment opportunity for global companies because of our talented workforce, our dual market access and our innovative homegrown companies. At the same time, our junior Ministers travelled to Brussels to engage in a round of meetings and events reinforcing, once again, our commitment to key relationships and networks across Europe.

In looking to the future, we are very much looking to continue to work alongside the Minister for the Economy to highlight the message that we are very much a place that is open for business.

**Mr Kingston:** Following on from that question, as the First Minister will be aware, the Northern Ireland Executive currently have a presence in Belgium, in China and in the United States of America. Will the First Minister indicate what other places are being considered as key markets for economic opportunity or for strengthening our diplomatic relations?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for that. As I said, we are going to take every opportunity to promote this place overseas. We have the three bureaux, which are really important in being there to support our access to those key markets and facilitating our engagement with the EU, its institutions and wider Europe.

Equally, alongside those key locations of Brussels, Washington and Beijing, there are interests elsewhere. We are going to work on our international relations strategy with Invest NI, which has 30 international offices. It is important that the work that Invest NI does and that we do in the Executive Office on an international strategy work alongside each other and become wider networks through which we can deliver our shared priorities. The actual places of interest will become more evident as we develop the strategy.

**Mr McNulty:** Could there be a better way to promote international relations than hosting a global soccer tournament at GAA HQ in west Belfast at a newly developed Casement Park? Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister be putting their shoulders to the wheel to ensure that Casement gets built in time for that tournament?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I absolutely concur regarding the enormous economic and sporting benefit and

legacy that the Euros would leave. It is an opportunity not to be missed. I noted Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's comments last week about a substantial contribution. We look forward to a figure being put on that statement. We must grasp with both hands the enormous benefit that we would have from the Euros. In turn, Casement Park will be built.

## **Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls**

6. **Mr McReynolds** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline when the draft strategic framework to end violence against women and girls will be approved. (AQO 486/22-27)

10. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a progress update on the strategic framework to ending violence against women and girls. (AQO 490/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, junior Minister Reilly will answer.

**Miss Reilly (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** With your permission, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 10 together.

We reiterate that ending violence against women and girls remains one of our key priorities. We are committed to bringing forward the strategic framework and action plan for consideration by the Executive Committee as soon as possible. The recent murder of Kathryn Parton only highlights the urgency required. We extend our sympathy to Kathryn's family and friends at this extremely difficult time.

We are giving active consideration to final options. It is anticipated that the updated framework and action plan will be brought to the Executive very shortly.

**Mr McReynolds:** I thank the junior Minister for her response, and I congratulate her on her appointment to her new role since I last saw her.

What resources will be available during this and future financial years to ensure the implementation of the strategic framework?

**Miss Reilly:** I thank the Member for his words of congratulations.

As the Member knows, we are operating in a very difficult budgetary situation. The impact of that is being felt across Departments and within communities, and we are hearing about that in today's debate on the Budget.

Work is ongoing to develop a costed action plan to support the delivery of the strategic framework, taking into account the wider financial implication across all Departments. I know that the Member — as do we — wants to make sure that the framework has the impact and delivers on the step change that is needed in society to end violence against women and girls. We will continue to engage with our Executive colleagues and partners in this crucial area and are committed to bringing the framework forward as soon as possible.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire sóisearach as a freagraí go dtí seo. *[Translation: I thank the junior Minister for her answers so far.]* How will the framework tackle the increasing abuse experienced by women and girls?

**Miss Reilly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. *[Translation: I thank the Member for his question.]* The horrendous murder of Kathryn Parton in recent weeks was yet another stark reminder that, every day, there are many women who are not safe in their home and suffer violence and abuse, often in silence. Yet again, we have to take a stand here today and say that enough is enough. Together, we need to ensure that there is zero tolerance of any violence or abuse towards women and girls.

My heart goes out to all of Kathryn's family and friends, but especially to her father, who experienced something that no parent ever should and which is every parent's worst nightmare. Words, however, are not enough, and the Executive are committed to taking action.

**Ms Hunter:** Two weeks ago, the other junior Minister said that the Department was engaging with the Health Minister to ensure that they had a conversation about the loss of Women's Aid funding. Will you update the House on the engagement that you have had and whether you will ensure that that funding is provided?

**Miss Reilly:** I thank the Member for her question regarding the cuts to the Women's Aid Federation's budget. We recognise the need to ensure that services for victims deliver a consistent, trauma-informed response across a diverse range of needs. That includes access to

funding and resources. We absolutely acknowledge the good work being carried out by our delivery partners, which include Women's Aid, in very challenging circumstances. As I said, we will continue to engage with our Executive colleagues about funding for the Women's Aid Federation and other delivery partners.

## Executive Legislative Programme

7. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the legislative programme of the Executive for the remainder of the 2022-27 mandate. (AQO 487/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Member will now be aware of the written ministerial statement on the Executive's legislative programme that we made to the Assembly on 23 May. It sets out the Bills that, subject to Executive agreement on the substance of each proposal, Ministers intend to introduce to the Assembly before the end of the calendar year. Ministers also have a large number of other legislative proposals in development, and we intend to make a further statement later this year about additional Bills that will be introduced before the end of the 2024-25 session.

**Mr McCrossan:** First Minister, the Assembly and the Executive have now been in place for over 100 days. The public rightly expect and deserve delivery from the Executive after continual failure. When will the Assembly get sight of the Programme for Government and have an opportunity to debate the priorities that will be laid before it?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Perhaps the Member missed this information: the Assembly will have the opportunity to debate and scrutinise the legislative programme on 11 June. We scheduled a debate in the aftermath of laying the written ministerial statement last week. We recognise that, importantly, the Executive's legislative priorities will set the framework for the legislative programme of work in the House. It is really important that we have that debate the week after next. For that reason, we have worked collaboratively with ministerial colleagues. We have also taken the necessary time to produce a programme that reflects departmental policy priorities and is deliverable within the committed time frame.

**Mrs Dillon:** Minister, having met many victims and survivors of abuse in mother-and-baby institutions, you will be well aware that they are very nervous and anxious to know when the Bill



on mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses might come forward. Will you outline the timeline for the publication of the Bill?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for asking that question, and I take the opportunity to acknowledge the fact that she and Members across the House have worked together really constructively in this sensitive area. Engagement with the groups will be core to the process. Along with the deputy First Minister, I will undertake a round of engagements with the groups and wider stakeholders before we make any public announcements. I can update the House that we are progressing legislation to establish a statutory public inquiry and a financial redress scheme for those who have been impacted on by their experience in mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses.

The Member will appreciate that a number of complex and sensitive issues have to be considered ahead of the next key stage, which is to bring a proposal to Executive colleagues, with the intention of launching a public policy consultation ahead of the summer recess. Following analysis of responses to the consultation, a draft Bill can be finalised. It will be brought to the Executive for their agreement and then introduced to the Assembly in 2024. The Member will appreciate that it is important and sensitive legislation. The deputy First Minister and I are really committed to ensuring that we work at pace to make more progress and to have the Bill debated in the Assembly.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Kate Nicholl for a very brief supplementary question.

**Ms Nicholl:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.

First Minister, will that legislation include the ability to enforce redress payments from religious orders that are still refusing to make such payments?

**Mrs O'Neill:** We are looking at the legislation to see how we can respond to the victims and survivors of the mother-and-baby homes. Financing is, however, dealt with separately, insofar as we have the framework and are trying to work with the institutions. I have said previously in the House that if payments are not forthcoming, we will have to look at other ways in which to achieve the proper financial redress, because that is also part of the healing process for victims. We have a very good framework in place. We will continue to work our way through

that, but we will not be found wanting if we need to bring forward legislation to achieve what is required.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, Patsy. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

**2.30 pm**

## **Programme for Government: Timetable**

**T1. Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after welcoming Rockwell College, Tipperary to proceedings, to state when we will see a full Programme for Government, given that, when the First Minister referenced the legislative programme, which he welcomes and acknowledges, in answer to his colleague's question, a Programme for Government, which is much broader than a legislative programme in which some of the measures are simply to keep parity with GB, was not mentioned. (AQT 321/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Your colleague asked a question about the legislative programme specifically, so I answered that question. It is important that we get the trilogy, if you want to call it that, right: the legislative programme, the Budget, which is being debated today, and the Programme for Government. Unfortunately, the election was called towards the end of last week, and the early advice that the deputy First Minister and I have received is that it will be very difficult to publish a Programme for Government in the midst of an election campaign.

We are exploring that situation further because we are determined to get the Programme for Government out the door to complement the work of the Budget and the legislative programme. We will keep the House updated on the legal advice that we receive. When the purdah period kicks in, it makes it very difficult for us to carry out certain areas of work. The Programme for Government appears to fall under that category, but we will keep people posted.

**Mr O'Toole:** As a former civil servant, I acknowledge that there is a pre-election period. Obviously, I do not want the First Minister or deputy First Minister to stray into political territory with official resources, so that is fine. When the Programme for Government is published, however, will it include provision for an Irish language commissioner and associated

commissioners? Will we have that clarity when the Programme for Government is published?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am delighted to say that there has been progress on the application and recruitment process and that we hope to be able to advance that in the coming days and weeks.

We are all desperate to get the Programme for Government out the door. We are all desperate to get that in place. We will seek further advice on what is possible in that space, but, unfortunately, the election being called puts its delivery before 4 July somewhat in jeopardy.

### COVID-19 Inquiry: Deleted WhatsApp Messages

T2. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister can state why she wiped her COVID WhatsApp messages and what she was hiding, given that it is clear from the transcript taken from Baroness Foster's phone that she wiped much more than administrative messages. (AQT 322/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** At the time, my understanding was that the Department operated a robust records system detailing all the required information about decisions made and engagements and meetings about departmental business. Considerable information was handed over to the inquiry, and the inquiry will now do its work. The official record is retained in the Department. Let us await the outcome of the COVID inquiry. I am sure that we will all commit to learning from that about best practice.

**Mr Allister:** In your witness statement to the tribunal, you said that you had wiped only administrative messages. Was that truthful? Is the situation —.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry [*Inaudible*] question.

**Mr Allister:** Is it the case that you were really hiding your WhatsApp messages about the Storey funeral?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** First Minister, respond to that in whatever way you see fit.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not expect any more from the Member than messing and nonsense. When it comes to the COVID inquiry, it is important that we are all committed to learning lessons. As I

said in the inquiry, I believe that all five parties in the Executive worked very hard throughout an unprecedented global crisis to try to get people through to the other side. Of course, we will all learn lessons and take those lessons on board as a result of the inquiry. That is its purpose. That is why we all participated in it and gave so much time to trying to learn those lessons. Some of those lessons have already been brought into play. Other lessons will come from the inquiry over time.

### Euro 2028: Economic Benefits

T3. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister agrees that holding Euro 2028 in Belfast will create an unprecedented economic opportunity that will significantly benefit all of the community. (AQT 323/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, I absolutely do. Hosting the Euro 2028 football championship in Belfast is an unmissable opportunity. As I have said, it will create millions for the local economy. The recent report commissioned by Ulster GAA revealed that hosting those games in the North would be worth over £100 million to the local economy. Those figures speak to the economic benefits of hosting those games. Hosting that championship in a newly developed Casement Park is an unmissable and unique economic opportunity that will leave an unprecedented legacy for local sport.

**Mr McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. [*Translation: I thank the First Minister for her answers so far.*] Will the First Minister commit to doing all that she can to ensure that the Euro 2028 bid is successful?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, such opportunities should not be missed. Of course, I will continue to do all that I can to ensure that we have a state-of-the-art stadium that is fit for purpose and that the Euro 2028 bid is the success that everyone wants it to be, which I genuinely believe to be the case. We just need to see an end to the dithering and for the British Government to deliver on their commitment to provide funding for the stadium without any more delays.

### Ministerial Code: Amendments

T4. **Mr Beattie** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when we will see a new or amended ministerial code, given that amendments to the ministerial code to incorporate changes made by the Executive

Committee (Functions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020 were agreed in February 2022, notwithstanding this place being down for two years. (AQT 324/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is a matter that the Member has raised before. I do not have the time frame, but I will come back to the Member as it is an area that he is particularly keen to see advanced. With no institutions in place, the amendments were not put in place, but they need to be. I am happy to respond in writing.

**Mr Beattie:** Thanks, First Minister. The point that I am getting at is that the ministerial code no longer reflects legislation. Has the Attorney General given a view on the validity of the present ministerial code?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Again, as part of the written response, I will confirm whether the AG has expressed a view. Nothing has been brought to my attention on that, but I am very happy to look into it.

## **Euro 2028: Economic Benefits**

T5. **Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister agrees with the assessment in a report recently commissioned by Ulster GAA in which accountants Grant Thornton stated that hosting the Euro 2028 games here could be worth more than £106 million to the local economy. (AQT 325/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. As I said earlier, the economic benefits would be transformational, and it is an epic opportunity to have such a world-class championship here in 2028. Imagine the knock-on impact that that would have on young people and sport and its legacy. We have to be ambitious about our place in the world and our ability to host the event. I am committed to making sure that all the opportunities are maximised.

**Mr Gildernew:** Do you believe that British Prime Minister Sunak should be clearer on the British Government's financial commitment to the building of Casement Park?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes. We need urgent clarity from the British Government on how they will contribute. We have had the language of "substantial contribution" over and over again, but what does that look like? Casement Park will unlock a huge economic driver and ensure that we are at the heart of hosting one of the most prestigious tournaments in the world.

Also, as the Member is aware, Casement Park is a flagship project for the Executive, and building it is a New Decade, New Approach commitment.

## **Gaza: Ceasefire**

T6. **Ms Sheerin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister agrees that Israel's barbaric attack on a refugee camp full of displaced Palestinians was another example of why there needs to be a complete and total ceasefire in Palestine, given that she will have seen over the weekend the horrible images from Gaza that flooded our screens. (AQT 326/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Speaking personally, there is no doubt that over one million Gazans are sheltering in Rafah with absolutely nowhere to go. Over the weekend, we all witnessed the horrendous scenes of charred remains and bodies under the rubble of a refugee camp that is in ruins. Israel's ongoing indiscriminate slaughter of the Palestinian people must end, and the international community must finally take a stand against Israel's genocide, ethnic cleansing and collective punishment of Palestinians. All hostages should be released immediately, and aid must be allowed to flow freely into Gaza. Israeli forces must withdraw from Gaza and the West Bank, and a peaceful settlement must be agreed through peace negotiations that lead to a viable Palestinian state.

**Ms Sheerin:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as an fhreagra sin. [*Translation: I thank the First Minister for that answer.*] First Minister, you have outlined the need for a total and unequivocal ceasefire. Do you agree that the Irish state's eventual recognition of the Palestinian state is a very good first step and a historic moment in our support for the Palestinian people?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Again, speaking personally, of course, I absolutely do. It is a historic moment for the people of Ireland and Palestine. I commend the efforts of all those people at home and across the international community who have campaigned for that outcome for years. However, there is no escaping the fact that the international community must come together and finally take a stand against Israel's genocide, ethnic cleansing and collective punishment of Palestinians, and work to deliver a peace settlement that leads to a viable Palestinian state.

## EU Convention on Human Rights: UK Withdrawal

T7. **Ms Egan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the fact that, last week, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee published a letter to the Secretary of State, which showed that the UK Government would be willingly in breach of the Good Friday Agreement if they were to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights, and to state how they will act to ensure that human rights are protected in Northern Ireland. (AQT 327/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** As the Member will be aware, and as all of us who are elected to this place are aware, human rights underpin our Good Friday Agreement and our peace agreement, and it is vital that they are respected and upheld. We are in an election period. What will come out the other side of that? Perhaps some of the damage that has been inflicted by the Tories over the past 14 years could be reversed. It is important, however, that we stand firmly in defence of our peace agreement and the human rights implications that underpin it.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you, First Minister. Will the First Minister commit to delivering a bill of rights in this mandate, as was committed to in previous political agreements?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Personally, I can say that, yes, I am absolutely committed to a bill of rights. Unfortunately, there have been political barriers to that being achieved, but those of us who want to bring that about should work together to do so.

## A5: Executive Flagship Priority

T8. **Ms Ennis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that the A5 remains an Executive flagship priority, given that, this year already, too many families have experienced untold hurt, heartbreak and loss as a result of the failure to take forward its upgrade. (AQT 328/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** As the Member rightly says, the A5 is one of the most dangerous roads on our island and has been the scene of heartbreak for far too many families. Delivering the transformation of the A5 will save lives and make the road safer for everybody. It is deeply frustrating that continued legal challenges have held up the vital project and stalled the delivery of a first-class road from the north-west to Dublin. However, the A5 remains a flagship

project and priority. My colleague the Infrastructure Minister, John O'Dowd, has said that he will make an announcement on plans for the A5 this summer. I look forward to that.

**Ms Ennis:** Go raibh maith agat, First Minister. *[Translation: Thank you, First Minister.]* I welcome those comments. Does the First Minister agree that upgrading the A5 should be a priority for Ministers, North and South, and that work to upgrade the A5 should start sooner rather than later?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, upgrading the road is a priority for the Executive, and also for the Irish Government, who recently committed £600 million towards the project. The numbers of tragedies and road deaths on the A5 are a statement and a challenge that we need to urgently upgrade that dangerous road to save lives now and to help ensure that no other family suffers this heartbreak. The A5 is a key infrastructure project that will transform lives for the better for everyone. The project will save lives, so we need to move forward and get the road built.

## Tourism: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

T9. **Ms Á Murphy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that the tourism sector is a huge driver for economic growth, particularly in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency, whether the First Minister agrees that growing prosperity and delivering regional balance are important outcomes for a future Programme for Government. (AQT 329/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is important and essential that all our communities share the benefits of prosperity. That is why it is essential that we deliver on key infrastructure projects such as the Narrow Water bridge and the A5 and A29 road schemes, which will enhance the mobility and connectivity of communities, whilst also delivering on the expansion of Ulster University at Magee and maximising the potential of the Euro 2028 bid. All those things are solid foundations on which to build our economy in a balanced way, because regional imbalance has been a factor for far too long. We have an opportunity to turn that around, particularly with the vision for the economy that Conor Murphy set out previously to make sure that prosperity is felt across the board.

**Ms Á Murphy:** I thank the First Minister for her answer. I take this opportunity to invite her and

the deputy First Minister to Fermanagh and South Tyrone to see our wonderful tourism offering in the coming period.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you for the invitation. I am sure, and I hope, that the deputy First Minister and I will be in a position to visit Fermanagh to see at first hand the wonderful tourism offering across the county. We hope to do that in the coming period.

## Central Good Relations Fund

T10. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the measures that are in place to ensure that the central good relations fund is distributed fairly to groups across all constituencies (AQT 330/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is very, very important that good relations funding is distributed fairly and that we have an open and transparent process for how applications are assessed and funding awarded. The programme is also subject to an equality impact assessment, as is normal procedure.

No doubt, a challenging Budget period lies ahead for us, but really good work is being done across Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC), Communities in Transition (CIT), the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) and Urban Villages (UV). There are a lot of good pieces of work there, but the equality impact assessment underpins them all.

**2.45 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** That ends Question Time. I am sorry, Alex, but there is no time left for a supplementary question.

Members should take their ease until we change the top Table.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget 2024-25

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2024-25 as announced by the Minister of Finance on 25 April 2024 and set out in the Budget document laid before the Assembly on 20 May 2024. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]*

**Mr Brett (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy):** Before I begin my remarks as Chair of the Committee for the Economy, I will pay a couple of tributes. Mr Mike Nesbitt has been an excellent and articulate member of our Committee and will be sorely missed when he takes up his new office. I also welcome the return of the Minister for the Economy to his post after his bout of ill health. The Committee looks forward to continuing its enquiries with the Minister.

I can advise that officials from the Department for the Economy recently provided an oral evidence session on the 2024-25 Budget. Owing to the compressed timescales and the continuing internal departmental allocation process, however, the Committee struggled somewhat to track changes in spending precisely from 2023 to 2024. The Committee awaits further clarification on a number of matters, and we hope to have that clarification before the next Budget Bill is introduced.

The Committee was relieved to note, however, that the opening position for the Department for the Economy's budget lines and its key arm's-length bodies (ALBs) appears to be largely similar to that of last year. The Committee will, of course, be interested in the outcomes of monitoring rounds and the allocation of capital, particularly to the higher education sector. Members welcomed assurances from officials about funding for apprenticeships and skills, despite the long-term lack of clarity on the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF).

Another considerable pressure in the Department was the pay settlement for further education lecturers, which is something that all members of the Committee were keen to see settled. I think that I speak on behalf of the Committee in welcoming the Minister's work

and the Executive's commitment to settling that dispute.

The Committee looks forward to the new model for the delivery of further education contributing successfully to the 10X economic strategy and the vision that the Minister has outlined. Finally on the Committee's considerations, we have sought clarity on annually managed expenditure (AME) and on the revised renewable heat incentive (RHI) tariffs and the future of the scheme. Perhaps the Minister of Finance, when summing up, will inform the House where her Department's consideration of that business case sits.

I will now speak briefly in my role as a DUP MLA for North Belfast. There is no doubting that this is a difficult Budget, that every Minister in the Executive could have spent additional funding and that funding overall has been reduced as a result of the UK-wide reduction in public spending. Those are not new facts but facts that have been articulated for some time. It was not this party that came out of the Hillsborough talks to say that the financial package secured would sort all of Northern Ireland's ills, and it was not this party, when calling for the restoration of Stormont, that said that there were millions of pounds in the Stormont bank account ready to be paid into people's pockets.

I welcome much of what is included in the Budget, however. I welcome the settlement of outstanding pay awards for our hard-working teachers, FE lecturers and other public servants; the introduction of much-needed support for our childcare sector to help families across Northern Ireland with soaring bills; and the progression of the subregional stadium funding, which will ensure that football clubs the length and breadth of Northern Ireland receive the facilities that they deserve.

The alternative to supporting the Budget has been clearly articulated by the Minister of Finance. We would put in jeopardy day-to-day services; we would remove the £25 million support for childcare; and there would be no agreement to continue with the priority of getting a pay settlement for our Education Authority (EA) support staff. That is the reality of the situation that we face.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Brett:** Of course.

**Mr O'Toole:** If the Budget were voted down today — I do not think that it will be — that

would not prevent the Minister from spending the money. There has been political agreement on the priorities, such as they are, but this is not a Budget Bill. It does not affect the legality of spending.

**Mr Brett:** The Member will be aware that the House set a trajectory through the Vote on Account that the Executive want to follow.

I will respond — it happens rarely in the House — to some of the legitimate charges that have been levelled against other Executive parties by the official Opposition and, indeed, the unofficial Opposition in the Executive. I agree entirely with the leader of the Opposition about the need for strategic plans. Those have been articulated by our Minister for Communities in relation to tackling the housing waiting lists across Northern Ireland and by the Minister of Education as to how we tackle the crisis facing our special educational needs (SEN) sector. I was going to say that I look forward to the leader of the Opposition's alternative Budget, but, in fairness to him, he continues to tell me each week about how we can save £2.5 million by removing long-haul air passenger duty (APD). I am sure that the rest of the Members from the SDLP who speak will outline their alternative Budget to the House this afternoon.

I agree with the Chair of the Health Committee: it is disappointing that, to date, no strategic plan or prioritisation has been set out by the Minister of Health. I and Members from all parties recognise the difficult role that Minister Swann has. We, as a party, supported the Minister's return to that office. I hope that he will continue to serve in that office long after the general election. When the new Minister takes office, we need to see a strategic prioritisation for that spend.

I disagree with the UUP finance spokesperson, who indicated that no self-respecting MLA could vote for the Budget. I do not doubt the sincerity or commitment of any MLA in the Chamber. I believe that every Member wants to deliver the best possible services for those whom we are honoured to represent. The Budget is difficult, but we were elected by the people of Northern Ireland to make strategic decisions in their long-term interests and to deliver for them.

I commit myself and my party to continuing to fight for a better deal for the people of Northern Ireland. The Budget represents important progress in that regard. Together, the House can send a strong message that we will stand up for working families across Northern Ireland.

**Mr Swann:** I speak as a Back-Bench MLA. I begin with a quote from another Member:

*"I am not going to impose cuts which will have such a negative consequence that it will damage the health of the Northern Ireland population ... I will make cuts, but there are certain services that I will not make cuts on, and the consequence of that is, we will break the budget by tens of millions of pounds unless more money is allocated to health".*

Those were not my words, Mr Speaker, but yours, when you were Health Minister in 2014. I applaud you for the stand that you took then. You, of course, were correct, but it is worth noting that you were removed as Health Minister a month later.

Sadly, funding for health and other public services has continued to be squeezed since then. The repeated stop-start nature of this place, combined with the failure to agree a multi-year Budget for almost a decade, has starved our health and social care system of the certainty and stable leadership that it so badly needs. We all agree, across the Chamber, that Northern Ireland is underfunded. At the same time, there is an onus on us to make the very best use of the resources that we have and to protect the most vulnerable. That is why I and so many patients and health service workers took reassurance from the public statements before and after the restoration of the Executive that the health of our people would be prioritised. Yet, this Budget does not achieve that.

Several other Departments, such as Education, Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Justice and Infrastructure, are all receiving proportionally greater increases to their general allocations than the Department of Health. To those who claim that this is about party politics or elections, I say this: do not judge me by your standards, because this is too important for games. People can debate figures all day long, but the fact is that the Department of Health's budget has been cut by over 2% compared with where it stood a little over a month ago. That fact was recognised in the report published by the Fiscal Council only a number of weeks ago. That is the exact opposite of prioritising healthcare. Let me give an illustration: I received an in-year allocation in the last financial year to pay for the uplift in pay: is anyone seriously suggesting that that uplift is taken off our workers this year? Of course it will not be and cannot be, but that is the implication when people talk in such basic terms.

I said at the beginning that I could spend a further £135 million on critical activity to tackle hips, knees, cataracts and many other procedures. If funded, I had also planned to reinstate a reimbursement scheme, following the success of the previous cross-border scheme. It feels as though almost every MLA has either mentioned it or asked me about that over the last number of months. Overall, almost 70,000 people would have benefited. The full details were shared with the Committee a number of weeks ago and were included in the Department of Health's elective care framework document that was published at the end of last week. However, once again, when push came to shove, the only targeted funding for the waiting lists that the Department of Health received was the £34 million that, we already knew, we were getting from the UK Government: not a penny more and not even half of what, I said, I needed to keep up with red-flag and time-critical demand. That is the reality of the Budget.

There is little point in demanding maximum action to tackle waiting times and, at the same time, tying the Department of Health's hands behind its back. Likewise, I am sure that some of the very people telling me and the Department to suck it up and accept the Budget will soon be urging the Department of Health to increase spending on a plethora of health issues. In the budget assessment that the Department of Health commissioned following the initial Executive agreement to the Budget last month, it is clear that the remaining £189 million deficit will be resolved only through high and catastrophic impacts to essential services. Again, those are not my words or descriptions but, rather, how our health trusts have described the consequences.

I fully accept that every pound given to the Department of Health is a pound less for somewhere else, but, frankly, not all need or level of risk is equal. That reflects the wider concerns with the budgetary process that I have sought to highlight in my discussions with Executive colleagues. The process is fundamentally flawed.

**A Member:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Swann:** I want to make way.

It is based on individual Departments identifying inescapable pressures; yet, Departments use different assessments of what constitutes a pressure. I fully believe that an assessment based on the principle of reducing harm would have led to a different Budget outcome. It is my assessment, as Minister of Health, that the

Budget, as presently set, will result in serious and potentially irreparable damage to health and care services. Mr Speaker, I do not say that lightly, nor did you in 2014.

In voting against the Budget today, I am conscious that I am not complying with the ministerial code. I do not do that easily, but I have a greater responsibility to defend and protect vital services, to stand up for patients and staff and to oppose cuts that will cause real harm.

**3.00 pm**

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

**Mr Swann:** I am trying to make progress.

As the chair of the BMA GPs committee said only this morning:

*"No Health Minister could support this Budget in good conscience".*

I agree with that, and that is why I will not do so. The ministerial code requires Ministers to:

*"support, and to act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly."*

I have to say that I did not always see evidence of that during the pandemic. Collective Executive decisions were publicly undermined within hours, and, of course, Executive COVID restrictions and guidelines were blatantly breached —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Swann:** — by other Ministers.

Mr Speaker, on my final day of office, can I just say that it has been an honour of my political life to twice serve as Minister of Health? I am absolutely certain that Mike Nesbitt will serve with similar commitment and pride.

**Mrs Mason:** When the Assembly returned, parties came together in agreement and acknowledged that the British Government have underfunded this place. That collective acknowledgement is hugely important, and that unity among parties strengthens our Finance Minister's hand when she negotiates with the British Treasury in the interests of people here. It is in that context of historical underfunding, however, that this discussion on the Budget takes place.

Although the Assembly has been back for only a short period, at the Education Committee, we have sifted through briefing after briefing with a similar message at their core: the system is not getting the level of resource that it needs to deliver the level of service that we want and expect for our children and young people and for those whom we charge with educating and nurturing them. While the Education Minister has an important responsibility to prioritise the resources that he has, there is only so much that he and the Finance Minister can do, given the chronic underfunding of our public services by the Tories in London. I commend both Ministers for working together to try to find solutions, particularly on fair pay for our education workers and the outstanding pay and grading review. Those workers are vital to the running of our education system. The system cannot function without them, and they need proper pay and conditions to be sorted immediately.

I will refer to a couple of other issues in education that point to the short-sightedness of failing to fund the system properly. Sinn Féin was highly critical of the actions taken in the absence of an Education Minister. Funding for vital programmes was slashed, cutting the holiday hunger grant, ending the Healthy Happy Minds programme and stopping the provision of free digital learning devices for our most disadvantaged. In a system that is not resourced properly, it baffles me that officials would not seek to protect and prioritise the most disadvantaged. When we do not fund those wrap-around supports and we fail to invest in early intervention, we end up paying for it in the long run. The evidence on that point is clear.

Moving forward, however, it is hugely positive that we have an Executive in place, with locally elected Ministers taking decisions. My Sinn Féin colleagues on the Education Committee and I have taken the opportunity to challenge the Education Minister on his responsibility to identify and set out his priorities for his Department. As the party's lead on childcare and early years, I welcome the recent announcement of the initial £25 million investment that puts the wheels in motion to begin to make childcare more affordable for parents, support struggling providers and create more spaces for children with additional needs. Transforming childcare was a day-1 priority for Sinn Féin and the Executive, and, while there is much more work ahead, this is a step in the right direction. We now need to see clear plans to address educational underachievement and transform provision for special educational needs. The key is early intervention. All the evidence tells us that investment at the earlier



stage of a child's journey is far more impactful. That is why prioritisation is so important.

Many of the issues that we want to see action on are cross-cutting. One criticism from the Assembly over the years has been that Departments often act in silos and do not talk to each other. It is important to make the point that, where shared objectives exist, Departments should work together and share funding and other resources to achieve them. It just makes financial sense. It is a good approach to policy, and, at the end of the day, that is what people want to see: their political representatives working together in the interests of all.

I thank the Finance Minister for her statement and her efforts thus far in what are extremely challenging financial circumstances. I look forward to working with others right across the Chamber to support our children and young people and their families.

**Mr Mathison (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** In the first instance, I will speak to the 2024-25 Budget debate as the Chairperson of the Education Committee.

The Committee has, unfortunately, had less engagement around the 2024-25 Budget process than it would have liked, making effective scrutiny difficult. The Department had outlined substantial pressures before this Budget was allocated, and those were set out as being in the region of £900 million for 2024-25. However, we have been given very limited detail on the full background to those pressures, and a full Budget briefing has been offered to the Committee only for a date after today's debate. That is unsatisfactory, and Committee members have expressed concern about the Department's lack of engagement on these issues.

Whilst the amount of non-ring-fenced resource DEL awarded to Education has increased by £297 million from the starting point last year, the Committee understands that at least £166 million of that will be absorbed by the implementation of teaching pay awards, and, combined with the exponential rise in the cost of SEN provision, it means that, in reality, the Department is likely to once again face substantial pressures in the year ahead. Capital DEL has also seen an increase. However, given the rising cost of construction, the long backlog of maintenance needs across our school estate and the very competitive list of capital projects vying for resource, it is unlikely

that that increase will meet the needs of all stakeholders in the sector.

The Committee has focused its work, in the main, on three key areas: SEN; tackling educational underachievement; and early learning and childcare. In the year ahead, despite the challenging financial position, the Committee hopes to see investment in those areas, with a commitment to deliver a programme of long-term reform being considered essential in the area of SEN.

I will now make some remarks in my capacity as an Alliance education spokesperson and MLA. We are, as every Member, without exception, has referenced, facing a hugely challenging budgetary position, owing largely, in my mind, to a prolonged period of austerity combined with our system of stop-start government here. It is beyond doubt that the absence of an Executive in recent years and periods of political uncertainty have significantly disrupted the Budget process here. Once again, we are scrambling to pass legislation that has received minimal scrutiny and oversight, and another period of suspension has left us voting on a Budget that is being passed at a rapid pace — not circumstances conducive to a proper review in the Chamber or in Committees. All parties must commit to reform of these institutions so that this never happens again. I fear, however, that some parties remain wedded to the destructive power of the veto in this place, perhaps while paying lip service to the need to do things better.

Despite that context, not passing this Budget would create further and unsustainable uncertainty for public services and disrupt ongoing engagement with Treasury. As other Members said, that engagement is crucial if we are serious about updating our funding formula and our fiscal framework to be reflective of need. Like all Departments, Education —

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much for giving way. The Member will be aware that we have already heard from the First Minister today that the likelihood of less engagement with central government during the period of purdah for the Westminster election means that that is not likely to happen. If that is the case, how are we to get any movement or progress?

**Mr Mathison:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, the pre-election period that we are moving into will present challenges in that regard, but I do not see how voting down a Budget today will help public services in any shape or form. It does not seem to me to be a

constructive response to the difficult position that we find ourselves in.

I will go back to my point. It would create uncertainty for public services and, yes, given that context, make ongoing engagement with Treasury difficult.

As I mentioned, we are seeing an issue with strained budgets in all Departments. Education is no exception, but we are yet to see the Education Minister outline his commitment to transforming our system in any meaningful way by bringing forward a programme of reform. We absolutely need a better funding settlement for Northern Ireland — I think that every Member of the House agrees with that — but devolved Ministers must do their part. We need a plan to develop a truly inclusive education system that is not divided along community, socio-economic or supposed academic lines, but the Minister has been clear that he has no intention of bringing forward an audit of the cost of division across any of those lines and how they impact on his Department. The independent review set out a suite of measures that could be transformative in our education system and deliver the best outcomes for our children and young people more efficiently, but I see no urgency from the Minister to prioritise any work in that space. That needs to change in the year ahead, and I urge the Minister to take forward urgent work in that regard.

Many debates in the House have referenced the need for Departments to work together over the course of the mandate to deliver meaningful early interventions. Nowhere is that more relevant than in Education. As we look at this hugely challenging budgetary position, we see that it is vital that the Education Minister clearly sets out how he will avoid late, wasted interventions in Education and fully utilise the Children's Services Co-Operation Act. We need a clear plan for how he will work with and pool resources with colleagues in Departments such as Health and Communities in particular to ensure that necessary and, ultimately, money-saving interventions are made in the areas of SEN, early years, tackling educational underachievement and the promotion of mental well-being in schools. Again, I call on the Minister to clearly set out his plans in that regard for the year ahead.

I cannot comment on the Budget without mentioning the lack of funding for the pay and grading review for non-teaching staff. It was profoundly disappointing that the Finance Minister was unable to find the resources to fund that in the Budget announcement. I ask her for an urgent update on the engagement

with Treasury in that regard and on how the entry into the pre-election period will impact on those deliberations. Ultimately, the pay and grading review sits with the Education Minister. He needs to clearly set out how he will resolve the impasse. It is an area that his Department is responsible for, and it affects every single school and thousands of staff members, so we need to hear from him on how he will address the crisis.

Ultimately, this is not a Budget that anyone wants to vote for. It gives no one here any pleasure to do so. It reflects the dire position of our public finances and shines a light on the impact of Tory austerity, years of stop-start government and the lack of commitment over many years to public service transformation, but we do need a Budget.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Mathison:** All Members must show a commitment to a responsible approach to public finances and support that today.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Bunting is not in her place, so I call Colin McGrath.

**Mr McGrath:** We are being presented with a Budget today that, let us face it, is not going to cut it. It is not going to solve the problems that the public sector faces, and it is not going to deal with the challenges that our communities face. Speaking as our party's health spokesperson, we have seen for too long that waiting lists are getting longer and waiting times are getting longer. Every sector of our health service has attended the Health Committee and detailed how budget cuts are impacting on and resulting in poorer outcomes for people and a bleak future.

We are seeing the collapse, in places, of our primary care sector, our community pharmacy sector and our NHS dental care. While it was always understood that there would be no silver bullet to resolve those matters overnight, the bottom line is that, when I look at the Budget, I feel that we could do better. For example, where is the money for transformation to allow the Health Department to keep some of the money that it spends and reinvest it in the Department? Where is the cross-departmental working? Health stretches beyond the Department of Health. One only has to look at the mental health challenges that face our young people, how they face them in schools on a daily basis and the impact that that has on their education and their future. That is just one example.

What about our community and voluntary sector? One only has to look at the community and voluntary sector to see that the Budget will obliterate it. What will the cuts achieve in the community and voluntary sector? It can take the money that it is given through the Health Department and turn every pound into much more money through what it can attract from other funds and the voluntary nature of its work. It can make that money go much further. However, unfortunately, all that we will do with the Budget is copper-fasten the fact that we are driving a coach and horses through that work, removing the core funding from the sector.

Sometimes, with Health, it feels that the only operation that the Executive manage to successfully deliver is that of cutting off their nose to spite their face. Our health trusts, for example, are being asked to make cuts like we have never seen before, with 400 fewer acute beds, 1,200 fewer staff, a million fewer hours of domiciliary care and 500 fewer care home beds.

What will our health trusts look like after the Budget?

**3.15 pm**

We know that the Tory Government have slashed the Budgets that have been made available to successive Executives over the years, but let us not hide the fact that the decision-averse political parties that have dominated those Executives have refused to take decisions unless they simply meant spending more money. Everyone knows that that policy will not work in the long term, can work only in the short term and needs to be reversed. Otherwise, that type of fiscal mismanagement simply drains the public purse.

The public purse is in a drought. There is nothing left in it, yet the bills keep mounting higher. One can only hope that the decisions that are taken for another place on 4 July will see a different type of independence, because the independence that I want to see is from austerity. I want to see a change in policy that means that we will see investment in public services here and a recognition of the desperate state that we have been left in through the poor management of public funds by Executives. I truly believe that only a Labour Government will deliver that and that defeating the Tories will be paramount. Turning up in Westminster to boot them out will be a critical task. Finance Minister, others will have to do that for you, because your colleagues refuse to turn up to kick the Tories out.

Over the last period, we have heard of fiscal floors, fiscal ceilings and fiscal promises, but, when I look at the landscape of the finances that are presented in this Budget, I fear that little will change. One of the saddest elements that will remain consistent is that Ministers will continue to work in silos — protect thy budget and rob everyone else's — if they hang around long enough to be able to do that. That is not the form of joined-up government that a responsible and mature democracy requires.

The London Government are evidently not providing enough for the North's Budget. As ever, the Executive prove that they are incapable of managing those funds fairly and equitably. Once again, Ministers have displayed immature, childish and selfish approaches to budgets, refusing to work with others and merely trying to deliver their own work. A detailed Programme for Government would help to address that, but we are still waiting, because we have to remember this: "Let's not be in a hurry".

Once again, we see a Budget that papers over the cracks rather than being a planned and strategic investment and dealing with the root causes of our problems. With this Budget, people will get sicker; poverty will not be challenged; inequalities in society will not be addressed; the school estate will continue to crumble; potholes will increase and get deeper; farmers will get little support; the housing crisis will continue; and many in the public sector will continue not to get a fair day's wage. With all that, the Executive still expect the House to support the Budget.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that any cuts to domiciliary care, difficult though it is at the moment, will result in one thing: increased pressures on the NHS? There will be increased use of contingency beds, more people requiring funding to go into nursing homes and more people, ultimately, winding up back in hospital.

**Mr McGrath:** Absolutely. That is what will happen with the circular nature of the Budget unless we break that circle and make sure that we are not creating more problems as we try to solve them. Domiciliary care is an example of where, if we do not intervene, we will not fix problems and will put pressures elsewhere.

It is not raining here. I am not getting soaked, but I can hear the distant rumble that things are going to get better, but not with this Budget.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** For a moment, Colin, I had a flashback to Nichola Mallon, who was in the Executive and also voted against, when she spoke about potholes and all the rest, but we will say nothing. She still voted against the Budget and asked for more money. That is constructive opposition.

I will focus on the fact that a lot of Members have said that they are deeply unhappy with the financial situation and that the onslaught of Tory cuts — those are my words and probably not what some would say — has had a massive impact on Budgets here. There has been a recognition that the British Government have consistently funded the Executive well below levels of need. That is accepted, and, thankfully, Caoimhe Archibald, the Finance Minister, will continue to keep the pressure on the British Government on behalf of the Executive to ensure that the funding disparity is addressed.

We also need to look at alternatives by raising our own money. Those alternatives are not introducing water charges, introducing prescription charges, taking bus passes away from pensioners or stuff like that, but we need a proper discussion about how this place will be continually funded. From what I have heard, I have concerns that, whatever British Government are next, this place is not their priority. This place has never been the British Government's priority, and people need to be honest about that.

There is also no doubt in my head that the interim fiscal framework, which, again, the Finance Minister secured, was a game changer, by ensuring that, for the most part, the funding in the Budget must meet the level of need and, hopefully, be above it. That is where we need to go.

As it stands, we will get slightly more money in the short term. For me, however, and for each of us on our Committees, our interests and the pressures that we face mean that we will say similar things, yet we will come away from the debate thinking differently. For example, when I look at the Department of Health, having heard what the former Minister — well, he still is the Minister — had to say about his priorities, I did not hear mental health mentioned. I did not hear domiciliary care mentioned. I did not hear about the reinstatement of moneys to Women's Aid, which represents the most vulnerable women in our society. They are vulnerable as a result of domestic abuse. It is a political decision not to fund that work, so let us not be fooled.

Regardless of what chair of what group has said what, we need to take decisions and own them. I do not see any Ministers being happy with the budget that they have got. We can agree on that, but what I have found disappointing, if not uncomfortable, is what I hear from the Ulster Unionist Party. I see Mike Nesbitt staring straight at me, so I will stare straight back at him. I would like to see him get his portfolio of money and make decisions on what, he feels, are his priorities so that we can scrutinise him on that basis. Instead, what we have is a petulant response: if you do not get what, you feel, you need, you will vote against. That is not political maturity. I smell an election, and that is why I am completely disappointed. To be frank, Robin has always risen above that nonsense, but he did not do so today.

In the long term, I also want to see what official opposition to the Budget will look like. I hear what we are all doing wrong and what we all need to do more of, but I see no proposals at all coming from the Opposition, despite being here for 100-odd days.

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

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** No, thanks, Mark. The fact is that the Opposition are funded to do all of that, maybe not to the level that they need, but they certainly have the resources. What do we get? Faic. [*Translation: Nothing*] We get nothing.

I would like to see TEO Ministers continue to address the inescapable pressures that they have talked about. They want to see an end to violence against women and girls. We have all made commitments around historical institutional abuse and around the mother-and-baby institutions. Some of us are making commitments to equality, while others see good relations as a priority. Either way, we cannot lose sight of the communities that are working really hard all year long, all week long and all weekend long to keep the peace. Unless they are funded, our summers could be completely different.

We also need to be honest about the money that we put into the private sector, particularly in health and social care. Domiciliary care is the lowest paid and last thought of. Own it — absolutely own it. You give GPs three times out-of-hours, paying them through the private sector, but, yet and all, you will not increase the mileage for a domiciliary care package. It is disgraceful. Own that as well. Own the fact that we need to have a more collegial approach to arguing for more money. It is not just about a motion: actions speak louder than words. I would like to see us looking at the ways in

which we can put our profiles forward. Make your political decision, put your financial objective and priority forward and stand over it, instead of hiding behind someone's back.

**Mrs Dodds:** Having listened to the debate, I think that all of us in the Chamber, particularly those on the Health Committee, would like to see a slightly easier Budget for all Departments but particularly for Health. We are aware of and acknowledge the people who are on long waiting lists and the number of people who require urgent treatment. In reality, however, we also know that the cake is only so large. We have other Departments with pressing priorities. While it is a challenging Budget for every Department, it is beyond dispute that Health gets over 51% of the total Budget.

The Minister of Health stated, in correspondence to the Committee, that he wanted an extra £1 billion but would settle for £800 million. Incidentally, the Committee took significant exception to some of the Minister's correspondence to the Committee being briefed to the media before it was released to the Committee. I understand that only an additional £958 million was available, so we were never going to reach £1 billion additional for Health in one year. Did the Minister seriously think that he would get £800 million out of £958 million, with all the pressures that there are in education, the economy, infrastructure and other sectors? It is difficult for the Minister to claim that others have not prioritised Health when he received the majority of the additional funding available and when Health obtains a majority of every pound allocated by the Executive. Indeed, the director of public spending at the Department of Finance said:

*"As a result of the ongoing prioritisation of Health, the allocation of a further £472 million in this Budget will see the Department of Health's baseline funding increase by almost £2 billion since ... 2020."*

That inevitably brings us to two significant questions: where will the additional money come from, and how can the Minister and, indeed, his party, say that he will not vote for the Budget, will resign and will install a colleague who will then have to implement the Budget? These are strange times. The previous Member to speak might have been accurate in her diagnosis of the problem.

Some of the material from the Department of Health has been a little disingenuous, seeking to compare the starting position for 2024-25 with the overall closing position for the previous year. The Minister and his officials are well

aware that significant allocations will be made over the year in monitoring rounds; indeed, the Minister's proposed amendment seems to satisfy that assumption.

In his letter to the Health Committee yesterday, the Minister pointed to various elements of health delivery that may be impacted on by the Budget, but he did not prioritise any of them, and the Health Committee has not yet seen the detailed spending plans for Health. The Minister indicated that £135 million could make a real difference to waiting lists, but he can invest that sum if he chooses, by prioritising it over other spend in his Department from his multi-billion-pound annual allocation.

**3.30 pm**

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

**Mrs Dodds:** I will.

**Mrs Erskine:** The Member makes a valid point, and she will be aware that waiting lists are very important. An awful lot of people who are on waiting lists contact us regularly, and we have seen zero plans for how we will spend the money that has been given. Surely, that should be the focus of whoever is going to take the Health Ministry, rather than playing politics with people's lives on this.

**Mrs Dodds:** I certainly agree with the Member. One of the things that we have managed to avoid in the House, particularly during the period of COVID, has been playing politics with health. We are in a place that is deeply regrettable, and we need to see detailed plans on how the significant budget will be spent.

On top of that, Ministers and other Assembly Members struggle with the fact that the Health Department assumes that it will be given an automatic increase year-on-year-on-year. We need to deal with that, and, on the Member's point, we need to actually get to the stage where we see significant transformation in health. For significant transformation to occur, there will have to be a re-prioritisation of how we deliver health, so we need to see the Minister's plan. In the House on 15 April, I asked the Minister when he would publish his plan for the reorganisation of hospitals and services. He replied that he would bring it forward:

*"within the next couple of weeks." — [Official Report (Hansard), 15 April 2024, p38, col 2].*

That was six weeks ago, and we still have no plan.

The multidisciplinary primary care teams, including social workers, physiotherapists and mental health practitioners, are key to the transformation and are part of the Bengoa Delivering Together programme. Initial funding for those teams came from the DUP confidence-and-supply agreement, and they were to be rolled out Province-wide. It is hard to fathom that something so fundamental to transformation has been allowed to wither on the vine, with all the difficulties that that contributes to general practice. Again, that is an investment that should have been prioritised and elevated above other projects or schemes that are not fundamental to transformation. From talking to GPs and their representatives, one of the things that we absolutely understand is that, if we are not going to transform primary care —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mrs Dodds:** — we will still have difficulties in secondary care.

**Mr McReynolds:** Mr Speaker, I welcome you back to your post.

I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to make some comments on matters relating to the expenditure proposals for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, as laid out by the Finance Minister this month. I start by commending the AERA Minister on his work so far in committing to tackle our climate and environmental challenges. The environmental crisis that we are experiencing in Lough Neagh, in particular, presents a significant challenge not only in the current financial year but on an ongoing basis due to budgetary constraints. The required work and statutory commitment to climate action may result in other important strategies and programmes being put on hold or delayed due to budgetary constraints. It is evident that prioritising more immediate short-term concerns such as waiting lists has its benefits. There is no doubt that many areas of our public services require urgent attention and expenditure. However, failing to adequately fund environmental protection will result in significant costs in the future. Those costs will have not only economic but social implications, and, of course, they will have environmental implications.

At last week's RSPB event in this Building, entitled Nature Can't Wait, the recent

biodiversity intactness index was referenced repeatedly. That index is a tool for identifying the amount of nature that a country has lost over time, and it placed Northern Ireland twelfth from the bottom out of 240 countries. That is 228th and the lowest in the G7. Improving that level of depletion demands immediate investment and resources. The Department responsible for the environment must be in a position to formalise the many overdue policies and strategies that have remained stagnated alongside the Assembly's collapse, such as the biodiversity strategy, the marine strategy, the peatland strategy and the clean air strategy. Many of those awaited strategies relate directly to climate change and are, therefore, crucial to protecting the natural environment. Implementing those strategies will require dedicated resources and expenditure.

I welcome Minister Muir's recent agriculture commitments such as the farm support and development programme. The programme offers initiatives, packages and measures aimed at promoting the economic and environmental sustainability of Northern Ireland's important agricultural sector. The rural affairs aspect of the AERA brief continues to require funding for various initiatives. Those include the development and implementation of social enterprise support programmes tailored to rural areas, with a focus on improving health and well-being, addressing rural poverty and combating social isolation by connecting rural and urban communities.

The funding package proposed for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is insufficient to sustain progress and take the necessary steps for a more environmentally friendly and cleaner future across the sectors governed by DAERA. The contrast between what Minister Muir bid for and received is stark: £95.8 million bid for versus £15.2 million received. The Minister is now reprioritising within that context.

Many in the Chamber have mentioned this point already but it needs to be repeated: Northern Ireland requires better financial governance. That includes the implementation of a more effective funding formula and the establishment of multi-year Budgets to ensure stability and progress in our financial management.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, before I call the next contributor, I wish to advise you that I have been notified that the proposer will not speak to her Adjournment debate topic on the new building for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School today. Members of the Business Committee have been informed.

**Miss Brogan:** I begin by thanking Minister Archibald for all the hard work that she has put into bringing forward the Budget, particularly given the very challenging circumstances that we find ourselves in.

It is a hugely welcome development that the Executive have agreed a Budget for 2024-25. That will provide some certainty and stability and allow Departments to plan. As some Members have pointed out, this is a single-year Budget, which is far from ideal. Unfortunately, as we are in the last year of the current spending review, a multi-year Budget was not possible. However, as we move into a new spending review period, a multi-year Budget is vital to allow Departments the space that they need to plan ahead.

This Budget is challenging for all Departments, with no Department getting all the funding that it wanted. Almost £1 billion of resource DEL was available for allocation set against bids totalling £3 billion. It was a similar picture in capital DEL. Within the allocations, Health was prioritised as it received over 50% of the available funding. Indeed, Health has received an additional £1.6 billion. That underlines the point that Health is a priority for Sinn Féin, even when it has limited resources.

The Budget aligns with the key priorities that were set out by the Executive parties and are expected to be in the Programme for Government. That includes £25 million being set aside for childcare and money for transformation. However, the financial situation remains difficult as a result of Tory austerity. For a number of years, the North has been funded below its level of need. That has been accepted publicly by the British Government. When the Assembly was down, the British Government brought chaos to our public finances. Under Tory rule, the 2023-24 Budget delivered cuts amounting to £1 billion, decimating our public services in the process. Those cuts had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable in our society, many of whom were already struggling due to the cost-of-living crisis. This Tory Government could not care less about people here, and many will be looking forward to seeing the back of that Government.

The interim fiscal framework that the Finance Minister has secured is a game changer. The agreement sets the fiscal floor at 124%, meaning that the North will be funded at or above its level of need in future years. That is a radical change to how the North is currently funded and will help us to mitigate British Government underfunding in the future. The

new interim framework also alleviates the concerns about the cliff edge that was coming once the financial package had been spent in 2026, as the fiscal floor will be baselined at the relevant spending review period.

We need to see greater Budget sustainability. The Minister is working on a report that will set out a path to achieve that. The report should include proposals that will allow us to have more control over our Budgets. The current system gives the Treasury, which is not accountable to people here, far too much of a say over our finances. That is not fair or democratic. Sinn Féin would like to see greater flexibility around Budgets, greater borrowing powers and more fiscal devolution.

Finally, I thank the Minister for sending her officials to the Finance Committee meeting last week to brief members on the budget outcome for her Department. Like the budgets of other Departments, the Department of Finance budget is extremely challenging, with a 6.4% reduction in resource DEL from 2023-24, excluding earmarked items. By proposing such a significant reduction to her Department, the Minister has led by example, which is the correct approach, given the scale of the challenges faced by all Departments.

**Mr Frew:** We have heard from the Finance Minister today and repeatedly over the past number of weeks that this is a challenging Budget. We hear that day in, day out, but what does it actually mean? It seems to mean that the envelope is far too small, and challenges come with that. Nobody is arguing that we have enough money. We know that we do not have enough money and that we are fighting hard to try to get Northern Ireland funded to its relative need. I applaud the Minister's work with His Majesty's Treasury on funding us to our relative need. Going forward, it is vital that we ensure that Northern Ireland is funded according to need.

When it comes to this challenging Budget, we know that the envelope is too small, but where is the strategy? Where is the strategic vision to get out of this and make sure that the money is spent appropriately for our people? Not having a Programme for Government allows parties to act irresponsibly around that. They can decide willy-nilly that they will not vote for a Budget, because doing so has no impact on the Budget. The SDLP did it for years. It complained about and voted the Budget all the time. We are seeing a repetition of that from the Ulster Unionist Party. It is sad; it really is.

When we need to step up and be responsible in how we act and spend money, it is sad that we can see that the Ulster Unionists are failing us — not only us, as a House and an Executive, but the people. Many people are waiting for procedures. Many are in chronic pain, which is unbearable, but, instead of the Health Minister stepping up to the mark, he is running away. In many ways, we have heard repetition today and over the past number of weeks. Again, the Minister is deploying fear that will hurt people, as it did during the pandemic. The Minister says that he does not have enough money and that the impact will be "catastrophic", a term that is up there with "biblical proportions".

Let us look at the Department of Health's record. If we throw more money at Health, what will we get? According to the Northern Ireland Audit Office report, 'Budgeting and Accountability', in 2018-19, the Department of Health underspent by £32 million, £26 million of which was non-ring-fenced resource DEL. In 2019-2020, there was an underspend of £69 million, £55 million of which was capital DEL. In 2021-22, the underspend was £25 million, and almost all of it was non-ring-fenced resource DEL. In 2022-23, there was an underspend of £27 million, £23 million of which was resource DEL. The Department has handed back £153 million over the past five years. How is that for a track record? How dare the Minister then ask for more money that he will not be able to spend, whilst there are people — our constituents and even some of our family members — who are waiting in chronic pain, unable to get the procedure that they need?

**3.45 pm**

Where is the strategy? Where is the focus? Where is the vision? The vision seems to be on South Antrim. That is his prerogative, but do not then come to the Assembly and Executive and try to run amok when there are people who, although I may disagree with their spends, are at least trying to make a go of it. At least they are here in the Chamber, making a go of it in the knowledge that their budgets are tight. Yet, we have a Minister who is running away when his Department has failed miserably to spend all the money that it has been allocated over five years. That is the nonsense, Mr Speaker. That is the nonsense. The deployment of fear, which will hurt people out there, is nothing but a sham fight.

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

**Mr Frew:** Yes, I will.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Member for making that point about the deployment of fear. I could do that with waste water treatment. Earlier, I made the point that people turning on their taps and getting good-quality water is a bedrock service. If we do not fund that properly, we will see more problems in our health centres and things like that.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for her contribution. She is absolutely right. If we do not get to grips with our infrastructure — water, waste water, rivers, waterways, roads, railways and everything else — and fund it properly, people will die, people will become sicker and people will become less fit, which will put a burden on the health service. There is more than one way to prevent sickness and to encourage fitness and well-being. Infrastructure is a key asset.

We have a very challenging Budget. I genuinely wish all the Ministers well with their challenging budgets. Their envelopes are small, but more money is coming. We have to put this in context: this Budget is 7% higher than the Secretary of State's initial Budget for 2023-24, with a commitment from the Government that more money will come through the June monitoring round. It is challenging, but it is doable. If we had a strategy and a Programme for Government that fit the needs of our people, we could spend that money wisely, better than we have in the past and, especially, better —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Frew:** — than the Department of Health has spent its money over the past five years.

**Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. My comments will be made in the context of the minimal information that the Committee has received, which provided it with limited opportunity to scrutinise the DAERA budget.

In February, the Committee received a briefing from DAERA officials on the budgetary pressures of 2023-24 going into 2024-25. The Committee held an extra meeting in early March with Minister Muir to hear his priorities and discuss the budget pressures. I highlighted those pressures and the Committee's initial concerns in the Chamber on 9 April. Those concerns included tackling bovine TB, implementing the Windsor framework, rural development funding and climate action. The



Committee is still waiting to see the draft, costed climate action plan and environmental improvement plan. We expect to see funding prioritised for that, along with the necessary science and innovation.

At its meeting on 2 May, the Committee considered a written briefing from DAERA on the resource DEL and capital DEL bids that were submitted to the Department of Finance. The Committee noted that DAERA has submitted new resource requirement bids to the Department of Finance of £95.8 million, which includes £23.8 million for the delivery of the bovine TB programme; £22.1 million for the delivery of the environmental improvement plan; and £33.4 million for the delivery of the farm support and development programme. On capital DEL, DAERA submitted new requirements bids of £155.2 million to the Department of Finance, including £300,000 that had priorly been committed for digital transformation; £101.6 million of inescapable costs; and £59.7 million of high priority costs. The written briefing went on to state that the Department of Finance had agreed allocations for DAERA of £577.3 million of resource and £95 million of capital DEL. These allocations, of course, include DAERA's earmarked allocations. DAERA advised the Committee that officials are working through the implications of those allocations for an oral briefing scheduled for 6 June. However, that has made it difficult to input meaningfully to today's debate.

The Committee has continued to hear from officials and stakeholders to build a picture about where the focus of our scrutiny will need to be. The Clerk made a number of requests for a briefing before today but was advised that officials would not be in a position any earlier due to the work needed to consider the implications of the allocations.

In order to be in a position to send a Committee response to the Finance Committee on 17 May, we turned to the Fiscal Council's assessment of the Budget to shed some light on the situation. The first point that we noted was that, as one of the relatively big-spending Departments, DAERA has fared worse than the average. The Fiscal Council's assessment showed the departmental resource requirements, including those earmarked, as £658 million, versus the allocations received of £577 million, which is 88% of the requirement.

The Committee also noted that the proportion of submitted non-earmarked bids met was only £15 million, which is just over 15% of the £96 million that was requested. The Committee will in due course investigate the impact of the

shortfall in non-earmarked bids with officials when we see them on 6 June. The capital bids from DAERA, including earmarked bids, were £155 million, of which 61.2% are marked as inescapable and pre-committed. The £95 million, which is the total allocation highlighted in the assessment, is well below £155 million. The Committee will also investigate the impact of that shortfall with officials.

At the meeting on 23 May, the Committee considered the Budget paper from the Minister of Finance, and noted the figure for DAERA's high-level spending areas. As the Minister stated in her introduction to the paper:

*"The ... reality is the demands on our finances far outstrip the funding available",*

and

*"The scale of the challenges facing us won't be fixed by one Budget."*

I wish that I was standing here with more insight and scrutiny from the Committee to support and assist DAERA, but that has not been possible for today's debate. The Committee looks forward to taking those issues forward with the Minister and the officials on 6 June.

I will comment briefly as the AERA spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. There is a common theme running through today's debate, and it is that Committees have had no or very little opportunity to scrutinise the departmental budgets. We all face that difficulty, and I have heard it regularly about Health, but it is no different to any other Department. That makes it very difficult and almost impossible to have a proper debate today. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has significant finances to secure for bovine TB, the agri-support programmes, the environmental improvement plan and, of course, the big issue of climate change. An estimated figure of £2.3 billion will be required by Departments over the next three years to implement the outworkings of the Climate Change Act, but I have been informed that the Department of Finance did not allocate any finance to Departments in the Budget to implement or support that. That is hugely concerning.

Finally, I noted some of the comments about the Department of Health and some of the motions tabled earlier in the mandate about junior doctors' pay, the implementation of the Autism Act, a new residential rehabilitation unit in Belfast, an increase in the number of foster carers, an updated action plan to tackle the

waiting list crisis and a fully budgeted women's health strategy, none of which were costed. I was pleased to hear Mr Frew mention the Programme for Government.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up, Mr Elliott.

**Mr Elliott:** Maybe he will mention that to the deputy First Minister.

**Ms Bunting (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):** I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chairman of the Justice Committee, and I declare that I have an immediate family member who works in the legal profession.

The fact that we are discussing a one-year Budget will come as a disappointment to many. Since our return, we have heard numerous calls for multi-year Budgets. It is also disappointing that, since we have not yet received a detailed briefing, the Committee has not had the opportunity to undertake in-depth scrutiny of the Department's budget or financial position for 2024-25. I am therefore not able to get into the detail to the extent that I would wish, and my remarks are necessarily based on broad parameters.

The Committee has held many oral evidence sessions with various directorates in the Department, as well as with a number of key justice organisations. Difficulties with the Department's challenging budgetary position were a consistent theme. As I have said during previous financial debates, the majority of the Department's budget is demand-led, taken up by the PSNI, the Prison Service, the Courts and Tribunals Service and legal aid. As a result, there is very little, if any, scope to reduce spend without impacting severely on the delivery of vital services. In fact, owing to cuts across the board, justice sector organisations are increasingly providing more and more vital services, but they are doing so with fewer and fewer resources. The justice system used to be the service of last resort, but, now, it is all too often becoming the first. We regularly hear that police officers spend inordinate amounts of time dealing with those facing mental health issues. Those people would be better served by mental health professionals, but it is often the police that are called. Those in crisis deserve better, and the police officers deserve better. We must work collaboratively to have any chance of addressing such issues.

When giving oral evidence to the Justice Committee, the then permanent secretary Richard Pengelly said:

*"there are undoubtedly individuals who are currently in a prison establishment but should be in a mental health facility."*

Given the pressures on the Prison Service, which I will come to, such a situation is unsustainable.

During an evidence session with Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI), the Committee was told that its budget had decreased by almost 10% in 10 years. We were told that if CJINI's budget remains similar to what it is at present, it will be unable to conduct a prison inspection in 2025. That is most concerning, given the continuing increase in the prison population, concurrent with ongoing issues with the numbers of prison officers. As I said during a debate on the Budget Bill, current staffing levels are for a population of 1,450 prisoners, but there are around 1,900 people in custody, and that number continues to rise.

Victims of crime and the services that they receive are also being impacted on by financial constraints. The Committee heard from the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime, who stated:

*"Despite our numerous strategies and fine words, the sad reality is that, when the system is stretched and staff and budgets are under pressure, it is victim care that suffers."*

It is intolerable that victims of crime suffer because of the dire financial situation that we are in.

I mentioned legal aid spend in my opening remarks. During an evidence session with the Law Society and the Bar of Northern Ireland, members were told that slowing down the payment of legal aid fees as a budget management tool has forced professionals to leave the Bar or to shift from doing legal aid work. We were informed that that disproportionately affects younger professionals and women and that it could close firms and threaten access to justice for many across Northern Ireland.

When the Lady Chief Justice briefed the Committee, she stated, in reference to the Department's budget:

*"there is now a significant risk to the ability to deliver services to support the administration of justice, which will have ramifications ... for the provision of fair and expeditious justice for citizens."*

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) also raised concerns about the impact that funding constraints will have on the delivery of its services.

When the Chief Constable briefed the Committee, the first thing that he spoke about was the PSNI's precarious financial position. He described it as:

*"the cause and effect of everything that we can or cannot do."*

He informed us that, since 2010, the PSNI budget has decreased in real terms by 30%. Again, that is an unsustainable situation.

The Committee has not yet had the opportunity to undertake in-depth scrutiny of the Department's budget or financial position for 2024-25 because we have not yet received a detailed briefing on it. Hopefully, that situation will be rectified during the Committee's forthcoming briefing.

However, it should be clear from my remarks that the areas of the justice system not, in some way, impacted by the current financial situation are negligible.

#### 4.00 pm

Speaking in my private capacity, as I stated, I find it difficult to pass comment on the Budget other than in generalities, given that, in an unconventional move, we are faced with a Budget debate prior to being briefed on it by our home Departments. However, in the throes of the discourse surrounding it for several weeks, one thing has become abundantly clear: the debate around Northern Ireland's Budget cannot and must not be focused around one Department alone.

Nobody can manage on the allocation that they have been given. That is why we in the DUP press for a review of the funding system for Northern Ireland. However, everybody else knuckled down with what they had, determined to work through it and do the best they could, hoping for something in monitoring rounds. Not so the UUP, who would soak up every additional penny and more besides. For years, the Department of Health has absorbed half of Northern Ireland's Budget, yet currently the position in the health service is worse and spiralling — not, of course, through any fault of those on the front line. The cry for £1 billion "just to stand still" is absurd. Health has already had an additional £1 billion over two years. Nobody else has had such a luxury.

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Bunting:** I will not.

The Department of Justice's flexibility is extremely limited and the bulk of its Budget is allocated to inescapable pressures but it has sacrificed for Health. The justice system is already picking up the pressures from the Department of Health until it is almost at breaking point itself. At the Committee recently, we heard from the Chief Constable that the PSNI is attending 500 calls a week on behalf of the Ambulance Service. Let there be no doubt that people are being put through justice services when they should be in healthcare. The answer lies not in perpetually throwing more and more money but in taking decisions and making tough choices. Load the front lines and do away with bureaucracy and a top-heavy system of multiple layers of management. It is hard, it is unpleasant and it may be unpopular, but it is the job that we were elected to do.

Despite repeatedly asking, I have not been able to ascertain the detail of areas for discussion between —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Ms Bunting:** — the Health and Justice Ministers, or at the highest strategic levels within their Departments, around their plans for collaborative working.

**Mr McGuigan:** I will speak primarily from the perspective of a Sinn Féin member of the Economy Committee.

It is important to state clearly, at the beginning of my remarks, as others have done before me, that the Executive have for years, and continue to be, substantially underfunded by the British Tory Government. That Tory austerity policy continues to have a detrimental impact on the Executive's finances, our public services, our economy and, ultimately, our workers and families. That the Finance Minister outlined in her opening remarks that bids by Executive members were three times the available allocation is a clear indication of the harm that Tory austerity is having on all our Ministers' ability to fund their Departments in the best interests of our citizens. These Tory cuts, as I suspect the Tories know, will always have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable, many of whom are also struggling due to the cost-of-living crisis. Families are struggling to make ends meet and businesses are struggling with increased costs. Those are the conditions, the constraints and the stark reality faced by the

Executive and the Finance Minister in bringing forward this Budget. All that said, I welcome the fact that we have got to the point of agreeing a Budget, and I commend the Finance Minister for making that happen. Despite the ongoing challenges experienced by all Departments, the Budget will bring a level of certainty and allow for forward planning.

Speaking as a member of the Economy Committee, I welcome Conor Murphy back to the role of Minister and put on record gratitude to Deirdre Hargey for her contribution to the Department in that role over the past few weeks. I thank the Economy Department officials for their Budget briefing at last week's Committee meeting, and I echo and agree with much of what the Committee Chair, Philip Brett, articulated earlier in his remarks on behalf of the Committee.

I have to point out, as I did in a previous debate, that over and above the impact of austerity and funding shortfalls, the loss of EU funding as a result of Brexit will particularly hit the Department for the Economy, especially its skills programmes, apprenticeships and business support programmes. The British Government's Shared Prosperity Fund falls short, leaving the Executive £90 million short of the £195 million that was received when we were in the EU. British Government schemes such as the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Community Renewal Fund gave the Executive little, if any, scope to shape skills funding to the needs of businesses and workers here. I am confident, however, that the Minister for the Economy will use the limited resources that he has at his disposal effectively and as efficiently as possible to deliver the highly productive, zero-carbon, regionally balanced economy with good jobs that is set out in his economic vision. A strategic and focused approach will be required to ensure that it can make a meaningful impact on people's lives.

As we look to the future, we need the required fiscal levers and multi-year Budgets to enable long-term planning and proper investment in our people, businesses and public services. The Finance Minister has done a very good job recently in getting the British Government to recognise that we have been underfunded and in securing commitments that should give us additional funding as part of the interim fiscal framework. However, we in the North are often left to deal with the consequences of insufficient funding or bad decisions or inaction at Westminster. We are in a Westminster election campaign, but it should be clear to all of us that the best people to take decisions on behalf of the citizens who live on this island are

politicians who are elected on this island, exercising power here in Ireland. We need the power, including fiscal power, and the sovereignty to do so. I look forward to that day coming.

**Miss McAllister:** I will speak, as health spokesperson for the Alliance Party, primarily about the health issues in the Budget. Like many others, I recognise — it is not a secret — that the current financial situation is dire and that budgets are being squeezed across Departments. Health is no exception. Like many others, I have engaged extensively with organisations from across the health and social care sector that continue to relay the same message: we cannot go on with the status quo. However, I have no clear indication of how the Minister is planning to use his budget allocation. Although I am disappointed about that, the entire Committee is not overly surprised. Throughout the past number of months, the Minister of Health has voiced his dismay at the financial situation while simultaneously failing to outline any plans to address the lack of efficient spending in the Department. That approach has culminated in his party's choosing to loudly voice its opposition to the current Budget while failing to propose any meaningful alternatives.

That inability to problem-solve or prioritise has been duly noted by many of the organisations that I have met since joining the Committee. The key issue at play should be clear to all, when you consider that our health service has the highest spend per head in the UK yet consistently has the poorest outcomes. The problem is not the lack of resource; it is the lack of reform. The feedback from the sector is clear in that regard. The message from the Minister, his Department and his party is that the budget is not enough, but they are not catching up with the rest of us. It is not just about budget; it is about how you manage your spend.

I understand — all of us do — that there are inescapable pressures and that many require significant funding. However, that does not mean that there is not room to prioritise measures that will provide efficiencies and transformation of the service. We have been talking about transformation for too long. The Bengoa report has sat on a shelf since 2016. Despite all parties having signed up to the principle of transformation, we too often see members of those parties, including the Minister's colleagues, standing on picket lines, protesting against those values in practice. Alliance is not afraid to take difficult decisions that will, ultimately, lead to a more efficient and sustainable health service. I hope that other colleagues —

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member very much for giving way. She referred to the Bengoa report and almost said that any opposition to any decision in health is opposition to the principles of Bengoa. Does the Member accept that Bengoa cannot be a fig leaf for every closure or capitulation of service?

**Miss McAllister:** I do not think that anyone claims that Bengoa is a fig leaf for anything, but we recognise that a holistic approach should be taken to reform. We cannot simply do it piecemeal. That is one of the issues that we have here. I hope that others will recognise that and that they will take responsibility when it is on their doorstep. Reform cannot be undertaken day by day; it has to be done holistically.

Ultimately, and understandably, if we want to stabilise our health service for the long term, we need to invest to save. Many Members across the Chamber have spoken about domiciliary care. We all recognise that we need to invest in domiciliary care, because not doing so means more spending, more time in hospitals and more money being spent on the system. There is no doubt that fully implementing all the strategies currently in the Health portfolio will take a long time and require a great deal of investment. However, that does not mean that we have to take an all-or-nothing approach. That is where we have a problem. No priorities have been outlined by the Minister or the Department.

I concur with the Chair of the Health Committee that, in each of the past few sessions of the Health Committee, we have simply not had enough information and, at times, conflicting information. When you get conflicting information from the Department itself, that makes for a rather difficult starting point on costing. Even when questioned last week, officials admitted that they have not even calculated workforce costs for consultants, specialised doctors and assistant specialised doctors. It is utter nonsense to think that a party, without access to the same data and information that the Department has, can provide that up front. Nobody in any other party is buying it, and nobody in the sector is buying it. I must also emphasise that, when it comes to the workforce, "The computer says no" attitude from the Minister and the Department is not the way to prioritise or negotiate anything. The workforce has to be the starting point.

I want to focus for a bit on the number of reviews, inquiries etc that we have had: the hyponatraemia inquiry; the independent neurology inquiry; the urology inquiry; the

Muckamore inquiry; the funding of services that are not in existence or even being offered — I have raised some of this directly with the Minister and in Committee — the fighting of judicial reviews where the Department knows that it has statutory obligations that it is not meeting; and the children's services review, which sets out what needs to be done. There is one thing in common across all those things: we do not have action. We have delay. We have patients, or families of deceased patients, waiting constantly. We have had so many more work streams created within the Department to look at what can be done — after we have already had inquiries and reviews saying what needs to be done. That is wasting time, wasting money and impacting on people's lives daily.

Deputy Speaker, I know the Minister does not need to be a health practitioner, but he needs to listen to health practitioners and take on board their advice. When questioned, he would not even commit to meeting relevant bodies with regard to reconfiguration and transformation. Those bodies have the experience and advice on how it can be done more efficiently.

In closing, Deputy Speaker, to reiterate what many have said today, this is not the situation we want to be in. However, instead of running away and refusing to lead, we will support the Budget, whilst continuing to engage with what will, hopefully, be the next UK Government to get a better fiscal package for Northern Ireland for good.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for the demotion.

**Mr Brooks:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Budget debate. As a member of the Education Committee, I will focus the majority of my remarks on the impact that the Budget will have on delivery and tackling challenges in education.

Since the restoration of these institutions, Committee members and other Assembly Members have raised issues in the education sector that they would like to see addressed: childcare, special educational needs, staffing and pay settlements, new school builds, improved maintenance, holiday hunger programmes and mental health programmes, to name just a few. Those are all worthy causes, and there is universal agreement across the Chamber that they need to be tackled. The reality is that priorities are easy to speak of but that to truly prioritise is to make difficult decisions. From reports today and contributions to the debate, it seems that some Ministers and their parties are more willing to work within the

realities that we face than others. To govern is to choose, and, within our system, to be unwilling to choose, difficult as it may be, is to be unfit to hold ministerial office. It is easy to forever argue that your Department needs more, even when it receives the majority of the funding. It is harder to come forward with a plan and harder still to outline what police, school or other services one might cut to create additional funds for that Department. The Education Minister stated that he needs a budget of £3.6 billion to put the Department of Education on the right footing. The budget that he received was £500 million less.

There is also, of course, £150 million less in the capital budget, due to the appalling decision of the Government to remove the ring-fenced Fresh Start funding for shared and integrated education.

#### 4.15 pm

Despite that, to the Minister's credit, he has announced today that he has found resource to ensure that the Bangor Central Integrated Primary School and Millennium Integrated Primary projects are able to progress, having been supported by parties across the Chamber and by the Education Committee. That is to be praised. The resource, however, will clearly come from the Department's budget. The seriousness of the budget situation is evidenced by the fact that the Department entered this financial year with a projected overspend of nearly £200 million. While it is easy from the outside to list many positive initiatives as a priority, the Minister does not have that luxury. He must deliver within his means and truly prioritise.

What are the priorities? The Minister, in one of his first addresses to the Chamber, assured the House that the development of an early learning and childcare strategy was a top priority. Last week saw the first delivery on that. Many across the Chamber recognised the positivity of that announcement. We are all aware that the cost of childcare puts immense strain on family finances, especially during a cost-of-living crisis. In many cases, it prevents parents, women disproportionately, from entering and remaining in the workforce. Otherwise, they would choose to do that.

The announcement of the 15% subsidy of childcare costs and the transitioning of all preschool education places to 22.5 hours per week is a great step in the right direction to help parents and towards real delivery against a top priority. I pay tribute to the work of Melted

Parents and Employers For Childcare towards that. I know that they will not stop there, nor will the Minister, who has already said that that is not the limit of his ambition. Implementing an ambitious programme of reform will take time. The budget required will be significant — £400 million has been quoted — and will require ongoing commitment from the Executive to real, meaningful change in childcare provision.

Another clear and genuine priority for many across the Chamber, rightly so, is appropriate support and services for special educational needs. We have heard in Committee how the current system fails pupils and their families. The Minister recognised the need to invest in SEN with the new special educational needs capital investment programme, which will be welcomed by everyone with an interest in the sector and our school system. The delivery of up to eight new special schools across Northern Ireland as part of a new school investment programme, including a new school in east Belfast, alongside the new builds for a number of existing special schools and enhanced maintenance and equipment funding, represents another step in the right direction. Structural reform is clearly needed in SEN. Educational transition should be as timely and smooth as possible for every child and should not exacerbate the challenges that children and their families already face. I know that the Minister is committed to addressing that. The Education Authority must be held to account. As I have previously said, its approach appears at times to be policy- rather than child-focused.

We cannot deliver progress without those who work in the sector. The Minister has sought to address teaching pay disputes. Agreement was reached on teachers' pay: a rise in starting salary for teachers makes their starting point equal to that of teachers in England. The Minister has sought to support our non-teaching staff, submitting his bid for approval to the Department of Finance to allow the implementation of the pay and grading review. It was agreed at the Executive that the Minister of Finance should seek approval from Treasury to bring forward funding that was set aside for future years under the agreed funding package to allow additional funding to be accessed in 2024-25. I understand that the Minister of Finance is making that case and awaits the decision from London.

There is much to celebrate in our education system, but there are many challenges that we need to address to give every child in Northern Ireland the best start in life and the foundation on which to succeed. I urge the Executive as a collective to continue to press the Treasury.

The DUP is clear that Northern Ireland is sorely in need of a more appropriate and fairer system and funding formula. Our leader, Gavin Robinson, has been to the very fore in crafting and giving voice to that argument and, at Westminster, pushing His Majesty's Government for change. Indeed, when, during the Hillsborough Castle talks late last year, we outlined our concerns, we stood alone in saying that what was on the table was not sufficient. I am glad that other parties have now aligned in that battle. Any incoming Government must move to a needs-based Budget for Northern Ireland as soon as possible to allow the Education Minister and the Executive as a whole to deliver for our children and young people.

**Mr Durkan:** Every time we debate a Budget in here, it seems to be a more challenging one. However, sadly, the Executive, now that we finally have one, have not risen to that challenge or delivered on their promises. The current Budget process feels akin to steering a ship through treacherous waters with a blindfold on. While those waters have undoubtedly been made much more treacherous by the Tory shark attacks on public services that have gone on for over a decade, today we are being asked to vote on a Budget with minimal opportunity for scrutiny. That is not just bad practice; it is indicative of the lackadaisical approach to governance. It undermines the democratic process and our ability to effectively represent the needs of our constituents. So much for the accountability and transparency promised by the leadership parties.

The Budget falls dangerously short on the most critical issues facing the North, issues that the Executive had vowed to prioritise, from housing to child poverty. The Budget does not undo the savage cuts, implemented in the absence of an Executive, to many crucial initiatives. As my party's infrastructure spokesperson, I will major on many of those issues.

The Executive have modelled governance by press release, prioritising sound bites over substance. For example, the Finance Minister put out a press release on the Budget and announced an £85.6 million allocation for the A6 and the Belfast transport hub. I now see that a meagre £4 million of that investment is for the A6, so why the explicit mention and fanfare? Would that have anything to do with the fact that that road runs through the heart of the Minister's constituency? The same press statement refers to £88.5 million for the A5, which is something that we all desperately want and need to see done, but neglects to mention

that that money is coming from the Dublin Government.

What we do know about the DFI budget is that, once again, it does little to alleviate pressures. It threatens delivery of basic front-line services and threatens safety on our fast-eroding road network. Other Members have outlined the economic, environmental and public health implications of not adequately funding our water and waste infrastructure, and this year's allocation does not offer much hope in that regard.

Reform and sustainability of our public transport network is merely a pipe dream. The public have been forced to foot the bill, with further increases to fares due to the Executive's persistent reluctance to invest in this key area. I hope, however, to see the retention of free travel for the over-60s, and I suspect that we will hear something on that in the coming weeks.

That brings me to my next point, which, again, is on public transport. When will we see delivery of phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail line? I see an allocation of capital, but it goes nowhere near far enough. That seems to be a hallmark of the Budget: it gives wee bits of money to lots but not enough to see any one big job completed. A lot of this underlines the need for the infrastructure commission, and I would like an update — maybe not from the Finance Minister today but from the Executive Office — on where that is. We need help to inform how we design and deliver major projects in a more timely and less costly fashion.

I turn briefly to housing. It is of deep concern that the use of B&Bs and hotels — non-standard accommodation that was once deemed to be a last resort — has spiralled tenfold in the past five or six years. It is a particularly bitter pill to swallow that we are spending over £8 million on that when we consider that DFC has not been able to fund homelessness prevention initiatives. I would like to know the logic behind that "Penny wise, pound foolish" approach, which continues to punish the most vulnerable.

Ms Ní Chuilín has left the Chamber, but I had flashbacks to when she was a Minister and her all-singing, all-dancing housing strategy that was going to deliver 100,000 homes. The Department for Communities' capital budget has been reduced by a whopping 45% — that is just shocking — while the list of those in housing stress has increased by 6,000 and the number of households in temporary accommodation has increased by 50%. How

will we address that if we do not invest in increasing our housing stock? Minister Lyons has also committed not just to making social housing a priority but to mitigating the damage of Tory welfare reform. Again, the Budget does nothing to increase the protections for the most vulnerable in our society.

Every Department wants a bigger slice of the pie, but it is incumbent on all Departments to use what they get prudently and fairly. I will come to Health in that regard. The west will no longer just take the crumbs off the table. The Western Trust is greatly failed by the current capitation formula that is used, which takes no account of the socio-economic factors that are so prevalent in that area. That really needs to be addressed to ensure fairness across the North. The west is not the only area that is neglected, but obviously it is the one that I know best. Where are we with transformation? We need to do things differently to ensure the maximum impact of the money that is spent on health.

The Budget has been hastily presented and neglects the core issues of housing, health and mental health. Those are not just line items on a balance sheet. We are dealing with people's lives, and we will not support today's Budget.

**Ms Ferguson:** I speak as a member of the Audit Committee to reflect the scrutiny of the Budget 2024-25 for the Assembly Commission, Audit Office and Public Services Ombudsman.

The Committee's agreed report by way of letter on its deliberations was published on 9 April. The main role of the Audit Committee is to scrutinise and agree the budgets and estimates of the Audit Office and Public Services Ombudsman. The Committee also undertakes scrutiny of the budget for the Assembly Commission in a similar manner. The Committee fulfils that function in place of the Department of Finance, in recognition of the independence of those non-ministerial bodies. The Committee's evidence gathering and deliberations took place over its first two meetings of the mandate on 6 March and 9 April. With the limited time available to me today, I cannot dwell on the minutiae of the evidence gathered by the Committee. However, I wish to reflect on some particular areas.

First, in relation to the Assembly Commission, it is clear that a large part of the Assembly's budget is driven by costs set out in the Assembly Members' salary and expenses determination. The Commission is legally obliged to meet those costs. However, members questioned officials on the

controllable portion of the Commission's budget. Elements included potential energy savings and sustainability; staffing implications of a fully functioning Assembly; and the Commission's capital budget and staffing resources. Members also noted the anticipated financial implications of recent changes, such as the introduction of the Windsor Framework Committee. It was also noted that the scrutiny role of the Audit Committee and Assembly Commission needs to be codified going forward.

Moving on to the Audit Office, members questioned officials on how they justified additional funding above the previously agreed 2022-25 budget. Members were concerned to hear of the potential risks to the office's public audit function and its vital scrutiny work. The Committee considers that scrutiny integral to public finances. The Committee also noted the Public Accounts Committee's recent observation that the Audit Office's average spend per full-time employment was well below other public audit agencies in Britain. The Committee stands over its decision to fully support the work of the Audit Office.

Members of the Committee were struck by the wide remit of the Public Services Ombudsman, despite its relatively small budget, as well as the growing number of complaints considered by the office since its inception in 2016. Members were particularly interested to hear about the recently introduced role of the office in relation to the Complaints Standards Authority. That, combined with investment in other preventative measures, such as the own-initiative programme, could lead to savings further down the line and reduce the number of complaints finding their way to the Public Services Ombudsman in the first place.

The Committee also probed a number of generic areas with all three bodies, and members received assurances and commitments in that regard. The Committee would support a multi-year budgetary framework in the future, enabling a more strategic budgetary focus. I am pleased to see that the Department of Finance's Budget document has made provision for the figures agreed by the Committee in its report published on 9 April.

#### 4.30 pm

I will now make some brief comments in my capacity as a Sinn Féin MLA. Throughout the Chamber, we recognise that the financial package that accompanied the restoration of the Executive was always going to fall far short



of what was required, given the years of continuous underfunding of this institution. On that note, I acknowledge the work that the Minister of Finance has done to secure the commitments made to date as part of the interim fiscal framework, in what were undoubtedly very difficult financial circumstances. We now need to look towards further devolution in order to allow for more long-term strategic planning, including a multi-annual budgetary framework and proper investment across public services, including in the core bodies that are responsible for scrutiny, transparency and accountability.

**Mr Middleton:** There are words that are commonly used when we look at any Budget that comes to the Chamber, and they have been used to describe the Budget today: "challenging", "difficult" and "frustrating". There is not one area of our public sector or public services that we would say has enough funding. Whether it be the health sector, education or policing, their Departments' budgets are under much pressure. The Finance Minister has produced a Budget of which we now have sight. There is no doubt that many of us share the frustration at, at times, its lack of detail and the level of that detail, but we are working within the time frames that we have.

That leaves political parties with two options: either they get behind the Budget, acknowledging, of course, the challenges and difficult position that we are in, and try to make it work within the envelope that we have or they vote against the Budget, while offering no solutions or, in the worst case, walking away from their ministerial portfolios. Walking away or opposing the Budget is not a responsible thing to do. It is even more irresponsible to do that without offering one single alternative suggestion for how we can improve the budget envelope for each Department. It may seem like a politically —

**Dr Aiken:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Middleton:** I will indeed.

**Dr Aiken:** The Member will be aware that there is a June monitoring round that may have a considerable amount of money in it: anywhere between £200 million and £300 million. Does he think that it is good governance to try to pass a Budget when that amount of money will become available in around 30 days' time? How is that possibly a good approach to government, and why would he support something like that? I believe that the Member and his party tend to look at budgeting in an

appropriate manner. Not waiting for an extra £300 million is not quite the way of doing that. Over to you.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Member for his intervention. That question has already been posed. Of course we look at the budgetary position in a sensible manner, but we also have to acknowledge the time frames that we are operating within and the legal responsibilities that we have. What is completely irresponsible is for Ministers to walk away from their portfolios for various political reasons.

As I was going on to say, those who do that may think that it is politically expedient in the short term, but if all parties were to take that narrow political stance, the consequences would be the creation of further instability and uncertainty, not only for Departments and those who work in them but for constituents, who very much rely on us to show leadership.

As a member of the Economy Committee, I see an opportunity for the Economy Minister and the Department in the budget envelope with which he has been provided. Is there enough funding? Of course not, but there is opportunity with what has been provided: funding for, for example, the city and growth deals, particularly in the north-west; the maritime museum; the riverfront project; and the medical school. Without the Budget, none of those would happen. There is no alternative other than asking for more money. At this time, no solutions are coming forward about from where else that money might come. The medical school at the Magee campus is an example of having to invest in order to save. Hopefully, we will see the fruits of that in the near future.

We need to grasp the opportunities that we have in this Assembly mandate to make a real difference to our communities. Investment in the tourism sector is another area in which we can see growth over the next few years if there is a proper events strategy from the Minister. We have an opportunity to bring world-class events to our shores but also to nurture home-grown events, such as the North West 200 and many others in my constituency.

It is for local Ministers to prioritise and bring forward plans and ideas to improve their Departments. The lack of a plan or a vision in the Health Department to address the ongoing challenges is deeply disappointing. In the past, we have seen numerous examples of how the foresight and vision of previous Ministers were able to address challenges in the midst of a difficult Budget. The radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin is an example. An Ulster Unionist

Party Minister, Michael McGimpsey, stopped that project because of what he cited as a difficult Budget. Mr Speaker will know too well that it was a DUP Minister, Minister Poots at the time, who delivered the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin. That is an example of how, under tight budgetary pressure, if we prioritise, we can address and deliver on some of the challenges that exist. We need to see the Health Minister bring forward a plan. It is not good enough simply to say that there is not enough money. The reality is that people see that the Health Department takes more than 50% of the Budget; nobody argues that it should not, but the Minister needs to bring forward a plan to address the issues that continue to exist.

Each Minister has a responsibility to bring forward a vision for their Department. I urge each of them to do so, and I urge those who are opposed to the Budget to step up to the plate and join the rest of us in delivering for a better society in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Dickson:** Although I will speak in support of the Budget, I need to address some of the many difficult situations that we face. As others have said, years of Executive collapse and systemic underfunding by Tory Governments have resulted in vital programmes, many for the most vulnerable, marginalised and deprived in our communities, coming to an end, with other programmes, such as Engage, Happy Healthy Minds and holiday hunger payments, getting the chop, not to mention the consequences of leaving the European Union, which resulted in the loss of so much, including the European social fund (ESF), also doing damage to our voluntary and community sectors.

The cost of division remains a significant problem for us in Northern Ireland — one for me, one for you — just as it has been for decades. Despite spending more per head on health, we have the worst hospital waiting lists in western Europe. We have reports, such as Bengoa, gathering dust on the shelves. We have a Minister resigning rather than facing the tough decisions.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dickson:** No, I want to make progress.

As someone said recently, there are more pilots in Northern Ireland Departments than there are in easyJet.

I will now speak briefly as the justice spokesperson for the Alliance Party on how the Budget will affect the Department of Justice.

While the Department has seen a slight uplift, it comes too little, too late after years of constrained budget settlements. Since devolution, Justice has been chronically underfunded relative to other Departments. That has been recognised by the Fiscal Council. While the Health budget has grown by 70% and the Education budget by 45% over the past 12 years, Justice has seen an increase of as little as 3%.

We must recognise that the vast majority of the Department of Justice's budget is demand-led and is truly inescapable. I challenge other Ministers to tell us where their inescapable sums are. Staff costs and statutory commitments consume nearly all available resources, leaving less than 1% for discretionary spending. Over the years, a cost recovery model has operated successfully and has delivered significant reforms despite the noose around the Department of Justice's neck. It is clear, however, that we have reached a point at which the potential savings would automatically increase costs in other areas. For instance, the introduction of electronic monitoring would allow police to monitor accused persons in real time, including their location, therefore reducing remand numbers, but the Department does not have the budget to deliver it.

Among the pressures facing the Department of Justice, the situation in our prisons is particularly concerning, with a 35% increase in prison numbers over the past three years. Since joining the Justice Committee, I have visited our prisons and have heard at first hand how the increases have made prison arrangements unsustainable. Older blocks, initially set for demolition, have been forced to reopen. Prisoners are now doubling up in small cells. Overcrowding has rendered adequate rehabilitation a mere pipe dream, with reoffending rates rising to in excess of 40%. There are safety concerns for overworked and understaffed prison officers, and, while we have known for some time that more prison officers are desperately needed, extra resources have also to be provided to fund that.

Policing has been cut to the bone over the past number of years to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. We are now in a situation where the service may become unrecognisable to the public. Policing numbers sit at some 6,390, the lowest number of officers since the formation of the PSNI and well below the New Decade, New Approach target of 7,500. Yet, our police have increasingly become the first port of call in the absence of other services, with officers sometimes spending their entire

shift in an accident and emergency department. With that, and many taking leave due to physical or mental health issues, the strain of those cuts is painfully evident in our Police Service.

Even without pressures from demand-led services, major issues exist. Our criminal justice system is picking up the pieces where other Departments, such as Health and Education, have failed. An increasing number of individuals entering the criminal justice system are grappling with severe mental health issues, addiction or unresolved traumas. If we want to avoid the immense societal harm, we need to rethink our approach and invest in prevention. Only then will we be able to avoid the what ifs. What if they had been better educated? What if they had been given more support in life? What if they had received adequate mental health care? Others persist in tackling delays in the justice system and the backlog in our courts, which fail victims. Those delays compound the hurt, stress and anxiety for victims. To open more courts, more staff need to be recruited, and the throughput in our court system needs to be enhanced, including legal aid payments to those in need of financial support for access to justice. Without a larger cash flow, the system will only get slower.

While I know that the Minister will act to do more with less and make the best of the available resources, it will be very difficult. It goes without saying that we are not where we want to be. If we had been able to do our job over the past two years, we might have been in a better place, but, given where we have landed, we need to ensure that we make more progress, where possible, in the three years that are available to us. Difficult decisions need to be made on the prioritisation of services, but the job of a Minister is to find a way.

To those voting against the Budget motion today, I ask you this: where is the alternative proposition? Where are you going to raise the money from to fill the gap in the coffers that, you feel, needs to be filled? Where is your Budget for delivering? I have not seen it published, but maybe we will see it in some of your election manifestos. For that reason, today, I will be supporting the Budget.

Finally, on a personal note, I have to express my deep disappointment at the resignation of the Health Minister, someone walking away from patients and healthcare workers.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up.

**Mr Dickson:** He has failed not only to deliver many of the strategies that have been promised —

**Mr Speaker:** Time, Mr Dickson.

**Mr Dickson:** — but, for me, on a personal basis, he has failed cancer patients in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I feel moved to begin by thanking the Chair of the Economy Committee for his very generous words when he opened his remarks, and I want to reciprocate. I have been on a few Committees during my 13 years in the House, and I think that the Economy Committee is particularly collegial and coherent. I wish it every success for the remainder of the mandate. I also note that Ms Ní Chuilín thought that I was staring at her during her remarks. I will do my best to be less attentive in future.

My starting point is to ask this: what is the purpose of a debate such as this? It seems to me that a lot of people think that it is to win the argument and then win the vote. I put it to you that there is an alternative: progress. Maybe the outcome of a debate such as this is to make progress, particularly in this consociational system of government that we have, or power-sharing, as it is known colloquially. With five parties — in this case, four — in government, it is difficult to rub along together, but, surely, that is ultimately the objective.

**4.45 pm**

As I said, I have been here for 13 years, and I have never been more optimistic about what we might achieve. The mood is different since we restored, and I am optimistic. Every one of the 90 MLAs knows that, if it collapses this time, it is gone, and fewer than a handful of MLAs would like to see that result. Perhaps that was in our political psyche and we had to take it right to the brink of destruction before we realised that there is no alternative to power-sharing and to learning to work together. I am optimistic despite the fact that we have a legacy of disaggregated working, with a single-year Budget divorced from the Programme for Government and divorced from the legislative programme. However, that is where we are, and that is what we have to work through.

I am a little disappointed at the number of contributors who are calling us "reckless" and saying that we do not have an alternative. We had an alternative. The alternative was to wait a few weeks. We know from the Department of Finance that June monitoring will yield £200

million or maybe even as much as £300 million. That would have done no damage to the working of the Departments because we have already passed a Vote on Account, so they would be solvent in that time. We had an alternative, which was to wait, see what the £200-plus million could do for the Budget and go from there.

I give way to the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Member for giving way. I find it unbelievable that he says it will not damage Departments. It may not do that, but it will damage community groups. I know the number of people who are in contact with my office. I am sure that people are in contact with his office and the Ulster Unionist Party offices. There is no wriggle room for us to wait in carrying out our legal responsibilities to make sure that Departments are funded and can spend money.

**Mr Nesbitt:** The Member maybe misunderstands what "Vote on Account" means. It means that Ministers are free to make decisions in the meantime.

My party, during all the talks that preceded restoration, was clear in its understanding that all the other parties that were going to form the Executive wanted to prioritise health. I refer to a response that I got from the Executive Office earlier this month to a question for written answer about the Programme for Government. The answer stated:

*"The Executive is agreed on priorities, including: childcare; reducing hospital waiting lists; tackling violence against women and girls; Special Educational Needs; housing; developing a globally competitive economy; and Reform and Transformation of public services."*

That is not an alphabetical list of those seven priorities, so it is either random, which would be a rather sloppy way to respond to a Member's request, or it is in rank order, in which case "reducing waiting lists" came second. However, the only money set aside for waiting lists is the £34 million that has come from the UK Government. Whether we say that it is a 6% increase on last year's starting position or a 2.8% decrease from the finishing position — I note that the esteemed BBC commentator John Campbell says that it is both — in my opinion, neither represents the prioritisation of health.

I heard a Member say that it was disingenuous to talk about the starting position compared with the finishing position, but I note, as a former member of the Economy Committee, that, in an exchange between the permanent secretary of the Department for the Economy and the Chairperson of the Committee, the permanent secretary indicated that the Department's budget for 2024-25 is largely positive and that it is hoped that the opening positions for arm's-length bodies would largely match the closing position from 2023-24 — ie include all the 2023-24 in-year allocations. That is not disingenuous; that is a valid assessment of the position.

I will conclude by referring to Mark Friedman, the man behind outcomes-based accountability (OBA) programmes for government. As a collective, we agreed that we would take that OBA approach sometime in the middle of the last decade. His book, which details how to do it, is entitled 'Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough'. In other words, it is not about the effort; it is about the outcomes. Outcomes are best delivered through cooperation. We are learning that, and we increasingly understand that few issues are dealt with in a departmental silo. We need to cooperate to tackle things like educational underachievement or to deliver childcare. I regret that the Budget is all about departmental budgets, because, ultimately, we need to share and cooperate in order to succeed.

**Mr Speaker:** The next speaker will be Sian Mulholland, but, before I call Sian, I inform Members that I have decided to use my discretion to add an extra 15 minutes to the debate. The Members who will speak after Sian are Mr Allister and Mr Carroll.

**Ms Mulholland:** My apologies, Mr Speaker, I was not expecting you to get to me. I will support the motion on the Budget. I do not think that we have much of an alternative. I would rather be agreeing a multi-year Budget that is linked to a Programme for Government. That would be preferable, and, absolutely, we would rather see that today.

Bear with me. I am so sorry, Mr Speaker. I was told that I was not on the list to speak.

When it comes to the impact of the Budget on the Department for Communities, put simply, there just is not enough in the pot. There is not enough to do all the things that we want to do to make people's lives better. The Department for Communities is the Department that most affects people's daily lives in Northern Ireland, and we need to get it right. We are in a housing crisis, and money needs to be invested to

ensure that everyone has a safe and secure place to live. The cost of temporary accommodation continues to rise, and the housing stock desperately needs to be maintained and made more energy-efficient through retrofitting to make sure that we meet our climate change obligations and people's health needs. Housing is at the core of our society. Having a stable tenure that is suitable for an individual's needs helps with mental and physical health and their ability to participate in society. Housing cuts across all Departments. We urgently need a housing supply strategy that addresses those key concerns.

There is a worrying downward trend in capital DEL over the past three years, with a substantial decrease this year. That massively limits investment and long-term improvements. We are in a stop-start, short-term firefighting cycle. We are facing a cliff edge when it comes to welfare mitigations. Whilst we received what the Minister bid for, it will not be enough to look at offsetting the two-child limit by introducing the Better Start larger families payment, restoring the £20 uplift in universal credit or introducing additional support for carers through a carer's recognition grant, all of which are recommendations from Les Allamby's independent review of welfare mitigations.

It is really difficult to ascertain exactly what pressure will be put on the arts and culture sector by the Budget, because this year's allocations and past allocations are not outlined like for like. That is really concerning. It is a concerning situation that urgently needs clarity from the Minister, because, as we know, the arts and culture sector is not a hobby or a nice add-on. It actively feeds into our health system — mental and physical health — our economy and our education system.

The best example that I can provide of the fact that the Budget does not link to a Programme for Government is the disconnect on issues relating to children. The responsibility for children falls between many Departments. When a situation requires the responsibility to push forward and drive a programme, it becomes difficult, in that it requires cross-departmental cooperation. If we had, as Mr Nesbitt pointed out, an outcomes-based Programme for Government linked to the Budget, we would see very different results.

Whilst I support the Budget, because we have no other sensible choice, I want to highlight how we could make the money work better for the people of Northern Ireland through resource pooling. It involves collaboration and the sharing of resources, such as personnel,

technology, facilities and expertise, among Departments to achieve common objectives. That approach fosters a spirit of teamwork and cooperation, leading to substantial cost savings and improved service delivery. That is exactly what the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 intended, but I feel that it has not been utilised to its fullest. Resource pooling reduces duplication of effort and leverages economies of scale, leading to cost savings and a more efficient use of public funds. Collaborative efforts lead to better outcomes for children: we know that. When Departments work together, they can create more effective and innovative solutions to address the complex needs of children and families. Integrated services are more accessible to families, reducing the burden of navigating multiple systems and ensuring that support is available when and where it is needed.

Ireland's Jigsaw initiative provides youth mental health services through pooled resources from various Departments and helps to prevent more severe mental health issues that require costlier interventions. Early and accessible mental health support can save the healthcare system a significant amount, with estimates suggesting savings of up to €5,000 per young person annually, by reducing hospitalisations and emergency care needs. In Ireland, early intervention programmes such as the Meitheal model have been shown to save substantial amounts by addressing issues before they escalate. Studies there have shown that early intervention can save up to €10,000 annually per child.

Whilst I support the Budget, it is important that we take the difficult decisions in the future to reform, change the way that government works and collaborate. I hope that we can commit to restructuring and making the changes necessary to ensure that our resources are used much more effectively for the betterment of all our people by the time we face our next Budget, which will hopefully be a multi-year one that is linked to a Programme for Government.

**Mr Speaker:** We have time to squeeze Ms McLaughlin in. Sinéad, if you wish to deliver your speech, please do so.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker; I was not expecting that either.

As we debate the Budget, I want to acknowledge that it is good that the Assembly is in the position to discuss government spending priorities and exercise our legislative scrutiny role. At the start of this year, that was by no means guaranteed; indeed, some of us

had lost faith that it would be back up and running any time soon. I also worry, however, that, due to the understandable relief that the Government are up and running again, we have set the bar much too low. I will make a number of points, first on the Budget and the process in general, before moving on to speak as the SDLP economy spokesperson to address that Department's allocations.

This is the tenth year in a row when a single-year Budget has been agreed, despite repeated calls from parties across the Floor for a multi-year Budget. Also, the Budget was agreed in the absence of a Programme for Government, which is really regrettable. In essence, we are funding pressures instead of planning for our priorities. Clearly, the Budget will be agreed in a difficult context with a much higher proportion of unmet bids than in previous years. There is little doubt that the years of underfunding and brutal cuts from Westminster have taken their toll. The failed economic strategy of the Government across the water, in Westminster — the bleak and cruel lifespan of which will, fortunately, finally come to an end in the coming weeks — has consistently undermined the ability of this place to deliver public services that meet all the needs of our people.

It is not the fault of the Tories alone. This morning, the chair of the BMA committee in Northern Ireland spoke about the end of the health service. Our public services are in complete free fall, collapsing before our eyes. We cannot just blame the Tories: this Government have failure writ large all over them. The absence of the institutions for many years and our hokey-cokey Government have broken our public services. Across Northern Ireland, thousands of people are effectively shut out of our health and education systems. The gap in healthy life expectancy between the poorest and the most affluent areas is still between 11 and 15 years. That is unacceptable, and we all bear responsibility.

The Budget is a consequence of failure: the failure to sustain political stability here. Nobody can move away from the fact that, in a large way, that is due to the two biggest parties in the House. It is also a consequence of the failure of the UK Government to understand or even to empathise with our needs and of the failure of the Government here to generate the inclusive growth that is needed.

In the absence of competence and, too often, in the shadow of callousness, this Budget has come after the start of the fiscal year, and the reliance on short-term financial support has

continued, while more and more people are forced into chronic and crippling poverty.

### 5.00 pm

That includes families who are struggling with childcare costs, and many of us were pleased to see the announcement last week by the Minister of Education about childcare costs. We know that that is only the start, as £25 million will never represent the kind of transformation of the early education and childcare system that we need to see. The fact that childcare bills have been allowed to spiral to such a significant extent is an indictment of the political failure here for many years. We must see much more ambition from the Executive in the coming months.

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

I turn to the specific allocation made to the Department for the Economy. It is clear that the Department faces a number of significant challenges, including with Invest NI, where the £3 million pay pressure has remained unfunded and no specific funding exists to implement the findings of Sir Michael Lyon's review or the transformation of that organisation. Higher education is particularly badly affected, as the £7.5 million shortfall in the teaching grant has not been addressed, and the increase in student hardship funding made last year has not been repeated. It represents an effective cut to students who are already struggling to make basic ends meet. We are forcing students into poverty while they struggle to invest in their education. Those cuts are even more damaging when we consider that the Sinn Féin Minister for the Economy has rolled back on the DUP Minister's commitment to a full review of higher education. Since February, we have been asking about that review, which was supposed to consider support for the teaching institutions as well as for the students. The Minister has only been able to tell us that officials are still considering it. Well, that is not good enough. The Budget effectively cuts support to higher education, which is morally indefensible and economically illiterate.

It is good to see some funding allocated for the expansion of the Magee campus, albeit with a lack of clarity on its exact purposes, and, admittedly, it is a fraction of the amount that is likely to be needed. More worryingly, I am concerned that no funding appears to exist for the recommendations produced by the Magee task force. This cannot be pushed on to future years. The task force is likely to make recommendations in the coming months, and

we need to see a ring-fenced budget to implement them.

In totality, it is concerning that there is no provision to screen any of this funding for regional balance. There has been a lot of talk about regional balance; there is no money for regional balance in any of the budgets, and there has been no meaningful screening with targets. It is supposedly one of the Minister's top priorities, but, too often, the Department has not been able to answer my basic questions for written answer on regional balance. The Minister has not been able to identify who is responsible for leading the work on regional balance. When pressed, he effectively told me that it was everyone's responsibility. Well, if it is everyone's responsibility, it is nobody's responsibility.

Finally, we know that the public is crying out for a change in the way that we do politics here. We only need to look at the COVID inquiry in the past few weeks to see proof of the devastating impact of the silo mentality. We need to see more —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Ms McLaughlin:** — coherence and cohesion in this Government. We will not support the Budget.

**Mr Allister:** There is something of a rich irony and a poor delivery in respect of both this debate and the Budget document. The rich irony arises from the fact that we are debating a Sinn Féin austerity Budget. It is the party that could not wait to get back into government, with no regard to whether there was or was not enough money. Indeed, that was the position of most of the parties, and then, when they came back, they discovered that they did not have all that they needed, so they had to produce what effectively is an austerity Budget. Welcome to the "New Tories", who sit to my left. Maybe the "Whining Tories", because they are still whining that there is not enough. Indeed, old habits die hard, because, even though Sinn Féin has the authority and is in charge, it is still someone else's fault. It is still the British Government's fault. It reminds me of that very apt tweet from the now deputy First Minister that appeared in the WhatsApp messages that were revealed in the COVID inquiry. When, obviously referring to Sinn Féin, she said:

*"Well, why not - let English taxpayers subsidise our free prescriptions, lower rates, no water charges, lower tuition fees and free*

*prescriptions.. but hey, how dare you guys starve us of funding".*

That is still the attitude of Sinn Féin, even though it is producing this austerity Budget. There is never enough for Sinn Féin. There is not enough money, we are told, for health, but there is enough money to squander by increasing the budgets of cross-border bodies. There is not enough money to deal with waiting lists, but there is enough money to increase the staff of InterTradeIreland by 50%. I think that we can see from this Budget and from the Department of Finance where Sinn Féin's priorities lie.

There has been much ado about childcare recently, but a sleight of hand has been delivered to parents, because, under the Barnett consequential, the Executive got £57.2 million for childcare, but what of that do they put into spend? They put in £25 million. Where did the rest go? Where is it being squandered? Why is childcare not getting the allocation that was intended for it? That is the product of this system of government.

When we talk about squander, one cannot but think of the rising demands for Casement Park. Whatever it costs — £300 million, or perhaps more — it is a flagship project of the Executive, and it therefore must be built. When it comes to it, it must be prioritised over health and education. If our constituents were faced with the choice of whether they would rather spend £300 million on improving their health system and educating their kids or on a vanity project for a sporting organisation, most people would think of their family and their health and decide which was the better spend. Of course, the GAA, by its demands, would bleed any budget dry but never put its hand into its own deep pockets. Here it is saying, "We will pay only £15 million, but we demand that it be built at whatever it costs". Where is the balance in that? As for football, it is held to the inflation-ravaged allocation of 10 years ago. That is all that it gets. Furthermore, it is expected to be happy that the only legacy of the Euros will be a futuristic stadium for the GAA, which will be a money-spinner for every non-sporting event that it runs commercially but will provide no clawback for government.

I come now to the Ulster Unionist Party's position. I understand its complaint, but I do not understand its response. It may well be right, and is, in the sincerity of its complaint to vote against the Budget, but where is the logic in its then going back with its tail between its legs to implement that same Budget? Where is the principle in that? You are taking a stand

because you have been inadequately provided for, as, indeed, an Ulster Unionist predecessor in Health, a number of years ago, was inadequately provided for. However, if you are taking a stand on the principle that you are being inadequately provided for, why on earth would you humiliate yourself to go back and implement the very same Budget? That is really what I do not understand at all.

As for efficiency, I asked every Department what efficiency savings it planned to make. Each Sinn Féin Department answered, "Nothing. We do not intend to make efficiencies". Their attitude still is: begging bowl, beg and then blame. That is the essence of this Budget.

**Mr Carroll:** This Tory Government is on life support, yet with every cut enacted by this Budget, the Stormont Executive breathe new life into their failed Conservative political project. After 14 years of crippling economic decisions implemented with the support of Sinn Féin, the DUP and others, the Tories are, I hope, set to be given the boot. However, it seems that they can be confident that Stormont will continue to implement their policies on behalf of the wealthy minority that they represent. This crucial juncture, when the British Government are at their weakest, should be the time when Stormont's ruling parties finally push back. They should say "No" to the implementation of more Budget cuts, "No" to the destruction of our public services and "No" to the further impoverishment of working-class people who have borne the brunt of their attacks. However, once again, they roll over and do the Tories' dirty work with this Budget.

As usual, Executive parties tell us that it is inevitable and that we have no choice but to make do with what we have got. We heard that ad nauseam today. Not more than four days ago, the Audit Office found that the Executive handed £2.1 billion back to the Treasury over a period of five years. Some £420 million every year was handed back to the Tories, and then they tell us that they have no money and no choice but to implement these cuts. Budget cuts are a political choice.

To counter the spin from the Executive, it is worth tallying up the impact of their choices and the consequences of what we are being asked to vote for. Our health service will suffer because of this Budget. The outgoing Minister said that there would be "serious and ... irreparable damage" because of this Budget. One in four people here is on a health waiting list, and the numbers will only grow. Stormont has cut over 1,000 hospital beds since 2010,

but things are likely to get worse as our services are cut and the NHS becomes more understaffed. Health workers have had their pay cut. Junior doctors are out on strike, and more will strike thanks to this Budget. Some 80% of domiciliary care has been privatised on Stormont's watch. This Budget will continue the reliance on the private sector and fuel the privatisation of our health service overall.

As we struggle to recruit health workers with low pay and poor conditions, the huge vacancies will continue to be filled by handing hundreds of millions of pounds to private agencies. GP services and NHS dentistry, already on the brink of collapse, will be driven to further destruction. People will die on waiting lists, in hospital corridors and in parked-up ambulances. They will die through lack of treatment and lack of services. They will die from disease, forced negligence, suicide, overdose and more, as they await barely existent or non-existent services. For the sake of people's health, I will vote against the Budget.

For the sake of homes, I will vote against the Budget. The Chartered Institute of Housing has warned that over 400 fewer homes will be built as a result of this Budget. There are more than 40,000 on the housing waiting list because of Stormont's failure to build, and that number will only get higher, as will the number of homeless people and those sleeping rough. The Department for Communities, which is responsible for housing, will have its budget cut by 38%. A lack of homes means that rents will increase under this Budget. Mortgages will increase, and people will continue to be squeezed under the weight of this Government's failures. The same Department is supposed to be advancing an anti-poverty strategy — how can it be any more than a wish list if its funding is slashed?

I will be voting against the Budget on behalf of education support workers, who have been waiting for a pay and grading review since 2018. Those workers, who keep our schools going, would not have to strike if this Budget delivered on their demands. Children with special educational needs and disabilities will face more discrimination under this Budget, as Stormont, once again, underfunds the schools and services that they rely on. They will experience a long wait for a statement of needs, be unsure of a school place and feel let down by the Government. Educators will do what they can with a lack of resources.

School buildings are falling down round their ears. The Budget will put more school build



projects on the long finger, and schoolchildren will be expected to suck it up. The Irish-medium sector, which is already on the receiving end of state bigotry, will suffer under the Budget. I will vote against it for the sake of children's education.

### 5.15 pm

Despite calls from Stormont to scrap the two-child limit, the Budget will continue to punish people through cruel welfare reforms that were implemented by Sinn Féin, the DUP and Alliance. The promised and much talked-about childcare strategy will remain in limbo. Parents will cripple themselves to pay for childcare costs, unchecked and unchallenged by the Budget. The Budget means more hardship and poverty. I cannot endorse it.

I will vote against the Budget for our environment. Countless emissions targets will be missed due to departmental budget cuts. The Budget will help to drive global warming and bring us closer to climate catastrophe. It will mean less public transport, off-the-charts agricultural emissions and homes in desperate need of retrofitting. I will also vote against the Budget for Lough Neagh. The Executive should be ashamed of the paltry £1.6 million that they have provided to deal with the disaster at Lough Neagh. If that is what the Government call a priority, we are all in for a rough time.

Infrastructure cuts will see public maintenance being scaled back. Public transport workers will have their pay cut, and passenger fares will be hiked. They are being hiked already in the coming days. The over-60s, who are some of the most vulnerable in our society, will face the threat of having their free travel revoked.

The worst thing about all of this is that Ministers know the consequences. They know that the Budget will cause devastation, but they will vote for it anyway and say that there is nothing that they can do. They have agreed to be bound by the economic logic of a Tory Government who are hell-bent on destroying the last vestiges of our public services and ripping our communities apart. I hope that the Tory Government are set to pay the price for the destruction that they have caused in the upcoming general election. The Executive should stand up to them now. They should stand up and say that they will not do their bidding and that they will fund services and provide a decent future for all our people, whatever the cost.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call the Minister of Finance to respond. Minister, given

the time available, which was outlined earlier, I am reliably informed that the calculator says that you have 49 minutes remaining.

**Dr Archibald:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank all the Members and Committee Chairs for their participation in the debate. I thank the Members who were supportive of the Budget proposals for their input, and I have listened with interest to Members who have spoken against the Budget. I intend to use most of my time to respond to as many of the useful and constructive issues raised by Members as possible.

The leader of the Opposition highlighted, as did other Members, the issue of multi-year Budgets. Colleagues will be aware that I have said numerous times that my preference is for a multi-year Budget. I am keen to be in a place where we are able to set a multi-year Budget to maximise Departments' abilities to plan. However, as I have also said many times, this is the final year of the current spending review period, so it is not possible to set a multi-year Budget at this point. That is set out in legislation. Unfortunately, that prevents Departments from being able to plan more effectively. Treasury has made it clear that a spending review will take place after the general election, which has been set for 4 July. What is not clear at this point is whether that will be a single- or multi-year settlement, although I have made the case to Treasury and to the shadow Secretary of State that the preference of the Executive and all parties here is for multi-year Budgets.

Mr O'Toole also raised the issue of the Fresh Start funding. I reiterate that the decision was taken by Treasury to un-ring-fence any money that was repackaged into the financial package. I am sure that the Member is aware that that money was then made available to the Executive as resource funding. To convert that back into capital would have meant £150 million less for day-to-day spending. Following a request by the Education Minister, the Executive agreed to provide £150 million over the next three years to build the Strule Shared Education Campus, which was previously a Fresh Start project. The Budget includes the first £20 million of that, and that was based on what DE has profiled to spend in this financial year. While the Fresh Start funding is no longer available to take forward the other shared and integrated education projects that are not already in contractual commitment, the Education Minister has confirmed that he will include those in his prioritisation for his Budget allocation. I am sure that the Member will agree that the £150 million from Fresh Start would

only have gone so far in the delivery of those 11 projects.

Mr O'Toole mentioned Casement Park. As all Members will be aware and as has been referred to, it is an Executive flagship project. The bid from the Department for Communities for this year was met in full. The Casement Park project can deliver huge sporting, economic and social benefits across our communities. It needs to be delivered, and it is unthinkable that that would not happen in time to host Euro 2028. My Department has received a strategic outline case on the subregional stadia programme that my officials are considering. As recently as last Friday, the Prime Minister reiterated that the British Government would make a significant contribution to the redevelopment of Casement Park. They need to get on and clarify as soon as possible what that contribution will be.

**Mr O'Toole:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dr Archibald:** Sure.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am grateful to the Minister for that update and for being so thorough in going through the points raised, although she has had a fair bit of time to do it. Has her Department been in touch directly with UEFA, or will she consider getting in touch with UEFA, to find out the parameters and timing, so that the Department of Finance and the Finance Minister have absolute clarity on when the money needs to be committed?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware that the Communities Minister is leading on Casement Park. I have written to the Communities Minister offering any support necessary from my Department and officials to move the project forward. I am open to any suggestions from him about how to move it forward.

Mr O'Toole mentioned revenue raising. I have always been clear that the Executive will consider all options, including efficiencies, generating revenue, additional borrowing and further fiscal powers. That will continue to be part of the negotiations with Treasury on the final fiscal framework. Mr O'Toole mentioned that, in his view, the Budget lacks strategic priorities. Of course, the correct place to set the Executive's priorities is a Programme for Government. I am certainly of the view that we want to take that forward as quickly as possible. The Executive have been clear that they want to progress it as quickly as possible. However,

we have to agree a Budget as early as possible to allow Departments to plan effectively.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dr Archibald:** I want to make some progress, please.

As I set out, the Budget reflects, as far as possible, the priorities of the Executive. It was developed in just three months from the Executive's return and in a challenging financial position. The interim fiscal framework will set out the scope of the sustainability plan, which my Department is working on at pace and which will include input from other Departments.

I have heard Members from the Opposition criticise the Budget today. It is easy to point to the problems, but there are fewer solutions to come by. I have yet to see or hear the Opposition provide an alternative Budget or a plan for how to move things forward.

Steve Aiken, Liz Kimmins and a number of other Members mentioned the Department of Health's budget. Mr Aiken remarked that the Department of Health has always received more than 50% of the available Budget. That is not the case; in fact, the share of the overall Budget allocated to Health has grown slowly and inexorably over time. Since the Executive returned in 2020, the Health baseline has increased by £2 billion. While some have highlighted my party and other parties' manifesto commitments to an additional £1 billion for Health over the spending review period, Health has, in fact, received a £1.6 billion uplift to its baseline funding over that period. I fully agree that Health needs more money, as do all Departments. The British Government need to provide the Executive with a sustainable level of public finances. Public services here are suffering because that is not happening. Of course, my job, as Finance Minister, is to balance all the asks and ensure that all Departments can deliver the public services within their responsibility.

**Mr Chambers:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dr Archibald:** I want to make some progress, please.

There remains an onus on the Department of Health, as the biggest spending Department, to continue to transform and improve productivity in the delivery of its services. Approximately £1 billion in resource DEL was available for allocation to all Departments. It simply was not realistic to meet all the pressures of one

Department, given the number of bids being made by all Departments. The Department of Health has been allocated 51.2% of the overall resource DEL funding available, a 6.3% uplift from the opening position of 2023-24.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister very much for giving way. The Minister will be aware that, across the rest of the United Kingdom, health is above the line — considerably so — because of the pressures on the health system across the place. Can you explain why Northern Ireland is somehow different from England, Scotland and Wales and, indeed, the Irish Republic?

**Dr Archibald:** I am sure that I could explain why there are differences between the North and England, Scotland and Wales and the South. We faced a really challenging Budget, and, as I said, the bids that came in from all Departments greatly outweighed the money to be allocated. It was a case of having to balance up and get some money to all Departments. We tried our best. Do I think that we put enough money into any Department? No, I do not. That is why I continue to make the case to Treasury that we need proper investment in our public services. Every Department asked for more than it received.

Mr Aiken said that the Budget should be delayed in order to allocate the additional funding that is likely to become available from Westminster Main Estimates. Perhaps the Member was not listening when, in my opening remarks, I explained that that approach is prohibited by the 1998 Act and that, even if it were possible to do that, it would carry the significant risks that I also outlined: the risk of overspends; the risk of worse impacts from decisions later in the year; the risk of the Vote on Account being exhausted; and the risk of £559 million having to be repaid next year. I have to say that I am not clear on what the Member or his party hope to achieve by delaying the Budget. As he said, the funding will be allocated in June monitoring. That will allow Departments to properly identify the impact of their funding envelope and develop bids accordingly. It will also allow the Executive to properly assess those bids in the context of competing pressures across all Departments. The Department of Health will be able to engage in that process in the same way as every other Department. Calls to delay the Budget —

**Mr Chambers:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dr Archibald:** I would like to continue to make some progress.

Calls to delay the Budget appear to be an excuse to avoid taking challenging decisions. We do not have that luxury.

Colm Gildernew mentioned the budget for Supporting People. The Supporting People programme assists some 19,500 vulnerable people each year to live independently and is an important element of the Department for Communities budget. That funding is recognised as a preventative intervention that reduces the potential for greater costs to fall on the health and justice sectors. It is a demanded service that has been under pressure as a result of increasing homelessness. The Communities Minister bid for £12.6 million for the programme, and it will now be for him to allocate his resource budget to take account of that important priority.

Paula Bradshaw asked about the Executive bureau in Beijing. TEO is responsible for implementing the Executive's international relations strategy. As part of that, TEO utilises £365,000 of its budget to fund the Executive's Beijing bureau. It is approaching its tenth year in operation and has made a significant contribution to the development of relationships with China. TEO and many Departments and agencies have worked and are working closely with the consulate to support initiatives to build relationships.

Phillip Brett and Cathy Mason mentioned the EA pay and grading review, and other Members raised that in the course of the debate. The Executive agreed that I would write to the British Treasury to seek agreement to re-profile the Executive's future years funding in order to fund the full implementation of the non-teaching pay and grading review for education support staff. The Education Minister wrote to me confirming the cost sought for re-profiling, and my officials and I engaged with the British Treasury to make that case. I formally wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 May, and I raised it with her when we met last week. The request remains with Treasury for it to address.

Mr Brett also raised RHI tariffs, the closure of the scheme and AME funding. The non-domestic RHI scheme continues to be funded through ring-fenced and capped AME budget set as a population proportion of the funding for the equivalent scheme in England. The Department for the Economy submitted a business case addendum to my Department for the uplift in tariffs in November 2023.

DFE subsequently confirmed to my Department that an Executive view was necessary

regarding the future of the scheme before the work was progressed. As DFE is the lead Department on energy policy and the operation of the non-domestic RHI scheme, responsibility for the business case rests with that Department, and my officials continue to engage with their counterparts on that.

### 5.30 pm

Colin McGrath raised the issue of the budget for the community and voluntary sector. Again, I recognise that the sector and its organisations are experiencing significant increases in demands for their services, including for advice and support at a time when rising costs are impacting on organisations and their ability to continue to meet demand. The Communities Minister bid for some additional money in the 2024-25 Budget, and, again, it will be for the Communities Minister, as with all other Ministers, to prioritise his budget and the programmes in it. Of course, Ministers will have the opportunity to bid for further funding allocations through the in-year monitoring rounds.

Mr McGrath seems to have more faith in an incoming Labour Government than I do, and he thinks that we could do better with the Budget that we have. The question that I pose to anybody who criticises the Budget is: where would you take the money from to give it to somebody else? I give the Departments the money and they decide how to spend it, but there was a limited pot of money to allocate. I have yet to hear any proposals on where I should take that money from.

Mr Swann talked about the reduction to the Department of Health's budget and compared the end of 2023-24 with the start of 2024-25. That is not a like-for-like comparison, as has been repeated numerous times. Additional funding is frequently provided in year. The Department of Health also received £80 million of transfers from Whitehall Departments in 2023-24, and I assume that the Department of Health will receive similar transfers this year. We are already talking about the in-year monitoring money that will be allocated in June, so it just does not stack up to compare the end of the year with the start of the year, and talking about a 2.3% reduction is misleading. The only true comparison with the end of 2023-24 will be the end of 2024-25.

Mr Swann also talked about how unrealistic it was to provide funding for pay in 2023-24 and not recover those costs this year. When asking the Executive to agree the final plan for 2023-24, I highlighted the fact that the same level of

funding would not be available this year. Indeed, that would have been clear to everyone. The financial package provided over £1 billion in 2023-24 and £520 million in 2024-25. It was for each Minister to decide what was affordable for the pay awards within their control in the knowledge that funding would be lower in 2024-25. Mr Swann also complained that the Department of Health only received £34 million specifically for waiting lists. That is true: I did not ring-fence additional money in order to give the Health Minister the maximum flexibility to manage the full £7.8 billion resource DEL Health budget.

Mr Swann has said a number of times that Departments did not bid on the same basis. That is true, despite guidance from my Department. Some Departments were cognisant of the funding available and competing pressures and minimised their bids, but others bid for everything possible. Some Departments followed the guidance and did not bid for pay costs, but others, such as the Department of Health, did. Some Departments broke their bids down into discrete areas, but others added a number of bids for different purposes together to present a large number of inescapable pressures. That is why Departments did not simply receive a proportion of their bids, nor did they receive an allocation based on their proportion of the block. Instead, an assessment was made of the best way possible to allocate the limited resources that were available. That approach gave the Department of Health half of what was available for general allocation. Frankly, it is utterly incoherent to resign, ostensibly in protest against the Budget, on the eve of an election campaign, only for your party to then appoint your colleague to the position. What message does that send? The public will make up their own minds.

Declan McAleer and Tom Elliott both spoke about the challenges facing the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, highlighting the challenges that the Executive faced in setting this Budget. Mr Elliott also raised climate change, an issue that he has raised with me a number of times. Under section 52 of the Climate Change Act 2022, all Departments are required to exercise their functions in a manner that is consistent with achieving emissions targets and carbon budgets. Given the constrained financial position, I did not propose earmarked allocations for climate change in the Budget. That was not reflective of the priority that should be given to climate change, but rather to reflect the intention to provide Departments with maximum flexibility to manage their budgets.

Indeed, as climate change is so far-reaching, it should be a consideration across all areas of spend in Departments.

Joanne Bunting and Stewart Dickson outlined their concerns about the Department of Justice budget. I fully agree that the Department of Justice needs more money. We tried to reflect that in the Budget allocations that were made. It received the third-largest allocation in relation to the money that was available to us. As I have said many times, including in the course of this debate, the limited funds meant that no Department got what it wanted. I have listened to the concerns of the Justice Minister. I hope that she will recognise that I have tried to work with her constructively, and I will continue to do so.

I fully intend to work as constructively as possible with Mr Nesbitt when he takes up his role as anticipated later today. He highlighted the potential to delay the vote because Departments have a 65% Vote on Account. I have already set out in the course of the discussion that the 65% Vote on Account was based on the assumption of Royal Assent for the next Budget Bill in September. If we delay this vote and the introduction of the next Budget Bill, there is a risk that Departments could run out of cash on the basis of the Vote on Account that was taken.

I want to put on record that I agree with Sian Mulholland's comments around the arts, which are not just nice-to-haves. We need to invest in our artists and creatives, not just because they contribute significantly to our economy but because they are beneficial to our communities, particularly in a society like ours that is emerging from conflict.

Mr Allister made some comments about parties going back into the Executive without clarity or sufficient funds. Time and again, my party has said that the best place to negotiate with the British Government and with Treasury was in an Executive, with a Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister negotiating with the British Government. That is exactly what has been borne out over the past couple of weeks.

I will bring my remarks to a close. It is the responsibility of a Finance Minister to bring Budget proposals before the House. It is a responsibility that I take seriously. I want to, and intend to, deliver for all our citizens. On that note, I commend the Budget to the Assembly.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Thank you, Minister. Before we proceed to the Question, I

remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 61; Noes 21.*

## **AYES**

### **NATIONALIST:**

*Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Miss Brogan, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Miss Reilly, Ms Sheerin.*

### **UNIONIST:**

*Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Robinson.*

### **OTHER:**

*Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Honeyford, Mrs Long, Miss McAllister, Mr McMurray, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr Tennyson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mrs Mason.*

## **NOES**

### **NATIONALIST:**

*Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole.*

### **UNIONIST:**

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mr Beattie, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.*

### **OTHER:**

*Mr Carroll.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken and Mr O'Toole.*

Total Votes	82	Total Ayes	61	[74.4%]
Nationalist Votes	32	Nationalist Ayes	24	[75.0%]
Unionist Votes	34	Unionist Ayes	22	[64.7%]
Other Votes	16	Other Ayes	15	[93.8%]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

*That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2024-25 as announced by the Minister of Finance on 25 April 2024 and set out in the Budget document laid before the Assembly on 20 May 2024.*

Motion made:

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair).]*

## Adjournment

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** As you were advised earlier, the Speaker was notified that the proposer will not speak to the Adjournment topic in the Order Paper today.

*Adjourned at 5.55 pm.*