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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 29 April 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Andrew McMurray

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that Patrick Brown resigned as a Member of the Assembly for South Down with effect from 23 April 2024. As Speaker, I notified the Chief Electoral Officer of a vacancy in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Andrew McMurray has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for South Down to fill that vacancy.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the resignation of Mr Brown, will you clarify something for the House? Since Mr Brown was the object of an ongoing complaint before the Commissioner for Standards, is that complaint now aborted as a result of his resignation, or does it continue? If it continues and if it were to have adverse findings, how would any such strictures be applied to him?

Mr Speaker: On the first part of the question, as I understand it, that is a matter for the Committee on Standards and Privileges in the first instance. I further understand that there was an investigation taking place and that investigation was ongoing. It is a matter for the Committee on Standards and Privileges if it wishes to bring forward a report to the House; it is still in order for the Committee to do that. It is a matter for that Committee to bring that report forward, if it so desires.

Standards of Debate

Mr Speaker: Last Monday, 22 April, a number of issues were raised with me about comments made during the debate on relationships and sexuality education. As is normal practice for my office, I have now reviewed the Official Report of the entire debate. Members may recall that, on 8 April 2024, I made a ruling on a

different exchange at that time. I made two points that are relevant here.

First, Members have a legal right to freedom of expression, which means that they may sometimes choose to express their views forcefully and points may be made that other Members will not agree with, sometimes in terms that other Members would not use themselves.

However, secondly, Members are expected to exercise that freedom of expression within the Assembly's standards of debate. That requires exchanges between Members to demonstrate courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect. The motion last Monday was on an issue on which there were strongly held opposing views. In such circumstances, it is likely that there will be passionate and robust debate. There is nothing wrong with that in itself. However, there were occasions when the behaviour of Members in different parts of the House, in speeches and from a sedentary position, fell short of showing courtesy, good temper, moderation or respect towards other Members or their views. For instance, comments that were made that linked parties to the far right or that associated Members with figures such as Hitler and Mussolini and organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the National Front were entirely inappropriate.

Similarly, extrapolating a party's position on previous legislation on human trafficking and prostitution to associating Members with standing with pimps and those who traffic people into the country was also inappropriate. None of those comments could be considered to have demonstrated courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect. That was a good example of where one or two exchanges can lead to the tone of the remainder of a debate spiralling downwards.

As a number of Members could have been perceived to be involved in the exchanges and behaviour that breach the expected standards of debate, I am not going to take action on this occasion, but I will be writing to a number of

Members to clarify some issues that have been raised. However, for the future, I return to the point that there is a balance between having a full and frank debate that can legitimately be challenged and having civility in exchanges that avoid personal attacks. Therefore, I remind all Members that they should exercise care in the language that they use and be mindful of the need for courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: If Members wish to be called to make a statement, they should indicate so by rising in their place. Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to speak. There will be no interventions.

Cúrsaí in Gaza/Situation in Gaza

Mr Sheehan: Ba mhaith liom labhairt arís ar maidin ar chúrsaí atá ag titim amach in Gaza.

Is deacair a chreidiúint go bhfuil an cinedhíothú ag dul ar aghaidh go fóill, ach ar an drochuair tá.

Shíl muid nach dtiocfadh le rudaí bheith níos measa, ach ansin chuala muid an tseachtain seo caite gur thángthas ar chóir a bheith 400 corp a bhí curtha faoi thalamh thart timpeall ar an dá otharlann, al-Shifa agus Nasser.

Ina measc bhí páistí, mná, seandaoine, dochtúirí agus daoine eile a bhí ag obair sna hotharlanna nó a bhí ann le cóir leighis a fháil.

I gcuid mhór cásanna bhí a lámha ceangailte taobh thiar dá ndroim, agus bhí fianaise ann go ndearnadh céasadh ar chuid mhór acu chomh maith. Creidtear fosta gur cuireadh cuid acu faoi thalamh agus iad go fóill beo.

Tá sé deacair a shamhlú go bhfuil daoine ann a bheadh sásta é sin a dhéanamh, daoine nach bhfuil croí ar bith iontu agus a dtiocfadh leo cruálacht agus drochíde a thabhairt ar dhaoine eile.

Ach in ainneoin na cinedhíothaithe, tá léas dóchais ann leis na hagóidí atá ar siúl i láthair na huair in ollscoileanna fud fad Stát Aontaithe Mheiriceá. Chuirfeadh sé na seascaidí i gcuimhne duit nuair a bhí na hagóidí ag dul ar aghaidh i gcoinne an chogaidh i Vítneam.

Tá míléamh ollmhór déanta ag Rialtas Iosrael. Chreid siad go dtiocfadh leo na mílte Palaistíneach a mharú gan bheith freagrach as. Ach tá dearcadh an phobail i gcoitinne ina n-aghaidh. Tá an pobal ar fud an domhain ag teacht le chéile i gcoinne an tsléachta.

Ba cheart don phobal idirnáisiúnta brú a chur ar Iosrael, go háirithe na Stáit Aontaithe, an Ghearmáin agus an Bhreatain, chun stad a chur leis an slad. Caithfidh sos cogaidh a bheith ann anois. Agus má bhíonn an choimhlint seo le teacht chun deiridh caithfidh próiseas fiúntach síochána bheith ann. Ní bheidh réiteach ann go dtí go mbeidh Palaistín

neamhspleách ann a bheidh saor ó ansmacht coilíneach.

[Translation: I would like to speak again this morning on events in Gaza.

It is difficult to believe that the genocide is continuing, but, unfortunately, it is.

We thought that the situation could not get any worse. However, then we heard last week that almost 400 bodies had been found buried around two hospitals, al-Shifa and Nasser.

Among the bodies were children, women, old people, doctors and others who had been working in the hospitals or who had gone there for treatment.

In many cases, their hands had been tied behind their backs and the bodies showed evidence of torture as well. It is also believed that some of them had been buried alive.

It is difficult to imagine that there are people who would be prepared to inflict that type of cruelty and barbarity on other human beings.

Despite the ongoing genocide, there is a ray of hope with the protests that are taking place in universities right across the USA. They are reminiscent of the protests in the sixties against the Vietnam War.

The Israeli Government have made a massive miscalculation. They thought that they could slaughter thousands of Palestinians without being held to account for their actions.

However, public opinion is against them. People around the world are coming together to oppose the slaughter.

The international community, especially the US, Germany and Britain, need to bring pressure to bear on the Israelis to stop the killing.

There must be a ceasefire now.

If this conflict is to come to an end, there must be a meaningful peace process. There will be no resolution until there is an independent Palestinian state, free from colonial oppression.]

Limavady United Football Club

Mr Robinson: I offer my congratulations to Limavady United Football Club, which has won

the Playr-Fit premier intermediate league championship. That will see the club play in the championship next season, and, given the team that has been built by the manager, Paul Owens, which he has retained and added to, I have no doubt that it will hold its own in that league. I also want to congratulate the club on being treble winners this season, having also won the North West Cup and the Craig Memorial Cup. To add to their credit, Alex Pomeroy, the club's key target man, was awarded the premier intermediate player of the year.

I had the opportunity to watch the Roesiders on a number of occasions, and, indeed, I enjoyed the final home game of the season, where they proudly and deservedly lifted the league-winning trophy. I previously invited the sports Minister to visit the club, and, when his diary permits, the club will have an opportunity to showcase its trophy haul to him.

The club has an illustrious history dating back to the late 1880s, and its triumphs this season will only add to the rich list of local footballing honours that it holds. Had the late David Brewster still been with us, who wrote many a piece on player appearances and, indeed, compiled books on the history of the club, he would have been kicking every ball. He would have spent Saturday evening smoking his pipe in one hand, his Limavady United scarf in the other, with, on his desk, his famous fax to Manchester City, in which he offered to take Carlos Tevez on loan, as long as Manchester City continued to pay his £200,000 a week wage. I have no doubt that the place that we call heaven will have been a noisy place on Saturday night.

I commend the management, players and, of course, the band of loyal Limavady United supporters who follow and assist the club, week in and week out. The success of Limavady United adds to the number of sporting achievements in the town of late, and long may it continue.

Paid Carers' Leave

Ms Eastwood: I speak in support of the Carers NI campaign for paid carers' leave. At first glance, such a policy could support 1,000 unpaid carers. People want to work, but we keep putting barriers in their way. We know that around 220,000 people in Northern Ireland are providing unpaid care for family members and friends. The people whom they care for need them, and we as a society depend on them.

Carers are having to juggle jobs, family life, bills, home life and other responsibilities, all whilst caring for loved ones. It is easy to talk about carers and not put faces to names, so I want to take you through some people whom I have come across in the past few weeks and months as I listened to people's stories on this matter. Last week, I met three incredible young carers — Nikita, Paul and Ella — all of whom have cared for a parent or a sibling or, indeed, a combination of the two since they were able to do so. That has included their giving care to those people whilst in primary school.

Incredibly, all those young people want to work: indeed, they love working and love that aspect of having something outside of themselves and having a different identity. As I am only just starting to learn personally, being a carer is all-consuming and often engulfing. We want to give those people an opportunity, and we think that getting behind the Carers NI proposal for paid carers' leave is a way to do that.

Indeed, as the Carers NI report notes, we need to remember that a huge number of those people will, indeed, love their careers, as I said. We also need to remember, however, when reading through the report, that behind those people are stories with unique circumstances.

Another person whom I have met is a constituent of mine called Alison. She is desperate to work and loves her job, but she has been forced out of work because she does not have the supports in place to allow her to work. She has had to leave her job due to the pressure of caring and now feels that she is taking a step backwards in her career and her life. Indeed, in her own words, she says that she feels as though she is starting off back at the start, where she was 10 or 15 years ago, losing everything that she fought so hard to build up for her and her son.

While GB has passed legislation for unpaid carers' leave, we in Northern Ireland have a special opportunity to take a step ahead, do what is right and bring forward legislation to introduce paid carers' leave. Thirty trade union leaders, economists, carer charities and women's sector groups have all backed the Carers NI campaign, and so do we. That is why I urge the Economy Minister to include provision for paid carers' leave in the employment Bill that, I hope, he will bring forward very soon. I trust that that will have the support of the House.

12.15 pm

Stephen Grimason

Mr Nesbitt: I stand to pay tribute to one of the finest public-spirited citizens this place has ever seen. Stephen Grimason passed away at the weekend after a long illness. It followed an even longer career as a public servant. I could simply list his career chronologically, but I think that it is much more important to discuss his character. However, for the record, Stephen was born in Lurgan. He was a reporter with the 'Lurgan Mail' and the 'Ulster Star' and became editor of the 'Banbridge Chronicle' at the tender age of 27. Then he went to Belfast, where he worked for the 'News Letter' and the 'Sunday News' and — the big move — as political editor of BBC Northern Ireland. Then the scoop of scoops: that famous moment in April 1998 in the car park of Castle Buildings, just halfway down the hill outside, when he gave the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement its first public outing as he uttered those famous six words:

"I have it in my hand."

Stephen always said that he would take the name of his source to the grave, and, as ever, he has been true to his word. As journalist Kathryn Johnston put it, he was:

"A wonderful, scrupulous and ethical journalist."

Earlier this year, Stephen and his good friend Ken Reid, the long-time political correspondent at UTV, were honoured with chancellor's medals at Queen's University. It was a bittersweet night: great to see them in public again, but tinged with that unspoken suspicion that it was to be for the last time. They did not just reminisce; they revealed, including something that very few people knew. While they remained fierce rivals at all times, beyond the competition, there was collaboration. Sometimes you needed to be in two places at once, so when Stephen interviewed somebody, he sometimes asked them to turn 90 degrees to create a different background and interviewed them again — the second interview mysteriously turning up in the UTV edit suite.

After journalism, he worked for the Executive here. Yesterday, Sam McBride of the 'Belfast Telegraph' wrote:

"When he was Stormont's"

director of communications,

"I spent years bombarding him with awkward questions. He never held it against

me, and when he retired he'd ring up with encouragement, advice, and tip-offs."

I will finish with a word cloud of what people have been saying about Stephen: "scrupulous"; "even-handed"; "intelligent"; "funny"; "compassionate"; "a tireless mentor"; "encouraging"; team player"; "trusted"; "authentic"; "courageous"; "kind"; and "brilliant".

My thoughts are his wife and family, his many, many friends and his countless admirers. Rest easy, Stephen Grimason.

Animal Welfare

Ms Hunter: I wish to raise the lack of appropriate animal welfare in Northern Ireland. In the past three years, in the Causeway Coast and Glens area, we have seen over 1,000 incidents of animal cruelty. Across Northern Ireland, animal welfare is not regarded as a priority. The current process for reporting such cruelty is not only not fit for purpose but absolutely appalling. There is a significant lack of investment in protecting our animals here, and the current process has not worked and does not work.

Over the past few months, we have seen dogs drowned in Tyrone and dogs buried in Co Derry. We clearly have a profound issue with the treatment of animals here. Not only that, but there is a lack of prosecutions for evil perpetrators who maliciously carry out horrific acts towards innocent animals. When we look at sentencing, we see that, when the perpetrators are caught and brought to court, they receive painfully lenient sentences. In one case, for example, a man held responsible for what was defined as a barbaric injury towards a dog got just nine months. Nine months. Knowing that, we must ask this: where is the deterrent for cruelty towards animals? We need to relook at the lack of lengthy sentences here for such barbaric actions. Abuse towards animals is widely recognised as a precursor for abuse towards human beings, and it is important to acknowledge that here today.

I recently had meetings with two animal charities in my consistency: the Causeway Coast Dog Rescue and Dog Leap in Limavady, both of which are led by incredible ladies who work so passionately on this issue. They have gone above and beyond to protect animals where local councils have, I believe, undeniably failed. There is an unbelievably obvious issue here: when you come across an abused animal after 5.00 pm or at the weekend, there is absolutely nobody available and no number to

call. That issue needs to be urgently addressed. It is not a failing system but a failed system, and we must act. There is also a huge lack of clarity on how much power and training local councils and the PSNI have in the handling of animals.

In the North, we urgently require an animal welfare strategy. Otherwise, how will we know which direction meets the needs of the community and what services we require? An understanding of the financial resources available is crucial. We need to know how to put services into place. Currently, the lack of data on animal cruelty incidents is unbelievable. There are challenges with tracking, and the level of transparency when a report is made is truly shocking.

The rising costs of vets' bills are crippling. When they come across injured animals, charities cannot afford to help each and every one of them. We need to think seriously about how we prioritise the health and well-being of vulnerable animals here. They look to us to protect them. I will be demanding action from the Minister of Agriculture. The current legislation is as weak as water. It is time for change.

Childcare

Mrs Mason: The £25 million investment in childcare by our Minister of Finance, Caoimhe Archibald, now puts the wheels in motion to deliver high-quality and affordable childcare. Funding to kick-start the initial actions that a cross-departmental working group on childcare proposed shows the Minister's commitment to working with all parties to deliver high-quality and affordable childcare. It is a positive first step by the Finance Minister that reaffirms the Executive's commitment on childcare, but that commitment must also be a priority for the Minister of Education and his Department. We now need the Education Minister to move urgently and introduce his plans for a bespoke childcare scheme that provides good-quality, affordable and sustainable childcare for families and providers.

Childcare costs are currently far too high and unaffordable for many. At a time of rising living costs, childcare costs place more and more financial pressure on families, providers and childcare workers. A bespoke childcare model must meet the needs of all children and young people. It must cater to the acute needs of children with special educational needs, children with physical disabilities and children who speak English as a second language. Delivering high-quality, affordable childcare is

absolutely essential to ensuring that our young people get the very best start in life. I look forward to working with all parties, childcare providers, workers and families to help shape the much-needed new childcare strategy.

D-Day: 80th Anniversary Commemorations

Mr Kingston: I recognise and welcome the fact that, last week, the grounds here at Stormont played a part in this year's D-Day 80th anniversary commemorations. Last week, I was contacted by Patricia Pedlow of the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association Northern Ireland about the pipers' 80-day countdown to D-Day. Pipers are playing the tune 'Highland Laddie' at prominent venues across the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man at 8.00 am for 80 days in the run-up to the 80th anniversary of D-Day on 6 June 2024. I am grateful to officials here at Parliament Buildings who agreed to the request. At 8.00 am last Thursday, Patricia played at the bottom of the steps in front of Parliament Buildings. Likewise, I obtained approval for her to play in front of Belfast City Hall at 8.00 am on Saturday, at which we were joined by the High Sheriff of Belfast, Councillor Sammy Douglas. We are very grateful to pipers Patricia Pedlow of Ballydonagh Pipe Band and David Hanna of Altnaveigh Memorial Pipe Band for ensuring that Northern Ireland participated in the national commemoration for 10 days. During those 10 days, they, between them, also played 'Highland Laddie' in front of Newry town hall, in Bessbrook, in Kilkeel, in Rathfriland, at Newry cemetery, at Lisburn civic centre, at the Barbican Gate in Antrim and at the fort in Royal Hillsborough.

The national initiative is led by piper John Millin and his son, Jacob. John's father, piper Bill Millin, famously played the pipes while under fire during the D-Day landings in Normandy. A Canadian, he was the personal piper of Simon Fraser, 15th Lord Lovat and commander of the British 1st Special Service Brigade on D-Day, who instructed him to play during the ferocious landing scene. Millin played 'Highland Laddie', 'The Road to the Isles' and 'All the Blue Bonnets are over the Border' as his comrades fell around him on Sword Beach. He later played as commandos marched on Pegasus Bridge, which was captured. Millin's actions on D-day were portrayed in the 1962 film 'The Longest Day'. This commemoration is a fitting tribute, with historic resonance, recognising the brave soldiers who were part of the D-Day landings who sacrificed so much helping to

secure the freedom that we all enjoy today. We will remember them.

Israel-Palestine War: Situation in Gaza

Ms Nicholl: The first Member's statement that ever I made was on the situation in Gaza and the call for an urgent ceasefire, the immediate end of Israel's siege in Gaza, the immediate release of the hostages by Hamas, a sustainable humanitarian corridor for aid to reach Gaza, the international community to do more and international community-led mediation to ensure a two-state solution.

I also talked about how I had met a group of film-makers during the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and how fascinated they were by the mundane, including how our Committees operated, how we were able to discuss and put forward legislation and policy and the fact that we had so many different views on things but were still able to work together. Now that the Assembly is up and running, they have returned. They are here today, in the Gallery, and it is wonderful to see them. I think that that is a reminder that we are so lucky to have what we have and for what has been achieved by so many of the people in this Chamber who paved the way for peace and for us to have these conversations about carers, animal welfare and other things that we are doing in the community. That is so wonderful, remarkable and precious, and we can reflect on that today and hold on to that for the future. They are here today, and, if any Members are about, I know that they would love to meet you and hear about what we are doing in the Assembly and how we are moving forward. I know that everyone in the House is sending our very best wishes to everyone in Palestine and Israel with a deep hope that peace can be found at last.

Smear Tests: Misreadings

Ms McLaughlin: I rise to speak on behalf of many women in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area and across Northern Ireland who are deeply concerned about the reports of smear tests that have been misread and which have led to devastating consequences for women. One woman came to my office and said, "It is very hard to live with the knowledge that I didn't get cancer. I was given cancer". That is how she feels. Her smear tests were misread in 2011, 2014 and 2017. In 2021, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer and had to undergo a hysterectomy.

Since 2017, we know that at least 12 serious adverse incidents have been registered in our trust area. It was really important that the Southern Trust undertook the previous review, and I know that any woman who hears of a review will be, understandably, really scared, as will the men and the families in their lives. It is not my intention to stir up fear today, and I want to be really clear that it is in women's interests to come forward and that these tests are absolutely vital to detect the early signs of cervical cancer and then to prevent the disease. I will continue to urge women to do so. It is vital that women come forward for their smear tests; it can literally save your life to do so. However, let us be honest. To ensure that as many women as possible do come forward, we need to make sure that every woman has the confidence in the health service in the first place. We need to ensure that these concerns are dealt with and that the Minister of Health and the chief executives of all the trusts can reassure the public on this issue. Trust and confidence are absolutely crucial, and, in the meantime, I encourage other women who might have been affected to come forward and share their stories. I have asked the Minister of Health whether he will start a public inquiry into cervical cancer screening, and I look forward to working with the Minister and, indeed, his successor and colleagues from across the Chamber to ensure that women have confidence in these services.

12.30 pm

Larne FC and Carrick Rangers FC

Ms Brownlee: I congratulate Larne FC on being crowned Irish Premiership champions for the second year in a row. Larne has been on an incredible journey, not only with its football club but as a town and a community. The area has been literally transformed and is now thriving with community passion along with great football. I say, "Huge congratulations" to Larne FC for its well-deserved first-place finish. However, it would be remiss of me, as a Carrickfergus girl, not to also acknowledge Carrick Rangers Football Club for its campaign this season. It has finished in its highest-ever position — seventh — with its highest-ever points total — 50 — with its most wins in a Premiership season — 15 — and with a cheeky European play-off qualification. I give a huge "Well done and congratulations" to the Amber Army for its season of many firsts and solid performance. East Antrim is leading the way in football, much to the dissatisfaction of my colleagues.

Migration

Mr Allister: I want to raise the controversy that the Dublin Government have whipped up about unwanted migrants crossing into the territory of the Republic, it is said, from Northern Ireland. There is a rich irony about that complaint, because the same Justice Minister and the same Government vehemently opposed the very idea of so much as a camera on the international frontier. At the time, Helen McEntee said:

"We have been very, very clear from day one, there cannot be a physical border and that means ruling out cameras, that means ruling out technology, that means ruling out anything that would imply a border on the island of Ireland, it is not an option for us".

Maybe, today, they wish that there was a border, because, then, there could be the restraints that they ask for. You reap what you sow, and the Dublin Government are reaping what they sowed in this regard.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said:

"My focus is on the United Kingdom and securing our borders."

I hope that he meant it, because he failed lamentably in securing our borders over Brexit when he partitioned the United Kingdom with a regulatory and customs border down the Irish Sea. That is a template that every unionist should warn him not to even contemplate in further placating the intransigent Irish Government, because, no doubt, they would love to see immigration passport checks and the rest of it at the Irish Sea border. I trust that the Prime Minister, when he says that he is in the business of securing the borders of the United Kingdom, means it and it is the border that is the international frontier that will be secured.

Whatever the problems of the Irish Republic, they are largely of their own making. Indeed, if they had not been so intransigent, they would have had infrastructure that would have aided in dealing with this situation. Now they are paying the cost.

Freedom Flotilla: Aid to Gaza

Mr Carroll: I salute and acknowledge the important work done by the Freedom Flotilla, which is seeking to break the siege of Gaza and bring much-needed aid. It is an international aid flotilla with activists from across the world

bravely taking part. Whilst Governments across the world send bombs to Israel to drop on the people of Gaza, those activists are bringing almost 6,000 tons of much-needed aid. As the Freedom Flotilla says: "When Governments fail, we sail". On that boat is Tyrone man, John Hurson, a long-time Palestine Solidarity Campaign activist. I wish him and all the flotilla the very best of luck and solidarity.

That important act of solidarity really exposes the situation starkly. On the one hand, you have Israel backed by the US, the highest military power in human history. Instead of all that technological skill and resource being used to help people, it is being used to commit a live-stream genocide. On the other hand, it is up to activists, volunteers and campaigners to expose Israel and call out its obscene actions.

Gaza is the end of the world that never ends. It is a daily nightmare for those who are trying to live there. Six months in, we daily see slaughter, massacre and hospitals and buildings being blown to smithereens. At least 35,000 people have been killed and 100,000 injured, not to mention the people still under the rubble. Palestine is the front line. It is the front line when it comes to facing the brutality of imperialism and settler colonialism; standing up to a brutal thug and bully who decides who lives, who dies and who lives where, with a brutal computer-assisted AI weapons system that slaughters on a mass scale; and resisting evictions from homes and towns. Solidarity with those on the flotilla and solidarity with the Palestinians.

Executive Committee Business

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 29 April 2024. — [Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister).]

Regulation (EU) 2023/2419: Applicability Motion

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): I beg to move

That Regulation (EU) 2023/2419 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 October 2023 on the labelling of organic pet food should be added to the Windsor framework by the United Kingdom and the European Union within the Joint Committee in Accordance with article 13(4) of that framework.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that, as the motion relates to legislation, there should be no time limit on the debate. Please open the debate on the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Before I start, I offer my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Stephen Grimason at this very difficult time. There is no doubt that Stephen made a huge contribution to journalism and was front and centre of some of the biggest moments in our political history, including the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. He was a much respected director of communications for our Executive, and he will, no doubt, be missed by all those who knew and loved him. I wanted to put that on record on behalf of the Assembly.

The deputy First Minister and I jointly tabled the applicability motion that regulation 2023/2419 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 October 2023 on the labelling of organic pet food be added to the Windsor framework, within the Joint Committee, in accordance with article 13(4) of that framework. On 28 March, the Speaker informed the Executive Office that notification of a new EU act had been received from the British Government's Windsor framework task force. The new act — regulation 2023/2419 of the European Parliament and of the Council — relates to the labelling of organic pet food products and is subject to the

applicability motion process set out in the Windsor Framework (Democratic Scrutiny) Regulations 2024. The notification was accompanied by an explanatory memorandum drafted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The Speaker has shared the notification and the explanatory memorandum with the Assembly.

The regulation was adopted by the EU on 9 October 2023. It entered into force on 30 October 2023, and the new provisions will be applicable from 1 May 2024. The regulation extends the labelling and production requirements that are in place for organic food for human consumption and livestock feed to organic pet food. The EU is seeking to apply the measure using the process set out in article 13(4) of the Windsor framework. It will apply here only if agreed at the EU-UK Joint Committee.

The explanatory memorandum explains that the regulation would extend the same labelling requirements to organic pet food as currently exist for other organic food. That means that pet food will need to be produced with at least 95% organic agricultural ingredients if it is to be labelled as organic. It is highlighted that producers here currently have to comply with more stringent regulations in order to ensure that their pet food can be marketed as organic and identifies the challenges due to the lack of availability of appropriate organic ingredients.

The British Government advise that, if introduced here, the regulation would bring our production requirements for organic pet food into alignment with production requirements in Britain. That is because, prior to the regulation, pet food produced here needed to be made with 100% organic ingredients, whereas the requirement for producers in Britain mandated only 95% organic ingredients. The explanatory memorandum emphasises the Government's position that we should continue to have unfettered access to the UK internal market and notes that, if adopted, the regulation will enable producers here to use a single standard when producing and marketing organic pet food, removing the need for them to apply more stringent standards than their competitors in Britain. That view is reinforced in the explanatory memorandum, where DEFRA notes that it does not expect:

"any material impact on trade ... save for a limited positive benefit from the creation of a common standard for organic pet food production".

In the explanatory memorandum, DEFRA also explains that, if the regulation were to apply here, its position is that it should not apply to pet food moving here under the NI retail movement scheme, as existing arrangements with the EU allow for the recognition of comparable rules in that regard. It notes that the position would be subject to engagement with the European Commission.

The explanatory memorandum outlines business impacts, identifying that local producers may benefit from the more flexible approach to classifying organic pet food products set out in the regulation, which brings the EU regulatory framework in line with the rules applied in Britain and would have the effect of creating a common production standard. DEFRA has explained that the potential impact of not adopting the regulation is that local businesses could be placed at a disadvantage relative to competitors in the South of Ireland, who would automatically be able to take advantage of the greater flexibility provided by this EU law when marketing their products across the EU.

DEFRA also draws our attention to the fact that no concerns were raised about the regulation during its engagement with relevant organic certification bodies, pet food trade associations and manufacturers here. It also highlights the fact that the majority of producers of organic pet food in Britain already comply with the requirements of the regulation in order to produce goods that can be sold in the British and EU markets.

In summary, the regulation relates to a comparatively small and defined area of trade and business. Its impact in any direction should, therefore, not be overstated. However, in the event that the regulation is not adopted, we expect the impact on trade to be negative from the perspective both of internal trade and of trade between us and the EU. There is a risk that local businesses trading with the EU could be placed at a disadvantage relative to businesses in the South, which would automatically be able to take advantage of the greater flexibility provided by this EU law when marketing their products across the EU.

We jointly tabled the motion to allow the Assembly to debate and vote on the addition of the regulation to the Windsor framework.

Mr McGuigan (The Chairperson of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee): I will make a few brief remarks as Chair of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee. At its meeting on 21

March, the Committee considered correspondence from the British Cabinet Office that indicated that the European Commission had confirmed its intention to seek to add the act to the list of EU laws applicable here under the Windsor framework through the article 13(4) Joint Committee process. The correspondence further indicated that the Assembly would be formally notified of the act subsequent to further discussions with the European Commission at the earliest opportunity.

Although the Committee does not have an explicit function to carry out inquiries or any other scrutiny in response to a notification that a new act has been published, the early alert from the British Cabinet Office provided time, albeit limited, for the Committee to gather evidence on the impact of the act. Specifically, the Committee requested a written departmental assessment of impact. We also heard oral evidence from departmental officials, and we sought views from key representatives of business and civil society that were identified as being affected or who would be affected if the act were to be added to the Windsor framework. Subsequently, a letter was issued to all MLAs, informing them that the evidence gathered was published and available on the Committee web page. I hope that Members found that useful in preparing for the debate.

I will make a few additional comments as a Sinn Féin MLA. Obviously, Sinn Féin will support the applicability motion. The regulation extends the labelling and production requirements that are in place for organic food for human consumption and livestock feed to organic pet food. Prior to the regulation, to be considered organic, pet food needed to be produced with 100% organic ingredients; under the regulation, to be labelled organic, pet food will need to be produced with at least 95% organic agriculture ingredients. There are currently no producers of organic pet food in the North, but that could change, and the legislation could encourage that position, because producers in the North would benefit from greater flexibility, as pointed out in DEFRA's explanatory memorandum. No businesses or trade associations raised any concerns about the regulation.

To conclude, a DAERA official who presented to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee, said:

"There appear to be no downsides to this; in fact, it would make sure that, if there were producers of organic pet food in Northern Ireland, the implementation of the act would align the position with GB and with the position in the rest of the EU."

12.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: I will speak uncharacteristically briefly, perhaps, on the motion. The SDLP — the Opposition — will support today's applicability motion. The previous Member to speak, Philip McGuigan, who is the Chair of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee, outlined the fact that no trade bodies raised any objections to the regulation. Where practical outcomes are concerned, there are no organic pet food producers in Northern Ireland, but, clearly, the continued realisation of the benefits of dual market access requires us to maximise the ability to export seamlessly into both markets.

Given that there does not appear to be any downside for any future producers — there are no producers of organic pet food here currently — there seems to be no good reason for us to not agree to the new law applying to Northern Ireland. I will not go much further. I was thinking of saying that should organic pet food be produced in Northern Ireland, it would be of a very fine pedigree, but, of course, that would be a pathetic pun to lighten the mood in the Assembly.

Other than that, we support the new law. It is important that we have the ability to debate it. We have always said that, when there are debates about changes and improvements to the protocol, which is now called the Windsor framework, we are happy to acknowledge that it is good to have increased scrutiny. That is what is happening in the Chamber today. We support the applicability motion.

Mr Brooks: The Democratic Unionist Party will support the motion. In restoring the institutions for the good of Northern Ireland as a whole, we sought to restore unionist confidence by ensuring that the concerns of our community were heard and systems put in place to protect our trade within our UK borders and our place in the UK single market. We have successfully delivered changes to article 13 of the protocol to give locally elected representatives a say on whether new or amended EU laws should apply in Northern Ireland and have seen already that the applicability motion mechanism has allowed unionist representatives at the Assembly to vote against the adoption of EU rules that relate to non-agricultural GIs.

The issues with new EU legislation on dental amalgam have been well documented in the press. Should no reasonable accommodation be reached with Brussels, I suspect that it is likely that the available mechanisms will be used to object to those rules as well, ensuring

our ability to remain aligned with UK rules, which, in that case, are not only beneficial but absolutely necessary.

The party has said, however, that it will not use the mechanism on every piece of forthcoming legislation, but with reference to the impact of relevant legislation on the people of Northern Ireland. This piece of legislation brings us into line with UK rules. To vote it down would be punitive and fruitless. It would not in any way lead to the removal of all EU law. Speaking personally, such removal is desirable, but it will not be attained by any vote today, and deliberately voting for an outcome that will, at best, force continued divergence with GB, is irrational. Those shouting from the sidelines have no plan, only rhetoric. From what I can ascertain, our detractors agree that the outcome is desirable, but the route is objectionable. I understand that. Indeed, I do not disagree in sentiment, but I do not agree that we should wilfully prolong needless, even potentially, economically harmful divergence with the rest of the UK, knowing that to do so would not result in any move from the UK Government to rectify the same.

We recognise that some EU law remains in Northern Ireland. Some try to misrepresent our position when we have been clear: we argued that the people of Northern Ireland, through their elected representatives, must have a say in the laws that govern them. While removing EU law is desirable, the DUP has focused on tangible, practical outcomes and on preventing regulatory borders from emerging. The DUP has made it a key objective to tackle the democratic deficit created by the protocol. The debate is further evidence of our success in giving the Assembly a meaningful say over future laws that apply in Northern Ireland. The safeguards against future uncontrolled divergence delivered by this party were a step forward from where the negotiation began. At no stage was it argued to be perfect, rather that we would bank the progress and work to build on it.

I recognise that, at times, it is complex and convoluted. I suspect that none of us who sit on the Democratic Scrutiny Committee would argue with that, but it has given the unionist population of Northern Ireland safeguards that we did not previously have. It has extracted from the UK Government and Brussels concessions that they would not previously give and that, our detractors said, they would not give; indeed, it was said that they would not negotiate at all.

Our detractors have no plan. They have never offered an alternative road map for the way forward. They can certainly articulate idealism — even, in many cases, in terms that would be desirable to many of us on these Benches — but they offer no means by which, in today's Northern Ireland, those ideals can be delivered. It is this party that is willing to lead, make difficult decisions and do what is required to move beyond stirring but empty words to deliver tangible progress.

Mr Tennyson: Like others, I intend to be uncharacteristically brief on the motion.

My party's overriding economic priority throughout the Brexit process has been to protect and uphold Northern Ireland's dual market access, giving us a unique and privileged competitive advantage. Sustaining that dual market access will require parties to take a pragmatic approach to applicability motions and to democratic scrutiny more broadly, prioritising the substance of motions over party politics or ideology.

If we are to take full advantage of the opportunities before us, we owe it to our business community to offer the maturity, certainty and stability that it so desires. In that vein, I support the motion, and, at the outset, I welcome the fact that the First and deputy First Ministers have managed to jointly table the motion on this occasion. It is a genuinely positive step, and I believe — I hope, rather — that we have crossed the Rubicon in our approach to dealing with EU law, which is important, albeit technical, in this instance.

Organic products are a highly regulated area. For a product to bear an organic logo, it must be subject to a fairly robust process. The motion before us is about a specific area: organic pet food. In effect, the regulation provides additional flexibility to producers, meaning that products containing 95% organic ingredients can be marketed as such. Whilst there are no pet food manufacturers in Northern Ireland currently registered as organic, we have to be cognisant of the fact that there may well be those who wish to enter the market in the future, and the regulation guarantees them that additional flexibility.

The regulation not only brings pet food into line with standards for human and livestock food, which sounds eminently sensible, but enhances alignment across these islands, moving us to a common production standard across the UK and EU to ensure that any pet food producers who seek to operate from Northern Ireland will continue to have the benefit of accessing both

markets. Again, that is a huge advantage. In some ways, it is small, but it is not insignificant, and we should all be advocates of it.

It is, however, a matter of regret that applicability motions are another element of Assembly procedure that is subject to cross-community vote. When it comes to Brexit, we talk on numerous occasions about the importance of cross-community consent. However, I am conscious that the people whom I represent are not properly included in that process. My party will continue to articulate and raise concerns about that issue.

We are happy to support the motion.

Dr Aiken: I congratulate the First and deputy First Ministers on taking an interest in the applicability motion. Members will remember the last applicability motion that came before the Chamber. I raised several questions from the Floor about when somebody was going to take ownership of that applicability motion, but no one did until the last possible minute. Rightly, it was rejected.

On this occasion, the Ulster Unionist Party will support the applicability motion. To do otherwise would create a divergence from the rest of the United Kingdom. In the complexity that is EU rules and regulations, Members need to realise that, on some occasions, we cannot be seen to diverge from the rest of our nation. It is important that we recognise these issues.

I welcome Mr Tennyson to the Democratic Scrutiny Committee, whose members will know that, at that Committee, on several occasions, I have raised the point that we are not curious enough about the regulations that are coming forward. I am glad to see that our Committee now takes a more proactive approach; indeed, we have already heard the issues about dental amalgam. I hope that those issues will be raised in the Joint Committee and that we do not get to the point where we have to debate them on the Floor. The issue should be sorted before we go ahead.

I encourage the Chair and members of our Committee to remain curious, because many elements coming through will challenge many in the Chamber not just on an intercommunity basis but for all of us on where we are likely to be. It is important that we continue to do our horizon scanning of what is going on. I am glad that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are here. They need to look closely at how we resource what we are doing. We need to ensure that our office in Brussels is ready to interact as legislation comes through. We also

need to make sure that we have sufficiently well-trained staff supporting the Northern Ireland Executive and the Democratic Scrutiny Committee who understand the legislation and the rules as they come through. As a warning, First Minister and deputy First Minister, I have been in communication and conversation with our friends in Norway, who have a lot of difficulty in dealing with EU rules and regulations, even though they have to accept most of them. I also took the matter up recently with a senior Estonian politician, who said exactly the same thing. We need to be more proactive; we need to look at how we resource these things; and we need to be prepared to work closely with all stakeholders to make sure that we understand the challenges that we are about to face.

Once again, I congratulate the First Minister and deputy First Minister for actually taking ownership of something. For that, we should all be grateful.

Mr Allister: The primary focus of the debate to this point has been on the content of this EU law. I want to shift the focus to the much more important issue of the constitutional affront that the motion is. That constitutional affront can be summarised in this way: the motion amounts to an acknowledgement of and assent to the fact that, on what is patently a devolved issue — namely how we prepare animal foods — only the EU can now make those laws for us. The Assembly cannot legislate on the issue. The Westminster Parliament cannot legislate for this part of the United Kingdom on the issue. Only a foreign jurisdiction — the EU — can formulate and pass laws that touch on the issue. Of course, it is not just this issue; it is every issue that is recited, to the tune of hundreds of laws, in annex 2 of the protocol.

Some do not want to face up to that constitutional affront. Some, of course, embrace it, because they want to see Northern Ireland being subjugated under the EU. Those who claim that they do not are not facing up to the situation in which a pretty mundane law can only ever now be made by a foreign Parliament. It cannot be made by the Parliament of the United Kingdom or the Northern Ireland Assembly; it can be made only by a foreign Parliament.

The motion is well named as an "applicability motion" because, by our slavish acceptance of it, we assent to the applicability of the appalling and absurd situation in which only a foreign Parliament can legislate for this area of law in Northern Ireland. That is what the Assembly is being asked to assent to. That is so

constitutionally absurd and such a constitutional affront that, frankly, I cannot and will not support it. Is it not the ultimate absurdity to be told in the debate by the DUP — the party that told us, in the words of Sammy Wilson:

"there should be no EU law applying to this part of the United Kingdom.",

which was repeated by the then leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson and by multiple Members of the House — that EU law was a red line?

We were told that it should not be applied to this part of the United Kingdom as we are not part of the EU. Today, however, the DUP or, at least, the DUP Members who are here — there are some notable absentees — has come to the point of telling us that the only way to attain parity with Great Britain is to vote through this EU law. Think of it: the only way to get parity with Great Britain is to vote through an EU law, because that law just happens to bring the EU into line with Great Britain. It may well be sensible for the EU to reduce its unattainable 100%-organic requirement. It may well be sensible for it to come into line with the 95% requirement that prevails elsewhere, but, when it comes to Northern Ireland, it should be the Assembly or, at least, Parliament that makes that decision, not the foreign EU Parliament.

1.00 pm

We have been told that there are "no downsides". Sorry, but there is a huge constitutional downside. Those who have rolled over and assent to that are showing their disregard for that constitutional affront and, of course, for what, we were told, was their unalterable position. They say, "If you don't vote for it, there will be divergence". No, there will not be. We know from the explanatory paper that the British Government will assent to it anyhow, but we will give them cover.

What about tomorrow? What if GB decides, as part of further deregulation, to deregulate organic pet food to a standard below 95% and goes down to 90%? Remember, the British Government are conducting a review of all their legislation on organic products. No publication of that is expected until the end of 2025, but the legislation is subject to review. What then? What if GB goes to 90%? Hapless Northern Ireland, supposedly an integral part of the United Kingdom, remains trapped by the EU law and subject to the 95% delineation. There is no assurance of parity. The only assurance is of subservience to a foreign Parliament. Sadly, unsurprisingly for some but surprisingly for

others, that is the position to which DUP Members and Ulster Unionist Members in the House have got themselves. They are embracing a situation in which, if any such product were to be produced in Northern Ireland, it would not be labelled as produce of Northern Ireland. Article 4 of the regulation makes it clear that it would have on it the EU logo and EU labelling, underscoring the fact that we are subservient to EU law.

This is a situation in which Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, is being subjected to colonial EU law, law that we did not make and cannot change but that today we are invited to endorse slavishly. We are asked to endorse colonial rule from the EU. It made the law. It is its law, not ours, and we cannot change it. Regardless of the merits or demerits of the content, it does not deserve democratic assent from anyone who holds to the fundamental democratic principle that, when you live in a place, you should be able to make your own laws, not be subjugated to the laws of a foreign power. I will not give my consent today. I was not sent here to consent to colonial EU rule, and I certainly will not consent to it. The DUP made that mistake on 8 December 2020, when they blindly and foolishly and in the face of warning embraced 45 EU laws, including the one that says you cannot bring British soil into British Ulster. They voted that onto the statute book. Sadly, today, we will have a repeat performance.

One will be interested to see, if we get a vote, who does not vote for this. As I have pointed out, I noted some notable absentees from the divided DUP Benches. I wish they had the courage to vote against — stand up against — EU colonial law and the obscenity and affront that it imposes on a supposed democratic Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly, to wind up the debate on the motion.

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for sending the First Minister and me the formal notification, and I thank Members for their comments and input to the debate on the applicability motion. The case setting out the arguments for the measures contained in Regulation (EU) 2023/2419 being added to the Windsor framework are set out clearly in the UK Government's assessment in its explanatory memorandum accompanying the notification.

Members will be aware now, in some way, of the procedure, having debated the previous

regulation. For an applicability motion to pass, it must receive cross-community support, as outlined in section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. If the threshold is met, the Assembly will have been seen to agree to the addition of the regulation to the relevant annex of the Windsor framework, and that will be adopted at the meeting of the UK-EU Joint Committee. If the applicability motion does not pass, the UK Government will veto the addition of the act to the Windsor framework of the Joint Committee. I believe that that section is still misunderstood by some. If the applicability motion does not pass, the UK Government will veto it. However, they can agree but only if the Minister considers that there are exceptional circumstances or that adoption would not create a new regulatory barrier between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Those were the new arrangements under the 'Safeguarding the Union' paper. In proposing to add a new rule to the Windsor framework on that basis — that it would not create a regulatory border or because there are exceptional circumstances — a UK Government Minister must make a statement to Parliament before doing so, explaining why they are of the opinion that either of those conditions have been met. The UK Government must also have indicated that, in this scenario, they intend to notify the Assembly of that decision.

I will respond to some Members who have made comments during the debate. In my view, the cop-out thing to do on the issue would be to vote against the motion, to leave it to others to make those decisions with the Assembly having no say and no role. Personally speaking and with regard to my party's position, that is exactly why we fought for and secured new mechanisms to give this place a meaningful say on matters that impact the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: No. Apologies.

In particular, those mechanisms were designed to ensure that Members here would have a significant role in stopping potential future divergence. Indeed, the explanatory memorandum on the regulation before us, which was published on 4 April, makes it clear that adopting the regulation would lead to a common production standard across the UK; would avoid NI producers having to abide by a more stringent and costly requirement than firms in GB; would not impede unfettered access in marketing of NI produce in GB; would reduce burdens on local producers in the development of their product ranges, especially in sourcing ingredients; and would not affect

organic pet food that is made to UK standards being sold and circulated in Northern Ireland.

Some Members have referred to the constitutional position in relation to that matter. I firmly believe in the principle of UK parliamentary sovereignty; indeed, I understand that the Member who has just spoken on that does so, too, and agrees with my position that the UK Parliament can legislate if it so wishes. However, today's debate and the position that I have taken on the matter —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I will finish the point. The matter that we are considering relates to an existing provision in annex 2. Annex 2 applies in Northern Ireland through the Windsor framework and did so before that through the protocol arrangements, not because it was imposed by the EU but — sadly, in my view — because the UK Government and our UK sovereign Parliament agreed that the laws and regulations set out in annex 2 apply to Northern Ireland. Our UK sovereign Parliament sets out the fact that the mechanism for changing that relates to the amendment of EU proposals or replacement of the law. As the Member is fully aware, under the Windsor framework, there was no democratic accountability for this place in relation to that decision by the UK sovereign Parliament on the laws that apply here. That is why the new mechanisms — applicability motions and the Stormont brake — were brought in. They were brought in because we — I speak personally and of my party — highlighted the absolutely appalling democratic deficit in our sovereign UK Parliament agreeing a mechanism for rules and regulations to be made automatically in the case of amended law or, in the case of new law, by decision of the UK and EU sitting in the Joint Committee.

It was my party that pushed for the mechanisms to be put in place in order to allow this place to have debate, not because we embrace the concept of annex 2 or we agree with our UK sovereign Parliament on the matter — indeed, we did not; we voted and spoke against it — but because, unlike some Members in the Chamber, I accept the legal reality of where we are. One thing that I will absolutely always do is put Northern Ireland first. I will ensure that Northern Ireland will not be left behind when the rest of the UK moves to a different position. I will not allow Northern Ireland to be in a position in which there is internal regulatory divergence in relation to new or amended law. Is this the way that I would ideally like it to be done? Absolutely not.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I have been clear on many occasions that it is not the way that I would choose to do these things, but, frankly, no pathway on the issue has been set out by any Member or by the UK Government. Therefore, we are exercising the mechanisms that we pushed for and secured so that the House now has a meaningful role in looking at regulations, primarily to ensure that what is done does not create a new regulatory barrier. If, indeed, we were to vote against —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: — Northern Ireland would be the only place across the United Kingdom that would be stuck with the old rule. It is important to clarify for people out there that the regulation is not new and additional but a replacement law and that, if it were not applied in Northern Ireland, the existing regulation would apply, putting us in a different position from that of the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Politics is about hard decisions. I wanted to stand here today to explain why —

Mr Allister: What about taking interventions? Is that too hard?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: — the right thing to do is, of course, to make sure that Northern Ireland is not left behind. Today's decision will be hard for many people. We disagree with the approach taken by the UK sovereign Parliament to the provisions, but those are the provisions that we currently operate under. We are therefore prepared to make the hard decisions on behalf of everyone in Northern Ireland to ensure that there are no new regulatory barriers across the United Kingdom.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The debated regulation relates to a small, defined area of —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take her seat. The Member has clearly decided not to give way. I spoke about this last week and said that, if a Member chooses not to give way two or three times, Members should not continue to chunter from the sidelines. I would appreciate it if Members observed that.

1.15 pm

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I believe that the Member may want to make some point about the constitutional position, but the reality is that the UK sovereign Parliament can decide to make regulations for Northern Ireland if it so chooses. It has chosen the mechanism that we are operating under today.

The debated regulation relates to a small and defined area of trade and business. In the event of it not being adopted, we expect the impact to be negative from the perspective of both internal UK trade and NI-EU trade. It is, therefore, our jointly agreed view that the Assembly should agree to the addition of the regulation to the relevant annex of the Windsor framework. That is a demonstration of the democratic scrutiny mechanisms and the role that this place will have in ensuring that free flow of trade.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 72; Noes 2.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Miss Brogan, Mr Delargy, Mrs Dillon, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mrs Mason, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

UNIONIST:

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Beattie, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

OTHER:

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Ms Eastwood, Ms Egan, Mr Honeyford, Mrs Long, Miss McAllister, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Nicholl, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brooks and Mr McGuigan.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Easton.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister and Mr Easton.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>74</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>[97.3%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>[92.3%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Regulation (EU) 2023/2419 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 October 2023 on the labelling of organic pet food should be added to the Windsor framework by the United Kingdom and the European Union within the Joint Committee in Accordance with article 13(4) of that framework.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease before we move to the next item of business.

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

Hospital Parking Charges Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Order, please, ladies and gentlemen. Can we just settle ourselves down? Thank you very much indeed.

The next item of business is the Further Consideration Stage of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill. I call the Minister of Health to move the Further Consideration Stage.

Moved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): As no amendments have been selected for debate, there is no opportunity to discuss the Hospital Parking Charges Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the

Hospital Parking Charges Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

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

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): I beg to move

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate. Over to you, Minister.

Mr C Murphy: I seek the Assembly's approval for the draft Period Products (the Department for the Economy Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024. These regulations were laid before the Assembly on 29 March 2024 and will come into operation once they are approved by the Assembly.

Period poverty is the inability of some women or girls to access sanitary products and/or the education that is needed to use products effectively, often due to their economic status. Research by Plan International UK found that one in 10 females cannot afford to buy sanitary products, while one in seven have struggled to afford them. In the South of Ireland, 50% reported occasional experience of period poverty, and 10% reported use of less suitable sanitary products. The Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 aims to remove financial barriers to accessing period products. It places a statutory duty on Departments to specify public service bodies that will be legally required to provide access to free period products in accordance with agreed arrangements. The Act also places importance on respect for the dignity of those who will avail themselves of those products. This is progressive, positive legislation and a major step towards eradicating period poverty.

The draft regulations relate to my Department's section 2 duties under the Act and specify the public service bodies within my Department's remit to which that legal requirement will apply. The Assembly has already approved similar regulations that were brought forward by the

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Department of Education. The Executive Office is progressing section 1 of the Act to require period products to be obtainable free of charge to everyone who needs to use them.

As bodies in the educational sphere are specifically referenced in the Act, I will turn to those bodies first. In further and higher education settings, students who experience period poverty can find that they are unable to attend classes, or even exams, if they do not have access to period products. It was acknowledged during the Assembly's consideration of the Bill that nobody should miss out on their education because of that. The draft regulations aim to address that by placing a statutory duty to provide access to free period products on the six further education colleges and the five higher education institutions. I am proud of the work that my Department has already undertaken in that area, through its designing and delivering successful pilot schemes in each sector. In particular, I note the excellent work of the stakeholders involved in delivering the higher education pilot, which, in its three years of operation, is projected to deliver over 180,000 products to those in need. That pilot was significant in the development of the overarching Act. It is because of the successful implementation of the pilot schemes that both sectors stand prepared to deliver the statutory obligation that the regulations will place on them.

The Act is permissive and does not place any limitations on free provision. Although I am keen to keep any limitations in the regulations to a minimum, it is important that the safeguarding of young persons and vulnerable adults in those settings be maintained through limiting access to those who have a legitimate reason to be on the premises. That is staff, students and visitors. In line with the outcome of the consultation conducted by the further education colleges and the higher education institutions, the draft regulations therefore define "premises", "persons" and "in use" for the purposes of the Act in order to help define more clearly how the products should be made available.

I turn now to the non-education bodies that fall within my Department's remit. The regulations specify the Construction Industry Training Board Northern Ireland (CITBNI), the Labour Relations Agency (LRA), the Consumer Council, the Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal (ITFET), Invest NI and

Tourism NI. The specification of those bodies is in keeping with the overall aim of the Act.

There are some bodies that fall within the remit of my Department that are not specified in the draft regulations. Members may wish to note those bodies and the reasons for their non-inclusion. First, the Industrial Court is not specifically included, as it uses premises that will already be covered by the specification of the Industrial Tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunal. Secondly, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has not been included, as its interaction with the general public tends to be at workplaces on other sites rather than on its own premises. Thirdly, NI Screen has not been included, as it does not fall within the Act's definition of a public service body. InterTradeIreland is not specified, as it is a cross-border body and therefore not solely within the function of my Department. Finally, the Certification Officer is not included, as he is a statutory appointee rather than a body.

All the bodies mentioned here today, both those that are specified in the draft regulations and those that are not, were consulted in accordance with my Department's statutory duty under the Act. The draft regulations before Members today reflect the outcome of that consultation. Our specified public service bodies will be carrying out their own consultation exercises with product users on the specific arrangements for the free provision of period products on their individual premises in due course, after the regulations come into operation. I thank them for their cooperation thus far. I also thank the Economy Committee for its prompt scrutiny of the draft regulations. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Mr Brett (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I thank the Minister for bringing the draft statutory rule (SR) to the House so quickly. I will speak briefly as Chair of the Economy Committee. The Committee considered the regulations at its meeting on 10 April 2024. As the Minister has indicated, the regulations will specify which premises are to be treated as being those of a specified public body for the purposes of the 2022 Act. They will also set out when those premises are considered to be in use. The Committee welcomed the provisions made under the 2022 Act, which was widely supported across the Chamber at the time and introduces a statutory requirement for free access to period products in education settings and other public buildings. The Committee supports the principle and the practice of the provision of free period products, thus reducing the financial burden on women and girls and promoting financial equality and

equal participation in civic society. For technical reasons, the rule had to be relaid. The Examiner of Statutory Rules commented on that but did not raise any concerns. That brings to an end my remarks as Committee Chair.

As a private Member, I put on record my thanks to and appreciation of the Bill sponsor, Mr Pat Catney, who introduced the Bill in the previous mandate. Pat Catney was an excellent MLA and is much missed from this House. One of the first phone calls that I received on being elected to the Chamber was from Mr Catney, not to be commiserated on his loss but to congratulate me on being elected. That is a testament to the gentleman that Mr Catney is. Although he is no longer in the House, his legacy and the work that he did will continue to live on for many generations. With that, I am very happy to support the draft regulations.

1.45 pm

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome the regulations. This is another step towards seeing the SDLP legislation, led by our former, formidable MLA Pat Catney in the last mandate, come to fruition. I also thank Menstruation Matters Belfast for the tremendous work that it did in support of Pat to ensure that the legislation passed in the previous mandate.

We need to work together to end period poverty once and for all. I know that many across the House feel, like I did, that the passing of the legislation in the previous mandate was an example of what we can do when we work together. It is welcome that we will see the roll-out start on 13 May. As the Minister stated, it is truly progressive and positive legislation. It is particularly important that the regulations concern higher education and further education colleges as well, given the student advocacy that was central to the campaign, as was the good work of many professionals, bodies and institutions.

Our party commends the regulations.

Mr Delargy: Period products are essentials, not luxury items. For many people and families struggling with the rising cost of living, they can be a huge financial burden. Free access to period products must be the norm in schools, universities, colleges, workplaces, football grounds and concert venues. Sinn Féin will continue to campaign in the Assembly and in councils.

In 2018, my party colleague Sandra Duffy tabled a motion that helped to make Derry City

and Strabane District Council the first district in Ireland to provide period products free in sporting grounds and in other public buildings. Sandra was inspired by the grassroots On the Ball campaign led by three young women who are passionate supporters of Celtic Football Club and who wanted to make the provision of period products as normal as the provision of soap and toilet roll in the stadium that they visit every other week. Not only did they achieve that, they were pivotal in sparking an important conversation and in making free availability of period products the norm in football grounds everywhere, with well over 100 football teams now getting on board.

That is a powerful example of positive change. It is important that we in the Assembly work together to deliver positive change for people here by making period products the norm in public buildings.

Mr Honeyford: I will be brief because I was not expecting to be called. We support and welcome the regulations. Free access must be the norm in all workplaces. We thank the Minister for bringing them through, as Phillip from the Committee said. It goes beyond workplaces to further education colleges and sports facilities. Alliance wants to see this become the norm in society.

I have spoken previously about Pat Catney, and Phillip has mentioned him. As someone from Lagan Valley, I wish Pat all the best in his role as a councillor. He is now elected to Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, and he will do a first-class job there, as he did in the House. I pass on my regards to him, and I welcome the regulations.

Mr Nesbitt: I have been asking myself three questions. One is whether the Minister is genuine in wishing to oversee his Department roll out this legislation; two is whether I think that his departmental officials are determined to roll it out; and three is whether it will be a permissive policy with minimum restrictions, in other words, maximum rather than minimum roll-out. As the answer to all three questions is "Yes", I see no reason to delay the House except to echo the sentiments of wishing the best to Pat Catney, who started this journey.

Mr C Murphy: I thank Members for their contributions and the Business Committee for scheduling the debate. I share in the acknowledgement of the initiation of the legislation by Pat Catney and the good work that was done at local government level by Sandra Duffy and others to advance the issue.

As others have said, it is important legislation where society is progressive and is an example of the positive change that the Assembly can bring to citizens when we work together. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Please take your ease while we get ready for the next item of business.

Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the draft Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

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

Mrs Long: Lay magistrates are members of the devolved judiciary whose role was introduced into the justice system in Northern Ireland in April 2005 following the recommendations of the criminal justice review, which published its report in 2000. Lay magistrates carry out important roles in the justice system. In the Youth Court, they sit as panel members tasked with determining the outcome of criminal proceedings brought against a child aged up to 17. They also sit as panel members in the family proceedings courts, determining matters relating to residence and contact arrangements for children, as well as considering applications from public authorities in relation to care proceedings. Lay magistrates are also empowered by various pieces of legislation to sign documents such as summonses and warrants.

Lay magistrates are appointed by the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission, whilst the Department of Justice has responsibility for the terms and conditions of appointment of these judicial officeholders and makes decisions in relation to their remuneration. Until recently, the age of

retirement for lay magistrates was 70, which was provided for in section 4(11) of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Section 26(1) of the Judicial Pensions and Retirement Act 1993 set the retirement age for other members of the judiciary at 70, but there was a facility under section 26(5) of the 1993 Act for the Minister of Justice to extend any individual's appointment for a year at a time up to a maximum age of 75, if it was deemed to be in the public interest to do so. However, that provision did not extend to lay magistrates, and, therefore, unlike for other members of the judiciary, there was no facility to extend their appointment beyond the age of 70.

The Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Act 2022, which was subject to a legislative consent motion on 1 November 2021, changed the retirement age for all members of the judiciary in Northern Ireland, England and Wales from 70 to 75 and, in doing so, removed the facility under the 1993 Act to extend appointments, as it was no longer required. The change in retirement age applied to lay magistrates too. Some lay magistrates, however, had recently been obliged to retire at the age of 70 with no facility to extend their appointment, whilst their colleagues benefited from the change in the retirement age that was effected by the 2022 Act. There seemed to be an inherent unfairness in the fact that some individuals would be prevented from continuing in their important roles on the mere basis of the date on which their birthday fell. To address that unfairness, the 2022 Act contains provision to reappoint retired lay magistrates who were required to retire at the age of 70 but had not yet reached the age of 75. The criteria for reappointment were to be set in secondary legislation that would be subject to the draft affirmative Assembly procedure. Given that it was not possible to progress that secondary legislation during the absence of the Assembly, I am pleased to be able to bring the draft order before the Assembly today.

The criteria for the eligibility for appointment of lay magistrates are determined by the provisions of the Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. The 2004 order contains a list of roles that will render an individual ineligible to carry out the role of a lay magistrate in Northern Ireland. In setting the eligibility for the reappointment of retired lay magistrates under the 2022 Act, the Department carried out a consultation with interested stakeholders, including lay magistrates, from 6 June to 1 August 2022. The consultation response was small, with three individuals responding. However, their responses were supportive of the approach

proposed by the Department. An analysis of the responses with proposed next steps was published on the Department's website on 20 September 2022.

The consultation responses indicated that a number of eligibility criteria for the reappointment of lay magistrates should be adopted, and they are reflected in the draft order. The criteria are as follows: individuals who are reappointed must still meet the criteria provided for by the Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004; any person seeking reappointment must not have been removed from their role as a result of disciplinary proceedings or have been subject to any pending disciplinary proceedings at the date of their retirement; the individual must have been aged between 70 and 75 on the date that the 2022 Act received Royal Assent, which is 10 March 2022, in order to be eligible to apply for reappointment; and any people seeking reappointment must be prepared to undergo any training or continuing professional development that may be identified as being necessary or desirable for their continued role as a lay magistrate.

The consultation response summary contained an additional reappointment criterion that would have required an individual seeking reappointment to be prepared to offer a reasonable period of service before they reached the age of 75 and to retire under the provisions of the 2022 Act. However, given the effect of the two-year absence of the Assembly, I have decided that that criterion should not be adopted.

In addition to the criteria contained in the draft order, practical steps will be taken to ensure that the individuals who are reappointed will be subject to appropriate disclosure and barring checks if those have lapsed. It should also be noted that the reappointment of individuals under the 2022 Act will not have an effect on the complement or maximum number of lay magistrates that has been determined by the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission and the Department.

I commend the draft Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order (Northern Ireland) to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the Assembly takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Joanne Bunting, Chair of the Justice Committee.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: Mr Buchanan sought to withdraw his question after the deadline, and he is not in his place. I call Declan Kearney.

Office of Identity and Cultural Expression

2. **Mr Kearney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on work to recruit commissioners to the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. (AQO 339/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, junior Minister Reilly will take the question.

Miss Reilly (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Go raibh maith agat, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. *[Translation: Thank you, and I thank the Member for his question.]*

Tá Oifig an Fheidhmeannais freagrach as na socruithe riachtanacha a thabhairt chun tosaigh leis na forálacha atá san Acht um Fhéiniúlacht agus Teanga (Tuaisceart Éireann) 2022 a chur i bhfeidhm, ina measc, bunú na nithe seo a leanas: an Oifig um Fhéiniúlacht agus Léiriú Cultúrtha; Coimisinéir Teanga na Gaeilge; agus an Coimisinéir um thraidisiún na nAlbanach Uladh agus na mBriotanach Uladh. Beidh sé seo ag teacht le cinní na nAí agus coinneoidh muid na Comhaltaí ar an eolas.

[Translation: TEO is responsible for taking forward the necessary arrangements to implement the provisions of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, including the establishment of the following: the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression; the Irish Language Commissioner; and the Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition. This will be in line with the Ministers' decisions. We will keep Members updated.]

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire shóisearach as ucht a freagra. An dtabharfaidh an tAire sóisearach uasdátú ar an obair atá idir lámha leis na struchtúir agus córais a chur ar

bun a leagtar amach san Acht Féiniúlachta agus Teanga?

[Translation: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. Will the junior Minister give us an update on the work that is ongoing to establish the structures and systems laid out in the Identity and Language Act?]

Miss Reilly: Cinnte, agus arís gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta. Tá obair ullmhúcháin déanta ag feidhmeannaigh na Roinne, agus ina measc sin na socruithe praiticiúla leis na comhlachtaí a bhunú. Mar chuid de sin, tá an obair ullmhúcháin is gá le riachtanais maidir le hearcaíocht, rialachas agus cóiríocht, mar aon le cás gnó achomair a thabhairt chun cinn. Is í an chéad chéim eile sa phróiseas seo na cinntí aireachta nach mór a dhéanamh leis na comhlachtaí nua a bhunú. Nuair a bheas na cinntí sin déanta, beidh muid in ann tús a chur ar an phróiseas ceapacháin.

[Translation: TEO officials have undertaken preparatory work, including the practical arrangements to establish the bodies. That includes the necessary preparatory work to take forward recruitment, governance, and accommodation requirements, alongside an outline business case. The next stage of the process is that ministerial decisions are required to establish the new bodies. Once those decisions have been taken, we will be in a position to commence the appointments process.]

Mr McGlone: An dtig leis an Aire shóisearach clár ama a thabhairt dúinn ar cad é mar a bheas rudaí agus cén uair a cheapfar na coimisinéirí? Ina theannta sin, cén buiséad a bheas ag oifigí na gcoimisinéirí?

[Translation: Will the junior Minister give us a timeline as to how things will materialise and when the commissioners will be appointed? Moreover, what will the budget look like for the commissioners?]

Miss Reilly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. *[Translation: I thank the Member for his question.]* De réir na taithí i mo Roinnese, glacann an próiseas ceapacháin phoiblí thart ar bhliain iomlán ón uair a dhéanann na hAíre cinntí tosaigh maidir leis an phróiseas. Ós rud é go gcaithfidh trí chomórtas a réachtáil ag an aon am amháin le suas le hocht gceapachán phoiblí, d'fhéadfadh sé go mbeadh níos mó ama de dhíth. Ag caint go pearsanta, mar Ghaeilgeoir, beidh mise ag déanamh mo sheacht ndícheall agus ag obair i gcomhar leis na hoifigí ina bhfuil na feidhmeannaigh seo bunaithe. Tá an tAcht, mar

is eol duit, tá sé i bhfeidhm le breis agus bliain. Tá pobal na Gaeilge ag fanacht le blianta fada leis na Coimisinéirí, ionas gur féidir leis an obair tosú agus dul chun cinn a dhéanamh ar chearta, ar chomhionannas agus ar fhéiniúlacht. Mar sin, tá mise tiomanta dó seo, agus tá a fhios agam gurb amhlaidh leat féin, ag iarraidh na Coimisinéirí agus na hoifigí a fheiceáil. Chomh luath agus a bheidh tuilleadh eolais agam air sin, tiocfaidh mé ar ais chugat le scéala.

[Translation: The experience in my Department is that public appointment processes take approximately a year once Ministers make the initial decisions about the process. As three competitions need to be run at the same time for up to eight public appointments, more time may be required. Speaking personally, as a Gaeilgeoir, I will be doing my utmost and will work closely with the offices in which those officials will be housed. The Act, as the Member knows, has been in effect for more than a year now. The Irish language community is waiting for the appointment of the commissioners so that they can start working on the progress that has been made in rights, equality and identity for many years now. I am determined, as I know the Member is, to see the commissioners established in their respective offices. Once I have any further information on the matter, I will get back to the Member.]

Mr Speaker: Doug Beattie.

Mr Beattie: *[Long pause.]* Sorry, Mr Speaker. I had headphones on and did not hear you. A question was asked about the budget, and I will ask it again. What is the budget likely to be, and has it been factored into the Budget that was announced recently?

Miss Reilly: On the budget and projected costs — I will answer in English; you do not need to worry about headphones — a business case in respect of establishing the new bodies is well advanced and is in the process of being approved. It will not be possible to meet the cost of establishing and running the bodies, now that the legislation has passed and partially commenced, without additional funding being provided to TEO.

The Executive will make a case — as they have been doing — that the North is massively underfunded, and that case will continually be made by my Executive colleagues and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the British Government. As we all know, we have suffered 13 years of Tory austerity, and we should all lay the blame firmly at the doors of

Westminster and the Tory party. However, we have work to do: there is a lot of work that we can do and many things that we can continue with, and the implementation of the Act that came into effect in 2022 is one of those.

Ms Egan: Apologies, my earphones were not working. I am very sorry if my question has already been asked. Again, it is on the budget. We had the statement last week. What was the Executive Office's bid for those offices?

Miss Reilly: I do not have that information in front of me, but I am happy to come back to the Member on that.

Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board: Compensation Scheme

3. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on financial contributions from institutions to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board's compensation scheme. (AQO 340/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to confirm that we have agreed contributions towards the cost of the redress scheme from two of the institutions, based on compensation paid to date. A payment has been received from the Good Shepherd Sisters, and our officials are engaging with Barnardo's on its payment, which we expect imminently. We are grateful to both institutions for their constructive engagement on the matter. We have listened to the victims and survivors, and we know that, for many, financial contributions from institutions are an important matter of accountability. The independent facilitator, Mr Paul Sweeney, also engaged with victims and survivors in the development of a framework for reaching agreement. That framework has formed the basis of the ongoing negotiations.

Engagement is ongoing with the other four institutions on appropriate contributions to the cost of redress and specialist support services. We will continue our discussions with the Good Shepherd Sisters and Barnardo's on a final payment following the closure of the redress scheme. The value of the total contributions will not be known until all applications that are made to the HIA Redress Board by the closing date of 2 April next year, 2025, have been determined. We encourage all victims and survivors who intend to make an application to the board to do so as soon as possible and definitely in advance of next year's deadline.

Mr Dunne: I thank the First Minister for her answer. The Hart report ultimately found that abuse was widespread and recommended an apology and compensation, amongst other things. I share the welcome for the financial commitment from Barnardo's and the Good Shepherd Sisters. Does the First Minister agree that the remaining institutions need to do the right thing, step up and make a contribution?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely, and that is why it is important that we have the framework in place and that Paul Sweeney continues with the work that he has commenced. We now have those two contributions secured, and it is important that each of the other institutions step forward and pay their contribution. As I said, this is an important part of what victims and survivors expect. It is part of the healing process and is about the institutions doing the right thing and stepping forward. We will be very happy to keep the Member and the House updated on any progress that we make in the area.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Will the First Minister confirm whether there is a timeline for the negotiations? I appreciate that April 2025 is the deadline, but is there a timeline for the negotiations to ensure that all the other four institutions not only make an interim payment but make their payment in full?

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member appreciates, these are obviously very sensitive and detailed negotiations that need some space and time to continue in a constructive manner. The discussions, however, are also important to many victims, as they want to see the institutions make those financial contributions to the redress scheme, as I said. To date, the negotiations have involved the production and scrutiny of accurate individual data sets for each institution. There has been consideration of complex determinations where a victim or survivor may have been resident in multiple institutions. There has been consideration on the basis of the Hart report and the independent facilitator's framework of each institution's ability to pay and of any payments or any other outlay that the institutions may wish to be taken into account.

The Member is right. The negotiations will not stop at the closure of the redress scheme in April next year. It could take a further 12 to 18 months to finalise the remaining contributions for the institutions after the closure of the scheme. That will depend on how many applications the board receives in the last year, how quickly they can be determined and

whether there are any legal challenges to the scheme in that period that could delay matters.

Ms Bradshaw: You will be aware, First Minister, that the institutions and the religious orders were put on notice in 2010. They have had 14 years to come forward with their contribution. Will you consider legal action if they do not come forward in a timely manner?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, it has taken far too long to get to this point. We are making progress, but, clearly, we have more to do. We have to keep all options on the table. For now, the approach has been constructive and has been built around the framework that Paul Sweeney developed. Everybody understands it. I have just run through the kinds of areas that are examined as part of that work. It is important that we keep all options open, but I encourage all the institutions that are found guilty of systemic failings of the victims and survivors to step forward and do the right thing. I would like to think that they would. That is obviously the optimum approach for the victims and survivors. Until this point, a lot of the conversations have been constructive. Two organisations have stepped forward, and the others need to do likewise. I hope that we can progress that in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the progress as reported by the First Minister. Was any consideration given to asking the institutions to pay upfront into a fund from which any overpayments could have been refunded?

Mrs O'Neill: As I outlined in a previous answer, the process involved looking at all the data sets and the information that we had, the institutions disclosing their financial circumstances and our officials doing due diligence on what we understand to be the assets of some of those organisations. At this stage, our approach has been the right one. We are trying to get to the point at which there is an agreed contribution that is based on all the data that we have garnered. However, if we hit or a wall or have challenges with some of those institutions stepping forward, we will, as I said previously, look at the other options that are open to us. To this point, it has not delayed any of the compensation that we have been able to pay, but we need to recoup that money. Those institutions must pay for what they did.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, will you name the institutions that are dragging their feet? We have called them "institutions" multiple times. Please name them. Will you give us details of the monetary value that is being sought from each of the institutions?

Mrs O'Neill: I cannot put a monetary value on what is being sought from each institution, the reason being that the negotiations are live play. They are ongoing and sensitive. They are each at different stages of what we have been able to establish from the data and the finances, so it is important that we give space to the negotiations and that we encourage the constructive manner in which they have been held. At this stage, it is not appropriate to announce the amounts that we have been able to achieve from the two that have come forward, but that will all become transparent in time. At this stage, we should not speculate about how much we might be able to receive in full. Suffice it to say that we will publish that information as soon as the negotiations have concluded. People will be able to judge, on the basis of the contributions that will be laid out for everybody to see, how appropriately the institutions have responded.

‘Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses in Northern Ireland’

4. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will consider a public inquiry following the truth recovery design panel's report on 'Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses in Northern Ireland'. (AQO 341/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: We have been unwavering in our commitment to implement the five key recommendations in the truth recovery design panel's report on 'Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene laundries and Workhouses'. That includes the commitment to an integrated truth investigation and related public inquiry. The first stage of the investigation has already begun, with the appointment of a non-statutory independent panel in April 2023. Key services are now in place to support victims and survivors through the testimony process. It is our intention to launch a public consultation on issues relating to the statutory public inquiry and the redress scheme as quickly as possible, following which we will finalise the draft legislation for Executive agreement, prior to its introduction to the Assembly.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for the response. I am very conscious that time is marching on, and, like victims and survivors of other historical abuse, the people who have been campaigning for accountability, truth and justice are getting very fed up. You said that you were going to launch the consultation as

soon as possible. Do you have a specific timeline for that?

Mrs O'Neill: The deputy First Minister and I have met our officials on this issue. Both of us have made it very clear that our priority is to get the legislation through the Executive and into the Assembly for discussion, debate and voting through. It is important that we continue to work with the victims and survivors to take them through that process. We are hopeful that we can move at pace. We have met our officials in the past week or so, and we hope to have a paper back on our desk with proposals for the time frame. We will, of course, engage with the Committee and you, as Chair, about the process that we will take forward. The legislative process will come forward in the months ahead.

Mrs Dillon: You have met Birth Mothers and their Children for Justice and other groups over the past number of years, and I know that you met that group again recently. It has requested a meeting with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it would greatly appreciate being able to have that conversation. Will you assure us that all the victims and survivors of the mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries will be given the information about timelines and the consultation on what will happen next before anyone else?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree that, as I said in the previous answer, women who were in mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries or the workhouses have all waited for far too long for truth, justice and acknowledgement.

What many of those women experienced and endured in those institutions is probably beyond the comprehension of many of us. Our intention is that a consultation on the key policy issues relating to a public inquiry be launched as soon as possible. The consultation will also be an opportunity, as the Member said, for victims and survivors to have their voice heard, particularly on the key policy issues that we are going to legislate for. Following the consultation, we will be in a position to finalise the draft legislation. I look forward to bringing the legislation to the Executive and introducing it in the Assembly as soon as possible. Both the deputy First Minister and I are absolutely keen to meet the women mentioned by the Member when we have the policy proposals to take them through.

2.15 pm

Mr Kingston: Will the Minister tell us more about the engagement that has taken place with the institutions? How hopeful is she that we are reaching an end point to that process?

Mrs O'Neill: The engagement has been going on for quite some time, as many Members have indicated. It is so important to do it in an ongoing way. It is happening across a number of areas. We had the initial engagement with the institutions, and our officials wrote to the relevant institutions and offered a briefing across the whole truth recovery programme ahead of the consultation. A number of institutions have taken us up on that and participated in some of those discussions. In addition to the institutional engagement, engagement with Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and the independent panel has happened.

To date, no negotiations have been undertaken with the institutions on financial contributions, because we need to get to the point of having the policy agreed before we can talk to them about their contributions. Clearly, what we have received to date was for what had gone before, but, when we introduce the new legislation, we will need additional contributions from the institutions, including from those that have already announced their contributions relating to this phase.

Mr McGrath: Has the First Minister considered the appointment of a dedicated advocate for the victims and survivors of mother-and-baby institutions, given that many of them feel left behind and let down by the process?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that victims and survivors hear directly from the deputy First Minister and me about the policy proposals that we want to take forward. Engagement has happened in a number of ways up to this point. In keeping with the recommendations of the report, TEO officials have worked closely with victims and survivors to progress implementation and to ensure accountability. It is also really important that the voices of birth mothers, adopted adults and their family members are central to that.

TEO officials have also met victims and survivors and their family representatives at monthly consultation forum meetings on 29 occasions since the truth recovery programme was established. About 20 people attend those meetings each month, so there is a good level of engagement. No doubt there are perhaps areas where there are sensitivities and where things are not always agreed. We should

always strive to do better on the engagement piece. When we look at the policy proposals, we will keep the issue of having an advocate under review.

Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

5. **Ms Kimmins** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the appointment process for a new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. (AQO 342/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: As the deputy First Minister has emphasised in the Chamber previously, ensuring that victims and survivors have a strong, independent voice remains a key priority for the Executive. The appointment of a new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors is essential to inform the development of policies and to help ensure that the longer-term needs of victims and survivors are addressed. We are reviewing the appointment plan for the recruitment competition to appoint a new commissioner, and the competition will be launched as soon as possible. The appointment process is regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and we estimate that it will take approximately six months to complete.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I know that safeguarding and protecting the rights of victims and delivering services is a key priority for her. In the absence of a commissioner, can the Minister update us on the work of the Victims' Commission?

Mrs O'Neill: As a body corporate, the commission continues to be in legal existence in the absence of a commissioner. In the current context, the chief executive officer is responsible for the day-to-day business of the commission. The commission continues to operate on the basis of the work programme that was agreed by the previous commissioner. It focuses on three broad areas of strategic development: advocacy, history and education, and young people. The commission also continues to play a key role in important areas such as the design of the new draft strategy for victims and survivors, development of the regional trauma network and delivery of the victims' payment scheme. There is no substitute for a commissioner, as a key advocate for victims and survivors, being in post, so I am very hopeful that the recruitment process will launch as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

7. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 344/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I acknowledge the importance of the victims' payments scheme to victims and survivors. It recognises the suffering of those who have a permanent disablement as a result of the conflict and provides the financial support that they need to help them move forward with their lives. As of the week commencing 22 April, almost 7,500 applications had been submitted to the scheme, with just over 1,300 determinations made by the Victims' Payments Board. To date, more than £39.6 million has been made in payments to applicants. We appreciate that there are some concerns about the length of time that it can take to process an application. That is because each application is unique and has its own complexities, and the Victims' Payments Board must consider each application on its merits in order to provide the best outcomes for applicants. The historical nature of much of the evidence, when record-keeping may not have been to the same standard as it is today, also means that evidence gathering can, at times, be challenging. The Victims' Payments Board has processes in place with a range of partners to assist in retrieving that evidence on behalf of applicants.

I reassure everyone that officials are working closely with all organisations that support victims and survivors to keep the scheme under review and to look for ways in which to improve the throughput of cases. The deputy First Minister and I have also written to the Secretary of State to support the extension of the backdating deadline, which is currently 31 August of this year. We have also suggested that the extension should align with the closing date of the scheme, which is currently 31 August 2026, because that would allow more time for eligible applicants to avail themselves of the backdated payments.

Mr Butler: I thank the First Minister for her answer and for her assurance about looking at the timescales. Another issue that is popping up, and of which the board will be aware, is that of unsuccessful applications. Is there any evidence for why applications are not successful? Can the First Minister point those who have been unsuccessful to the main reasons for their applications not being successful?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, there are a number of complexities built into the system for gathering information and doing the due diligence work, but each application is unique and brings with it its own set of complexities. For example, another added complication is that one in three applications includes multiple relevant incidents, with up to 50 incidents listed in one application. That demonstrates the challenges. As I said, the historical nature of much of the evidence is also a challenge, as record-keeping then was not the same as it is today. I am not aware of any particular underlying thematic issue, but I will enquire, since the Member has asked me that question. We will write to him if anything is identified, but I assume that, given the ongoing review of how we are doing things, how the payments are being made and how the processes work, that would be flagged as an issue. If we find out anything in particular, however, I am happy to write to the Member.

Ms Ferguson: The victims' payments scheme is a crucial support mechanism for those who have suffered permanent injury during conflict. My question is about cost. At one stage, it was suggested that the scheme would cost upwards of £600 million. Will the First Minister outline the future funding arrangements for the scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: Funding for the victims' payments scheme continues to be an area of significant concern for the Executive. We are aware that the Finance Minister, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, is engaged in a formal dispute process with the Treasury in London. The issue was noted in the Executive's letter to the Prime Minister and discussed at length with the Secretary of State when we met him on 18 April. It is our view that the British Government must contribute to the scheme's costs. It has always been, and remains, the Executive's position that the scheme, which was designed and legislated for by the British Government, goes further than what was originally intended by the Executive and what was set out in the Stormont House Agreement and that not enough consideration was given to the potential impact on the Executive's Budget. That will be an ongoing piece of work for us.

Mr Honeyford: First Minister, when will the scheme be extended to include those people who were bereaved?

Mrs O'Neill: Sorry. I did not hear the end of your question.

Mr Honeyford: When will the scheme be extended to include those people who were bereaved?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you. It is something that we are looking at. We are very aware of the issues affecting bereaved victims and survivors. We are very keen to address their needs and to acknowledge the ongoing loss felt by many. Our Department has, for many years, been funding the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) to provide financial support to bereaved victims and survivors. I am pleased that, in April 2021, we were able to reopen the scheme for new people to come forward so that all bereaved victims can avail themselves of the support. Since the self-directed support scheme opened in 2017, our Department has provided over £13.5 million in funding to the VSS to support bereaved victims and survivors. We continue to keep under review the support that we are able to provide.

Mr McNulty: Minister, further to the previous question about victims and survivors, there are those who do not have physical scars but whose life has been changed utterly and who bear psychological scars. They have had to leave their home and move country to get away from the terror, and they bear the scars to this day. Will the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme accommodate those people?

Mrs O'Neill: I have set out the complexities. It is important that we, as a society that has come from conflict, do everything that we can to support victims, survivors and people who have been impacted on by conflict. The category of people that you refer to is not currently under the remit of the scheme, but I take on board what the Member said.

Urban Villages: North Belfast

8. **Mr Brett** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Urban Villages initiative in North Belfast. (AQO 345/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Reilly will answer the question.

Miss Reilly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Urban Villages programme has had many positive outcomes, with 56 capital projects, comprising shared community facilities, parks and public realm, now completed, 13 of which are in North Belfast. A further 16 projects are progressing through the capital development life cycle, including four in North Belfast.

A few examples of those projects include the Marrowbone Millennium Park and the ABC

Trust Health and Leisure Hub in north Belfast; Páirc Nua Chollann and Healthy Living Centre in the Colin area of west Belfast; New Gate Arts and Culture Centre and Meenan Square in Derry; the ProKick community gym and the Hosford Community Homes: Inclusion Hub in east Belfast; and the Lockhouse and the Donegall Pass Good Relations Hub in south Belfast.

Since 2016, £13.5 million has been invested, through revenue projects, in improving good relations outcomes in all five Urban Village areas, with over £2 million having been invested in North Belfast.

Officials have developed a range of options for the future of the Urban Villages programme. We are committed to continuing to promote thriving places and achieving the best outcomes for all our citizens. We will update Members on future plans for the programme when options have been considered.

Mr Brett: I thank the junior Minister for that update. Can she confirm that, as part of its work on the options, the Executive Office will look at the extension of the Urban Villages scheme to cover other parts of North Belfast in order to ensure that all communities continue to benefit from that very welcome investment?

Miss Reilly: I thank the Member for his follow-up question. In its design, Urban Villages was never intended to be a core funder. The aim was always to provide additionality to supplement areas' existing provision. It was always envisaged that Urban Villages would be a time-bound programme and not a perpetual or long-term funder. The Urban Villages revenue funding programme was extended to 31 March 2024 to allow appropriate time to support all project promoters, including by encouraging collaborative approaches for the purpose of shared benefits, delivery and identifying alternative funding sources.

The Urban Villages team will operate in North Belfast until at least 2027 to allow capital projects to be completed. We continue to work with our colleagues in other Departments to ascertain how support can best be delivered to communities in a way that will be impactful and sustainable.

Ms Nicholl: Amazing projects, in Sandy Row and elsewhere, came to an end when the funding ceased. Will the Executive bring forward any other support to allow some of those projects to continue?

Miss Reilly: I thank the Member for her question. As I mentioned, the Department recognises that needs vary across communities here and seeks to address as many of them as possible. Since Urban Villages launched in 2016, there has been a range of other developments that will impact on what Urban Villages does next. That will include reviews of programmes such as Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) and DFC's neighbourhood renewal programme, and a cross-departmental test and learning pilot to test departmental joint working, initially in the Diamond area of Derry and in Aughnacloy.

We look forward to updating Members once we have considered how best to continue with our aim of promoting thriving places and achieving the best outcomes for all our citizens.

2.30 pm

As you said, the Urban Villages programme idea has proved to be very successful, particularly the co-design process with communities. We all know that communities are better placed to reflect their needs than any of us here or any official. As I said, TEO officials have developed options on the future of the programme, and, once those have been considered, Members will be updated.

Mr Speaker: We move to topical questions.

Open Border

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister agrees that we need an open border on this island, something that the SDLP has spent years arguing for, for goods and people, and whether she agrees that, should a united Ireland be successfully achieved, we will need the most open of borders possible between the islands of Britain and Ireland. (AQT 221/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: It is really important that we respect all sets of relationships across our two islands and that we work on the basis of being good neighbours. Obviously, when it comes to the constitutional position, what I want to achieve and what the deputy First Minister wants to achieve are different things, but that is OK. We can work together in the Executive whilst pursuing our political aspirations for the future of the place that we all call "Home".

Mr O'Toole: First Minister, I specifically asked you about the phrase "open borders". That is important because our parties have fought for a

long time to have the most open border on this island for goods and people. If you agree with that, why is your party leadership using a hard-right dog whistle to talk about open borders? Is that not, for the sake of a few votes, emboldening those who want to create a hard border on the island for reasons including to make life more difficult for vulnerable people?

Mrs O'Neill: Let me be clear: I have no truck with the hard right, as the Member well knows. I absolutely support a migration policy and system that is fair, efficient, enforceable and compassionate. We must do everything to make sure that anything that is done is human-rights-compliant. That should be the underlying factor in everything that we do. Of course, we have a unique circumstance on our island because of partition, and that must be respected, but we also enjoy the free movement of people across our islands.

To make a more political point as opposed to a point from an Executive Office point of view, Ireland cannot become a casualty of the horrific Rwanda legislation that the Tories have decided to railroad through. I am clear about that. It is a disgraceful policy that serves the needs of nobody. Given the issues that have arisen over the last couple of days, officials now need to get to grips with the matter. We have tasked our officials to engage with counterparts in Dublin and London to get more information on the issues that have been raised, because it is important that solutions are found when problems are identified.

Political Cooperation

T2. **Mr Baker** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that, tomorrow, we will hear a report on a recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, whether the First Minister agrees that the efficient functioning of all our interlinked political institutions provides us with the opportunity and structures to build cooperation and joint approaches across these islands. (AQT 222/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, and that builds on the previous question. The North/South Ministerial Council, which I will make a statement to the Assembly about tomorrow and give feedback on, is an important part of the jigsaw of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. It is important that all elements of that agreement are up and running and working again. I am glad that we have sectoral meetings happening again, because our people are best served when all institutions of the Good Friday

Agreement are delivering on both a North/South and an east-west basis. It is important that all those sets of relationships are respected and worked on. I am certainly committed to making progress and continuing to work together on all those bases, because, when we collectively work through all the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement and are faithful to that agreement, we can continue to build a better future and give the people the support that they elect us to deliver for them.

Mr Baker: A few weeks ago, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly met and discussed a range of issues including the horrors that are unfolding in Gaza. It called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. Does the First Minister also acknowledge the importance of that forum?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I do not think that we can pick and choose across the institutions. It is really important that we respect all parts of the Good Friday Agreement and all institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, so I recognise the importance of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I repeat the point: we are all better served when all the institutions are working better.

I acknowledge the Member's comment about the gravest human rights violation of our time that we are witnessing unfolding in Palestine. We have to use all the forums and platforms that are open to us to call for an end to the genocide, for an immediate ceasefire, for aid to be delivered and for the hostages to be released. It is important that, collectively, we make as much noise on that as we can.

Block Grant: Fair Funding Model

T3. **Mr Brooks** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the discussions that the Executive Office plans to have with His Majesty's Government to speed up the delivery of a fair funding model for Northern Ireland, given that the Fiscal Council has warned that, despite top-ups, the Northern Ireland block grant will not meet our budgetary needs until 2035. (AQT 223/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for that question. As he knows, that has been the number-one issue for the Executive. We acknowledged from day one that the funding that was on the table was never going to be enough and that we needed to get to a point where we had a sustainable budget situation and were in a much better fiscal environment. We have just come through a very tight Budget,

and there are difficult choices for Ministers to make, but it is important that we continue the ongoing discussion on the fiscal framework with the Treasury. Our officials and our Finance Minister continue to work at political and official level on the application of the needs-based adjustment factor in our financial package, so that we get to the point where we have a proper funding model in place. We have work to do as an Executive. We need to transform things, and we need to do things better. We know all of that, but we need the right resources with which to do that, and we need the money to invest in public services. I am absolutely determined, as are, I think, the Executive, to, with a collective voice, continue in that conversation with the Treasury.

Mr Brooks: I thank the First Minister for her answer. She spoke about difficult choices. Most will understand that additional funding will come with some push for more efficient, cost-effective and better services through reform. Given the lack of pace of reform in some areas — health, for example — how will the Programme for Government encourage significant progress?

Mrs O'Neill: The Executive are committed to transformation. We know that we can transform things, and we know that we can do things better. We will always be stronger at doing those things when we work in partnership and provide the leadership that is required. That is the case in health and education and across all of our public services. We know that, when it comes to the health service, for example, we need to transform that service and get to the point at which we are talking about people's outcomes, how they can live longer and how they can be treated better. When it comes to education, we need to ensure that every child is valued in the education system, particularly the children with additional needs. It is important that we continue to fight and let the public know that we will continue to fight for a proper funding model to allow us to do those things much better.

Redress Scheme: Payments from Institutions

T4. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the earlier question about the amount that each institution is contributing to the redress scheme, whether the First Minister is satisfied that the amount being asked of the institutions is adequate when compared with the cost to the public purse, in light of the fact that £90 million has already been paid out, albeit that amount does

not include administration and legal costs. (AQT 224/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I am satisfied that the framework that is being developed is the fairest way to advance these conversations, so I am satisfied that Paul Sweeney, who heads up the work on our behalf, is challenging, pushing back and thoroughly investigating the contributions of the institutions. However, we are not at the end of the road yet; even the payments that have come forward are only partial payments. There is more to come, and we need to continue to ensure that the institutions pay up, because the costs are so large. It is the right thing to do, of course, but it is important that the institutions pay up. It is hard to judge the sufficiency or otherwise of them until we get to the final picture.

Ms Bradshaw: Maybe I misheard you earlier, First Minister, but did you say that there may be a point at which some of the contributions may go back, once a threshold is reached? I am conscious that the institutions should pay not just for the redress but towards the professional ongoing services that many victims and survivors will need for the rest of their lives.

Mrs O'Neill: No, I did not say that. To be clear, I agree with you: it cannot be for just the payment itself; it has to be for the services and the wrap-around support. That needs to be absolutely factored into the contributions. I can envisage no situation where, if a payment came forward, it would be given back to the institution.

Legacy Act

T5. **Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the Legacy Act's imposed ending of Troubles-related inquests on 1 May 2024, which is causing serious and legitimate concern among organisations that support victims and survivors of the Troubles, demand for whose services will rise, to outline the additional funding that will be provided for those organisations to facilitate the additional work that the imposed legislation will generate. (AQT 225/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member — we have shown it to date — that, when it came to finding efficiencies in the Department, we did not touch that area and were able to protect that funding. That remains our position. The Member is absolutely right: when the legislation comes into effect on Wednesday of this week, it effectively closes the door on all those who are seeking truth and justice. It is the collective will of all

parties in the Chamber that this horrific legislation should be repealed immediately.

Back in 2015, with the Stormont House Agreement, we had a way in which to deal with the past, and I still commend that approach today. What the British Government are doing, however, by shutting the door firmly on access to justice and the courts is totally unacceptable. It is harrowing, and the last number of weeks, with the inquests that have come forward, have been a bruising time for so many families. That highlights and underlines why the legislation is absolutely not good enough and is unacceptable and should be binned.

Mr Dickson: I thank the First Minister. Given the cliff-edge nature of the Legacy Act, does the First Minister recognise, as I do, that there is a serious threat to good relations and reconciliation in Northern Ireland as a result of its imposition? What measures will her Department take to deal with that in order to improve good relations?

Mrs O'Neill: We are all committed to good relations and to lifting up everybody in society. Given the complexity of our past, when we look to today and to the future, prosperity should be the thing that unites us all. We need to allow everybody to prosper. That is what I and the deputy First Minister are determined to do: to build around that prosperity agenda. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, as a result of Wednesday's legislation coming into effect, the victims and survivors and their families will feel the brunt of it. That is unfair. It will burden today's generation with carrying on that battle, and that is completely unfair as well. We will all continue to say with one voice that the legislation should be repealed; it should be absolutely stripped back.

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

T6. **Ms Sheerin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister commits to the ending violence against women and girls strategy, in light of the news coverage in recent days about the circumstances in which Katie Simpson sadly lost her life in 2020, which has generated a lot of questions about how women are treated by the criminal justice system. (AQT 226/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for raising that matter. As always in such cases, first and foremost, our thoughts are with Katie's family, who must be heartbroken and devastated to have lost their daughter and sister. I absolutely

agree with the Member that that is why we have to get to grips with tackling violence against women and girls. We are committed to prioritising the bringing forward of that strategy, and excellent work has been done on it to this point. We have to break the cycle of violence, and that is the job not just of women but of wider society. That is the outcome that, I believe, everybody in the House wants to achieve, working together.

Ms Sheerin: Does the First Minister agree that to end violence against women and girls will take a whole-of-government approach?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I absolutely do, and much more needs to be done to end the cycle of violence against women and girls. That is at the heart of the strategy that we are developing. We need to see enhanced collaboration and partnership working across all Departments and public bodies, working with Women's Aid and all the other excellent community-based organisations that are on the ground and at the coalface. That will be a critical first step in setting us on the right direction, with the right interventions and support at the right time for the women who need it.

Treasury Support

T7. **Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, further to the question posed by his colleague David Brooks from East Belfast, whether, in the short term, the First Minister expects further financial support from the Treasury to help to address Stormont's funding concerns. (AQT 227/22-27)

Mrs O'Neill: That is the battle for us from day one. We need a proper funding model. Our public services have been decimated for over 13 years by Tory austerity. It is not just here: it is the same picture in England, Scotland and Wales. The Tories have decimated public services across the piece, and that has led to the running-down of our public services. We have a battle on our hands, but it is a battle that the public, rightly, expect us to fight.

We cannot continue to be hamstrung by the Tories, who are stripping out public services day by day. I want us to do more and do better, and I think that we can, but we need the finances to be able to do so. Getting to a proper funding model will be an ongoing theme, to which, I think, we are collectively committed.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move to questions to the Minister for the Economy.

Economy

Careers Advice

1. **Ms Eastwood** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he has met the Minister of Education regarding improving careers advice in schools. (AQO 353/22-27)

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): Ensuring that we have a high-quality careers system is key to connecting our people with the full range of opportunities that exist across our economy. While the Department's Careers Service works with clients of all ages and in a range of settings, it is critical that our young people in schools have timely access to high-quality, professional careers advice and guidance. I recently met the Education Minister to discuss opportunities to enhance our careers provision and increase engagement across both Departments. We agreed to work collaboratively in order to ensure that all young people have access to the full range of career options that exist and that they receive the best careers advice possible as they progress through school.

Ms Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am glad to hear that there has been that collaborative working. We have talked about that over the past few weeks. Is there an intention to agree a joint action plan? If that is the case, is there a timeline to go with it?

Mr C Murphy: We discussed it on a couple of occasions, and then we brought officials with us when we met. We want to ensure that the Careers Service, and all the information that goes into it, is accessible to all young people. That is perhaps not currently the case in every set of circumstances. In the first instance, we want to make sure that the full range of advice is available to people. The Careers Service keeps itself very much up to date on developing work opportunities and careers and those that may become available in the future, as well as the skills and the education that are needed to engage with them. We agreed that that is the first phase of what both Departments want to develop in order to ensure that we have a seamless way of working people through the education system, from primary school right up to university and beyond.

Mr Butler: We know that children who come from a special educational needs background,

children with a disability and those from a socially disadvantaged area will, sadly, struggle to get a job in the same way as others. What conversations have you and the Education Minister had about redressing the balance?

Mr C Murphy: We want to ensure that the full range of advice is available to all kids, regardless of their background or school setting, and that there is an opportunity for all young people and their parents to get proper, professional advice on the range of options that are available. Of course, the more options we have, the more young people can access skills and training and get opportunities for employment. That is not confined to one particular set of students; it is for every student who is going through our system.

Ms Hunter: Minister, on the point about the joint action plan with the Minister of Education, let me say that I recently met a speaker for schools on the lack of standardised work experience. Have you had conversations with the Education Minister about the access to work experience and the need to ensure that children get every opportunity possible?

Mr C Murphy: As I said, the meeting that I had with Minister Givan was to discuss, in the first instance, careers advice. We both agreed that the two Departments, because we share responsibility for education, need to work together closely and seamlessly to make sure that all young people experience maximum advantage as they go through school. That will include work experience, because that is very much part of preparing people for choosing the path that suits them best.

In the first instance, as I say, we are concentrating on careers advice and making sure that that is available and delivered to all. We have agreed that we will continue that work and develop more areas of work as that progresses.

Hospitality Sector: Challenges

2. **Mr Honeyford** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what action he is taking to address the challenges faced by the hospitality sector as a result of rising costs. (AQO 354/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I understand the importance of the hospitality sector for both the tourism industry and the high street economy, with approximately 57,000 jobs in the accommodation and food service sector. Addressing the challenges of rising costs cuts

across several areas of government, including the Department for Communities and local councils. My Department is taking steps to support businesses through delivery of the Executive's path to net zero energy strategy, a key objective being to ensure that all consumers have access to essential and affordable energy.

The level of VAT is also a specific issue. The Department of Finance has repeatedly raised with the Treasury the negative impacts on hospitality of high levels of VAT.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you, Minister, for your response. Every quarter, 13% of hospitality businesses are losing money, 20% are just breaking even, and a further 20% have no cash reserves. You have outlined that the hospitality industry is a hugely important sector that generates growth and drives the economy. Is it now time, Minister, for you to get together with the Department of Finance to come up with a relief package for those businesses?

Mr C Murphy: In the context of the Budget that we have available to us, that will always be very challenging, but there are things that we can do. As I said, one of the key elements of the increasing cost of doing business is energy costs. Through the path to net zero energy strategy, there are supports for energy, being more efficient and having access to renewable energy for businesses through Invest NI. We will continue to provide that.

I have no doubt that the Finance Minister will continue, as I did when I was in that position, to fight the fight on VAT with Treasury. However, I have to say that it has never appeared to be very much minded to move on those things when we have engaged with it. We will continue that work. Of course, whatever measures can be taken within the limited resources that I have, or, indeed, the Finance Department has, to support people, we will certainly take them. I am putting together a tourism implementation group to work on issues that will bring support to tourism and hospitality. The hospitality sector will be represented on that.

Mr McGuigan: Just as you were finishing your response, Minister, you mentioned the tourism partnership board. Recently, you announced your intention to set it up. How will you ensure that the hospitality sector will be represented and allowed to play a fruitful role in that organisation?

Mr C Murphy: I am a firm believer that policies and strategies must be co-designed with the

people who are at the working end of them in those sectors. Clearly, when we are designing a strategy for the tourism and hospitality sector, we want people who are in that sector to be engaged in it. I think that that will lead to the best outcome. As I said, in a space where we have limited resources, we need to ensure that what we are doing with those resources is targeted in the most effective way. People who work in the industry, working with officials, will give us the best possible outcome. We will ensure that people from that sector are included.

Mr Nesbitt: Beyond rising costs, another challenge to hospitality and tourism is the electronic travel authorisation. I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on any negotiations that he is having on that issue. Is he aware of whether it is on the agenda of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIC), which meets today?

Mr C Murphy: I am not. We do not have access to the agenda for the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. I am not sure whether that issue is on it, but I know that, if part of that is to support the arrangements from the Good Friday Agreement, both Governments need to ensure that what they are doing collectively supports the general direction that we are trying to develop to grow the economy.

As I said, the sector is important. Recently, there has been consultation on a document. That has come back in. From that, we want to set up an implementation group that will try to develop a strategy, and do so at pace — this is not about kicking the can down the road — that will inform the targeting of our limited resources in the most effective way. Some of that is about targeting resource. Some of it is about clearing away barriers to tourism growth and ensuring that the agencies and facilities that we have at our disposal are working in the most effective way.

Mr Durkan: Last week, the Sooty Olive restaurant in my constituency closed its doors for the final time. When asked what the Government could have done to help, the owner said, "Anything". The Minister rightly pointed out the difficulty that the Budget presents and how that would make it difficult to do anything around rates, but will he accept that the rates that are generated by a business that has closed down amount to much less than the discounted rates that could be offered to hospitality businesses?

Mr C Murphy: Yes, I do understand that fully, and that is an ongoing challenge. The rates that we collect fund about 10% of the Executive's available resources, and that goes into health, education and all the other priorities that Members in this Chamber stand up and say we need to spend more money on. That is the balance between trying to raise money and doing so in a way that tries to ensure that businesses stay open. Clearly, if the consequences of rates being collected put businesses out, no rate is collected. There are other challenges with energy costs and other matters that equally provide significant challenges to businesses, and we have to try to find ways to support people across a range of matters so that the issue of rates does not become the key factor in their survival or not as a business.

Intertrade UK

3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the role of Intertrade UK in the delivery plan of his Department's 10X Economy strategy. (AQO 355/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: The responsibility for establishing Intertrade UK sits with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and is in the planning stage. As part of my plans to grow the economy, we will be engaging with all relevant partners and bodies to ensure that trade moves smoothly and businesses are kept informed of new trading arrangements. We look forward to working with all stakeholders, including Intertrade UK. I had initial discussions at the East-West Council meeting recently on what positive steps can be taken to grow trade across these islands. Smooth trade across the islands and further afield is critical to successful business export growth.

Mr Beattie: Thank you for your answer. I get that we are still in the really early stages of Intertrade UK, so it is good that you are engaging, and thank you for that. Looking forward, you clearly put in a Budget bid for InterTradelreland. Have you done the same for Intertrade UK, working on the principle that it is roughly the same type of budget?

Mr C Murphy: As I said, Intertrade UK is a creation of Whitehall. Its ownership stays in Whitehall with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, so we do not have any funding input to it. InterTradelreland, as you know, is a creation of the Good Friday Agreement and the North/South bodies that flow from that, and the arrangements for

funding — our contribution and Dublin's contribution — were established 25 years ago. Intertrade UK is a different animal, if you like. It will not have the same functions as InterTradelreland. It is about making sure that information is shared, that there is promotion of trade east to west and west to east, ensuring that people are aware and, where problems may arise, that people are informed about solutions to them. We do not have a direct funding input, and as the Member has acknowledged, its development is at its early stages. Obviously, we will keep an eye to that, and anything that can enhance our trade across the islands is something that we will engage with.

Ms Ennis: Since taking office, the Minister has set out a clear and positive strategy on how to develop our economy. Will he ensure that his Department's budget aligns with that economic strategy?

Mr C Murphy: As I have been saying in response to previous questions, there is a real challenge for all Departments with the budgets that are available to us. There was an acknowledgement by the Government, prior to the Executive's coming back, that we had been underfunded. We continue to suffer from the legacy of that underfunding, which has not been properly addressed by the Treasury as yet. On the fiscal framework that we need to be in, discussions have begun and are ongoing between the Treasury and the Department of Finance, and I know that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will become involved in that as well. We all face the challenge of very restricted budgets. I have provided strategic focus to the Department across four areas, so we will ensure that whatever limited resources we have are being used with an eye to that strategic focus and, in that way, try to achieve good outcomes for regional balance, good jobs, productivity and our challenges in meeting net zero.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, the question referenced the 10X Economy strategy. As far as I can ascertain, "10X" is a slogan coined by a US self-help expert and not a real, meaningful target for the Northern Ireland economy. Will there be specific targets around growing the all-Ireland economy? Will they be in the Programme for Government, will they be aligned to a multi-year Budget and what will those targets be?

Mr C Murphy: The Member has made his own commentary on 10X. We have a three-year mandate. If we were to go back to starting all

these strategies from scratch and going out to consult on them, the mandate would be over by the time that that was complete. Therefore, we decided, with the agreement of the Department and of Invest NI, to put in place a strategic focus. One of the criticisms of Invest NI in the report was that there had not been sufficient strategic focus.

On the all-Ireland economy, as the Member will know, at the North/South sectoral meeting last Friday, we agreed the increased headcount for InterTradelreland to do more work in the area of North/South collaboration, the growing of clusters, exports and developing the North/South economy.

The economy, North to South, grew from just over £2 billion in 2015 to just over £10 billion by 2022. Organically, it has clearly been growing, even through the debates and the uncertainty around Brexit. We now have an opportunity to make a step change. As yet, we have not set a specific target, but I will certainly develop those discussions. Now that we have put InterTradelreland on the footing that will allow it to do much more in that area, we will examine what can be done. We have already had useful and fruitful discussions with all the Departments in Dublin that we deal with on growing the economy.

3.00 pm

Mr Allister: It seems to me that the Minister does not exude much interest or enthusiasm for InterTrade UK, but, if he ever gets around to discussing it with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, will he at least advocate that it be headquartered in Northern Ireland in a progressive commercial town such as Ballymena? *[Laughter.]*

Mr C Murphy: Did you say "progressive"? *[Laughter.]* OK.

Anyway, as I said in answer to Mr Beattie, it is an idea that was developed as a consequence of the Command Paper. It is not fully developed. In that paper, it was agreed by the British Government that it would be housed in Whitehall and would be the responsibility of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We do not have a function in its actual operation. It is to provide a service. I had discussions on it with Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, at the meeting of the East-West Council. It is about having a service to inform businesses that wish to do business over here how they can go about doing that. That is its function. I would be

happy to engage with anything that improves east-west or North/South trade, even for Ballymena.

Community Wealth Building

4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how his Department will promote community wealth building. (AQO 356/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: Community wealth building is an important piece in the delivery of my overall economic strategy and one that I am committed to strengthening. Community wealth building cuts across several areas of government and, in particular, connects with the work of the Department for Communities. I intend to work closely with DFC to address agreed recommendations outlined in its recent report by an independent ministerial advisory panel.

The report's first recommendation is to adopt, deliver and resource a social economy strategy. In response, I have initiated the development of a comprehensive three-year social enterprise action plan. I will be working closely with sector representatives to ensure that the action plan is co-designed and aligns with my economic strategy.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.]* Minister, given the focus that you have rightly put on regional balance, will you please ensure that the focus of the social economy and community wealth building is on areas of deprivation such as the north-west and parts of Belfast?

Mr C Murphy: A pilot scheme is already up and running on community wealth building between Larne and Derry. It is for the north-west generally but is focused on Derry. We recognise that, when we talk about regional balance and addressing inequality, imbalance does not exist just outside Belfast and that there are areas in Belfast that suffer from inequalities that need to be addressed.

Of course, when we talk about issues such as community wealth building and social enterprise and the contribution that both could make at grassroots level, we acknowledge that they are not a replacement for economic activity in those areas through conventional means. We want to support community wealth building and social enterprise, however, and some good projects are being developed. There are good action plans from the social economy side to provide support for people who wish to enter the

workplace and for projects that will bring about not just economic benefit but social benefit for communities that need it most.

Ms Mulholland: Following on from the question from Carál, how can community wealth building be utilised in rural areas, specifically in my constituency of North Antrim, to build economic resilience outside the more urban hubs?

Mr C Murphy: There are many good social economy projects in rural areas. As I said, we have resourced a three-year strategy for the social economy that, I expect, will not be confined to urban areas. The community wealth building pilot project to which I referred will bring us much good information on how that can be done. At the moment, the one linkage is between Larne and Derry, which is a good project, with people very knowledgeable of the areas involved. It also involves — the name of the organisation escapes me — the community development trust.

Those schemes are not just for urban areas. The pilot happens to involve urban areas, but we want to see opportunities for social enterprise across rural areas as well. We understand clearly that rural areas suffer from a lack of access to services and from what is, in many ways, hidden deprivation that is not readily identified. It is important that the projects reach into those areas and work with communities. We will encourage that through the strategy.

UEFA European Football Championship 2028

5. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the 2028 UEFA European Football Championship bid. (AQO 357/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: Following a historic and successful joint bid, the five football associations across these islands are set to host the UEFA European Championships in 2028. In February, officials from my Department and the Department for Communities, alongside the Irish FA and the GAA, met a UEFA delegation in Belfast. Since then, there has been further engagement. Significant progress has been made, including on detailed plans that demonstrate how a redeveloped Casement Park can host games during Euro 2028. We await a final report from UEFA in response to the proposals, which is expected by early June. It is estimated that the tournament will generate £2.6 billion of benefits across these islands. With games due to be hosted in Belfast and

Dublin, it creates a fantastic opportunity to promote the island of Ireland to a worldwide audience of over six billion people.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his answers so far.*] The Minister knows not only that Casement Park is an Executive flagship project; he knows how sensible a project it is for meeting the needs of the Gaels of Antrim and the wider Ulster Gaelic community. Can the Minister give us an update on where we are with the redevelopment of Casement Park?

Mr C Murphy: I acknowledge what the Member says. At its initiation, Casement Park was a project to provide for Gaelic games in Ulster and further afield and to provide economic regeneration in that part of west Belfast and, I have no doubt, the whole of Belfast through the provision of a fantastic venue.

The work is progressing well. The Ulster GAA council has commenced site clearance work, which is a welcome proactive move on its part. It has committed £4 million of its own money to keep the project alive, which is a clear demonstration of its commitment to being a positive and active contributor in bringing the Euro 2028 international soccer tournament to Belfast.

Mr McNulty: What communications has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Executive Office about how delays to tendering are hiking costs and potentially scuppering the possibility of the Euros being hosted in west Belfast in 2028?

Mr C Murphy: The matter does not rest with the Executive Office; it rests with the Department for Communities. I would like to see the tendering documents being released. That would give us more certainty about what the cost of the project will be. I recently met the IFA and the GAA. There is a concern that any delays with this will potentially dent UEFA's confidence in the project, and it is UEFA's decision whether or not it will host the games here. I would like to see that moving at pace, as soon as it can happen. I understand that the Communities Minister is engaged with the British Government about their contribution, but that should not necessarily delay the release of tender documents. As I said, the work has begun on site, at the GAA's own risk and using its contribution. If those documents were to be released, we would get a clearer sense of what the cost might be.

Grid Connection Charges

6. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister for the Economy whether his Department plans to introduce socialisation of grid connection charges. (AQO 358/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I plan to introduce socialisation of grid connection charges. Socialisation of connection charges is an important step in removing the current high cost barrier to the mass adoption of heat pumps and electric vehicles. It will create opportunities for businesses to decarbonise and is a key enabler in meeting our net zero targets.

Precise details of how that will work will need to be worked through. My Department conducted a joint call for evidence on Northern Ireland's connection charging policy with the Utility Regulator late last year. A paper summarising the responses to the joint call for evidence will be published shortly. Officials from my Department, along with the Utility Regulator, are assessing the evidence with a view to publishing an options paper for consultation in June.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister. That is positive news. The Minister will be aware that the cost of connection, lack of market support and planning timelines are the three big barriers that are always cited by the renewables sector. Further to his announcement about connection charging, what engagement has the Minister had with his colleague in the Department for Infrastructure about planning improvement programmes?

Mr C Murphy: Last summer, when the parties who were going to make up the Executive met, we talked about planning reform, not in the sense of planning policy but in the sense of improving planning systems and getting decisions to be taken quickly. There was broad agreement across all the parties. I have not had an opportunity for direct engagement on that, but I have no doubt that, when we produce the paper, it will take me into a conversation. The Member is correct to say that a number of factors are cited that will move us further down the renewable energy path, which we need to do. According to the targets that have been set for us for 2030 and 2050, we need to move quickly into that area. Anything that provides a barrier to that needs to be addressed, certainly when it comes to the systems of government.

Ms Á Murphy: Minister, given that grid connection tends to be a lot more difficult to achieve in rural areas, do you agree that the

socialisation of costs will promote regional balance?

Mr C Murphy: Yes, it will. The Member will know, as I do, from representing rural areas that connection charges can be prohibitive because of the isolated topography. The opportunity to socialise charges will assist people to get support for building their own homes or establishing small businesses or businesses in rural areas. It is an important factor in ensuring that we have more regional balance and move towards meeting our net zero targets.

Agri-food Sector: Investment

7. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on proposals to introduce a scheme to invest in the agri-food sector. (AQO 359/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I recognise the importance of the agri-food processing sector to our economy and the contribution that it will make to delivering my economic strategy. My Department, through Invest NI, provides a wide range of support to the sector in areas including innovation, skills, sustainability and export development. However, the sector faces challenges including a productivity gap compared with firms in the South and in Britain. I am supportive of activities that will help to address that challenge and will consider any proposals that are presented to me in relation to support for the agri-food and drink-processing sector.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. [*Translation: Thank you.*] I thank the Minister for his commitment. What is the potential timeline for any scheme to support the agri-food sector to be formulated and launched?

Mr C Murphy: A project for that is under discussion. It has been through various processes, including in my Department, and is now going through a business case process in the Department of Finance. I expect that we will be in a position this year to announce support for the sector.

Mr McGlone: Minister, with regard to the agri-food sector and wider farm produce, will your Department be in a position to contribute in any way to the obligations of the just transition?

Mr C Murphy: As, I am sure, the Member will understand, it will lie primarily in the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and

Rural Affairs to assist people to get land and farms into that area. We will be able to contribute to that, even through some of the areas that were referred to in the previous questions on connectivity and making grid connections more accessible for people. The move towards a just transition and towards the targets that we have set ourselves is not for a single Department; we all have a responsibility. We have a legal obligation but also a moral one. Given the rural society that we live in, there are opportunities for farmers and landowners to become involved in that work. We will be happy to do anything that we can across all Departments, including mine, to support that.

Ministry of Defence Contracts

8. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what discussions his Department has had with the Ministry of Defence to increase the number of contracts awarded to small to medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland. (AQO 360/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: The aerospace sector has over 100 companies, employs 8,000 workers and contributes an estimated £1.9 billion to the local economy. Invest NI, supported by the Department, engages with the MoD across several forums. In 2022-23, MoD spend per head was £100 here, compared with £380 in Scotland and England and £250 in Wales. Invest NI works closely with the ADS trade association to lobby for additional spend here.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that there is huge potential to maximise Ministry of Defence spend in Northern Ireland. My figures are slightly different from his — a meagre £60 per head of population here compared with £340 in the rest of the UK. What support can the Department give to businesses that seek to tender for Ministry of Defence contracts?

Mr C Murphy: Invest NI is already working in that space, with both the MoD and the ADS trade association, to lobby for additional spend and facilitate companies that want to get into that area of work. That work will continue.

Mr Speaker: We will move to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Renewables Targets

T1. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy what he would say to those who say that he is not aiming high enough and is not ambitious enough, in light of the fact that sector experts have said that, in order to reach the renewables targets by 2030, significant acceleration of pace is needed. (AQT 231/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I did not set the targets, so it is nothing to do with my ambition. The Executive in the previous mandate agreed the targets, and we all have to bend our will to make sure that we meet them. It is not just a legal obligation to meet them; it is a moral obligation. I understand that other jurisdictions are struggling, and I have no doubt that the targets are incredibly challenging. I also have no doubt that there needs to be a significant acceleration in what is happening in that space. Renewables also present us with significant opportunities because of the nature of the country that we live in and the expertise in our manufacturing sector to get us into that space. They are not my targets; they are agreed targets across the Executive that are supported by the Assembly. We should all do our very best to make sure that they are met.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, even if we invest in the right places, fundamental changes have to take place, particularly in our planning regulations and grid capacity. Honestly, there is no sense of urgency on all of that. What guarantees can you give us that you will lead an all-systems approach?

Mr C Murphy: As I said, that is a matter for the Executive as a whole. We have a responsibility there and we have a responsibility to work with others on it, and we certainly will not slack. That is why I made net zero one of the four priorities for the Department. When a strategic focus was being provided to the Department, I identified that a net zero approach as one of the four targets. We will do everything in our regard, and we recognise that it has to move at pace and accelerate if targets are to be met. It is a matter for the Executive and for collaboration between all the Departments. I hope that it will be a matter that the House will support.

Shared Prosperity Fund

T2. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for the Economy what he is doing to support NICVA and other community and voluntary sector organisations that recently highlighted their concerns around the end of the current funding round for the Shared Prosperity Fund, which

assists their important work on skills and employment. (AQT 232/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: A lot of the funding that we provided to the sector came directly from European funding. That European funding was lost. We managed to plug the gap over COVID, but that funding came to an end in the last round. The funding was not replaced, despite the Government's promises. We have moved from a process where the Executive had funding that could be used through the Department for the Economy, which knew the groups that did that work and could support them, to one where those groups are in a competition-based approach that is run directly by Whitehall. The outcome of that has been haphazard.

There were groups that received funding to continue their work, which I very much welcome, but they are now coming to a cliff edge, with no certainty on what will happen. Of course, we will try to work with the groups. We will continue to engage with the Department in London. I raised the issue with Minister Michael Gove at the East-West Council, and they appear to be moving more to the line that the Executive will have some input into the process, which I hope is the case because we know the groups and the necessity of the work that they do, and we will give them whatever support we can. It will be a matter of looking at what we have in our limited resources and encouraging continued funding from Whitehall to the areas where it is needed most.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for that response and welcome the work that is ongoing. Will the Minister commit to continuing to meet the sector and the Minister for Communities to ensure that there is a joined-up approach right across the community and voluntary sector, which will provide some reassurance that their local representatives are fighting for them?

Mr C Murphy: Yes. I am more than happy to meet the Minister for Communities, as we have a shared interest in the matter. When we talk to people abroad and here, the big attraction for investment is the people and their skills. That is the number-one attraction that people refer to. Our biggest challenge is getting more people and more skills because of the way that that support has been removed from European funding into direct Whitehall funding on a competition basis. Of course we want to fix that. I am very happy to work with the Department for Communities. I know of its interest. If we can put pressure jointly on Whitehall to deliver the

goods in that area, we will do that, I am sure. We will also see what we can do ourselves to try to support the groups that are providing that vital service.

Tourism: Economic Potential

T3. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister for the Economy, with the tourism industry having huge, untapped potential for the Northern Ireland economy, to outline the steps that he plans to take in its promotion, while highlighting its top attractions such as the Mourne Mountains. (AQT 233/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I agree with the Member that we could do much more. Some 70% of people employed in the tourism industry are outside Belfast, so support for it certainly adds to regional balance. A consultation document was out, and there has been a lot of feedback on that. We are now setting up a tourism implementation group, which will involve people from tourism, hospitality and other sectors to make sure that we target whatever limited resources we have in the most effective way.

I have also been in discussion with the various tourism agencies and with Minister Catherine Martin in the South about the tourism brands that have been very successful. A piece of work has been paid for out of the Shared Island Fund in relation to the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway coast. We also had discussions about the Hidden Heartlands brand that could come up into Fermanagh and Omagh. I know that they are very keen in that area about that. Of course, in the area that the Member and I both represent, Ireland's Ancient East does not stop at Carlingford lough. The attraction and the central theme of that extends very much into counties Armagh and Down and perhaps beyond into Antrim.

There is a lot of work that we can do. I had engagement with tour operators, when I was in the United States, to encourage them to come here, know more about the place and make sure that Tourism Ireland works for them. Since I came into office, I have been to many events to offer support to the tourism sector. We continue to do that because, as the Member said, so much is as yet untapped.

Ms Forsythe: As the Minister is aware, locally, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is moving towards a rebranding of its tourism strategy. It is removing the names of local area attractions, such as Mourne Mountains, Slieve Gullian and Strangford lough, in favour of a broad term, "Ireland's True Nature". Does the

Minister agree that councils have a responsibility to focus on their local area and local attractions in promoting their tourism strategy to maximise local potential?

Mr C Murphy: A large brand attracts people. They become interested in the overall attraction — it might be the Wild Atlantic Way, which runs the full length of the west coast — and then, when people are interested in going there because of the large brand, you get into the local sectoral offer and what is available. That is what attracts any of us who plan a holiday. You look at an area that you might want to go to, and then you look for specific things. Therefore, it is about a mixture of having big brands, which have significant attraction, can be promoted internationally and get international visitors here, and ensuring that, at local level, we promote all the various attractions that we have. The council area that we both live in has no shortage of attractions for people to come and see, from the island of Ireland locally or internationally. We need to make sure to promote to both.

Tourism: Failte Ireland's Brands

T4. **Miss Hargey** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the plans he has to extend Failte Ireland's tourism brands in the North, taking advantage of the global impacts. (AQT 234/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: I have already had conversations with officials. A piece of work is already agreed and funded by the Shared Island Fund to consider linkages in relation to the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway coast. There is scope for looking at the other major brands, Ireland's Ancient East and the Hidden Heartlands. We are in a conversation about those, and I hope to see some movement there. Of course, we also want to make sure that we talk to people on the ground. There has been a clamour for some of those larger brands to be available. In that, then, we lift not only the level of offering but the understanding of the attraction at national and international level.

Miss Hargey: The Minister knows that tourists are becoming more inquisitive about local places, their histories and their impacts. What plans does he have around political tourism and local social tourism to engage those key sectors and, importantly, to involve communities in feeding into those bigger strategies?

Mr C Murphy: Local political and cultural tours are opportunities to bring tourism benefits, including those from tourism spend, into areas

that have not necessarily had a peace dividend. Things like the black taxi tours on the Falls and the Shankill are, I think, the second-biggest attraction in Belfast, without having been seriously promoted. I am sure that, in Derry, the experience of the walls and the Museum of Free Derry could be better promoted as well. As I said, those have brought jobs and income into areas that have not benefited in the past.

We will absolutely look at that as part of the strategy. I get all the sensitivities around political and cultural tours, but they are an area of interest for people who come here. They are managed well in other parts of the world. They are also managed well in the South; I am sure that you are familiar with a lot of the tours in Dublin that go around sites of conflict there. They are important attractions. There is a greater curiosity among international visitors about the history and culture of places, as well as about the sense of place. We need to do all that we can to promote those tours.

Apprenticeships

T5. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he has specific plans to introduce additional apprenticeship schemes. (AQT 235/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: There is a range of programmes that deal with apprenticeships. They are critical. As I said in response to one of your colleagues, when you go internationally in particular, you hear people saying that the attraction of here is the people and the skills. We need to ensure that we have sufficient skills. We used European funding for programmes to bring people into, and back into, the workforce, but Whitehall has not fully replaced that. We need to try to do more in that area.

I think that I said in response to an earlier question that the job of work that the Education Minister and I have agreed to do together is to ensure that young people understand the range of options that are available to them. We are not convinced that, in all schools, young people are told about the possibility of apprenticeships or of getting qualifications that are equivalent to degrees but that allow people to earn while they learn. Those are great options for young people.

Where we can get additional resources to provide additional courses — there are already quite a few — we will do that. We certainly want to make sure that people from a young age, and their parents, are fully aware of the range of options that are available to them. That is the

piece of work that the Education Minister and I have agreed to undertake together.

Mr Clarke: Does the Minister accept that, sometimes, there are criticisms of apprenticeships and that apprentices are seen as cheap labour, particularly those for electricians, plumbers, bricklayers and so on, where there is a shortage? Does he have any specific plans to make apprenticeships more attractive so that apprentices feel more valued, rather than being seen just as cheap labour?

Mr C Murphy: The Member correctly identifies that not only are those good jobs and good skills to have but that they are transferable, wherever you go. We are also now in a situation in which people cannot get apprentices or skilled workers, such as people with construction skills and a whole range of others. There is a greater sense from employers — we need to keep encouraging this — that they value young people whom they bring in. Everybody whom we speak to is very keen to get young people into their workplace across all ranges of business and to give them the skills that they need in order to work in their business. There needs to be an understanding. Certain industries, or certain sectors of industries, should not think that apprentices are just a source of cheap employment. At a time when we do not have sufficient people in the workforce, it will be vital to get young people in and give them the skills and sufficient support to make them want to stay and continue to work in a business.

Non-domestic RHI: Proposals

T6. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline his proposals to replace the non-domestic renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme. (AQT 236/22-27)

Mr C Murphy: The Member will be aware that a previous Executive committed, as part of an agreement, to closing the RHI scheme. I have put forward proposals to the Executive to do just that. I hope that the Executive will deal with that in the not-too-distant future. We have a situation where the scheme is not delivering its intended outcomes in carbon reduction. As I said, there was an agreement among the parties to close the scheme. I hoped that that would be done in a previous mandate, but it has now landed with me to clear up that particular mess. My intention — I have already brought this matter to the Executive's attention — is to close the scheme, consult on the best way forward to do that and try to get access to the

funding that we have missed out on over the years to get better schemes in place.

3.30 pm

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much, Minister. Have you done any costings on how much the closure would cost?

Mr C Murphy: Costings have been done, but they need to be bottomed out. Part of the paper that we brought to the Executive will do that. The Executive need to be agreeable to bringing the scheme to a close, and we will then put that forward. We have no doubt that it will be a matter of some debate and discussion. We have a sense of the cost. Bear in mind that the scheme was funded through annually managed expenditure (AME); it was not funded through our block grant. We have a sense of the cost to close down the scheme over a number of years while ensuring that those in the scheme are treated fairly. We also have a sense of what we are missing out on, in that we could be spending on schemes that would contribute to net zero.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Finance

Budget 2024-25

Mr Speaker: Eóin Tennyson has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Finance. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will automatically be called to ask a supplementary.

Mr Tennyson asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Executive's agreement on a Budget for 2024-25.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): We have all been clear from the outset that this was going to be an incredibly challenging Budget. Demand far outstripped the funding available many times over. For every £1 that we had to spend on day-to-day funding for public services we had three times as many demands. Similarly, for every £1 that we had to spend on capital, including money for hospitals, schools and roads, we had one and a half times as many demands.

When the Executive were restored, it was clear that the funding available was not enough to undo the damage inflicted by the British Government's lack of investment in public services. With increased demands on services and rising costs, the Executive simply do not have the Budget to do everything that we want to do. Providing additional funding for one area means less funding for another. The reality is that, without a Budget, Departments and outside bodies cannot plan. That is not a sustainable or tenable position.

The Budget demonstrates the Executive's commitment, despite the severity of the financial challenges facing us, to work together, make tough choices and demonstrate the leadership that people rightly expect. That is why, last Thursday, the Executive agreed the 2024-25 Budget, which was the result of a series of engagements with Ministers. A written ministerial statement was laid in the Assembly on the same day, setting out the Budget outcome for each Department. Ministers will prioritise spending within the funding envelope provided to their Department. It will undoubtedly mean incredibly difficult decisions for Departments, including mine. My officials are

working with Departments on the production of a Budget document. Once it is published, I will bring the Budget 2024-25 to the Assembly for a debate and vote. I anticipate that being at the end of May.

The scale of the challenges facing us will not be fixed by one Budget. We all recognise 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. Working together, we will be better placed to meet the challenges ahead.

Mr Tennyson: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister has outlined the capital pressures in relation to the allocations in the Budget. I note that the Strule Shared Education Campus is one of the earmarked projects listed in the written ministerial statement. The cost of that project is ballooning and has been criticised by the independent review of education and the Audit Office. How can the Minister be sure that that is not an empty promise to those schools and how can she be confident that it is not a Public Accounts Committee inquiry in the making?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will be aware, the Executive approved the earmarking of funding for Strule a number of weeks ago. The project will still be subject to business case approval by the Department of Finance before any further funding is allocated to it. In the Budget, there is an allocation earmarked at £20 million. That requirement was identified by the Department of Education for 2024-25, and it reflects the Executive's previous commitment to £150 million of funding for Strule, which was an amount that was included in the repurposed funds in the financial package. Funding will, of course, not flow to that project until the appropriate approvals are in place.

Miss Brogan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister.]* Minister, will you outline the timeline of how agreement on the 2024-25 Budget was reached and how you plan to take it forward?

Dr Archibald: The agreement of the 2024-25 Budget was the culmination of weeks of engagement with Ministers. The approach to the Budget was agreed by the Executive on 15 February, and that included recognising that the final Budget position for 2023-24 could not be used as the starting point for Budget 2024-25, as the funding available would not be sufficient as the opening position for this Budget. It is not possible within the funding available for 2024-

25. It was also agreed that there would be a short delay until the end of April to allow individual Ministers to consider their Department's financial position. During that time, my officials have been working with officials across all Departments on their requirements, and I held one-to-one meetings with Ministers. On 11 April, I brought a paper to the Executive that set out the quantum of bids against the Budget available and the sheer scale of the challenge facing us, with demands far outweighing the funding available.

My focus throughout, which will continue, has been in problem-solving mode. If we are to tackle the serious problems across our public services, how we are funded needs to change, and that position is endorsed by the independent Fiscal Council. I am determined to build on the positive engagement that I have had with Treasury to date and to find a way to put the Executive's finances on a more stable footing going forward. I will continue to press Treasury to ensure that our long-term funding reflects our needs.

Ms Forsythe: There is no question that this is a difficult Budget, with all Departments facing extremely challenging decisions going forward. No Minister got everything that they bid for in the Budget. Will the Minister confirm that, looking back to the 2023-24 baseline, settlements in-year and increases and contrary to the Minister of Health's claim, the Department of Health has, in fact, received an additional £1.1 billion in funding on top of its baseline resource budget since 1 April 2023?

Dr Archibald: In relation to individual Departments, Health has increased its baseline by 6.3% since the beginning of the financial year 2023-24. As the Member will be aware, there are often in-year technical allocations added to a baseline, as well as in-year funding that would normally be allocated during monitoring rounds. This year, in particular, we had the financial package, and Health got over £500 million of that package. That is reflected in its out-turn for the last financial year.

Dr Aiken: I am just following on from my friend across the Chamber. Will the Minister explain her party's commitment to putting public health first, as evidenced by her party's manifesto and, indeed, other parties' manifestos to put an extra £1 billion into the Health budget, as well as the statements from the First Minister and her leader, Mary Lou McDonald, at Hillsborough Castle, now that she is cutting the Health budget by 2.3%, according to her own figures. They are not our figures; they are her figures.

Mr Speaker: Please get to the question, Dr Aiken.

Dr Aiken: Will she explain why, within the overall Budget of £15.6 billion, she is not in negotiation with the Health Minister and other Departments to significantly close the £300 million gap, as, she has already said in the media, she is doing with the Education Minister?

Mr Speaker: Question, please.

Dr Aiken: That was the question, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Good, good. Thank you.

Dr Archibald: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Member will be well aware, as a long-time member of the Finance Committee, that you cannot compare the end-of-year position from one financial year with the start of another financial year. It is also true that the Department of Health has received an additional £2 billion since the beginning of the 2020 financial year. I am clear that Health is a priority for the Executive. It is a priority for my Department and for the Executive. It has received over 50% of the Budget allocation for this year, and it received 50% of the funding that I had available to me to allocate for this financial year.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, there are reports today that you have told Executive colleagues that the Treasury has told your Department that there will be no progress on an increased funding package. I presume that that means an improvement to the fiscal framework for the next two years. Is that true? Can you confirm exactly where negotiations are with the Treasury? Indeed, are there negotiations? You also mentioned revenue raising earlier in your remarks. Are you formally now committed to introducing new revenue-raising measures within this mandate?

Dr Archibald: Thank you. There was more than one question in there.

To be clear, I have had a number of engagements with Treasury. I have met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on a number of occasions, and my officials have been working with Treasury officials on the application of the needs-based adjustment factor to be included in the financial package, on the need to fund the Executive at an agreed level of need and on the development of a wider fiscal framework. As the Member will be aware, we have a financial package for the next two years, but we also had agreement that there would be a new fiscal

framework. I have set out to Treasury what, I think, should be included in that, and, likewise, on their restoration, the Executive set that out in their letter to the Prime Minister.

I am clear that we need an agreed level of need and a proper funding framework, but I will not stop challenging the Tory underfunding of our public services that, for the past decade, has starved them of much-needed money. As recently as the spring statement this year, the Tory Government have prioritised tax cuts over our public services and hard-pressed workers and families. With Executive colleagues, I will continue to make the case on behalf of the Executive and to relay the view of the Assembly, which, in passing the first motion of the mandate, called for us to be properly funded. I will continue to have the back of our public-sector workers and communities in making that case. I will not give up on that, and it is important to say that our position would be stronger if we were united in making that case.

Ms Ferguson: Will the Minister provide further detail on the childcare funding that will be provided in the Budget?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for her question. Affordable childcare has been supported by every party in the Assembly, and it was one of the priorities that the Executive agreed. It is important to get childcare right. It will play a vital role in our economy, and it will help support childcare providers as well as workers and families. In the Budget allocation, we agreed to earmark £25 million for the childcare strategy to fund new actions above and beyond those undertaken by Departments within their remit, as part of the work that a cross-departmental working group agreed to by the Executive is undertaking. We will look again at that as proposals are brought forward and, if necessary, increase funding for it in-year, if funding becomes available. Obviously, the delivery of a childcare strategy is a cross-cutting issue that requires support across Departments in its development. It was important that, as an Executive, we considered how we could best facilitate that. My Department is contributing to the cross-departmental working group, but it was the Executive's priority that was reflected in the allocation.

Mr Mathison: The Minister will be aware that the news that the money and resource required for the non-teaching staff pay and grading review were not in the Budget was met with widespread dismay among staff who work in that sector. Will the Minister outline how we

arrived at a position where resource for that review was not found? What can be done to remedy that?

Dr Archibald: The Member will be aware that funding was made available as part of the financial package for pay awards for the previous financial year and that the business case for the pay and grading review was not complete at that time. I am absolutely committed to working with the Education Minister to find a resolution for education support workers. I recognise the importance of those workers, some of whom are among the lowest-paid in the sector while doing such vital work to support our children and young people. As part of the Budget, I proposed that the Executive seek agreement from Treasury to reprofile some of the money from the repurposed funds in the financial package to be used for that purpose. The Executive, thankfully, endorsed that position, so I will raise that as a priority in my discussions with Treasury, which, hopefully, will be in the next short while.

Mr Allister: When the Minister goes back to the Treasury looking for more money, will it not have her measure as someone who is prepared to come back to this Government without one penny of extra money and has briefed her Executive colleagues that she has no expectation of that? Is that because the Sinn Féin strategy is to make demands so that it can blame the British Government? Is that really what this is all about?

3.45 pm

Dr Archibald: My party and others were clear from the very start that the money that was available through the financial package was not enough to undo the damage caused by the underfunding of our public services. The first action of the Executive was to set that out in our letter to the Prime Minister, and the first motion that was passed in this Assembly was to endorse that position. I will continue to make the case to the British Government and to Treasury for proper funding for our public services.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister explain how the impacts of the various departmental bids were taken into account? In particular, does she accept that, if relative risks for each were actually measured and fairly assessed, it is quite likely that different decisions would have been reached?

Dr Archibald: I had considerable engagement with each Minister during the development of this Budget, and my departmental officials had considerable engagement with officials from each of those Departments. Obviously, every Minister put forward a strong case for their own Department, and each Department set out its pressures and the impact that those pressures would have on our citizens. Unfortunately, the funding available simply does not allow us to do everything that we want to do, and tough decisions will have to be made.

As the Member will be aware, over half of the Executive's resource budget went to the Department of Health, but it cannot be exempt from these decisions. I would dearly like to be in a position where I am able to allocate more money to the Health Department to recognise its pressures and to give more money to Education, Justice and every Department, because every Minister can make the case as to why they should have more money.

Mr McGlone: Will the Minister advise us what financial allocations are available to meet the just transition obligations of the Climate Change Act, please?

Dr Archibald: Each Minister will have received a funding envelope as part of the Budget, and it will now be for each Minister to prioritise according to their budget and the priorities in their Department.

Mr Donnelly: I agree completely with the Minister's comments about the need for transformation and reform, and I hope that, despite the limitations of the Budget, we can progress transformation and reform. Will the Minister give an indication of how transformation funding provided by the Secretary of State will be spent? Have any projects in Departments been identified to utilise that funding?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will be aware, £235 million was allocated and was ring-fenced for transformation in the financial package, and that was to be spent in the form of £47 million a year over five years. I will soon bring a paper to the Executive about the setting up of a transformation board that will allocate the funding, and Departments will bring forward bids to the transformation board for that transformation funding. I will not pre-empt what bids Departments might bring, but, obviously, they will each prioritise those based on what work they think can be done in this financial year.

Mr Carroll: Minister, you and your party colleagues made a lot of noise about public-sector pay you came here and took up office. Given that the money that you promised to education workers as part of the pay and grading review is not in this Budget and, according to recent reports, will not be for at least another two years, what is your message to the workers who are likely to be on strike very soon because of an Executive rollback?

Dr Archibald: I do not accept the Member's analysis of its not being available for the next two financial years, but I am absolutely committed to working with the Education Minister to try to find a resolution for those workers. I have already said in the Chamber today that I very much recognise the importance of those workers, who do such vital work in supporting our children and young people. As part of this Budget, the Executive agreed to seek agreement from Treasury to re-profile some of the repurposed funds, and I will raise that as a priority with the Treasury in the coming days.

Ms Mulholland: There has been much debate over the past few days about recommended allocations, but can the Minister clarify whether any costed alternative proposals were made to her Department by any Minister in the Executive?

Dr Archibald: Back in February, the Executive agreed the approach that would be taken to the setting of the Budget. We agreed that there would be a short extension to the normal time frame to take us beyond the beginning of the financial year. No proposals were brought forward on any alternative approach to the setting of the Budget. In relation to the Budget that was proposed to the Executive last week, no alternative proposals were put forward.

Mr Speaker: That brings to a conclusion the question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Finance.

Members, please take your ease before we move on to the next item of business.

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

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was in the Chamber when the Finance Minister was answered her last question, which was from one of my colleagues. Whilst I do not want to raise in open Chamber those matters in the Executive that remain confidential, I ask the Minister to take an opportunity at the next point that she is in the

Chamber to correct the answer that she just gave, because, in fact, at least one alternative Budget proposal was put to the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I will pass on that message on the Speaker's Office.

Executive Committee Business

Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Debate resumed on motion:

That the draft Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Ms Bunting (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly on the motion as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice. I also declare that I have an immediate family member who works in the legal profession.

As the Minister outlined, the draft statutory rule before the House makes provision to set the eligibility criteria for the reappointment of lay magistrates until the age of 75, after they were previously required to retire at the age of 70. That will bring lay magistrates into line with other members of the judiciary.

The Committee was first alerted to the Department's intention to propose this rule at its meeting on 21 March 2024 and raised no issues with it so doing. The Committee then considered the draft statutory rule at its meeting of 25 April 2024. We were informed that the eligibility criteria for the appointment of lay magistrates, as specified in the Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, will still apply and that this draft statutory rule will add two criteria for reappointments: first, the individual must not have been removed from the role as a result of disciplinary proceedings or have been subject to pending disciplinary proceedings at the date of their retirement; secondly, the individual must be prepared to undergo training or continuing professional development identified as necessary or desirable for their role. That is to be welcomed. The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had raised no concerns regarding the technical aspects of the draft statutory rule. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Justice, I support the motion before the House.

In my capacity as an MLA, I reiterate my party's support for this rule, which brings lay magistrates into line with the rest of the judiciary.

Miss Hargey: I welcome the motion on the draft Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order. It brings

the age for lay magistrates into line with that of other members of the judiciary, which is currently 75 years old, whilst keeping the other reappointment criteria, as laid out by the Minister earlier. Addressing the unfairness that existed for some individuals who may have been prevented from continuing in their role is an important step, and this rule corrects that unfairness. Lay magistrates play an important role in our judiciary, particularly, as was said, around the youth courts, family proceedings and signatory duties. I am happy to support the motion.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I thank Members for their contributions on this matter. I hope that, in the course of the bringing forward of the order, we have been able to satisfy Members' queries. I hope that that, as opposed to disinterest in the subject matter, is the reason why so few have spoken. I believe that the order will allow for the reappointment of skilled and committed individuals who will be able to continue to serve the justice system until their new retirement age of 75. I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

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

The draft Period Products (Department of Justice Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the draft Period Products (Department of Justice Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

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

Mrs Long: I am asking the Assembly to approve the Period Products (Department of Justice Specified Public Service Bodies)

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024. I am delighted to bring forward these regulations for approval, as required by the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which created a legal right of free access to period products across Northern Ireland.

These regulations fulfil my Department's statutory obligations under the 2022 Act. The Act aims to remove financial barriers to accessing period products and to make products universally available, free of charge, as is the case for many other basic hygiene products. Taken together with the universal provision of free period products, on which TEO is leading, these new services, provided free of charge, will make a significant impact on addressing the issue of period poverty as it exists today across Northern Ireland.

I turn directly to the regulations. The regulations specify the eight public-service bodies, as prescribed by the 2022 Act, that are within the functions of the Department of Justice and will provide period products, free of charge, to persons on their premises who need to use them. Those are: the Police Service of Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Policing Board; the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland; the Probation Board for Northern Ireland; the office of the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Police Fund; the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation; and the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust. The regulations also provide a description of the premises of those public-service bodies from which free period products will be provided, as well as specifying the persons in the premises that can avail themselves of the new service provision, namely service users, staff and visitors.

My Department has been liaising with the specified public-service bodies as to how the regulations will be implemented at their various premises throughout Northern Ireland. The specified public-service bodies have been consulting with their user groups to inform the implementation of the Act, and they will now consider further consultation across their respective user groups to ensure that their expectations will be met and to inform affordability issues.

As the Act is intended to be as wide-ranging as possible, my Department is also engaging with its five agencies, particularly those with public-facing areas, such as the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, to establish pilot exercises to widen the provision of free period products beyond the statutory obligations in the

legislation. As a Department, we recognise the importance of a consistent approach across our agencies and will take those exercises forward on that basis. The core Department is also considering how it can implement similar arrangements.

I thank our specified public-service bodies for their cooperation in introducing this important new service. I also thank the Justice Committee for its prompt scrutiny of the SL1 for these regulations. Last but not least, I thank Pat Catney, the former SDLP MLA, for bringing forward this important piece of legislation. I trust that the regulations will deliver his commitment to addressing the important issue of period poverty in Northern Ireland. That concludes my opening remarks.

4.00 pm

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

As the Minister said, the draft statutory rule specifies the public service bodies within the Department of Justice's remit that will be responsible for making and maintaining arrangements for period products to be available free of charge on their premises. The Committee was first alerted to the Department's intention to propose the rule at its meeting on 11 April and raised no issues with it doing so.

Having noted the legal advice, which stated that core Departments and statutory agencies do not meet the criteria of a public service provider as defined in the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, the Committee, nevertheless, wrote to the Department of Justice to request clarification of whether period products would be made available throughout the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) estate and other publicly accessible buildings that are within the Department's remit. The Committee welcomed the Department's response, stating that, in addition to its statutory remit, it had written to the chief executives of its five agencies — the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), the Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland (LSANI), Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI) and the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) — to ask whether they would be willing to consider introducing the provisions on a pilot basis to gather the views and expectations of their respective user groups

and to inform affordability issues. The Committee was reassured to learn that the early indications are that the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and the other agencies with public-facing areas are, indeed, willing to engage in pilot exercises.

The draft statutory rule was considered at the Committee's meeting on 25 April 2024, during which 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 draft statutory rule be approved by the Assembly. I, therefore, support the motion on behalf of the Committee for Justice.

I will now speak as justice spokesperson for the DUP. It was at my request that the Committee sought to establish the position on the provision of period products in other public-facing bodies in the Justice portfolio such as the Courts and Tribunals Service. It seems to me that, if arm's-length bodies, much smaller organisations and core agencies have to make such provision, it naturally follows and is sensible that those with much greater throughput of the general public should do likewise, if we are truly committed to and serious about addressing period poverty. I was, therefore, pleased to receive the Department's response that it will make provision and endeavour to engage, even if on a trial basis.

I trust that the pilot will be successful and that the provision of sanitary products in such public places, particularly the courts, where there are significant numbers of the public and where people can spend an entire day, will go some way towards alleviating the dignity issues faced by women and girls who find themselves in difficult financial circumstances or in emergency need to avail themselves of the products. We in the DUP support the rule.

Ms Hunter: I will speak briefly. I wholeheartedly welcome this. I hope that the trial is successful. I note the Member's comment about the fact that people are at court all day. Hopefully, the presence of such products will go some way towards tackling feelings of indignity. It is really positive that they will be available across the named agencies and organisations. Again, I thank Pat Catney for the Period Products Act.

Miss Hargey: I declare that I also have a family member who works in the Courts and Tribunals Service. I welcome the regulations. The Act is important legislation that was passed during the last mandate. I was happy to assist with the passage of the Bill, which was introduced by Pat Catney.

The regulations specify which public service bodies in the Justice family will make and maintain arrangements for period products to be made available free of charge on their premises. That is a step in the right direction in addressing period poverty. It is also important to normalise the subject, given that over 50% of our population currently have or previously had periods. It is important that that is recognised and supported.

Mr Dickson: As a member of the Justice Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank those who worked and played a key part in getting the legislation to this stage.

The ability to access essential hygiene products without worry is not just about cost but about convenience. It is a human right that speaks to dignity and equality. The Period Products (Free Provision) Act 2022 was landmark legislation and a high watermark for this legislative Assembly. The regulations mark a significant step forward in making sure that people who use those public spaces are never put at a disadvantage because of their period. By providing free products, the premises of key public service bodies that are under the Department of Justice will ensure that they are a first point of contact with the public and that they uphold those values. Those bodies are now fully equipped to support everyone, irrespective of their financial situation. We welcome the Department's indication that it will undertake a pilot project in other areas.

This debate and those that we have had on period poverty regulations for other Departments have set the standard for public spaces. I encourage employers and others in the public space to similarly provide period products free of charge.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I call the Minister to make her winding-up speech.

Mrs Long: I thank all the Members who spoke on the motion and the Business Committee for scheduling the debate for today.

I guess that the only issue that was raised throughout the debate was why the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and, indeed, the core Department, as well as its agencies, are not specified in the regulations. Unfortunately, the Act was drafted in such a way that it does not enable the Department to specify itself or its agencies as public service bodies. That has been explored through legal advice. However, it is my view and that of my

Department that we should live up to the spirit and not just the letter of the law, and, therefore, we want implementation to be as wide-ranging as possible. The Department has therefore been engaging with its five agencies, particularly those that have public-facing areas, such as the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, to establish pilot exercises so that we can widen the provision of period products beyond the statutory obligations that are specified in the Act while being in line with its objectives. On that basis, I hope that Members are satisfied to support the regulations. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Period Products (Department of Justice Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Members may take their ease for a minute or two.

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

Private Members' Business

Loneliness Strategy

Mr Butler: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the high prevalence of loneliness in Northern Ireland, with almost one in five people feeling lonely at least some of the time and one in 20 identified as chronically lonely; further notes the severe social and economic impact of chronic loneliness, including on people's physical and mental health, such as increased risks of developing heart disease and depression; recognises the urgent need to address loneliness among people of all ages and backgrounds; calls on the Executive to support the development of a cross-departmental loneliness strategy to tackle this issue on a long-term basis; and further calls on the Executive Office to lead on the development of a cross-departmental loneliness strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Butler: I do not usually start off on a negative, but I will have to on this one. It is a pleasure to bring the motion to the House today. However, the original motion was changed in the hope of getting a Minister from the Executive Office to come and hear the debate. Unfortunately, even the change to the motion has not managed to do that.

To introduce a note of positivity —this is not positive spin; I mean it — I will recognise that there are Members in the Chamber from every party who are committed to the topic. I value their presence here today and know that their contributions will be good. I tabled the motion, first, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, as our party is committed to the subject, and, secondly, as the chair of the all-party group (APG) on preventing loneliness. It is a pressing matter that affects all of our communities deeply. Loneliness, in particular, has a growing grip on many people, but it is experienced significantly more among carers, people with a disability, the bereaved and our growing older population in Northern Ireland. At the outset, I pay tribute to the Action Group on Loneliness

Policy for its advocacy and service and particularly to the all-party group on loneliness here at Stormont. I am getting an itchy nose, and I hope that that does not mean that I am going to fight. I pay tribute to former MLA Sinéad Bradley, the former chair of the all-party group on loneliness, who really set this up and then passed the baton to me.

Sometimes when I speak here, I speak absolutely from notes. However, my starting point today is to reflect on why loneliness is of interest to me and on some of my experiences. I will take you back to a story that some of you will have heard before. About 35 years ago, as an apprentice butcher in Lisburn, I worked six days a week and served thousands of people across the counter. An elderly lady used to come into the shop at Knockmore every day, and she bought her meat, fish, cooked meats and other bits and pieces from me. As a helpful young butcher, I thought that I would help her. I found out on which day she got her pension, and, the next day she was in, I asked her whether it would help her if I was able to put everything together on a Monday, nice and fresh, wrap it up for her to freeze, and she could just pay for it. Her answer was revealing: "Robbie, I don't come in here to buy the meat every day. I come in for a chat". We got a conversation going, and it turned out that that lady lived on her own. She was from Omagh but had moved to Lisburn, and she had no extended family. She had purpose in her day, and her purpose was to go and meet people and have a conversation about the things that mattered to her. It was not that it was Robbie; it did not matter if it was Gerald, whom I worked for. Her purpose in the day was to meet and speak to people. That is why I am particularly interested in the topic.

Loneliness is not merely a fleeting emotion; it is a pervasive reality for far too many individuals. It has consequences that ripple through our society, through our health system and through our collective well-being. We also need to be clear that there is a difference between loneliness and being alone. It can absolutely be the case that someone can be perfectly happy being alone but can also be lonely even in a group of people. I have listened to a lot of podcasts and done a lot of reading, and I was reflecting on Robin Williams, who entertained tens of millions of us. He was one of the funniest actors ever to go on the stage and be in films. For Robin Williams, even in a crowd of however many people, the adoration meant nothing to him, because he was one of the loneliest people ever. He was brave in discussing and sharing that with us.

I have a quotation that is worth sharing. I read these quotes every day. It is:

"the answer to loneliness is not people — it's purpose!"

Recent statistics paint a stark picture. In 2022-23, nearly one fifth of the population in Northern Ireland reported feeling lonely at least some of the time. That equates to approximately 361,000 individuals, and what is more troubling is that loneliness was on the rise even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. That only exacerbated the feelings of isolation and disconnection, especially among vulnerable groups such as carers, people with disabilities and those with terminal illnesses. For carers, in particular, loneliness can be caused by a range of circumstances, many of them outside an individual carer's control. For many, the intensity of caring can be so demanding that they are left with little time or energy to see friends or family. As they neglect their own hobbies and interests, their focus is largely on the person whom they care for.

4.15 pm

The causes of loneliness in older people are multifaceted. They include transitions such as moving house or going into residential care, bereavement, loss of sensory abilities such as hearing or vision, financial stress due to retirement, and various structural issues such as a lack of access to transportation, community services and, in some instances, even technology.

Our disabled citizens are far too often an afterthought, and that must change. A recent report stated that more than a third of disabled people said that they were chronically lonely before the pandemic, and that rose to one in two, or 54%, for 16- to 24-year-olds. A lot of people think that loneliness is the purview of just those who age. It is not; it is across all age groups. A third of disabled people are limited to having under an hour of interaction with someone else each day, and over two thirds of disabled people now say that social isolation is affecting their mental health and well-being, with two in five reporting an impact on their physical health. That has led to the majority of disabled people believing that the Government should prioritise tackling mental health and issues including loneliness over every other pressure.

Loneliness is not just a personal burden, however. It is a public health crisis, and research has shown that chronic loneliness can

have detrimental effects on physical and mental health comparable with obesity, physical inactivity, air pollution and other issues. It includes the risk of developing conditions such as heart disease and depression and it exacerbates existing health issues, particularly among those with terminal illnesses and, as we have spoken about, caregivers. Despite the gravity of the situation, however, Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK in addressing loneliness. We are the only part of the UK without a loneliness strategy, and that must change. We need a comprehensive, cross-departmental approach that brings together all sectors of society to tackle this issue head on.

The action group on loneliness policy, which I mentioned, outlined several recommendations to address loneliness across all age groups. I am not going to do them all, but they include the need to develop and implement a Northern Ireland loneliness strategy, embedded in the Programme for Government, that commits resources and has a clear time frame for delivery. The strategy must prioritise supporting opportunities for people to connect, invest in infrastructure to increase social connections and ensure age-friendly provision of local services. Also, it needs to prioritise loneliness in the health and social care system by embedding a cross-sectoral loneliness policy framework and providing training for front-line staff to identify and support those affected by loneliness. That includes investing in befriending and companionship services for those at greater risk, such as people with disabilities and terminal illnesses, and caregivers.

I recognise the efforts of some councils that are trailblazing in this area. Additionally, we must recognise the unique challenges faced by unpaid carers, who often experience as a significant consequence of their caregiving responsibilities. We must provide them with the support that they need to maintain social connections and prevent isolation. Furthermore, we must empower general practitioners to address loneliness as a public health concern, recognising that it can be as detrimental to health as a chronic long-term condition. GPs play a crucial role in identifying and supporting lonely individuals, focusing on not just physical symptoms but emotional well-being, taking a holistic view. Finally, we must establish a cross-sector loneliness implementation group to drive forward these recommendations and ensure that they are implemented effectively across Northern Ireland.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely, yes.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for giving thanks to my former SDLP MLA colleague Ms Sinéad Bradley. Her idea was born out of the loneliness task force led by Professor Sean Moynihan of ALONE and Dr Keith Swanick. They laid the ground for that all-party group that was founded by Sinéad Bradley. Fair play to the Member for paying tribute to Sinéad Bradley and her work in that regard. Does he agree that we all have a responsibility to tackle loneliness, one conversation at a time?

Mr Butler: I absolutely do. In paying tribute to Sinéad, I will pay tribute to you. I find you to be one of the most compassionate and empathetic individuals in this Chamber — one of — and I am not surprised to see you here. On Sinéad's contribution, she was absolutely wedded to this issue and asked me to take the baton on when she stepped down. Her heart for the issue laid the foundations for this debate, so I thank you for that, and I do agree with you about conversations one at a time. Let us knock the barriers down and create something that is effective but will be a game changer in Northern Ireland for all our communities.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker — I have elevated you to the position of Mr Speaker because I cannot get the "Deputy" bit out — loneliness is not an inevitable part of ageing or a personal failing. Rather, it is a societal challenge that requires collective action. By working together across sectors and communities, we can create a Northern Ireland in which nobody feels alone or isolated, in which every individual is supported and connected and in which our communities thrive.

I again put on record that, although this is an Ulster Unionist motion, it is really a collective motion from two all-party groups. We in the UUP gave up our slot in order to table it. I thank my colleague Claire Sugden, who is the chair of the all-party group on ageing and older people and who will make the winding-up speech on the motion. I look forward to Members' contributions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Mr Butler, for opening the debate.

Mr Gildernew: I thank Robbie for proposing the motion on an important issue that all of us need to consider. I acknowledge the many people around the Chamber who have worked collectively on the issue, including the chairs of the all-party group on ageing and older people and the all-party group on preventing

loneliness, which came together on the issue. It is important work.

I have figures for the impacted groups, but Robbie covered that aspect admirably, so I will not go into the number of people or sectors impacted on. I will say, however, that we clearly have an issue with an ageing society. We need to do better by older people but also recognise that it is not simply about older people. Many younger people and many people with caring responsibilities are impacted on. In my role as a social worker, I often had to fight to get carers perhaps 15 minutes in which to go out, or even at times an hour in which to maintain their faith, never mind to do their own messages. It is very isolating to care for someone. Our system cares for those people rather badly and needs to do better.

Loneliness is a public health issue, in that it clearly and significantly impacts on the health and well-being of many citizens across many key sectors, where it can exacerbate other vulnerabilities and disadvantages. We now have an understanding from research that the impact of loneliness on a person's physical health can be the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. That is a call to action. That is not to say that the response must, or even should, come solely from the Department of Health. Indeed, it is important that we do not medicalise issues or solutions where we do not need to. Taking a cross-governmental approach, we can see that many of the solutions can come from housing, planning strategies, education, rural development in DAERA and our broader economic policies. In addition, many of the solutions lie within the realm of community services and with the community and voluntary sector. Instead of cutting back on community transport, we should look at how we can expand it, because it is a lifeline for many of our citizens who live in rural areas. It maintains their independence, dignity and connection to other people so that they can go to the butcher's to get the meat or so that they can do that other piece of shopping.

We need to, and must, support community groups that know their area and know who may need additional support from time to time. They are ideal partners for us in this. We need to focus on building community groups' capacity to reach out further and support people for whom loneliness becomes an issue. I recognise that "social prescribing" is a contested term, and I understand why it is contested, but it is the term that is widely used, and we need to make much more use of social prescribing. We need to provide outlets in the community for people to build connections and gain the sense of

purpose that Robbie was right to identify as being crucial to all of this. I fully endorse his comments about the need for an all-island strategy. When we look at our transport system and at border areas, it is clear that it is key that we have a strategy that covers the entire island.

I am pleased to support the motion. This is a fundamentally important debate, and I am delighted that we have a chance to take up the issue today.

Mr Harvey: I support the motion proposed by Mr Butler. Colleagues across the Chamber have covered many of the salient points, but I want to hone in on a few of the statistics presented in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) continuous household survey for 2022-23 in evidencing a few thoughts on the motion.

We must first acknowledge not just the presence of loneliness but, more importantly, its prevalence, which all relevant data shows to have increased dramatically in recent years. According to the Action Group on Loneliness Policy, over the past three years, there has been a 3% increase in the number of people in Northern Ireland who report feeling lonely. We are all aware of the long-term impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on exacerbate the issue, particularly among the vulnerable. We can all think of older people who led quite socially engaged lives prior to the pandemic but who are now rarely to be found outside the house, largely due to fear. Although we were grappling with an unknown at the time, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that things could have been done differently. We must acknowledge that the House carries a degree of responsibility in that regard and should therefore, similarly, carry a duty to rectify the social harm that is still in evidence among our most vulnerable.

Many organisations already do exceptional work across Northern Ireland, particularly with older and more vulnerable citizens, to drive down social isolation and foster healthy, regular relationships. As ever, our faith community is front and centre of that effort, providing space and opportunity for senior groups to meet and organising day trips, lunches and craft evenings that are a lifeline for many people who live on their own. I think of West Winds Community Church and The Warehouse in my constituency, in particular. It is worth remembering that many church organisations not only facilitate such services for our older people but fully finance them. Given that so many funders, including government funders, either preclude them from applying or rule them

out, due to the involvement of National Lottery funding, that is an unfairness that urgently needs to be rebalanced. As my colleague Diane Dodds said, it is vital that the Government, and funders generally, support organisations that seek to tackle loneliness among the elderly and vulnerable as much as possible. I look forward to the Communities Minister addressing the matter in the time ahead.

As I said, many organisations work in this area, but, as the motion implies, in the absence of a clear strategy and a collaborative cross-organisational approach to loneliness, many across the sector have had to resort to a silo approach. We work best when we all work together, so I welcome the proposal for greater governmental structure to support providers in the charity sector that work hard to tackle loneliness. The DOH, Health and Social Care, the Loneliness Forum, the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) framework, the various loneliness networks across local government areas and everyone else who works in this space will benefit greatly from a specific government strategy on loneliness.

I was shocked to learn from Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) research that one in 20 people in Northern Ireland experiences chronic loneliness. Whilst I am sure that there will be occasions in our lifetime when each one of us experiences a degree of loneliness, the levels of chronic loneliness evidence the size of the societal problem at present. We often focus on groups whom we view as being more susceptible to loneliness, but the NISRA statistics show that other groups are equally affected. One statistic that stood out for me was the urban/rural divide. One would have expected that rural and isolated areas of the Province would present with higher percentages of loneliness, but that is not the case. In fact, Belfast presented with the highest figure, at 24.9%, with an urban/rural divide of 22.7% urban to 14.1% rural, proving the old adage that you can be lonely in a crowd.

I want to highlight a specific group that is often forgotten —

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

Mr Harvey: — but is particularly vulnerable to chronic loneliness: our veterans community.

4.30 pm

Ms Egan: I thank Robbie Butler for tabling the motion and for the work that he and Claire

Sugden have done on the all-party group on ageing and older people.

I join everyone who has spoken in supporting the motion. The Alliance Party is glad to support the development of a needs-led, cross-departmental strategy. Ideally, I would like it to be co-designed as well. We need a cross-departmental strategy to end chronic loneliness. It should include collaborative government working to tackle a huge issue that faces people across our society.

Sometimes, people shy away from discussing loneliness. A lot of people will be embarrassed to admit to others or to services that they feel lonely and to reach out for help. In December 2020, over 70 community and voluntary organisations wrote to the then First Minister and deputy First Minister to call for their support for the development of a cross-departmental loneliness strategy for Northern Ireland. It is important that significant steps are taken to make progress on the issue, and a fit-for-purpose strategy is a good place to begin. Loneliness is a problem that affects every Department, and, therefore, we are happy for the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive Office to coordinate the cross-departmental elements.

Last year, I met the Red Cross, which works across Northern Ireland to tackle loneliness. I have to say that I was shocked by some of the case studies that it brought to me. Sometimes, we have a perception about who in society is more likely to be lonely, but the Red Cross works across Northern Ireland with people of a range of ages. Loneliness can affect anybody.

Research conducted by the National Centre for Social Research painted a stark picture. As my colleague mentioned, people with disabilities or long-standing health conditions are 2.9 times more likely to experience chronic loneliness. Statistics from the Campaign to End Loneliness highlight that significant research has been carried out into loneliness among our older population, and that is an important context for the discussion. However, it is important that a new loneliness strategy meets the needs of everybody across Northern Ireland, recognising that chronic loneliness is experienced by people of all backgrounds and at all stages of life.

As my colleagues have mentioned, other regions of the United Kingdom have developed strategic responses to tackle loneliness. Unfortunately, as is the case in many areas of policy, Northern Ireland has been left behind, with our constituents paying the price. The 'Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23' report

found that people over the age of 75 report the highest levels of loneliness, with almost one in four feeling lonely some or almost all of the time. People over 75 are also the most likely age group to feel lonely often or always. It is important to tackle the issue in a way that meets the bespoke needs of individuals who are experiencing chronic loneliness. A one-size-fits-all solution or a quick fix will not cut it. That is why I am happy to support a cross-departmental strategy.

In my North Down constituency, we have seen some recognition of loneliness in our society and efforts to combat it. For example, we installed "chatty benches" throughout the Ards and North Down Borough Council area, which my party colleagues were happy to support. I visited one such bench in Linear Park in Bangor. It is a relatively small investment and it is a small thing, but it can make a difference on the ground. It encourages people to think about loneliness and to stop, chat and connect with other people in their local communities.

Like in many areas where the Assembly does not deliver, we see grassroots community and voluntary groups stepping up in our constituencies to bring people together. They promote social cohesion and tackle loneliness. We see that through women's centres, local community groups, Men's Sheds and lots more. They have been invaluable lifelines for so many and are often run by volunteers on a shoestring budget. That cannot, however, be expected to replace a comprehensive, needs-led strategy that works towards supporting people and our community and voluntary sector across Northern Ireland.

I will continue to work with everyone in the Assembly and on the Executive Office Committee to ensure that we see a loneliness strategy, with the First Minister and deputy First Minister leading the way on the cross-departmental aspects.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate, and I thank the Member for tabling the motion. I echo some of his opening remarks. I feel a bit lonely, because we do not have a Minister here to pick up on any of the discussion that we are having or the points that we raise or the fact that we are highlighting that nearly one in five of our population is impacted by loneliness. What will happen about it in this Executive? Zero, because there is no one here to listen to what we say.

The need for a loneliness strategy is an important matter. If I look around the Chamber, I see that we are all different. Often, our

disagreements in here can be heated — just like my remarks a few moments ago — and rightly so for what we are debating. However, when we leave the Chamber, we are able to pass each other in the corridors, stop and have a chat and go and have a coffee and discuss how our working week is going. We might even have a laugh together and ask how each other's families are keeping or share a moment or two together in a working week. We do that because, while we may debate with each other politically, we recognise that we are human and have that need for human interaction. However, many people across the North may not be in such a position and cannot experience such social interactions. As I said, one in five of the population suffers from loneliness and one in 20 suffers from chronic loneliness. Those people may go days or even weeks at a time without interacting with another person.

The reasons for loneliness are as diverse as the people who are impacted by them. Without a fully funded cross-departmental strategy in place, we are only hampering our ability to alleviate that loneliness. That can have a devastating impact on health, well-being and quality of life. There are visible and invisible realities of loneliness.

I echo the remarks made earlier about my former colleague Sinéad Bradley, who worked so diligently in the last mandate to help establish and chair the all-party group on loneliness. She represented a rural constituency and understood how living in a rural area can impact on loneliness.

The Executive have a moral duty to alleviate that loneliness and must act to do so. That is why I feel so passionate about a Minister being here to hear that. When I look at my constituency of South Down, I see great work being undertaken by many local organisations, such as our local libraries; the Good Morning Down project, which makes phone calls and looks out for people by checking in with them; the local Men's Sheds that have sprung up across the place and give men the opportunity to get together and check in; and, on a slightly wider scale, the University of the Third Age (U3A), which I love to talk about because I have a family member who participates in it. The U3A plays that essential role in giving older people opportunities to avail themselves of new interests or develop existing ones and to do so in social groups where they can make new friends or strengthen the interactions and relationships that they have. The U3A has 25 branches across Northern Ireland and a membership of over 1,200 people. Since 1990, it has been clear that the U3A does great work.

While some councils fund some work to coordinate and organise activities for older people, I would love to see that extended across Northern Ireland so that we have programmes of activities available for older people in all areas instead of a postcode lottery.

The importance of that is the fact that none of us are getting any younger and the numbers of us who reach older age is increasing year on year. It is more important that we have those activities and structured opportunities because then we might be able to combat the negative health impacts that come from —.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes, of course.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. He raises a really good point: we are an ageing population. We are also growing older with more comorbidities and greater difficulties, which build into the reality of developing issues such as loneliness.

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

Mr McGrath: Absolutely. If we can work in a coordinated way to challenge that, it can only be good for our health service and, most importantly, for the people who feel that loneliness.

We are also told that one third of adults feel ashamed about being lonely; one third feel anxious as a result of loneliness; and almost half would never admit to feeling lonely. I think that we can all, in some ways, subscribe to that. Nobody wants to put their hand up and say, "Hey, I feel lonely, and I need some help to talk to people".

As I said, the loneliness that people experience comes from the same place as the need that we have to connect with people. I hope that we can try to address that. Reaching out to others is a basic form of our humanity. The motion directly asks Executive Office Ministers to do something, but they are not here to hear it. I hope that a cross-departmental loneliness strategy will be implemented as soon as possible.

Ms Flynn: I say a big "Thank you" to Robbie and Claire for today's motion. It is another really important motion that we are debating in the Assembly. Hopefully, there will be cross-party support for a cross-departmental approach to a loneliness strategy that, importantly, is fully

funded. It is not the fault of any individual Minister in the Executive, because we know how the budgets are, but there are problems with the 10-year strategy, the Protect Life 2 strategy and the substance use strategy. Those are all really important pieces of work, but they are in competition with one another for funding, and they would be in competition for funding with a loneliness strategy. However, we still need to pull this piece of work together and then try to prioritise the funding for it. We need to get the strategy pulled together first to see the detail of what it will look like.

Robbie said that we are lagging behind other countries and parts of Britain that have already done this work and have a strategy up and running. We know that the rates of people who are battling loneliness are rising. Members have mentioned that there are people who feel lonely, and then there is chronic loneliness. Some of that can be really hard to live with for people. Colin talked about how social isolation can build up through people feeling anxious, and he said that one third of people feel shame around admitting that they feel lonely. It is so sad that so many people feel embarrassed and ashamed about speaking out to say that they are lonely and do not have people to speak to.

Members have already mentioned mental health, but there are lots of linkages between loneliness and mental health problems and mental ill health, proper diagnosable mental illness. Sadly, we know that that all has a longer-term effect on the overall health system, health services and waiting lists. It is not about trying to dismiss someone who, as a result of loneliness, ends up with a mental illness or a physical illness, but the point is that that all has a knock-on impact on the Department of Health, our A&Es and our waiting lists for different physical health problems. Today's motion should be about preventing some of that, which would prevent a cost to the health service and all the Departments. The motion is linked to all the Departments, so they will have to get on board.

Harry mentioned some brilliant groups in his constituency. Colin mentioned Men's Sheds. I am sure that all of us can think of really good community groups that already do good preventative work with people on loneliness, but I will reference a group that briefed the Health Committee. It was our planning day last week, and one of the groups that came in to give us a briefing was the Safe Families project. That charity is currently working out of the Belfast Trust and the Northern Trust. It offers hope, belonging, support, comfort and friendship to some really vulnerable families and some

families who are possibly on the verge of breaking up, where social services have to get involved. In a lot of cases, it is down to isolation and loneliness. It is just down to people struggling a wee bit and not having a bit of support, such as a listening ear, a person to take their kids to the park for 10 minutes or a person to let them get the house cleaned up. It is about having company and friendship.

Some members of Safe Families might be in the Public Gallery today. Their presentation to the Health Committee the other week was brilliant. The work that they do —.

4.45 pm

Mr Harvey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Flynn: Yes, of course.

Mr Harvey: Does the Member agree that, sometimes, even just saying, "Hello" makes a difference to people?

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

Ms Flynn: It does, absolutely, Harry. That is the intention of the great work that Safe Families carries out. Through that work, it has been able to connect 200 families back into their community. That is massive. Over 500 children now have a trusted adult in their life. It even helps the family unit. It helps wee kids before they maybe have to go to social services to get high-level interventions. That group prevents some of that by caring about people and helping them with their isolation and loneliness. At last week's briefing, they said that the volunteers do ordinary things that have extraordinary effects on families and outcomes. It can be something as simple as taking a mum for a coffee, helping her around the home or taking the kids to the park. One volunteer summed it up well:

"What I am doing is not earth-shattering, but it would be if everyone did it."

That is at the heart of the debate. Yes, we need the strategy, we need to prepare and we need all Departments to be involved, but, as Colin said, we need to treat each other like humans and look out for and support one another. If you see someone who is lonely or isolated, try to intervene early so that they do not end up with chronic loneliness.

Mr Robinson: Like others, I thank Robbie for tabling the motion.

Imagine the only company that you have is a clock ticking in a room. We have all been there, but, for us, it is likely to have been short-lived. For thousands of others in our Province, that is their daily reality. Feeling lonely is a seemingly innocuous emotion, but it has far-reaching consequences that can affect all age groups, people with disabilities and even those with a caring role. That role can be so demanding that they lose their hobbies or what was once their circle of friends. On some occasions, as some of us can testify, they lose the will to live.

As we heard, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that does not have a loneliness strategy. When we hear of the need for a cross-departmental strategy, which we have, it is an opportunity to applaud the good work that is happening as we speak to address the issue. In my constituency, I think of the wonderful work of Men's Sheds, including the groups at Ballykelly, Limavady and Portstewart, which provide users with skills in woodcraft and opportunities for people who are lonely to participate in pool, darts, gardening, cooking, counselling, art projects, health talks, walking groups and trips. I think of Age Concern Causeway, which does so much good work in befriending people and providing networking opportunities. I think of Good Morning Roe Valley, which the Limavady Community Development Initiative (LCDI) delivers, and, of course, Causeway Older Active Strategic Team (COAST), which supports people across the Causeway area who are aged 60-plus and delivers a vital handyman service to keep older people safe in their homes.

I met representatives from COAST recently, and I was horrified by the fact that their current funding is due to cease in 2026. If we are truly to deliver on such a strategy, organisations such as COAST should have ring-fenced and sustainable funding. We should invest in those who provide befriending and companionship services and who have been at the front line in addressing loneliness, rather than de-investing in them. Indeed, we should use their experience to drive policies and frame any such strategy. I agree that the strategy should apply to all ages and that it should be embedded in a Programme for Government and developed through schools and youth services. Given that the thrust of the motion lies, on the whole, with the Health Minister, it would have been helpful for him to be here or for the proposer not to frame the motion in a way that dials down the obligations of his Minister.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. In the previous mandate, it was recognised in the Final Stage debate on the provision of period products that a cross-departmental strategy would sit much better with TEO, as it has oversight. Given the burden on Health, many have agreed that the loneliness strategy was similar in that way. It is not a health issue; it becomes a health issue when we do not address it up front. This is more of a preventative strategy. If we wait until people are lonely, we will have failed.

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

Mr Robinson: I appreciate the Member's comments, but, sometimes, we differ in here.

The building blocks of a strategy could be lifted from the 'Loneliness in Northern Ireland: A call to action' report, which was published in 2020. The report brought together different approaches from across the UK and Ireland, and it recommended, as a first step, setting up an Assembly Committee inquiry and making recommendations based on the evidence gathered. It is a starting point but one that must commence. My party will support the motion.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you to Robbie Butler and others on the all-party group for tabling the motion. Loneliness is a huge problem in communities across Northern Ireland. Far too often, it gets swept under the carpet. It is right that we give time in the Assembly to discuss that hidden crisis. Of course, we can all expect to be lonely at some point in our lives, but persistent and chronic loneliness and, indeed, social isolation are issues that the Executive must face up to. The scale of the problem will be a concern to all of us. The fact that one in 20 people have been identified as chronically lonely is hugely worrying.

In my council area, it is a matter of real concern that over 22% of people reported feeling lonely at some point. We should be equally concerned by the inequalities in whom loneliness affects the most. We know that older people experience a higher level of loneliness than younger people, and the figures are really stark. Age NI has highlighted that one in four older people over the age of 75 described feeling lonely some, most or all of the time. Perhaps one of the starkest differences, however, is between the level of loneliness experienced by people in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland, where almost 28% reported feeling lonely at least some of the time, and the level of loneliness experienced by people in the less

deprived areas, where the figure was just 14%. We need to recognise that disparity in the conversation that we have today. There is a loneliness penalty for some of our poorest communities, and we simply cannot afford to stand over that any longer.

As the motion rightly highlights, it is an increasing public health issue. I was really struck, as were many Members who spoke today, by the statistic that chronic loneliness can be just as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Not only is social isolation associated with faster rates of cognitive decline but it increases cardiovascular problems; indeed, it increases the risk of early death by up to 26%. Clearly, that costs us in public health outcomes, but it also costs our public purse. Every day, a GP sees between one and five people because they are lonely. Of course, lonely periods in someone's life can often take place at a time of transition, such as when you become a new parent. When people are faced with those challenges, the interventions made by community organisations are really vital, more than ever, in addressing that loneliness. I think particularly of an organisation in Foyle called Minding Mum, which brings together new mums. They go out walking with their babies on a Wednesday morning. It is about getting the mums out and letting them talk to one another as they experience the absolute new love that they have for their baby but also the loneliness and other experiences.

Mr Butler: I appreciate the Member giving way. I will say this as briefly as I can. It is a really important point that is niggling me. We know the importance of skin-to-skin contact, for instance, for mums and babies. As a society, and I am not targeting anybody, we have gone from these blinking things — mobile phones — and we now have screen-to-skin contact. I am seriously concerned about the problem that we are building up for our young people, in particular, who are sometimes more interested in getting followers than friends. Does the Member agree that the societal approach and the prevention need to be targeted at young people too?

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

Ms McLaughlin: Absolutely, Mr Butler. We are losing that person-to-person connectivity.

I have recently become a grandmother, and I have seen how lonely it can be for some mums. It is a really challenging time, and it is lonely for many. Many of us are lucky to have big family

circles, but others are not. I think in particular of our new citizens — our immigrant community — who do not have that family support. The Minding Mum project in Derry helps to support those families.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for giving way. On Mr Butler's point, does she agree that the growth of technology, the closure of banks and post offices and the move to two-step authentication can often make older people — the elderly community — feel isolated, due to not knowing how to use the technology and not seeing the people whom they would have seen every day because those spaces no longer exist?

Ms McLaughlin: I totally agree with the Member. Sometimes, things are convenient but not conducive to one-to-one engagement with people.

I also think of U3A, another group in Derry that helps hundreds of people every year to have a fulfilling and active lifestyle in older age. There is also a wonderful cafe in Derry called "Claude's" that runs a Thursday club that men can drop into for a chat and come together in support and friendship. Those are all really important organisations, but they are no substitute for government action and intervention.

The time is right for a cross-departmental loneliness strategy. Clearly, good work is taking place across the Departments, but it is without a strategic focus. I fear that, as with so many other things in this place, we can expect chronic loneliness —

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

Ms McLaughlin: — to be a fact of life for many years to come.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Members who tabled this important motion. Loneliness has become a public health epidemic, and Stormont's position as the only Government in the UK without a strategy on it is no longer excusable. Poverty is pervasive, and it intensifies loneliness. Of those living in the most deprived areas, almost 30% reported feelings of loneliness, a figure that is much higher than in more affluent communities across the North. The impact that a lack of money has on ability to take part in the celebrations and get-togethers that many take for granted intensifies isolation. The inability to join in or even provide for yourself or your family can often fill people with shame. Too

often, care homes and supported housing schemes are cut off from wider communities. In housing developments, a lack of safe communal areas often inhibits people from connecting with their neighbours. Accessible and affordable spaces such as community centres, youth clubs and libraries in which community groups can meet are vital, but those services are often underfunded, to the detriment of the health of those who already live in isolation.

For many, being social is a privilege, even though it is in our nature and our DNA to be so. Almost everything costs money, whether it is travelling to meet someone or going for a coffee. Loneliness is exacerbated by lack of access to social amenities, and lack of access stems from lack of resources. Today, members of the parties in the Assembly speak of the detrimental impact of loneliness on the most vulnerable in our society, yet, only last month, some parties voted to hike the rates for those households, placing the burden of revenue raising on working people.

The NI health survey, which has already been referred to, has shown that loneliness amongst older people can be exacerbated by factors such as geographical isolation and poor connectivity and transport links. The concessionary fares scheme that provides free travel for over-60s was established to promote accessible public transport for the members of the community who are most at risk of social exclusion, yet the Department for Infrastructure has not fully committed to maintaining that in the months and years ahead. Parties here cannot express their concern for the very people whom they want to rinse of their limited income, driving them further into poverty and thus social isolation. They cannot pretend to empathise with the people whom they continually punish and marginalise with their vote.

There is a loneliness epidemic in the North that is produced by a system that drives us apart. It targets the most vulnerable in our society. We need to invest in our communities' infrastructure and transport to ensure that we do not drive them further into social isolation. We support the motion; however, we call on the Executive to properly fund those vital services, to invest in our communities and to lift people out of poverty, if we are ever to have an anti-loneliness strategy that is worth the paper that it is written on.

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

5.00 pm

Ms Sugden: I appreciate all the contributions and the fact that Members have indicated their support for the motion. In particular, I appreciate the contributions from Members who are on the all-party group on ageing and older people and the all-party group on preventing loneliness. A number of weeks' work went into getting the motion on to the agenda today, and it is important that we did that.

I also thank the Ulster Unionist Party for allowing me to make the winding-up speech on the motion. That again shows the cross-party support, in which I include that of independent MLAs, for the motion. I also thank the sector, particularly the British Red Cross and Age NI, for informing the debate.

Loneliness is not just a feeling. It is not just a brief and temporary feeling of being alone when you would rather not be, and it is not something that passes or that everybody experiences from time to time. Rather, loneliness is a debilitating condition that can affect anyone regardless of age, background or circumstance. We heard from Members who said that recent data has shown that one in five — 19% — of all people in Northern Ireland have reported feeling lonely at some point in time. That is over 360,000 individuals.

Ms Egan said that people aged 75 and above in Northern Ireland report significantly higher rates of loneliness compared with people in other age groups, and we have heard heartbreaking accounts. Mr Butler, in his opening remarks, talked about the elderly lady who came into the shop once a week. Perhaps that was her only opportunity to speak to someone once a week, or perhaps even once a month or over a number of months. Surely that is enough to compel the Government to develop a cross-departmental strategy immediately to address a pervasive issue that affects so many.

The pandemic certainly drew attention to loneliness as a growing concern. Although COVID-19 exacerbated the issue, particularly among those who were already vulnerable, such as carers, individuals with disabilities, those with a terminal illness, new parents — they were mentioned by Sinéad McLaughlin — and older people, the pandemic did not create the issue. I became a new parent last year, and, in the first number of months, I had what I suppose would be called a "Velcro baby", so I certainly was not alone, as she was always attached to me in some form. In the early hours of the morning, however, I was lonely. It was really difficult, and it brought on a form of

postnatal anxiety that I still deal with all these months later. It is therefore important to recognise that, yes, we often associate loneliness with older people, but it affects people from all different backgrounds at all stages in their life. Ms McLaughlin makes a really important point about transitions, and there are huge life changes that are inevitable in the journeys that we go through.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way, and I understand her personal experiences. Will she agree that some Departments do not make it easy for applicants, particularly with the likes — I think that this was referred to earlier — of universal credit or even applications involving the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, which are very blunt instruments and where everything is black and white instead of there being some practical flexibility?

Ms Sugden: I agree, not just on that issue but across all areas, that government needs to do more to support people in accessing support and not almost stand in their way, as some of the processes suggest. I will come to that a little bit later.

Ms Hunter and Mr Butler talked about the growth of digital technology and said that, although our ability to communicate more remotely can be effective and efficient in some respects, the decline of physical communication, physical communities, local facilities and public services has led us towards living increasingly isolated lives. In-person conversations and interaction with those outside our known friend groups and family is becoming rarer, and, for too many of us, our neighbours, who were once so familiar to us, are now strangers.

Loneliness is a silent epidemic with far-reaching consequences, and others have talked about how chronic loneliness — the most serious form — can be linked to a multitude of health issues, including a risk of early death, cardiovascular problems, cognitive decline and depression. Furthermore, structural factors such as transitions in living arrangements, about which we have talked, bereavement, financial strain and technological barriers all contribute to the prevalence of loneliness among our elderly population, as well as among other groups.

As Mr Elliott suggested, government has perhaps inadvertently created the conditions for loneliness. There has been a failure to recognise rural needs, there is poor transport and infrastructure and there has been a defunding of community groups. We have heard Members right across the House talk

about the community groups in their constituencies and the good work that they are doing, but we are hearing every day about how those community groups are not being funded from one year to the next. Therefore if government is not going to do it, we are cutting off our nose to spite our face if we do not support the groups that are already doing those things.

Poor education on healthy relationships is another issue; we need to know how to talk to one another. We voted for a motion on that issue, last week, but too many Members voted against it. Waiting lists and a lack of support for parents and families are also relevant, and there is no real plan to tackle social deprivation or protect the most vulnerable in society. We are also grossly overlooking the fact that we are an ageing population. There is no consideration of how our fast-changing demographic is impacting services and people. Others have mentioned the demographic. We do not have an active ageing strategy, and, 10 years from now, the problems that we are experiencing today will have increased tenfold.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with her points on the lack of support from government. Does she agree that one of the most heartbreaking things to do when you are standing in elections is to canvass at somebody's door — it tends to be an older person — and the person keeps you a bit longer for a chat because, you surmise, they have not talked to anyone all day? Does she agree that that is heartbreaking and exposes the extent of the problem across society?

Ms Sugden: Yes, as elected representatives, all of us have probably experienced that. When we chat to someone, they want to bring you in for a cup of tea. It was referenced in the most recent series of 'Blue Lights' when the police officers were persuaded to stay at a person's home. Again, that is having an impact on services. You want to know where our police officers are: they are doing the jobs that other public services have not been able to do.

I am making the point that loneliness is not the responsibility of one Minister or one Department. It requires a whole-of-government approach, beginning with a Programme for Government, which we do not yet have, and, within that document, a commitment to develop a strategy for loneliness and active ageing. It is important to reiterate the point that Mr Butler made at the outset, as did Mr McGrath. It is disappointing that no Minister felt that this issue was important enough to respond to. I appreciate that there is debate about where the

issue should sit, but going by the contributions from all Members, whether they believe it should be Health, Communities or even the Department of Justice, strangely enough, it is an issue that should be tackled from the top. Again, we have to be mindful that we are an ageing population. If that is the group that is the most affected, why are we overlooking the issue?

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the issue and strong cross-party support — I welcome the fact that Órlaithí Flynn said that we should get that support — we remain the only part of the United Kingdom without a dedicated loneliness strategy. Therefore, I urge the Executive to take decisive action by implementing a comprehensive Northern Ireland loneliness strategy. Such a strategy must be cross-departmental, embedded in a Programme for Government — whenever we see it — and backed by committed resources and a clear time frame for development and delivery. That funding is key. Too often in the House, we talk about things. These motions are non-binding. The next action that we have to take is upholding what we agree here today, and that requires a strategy that is fully funded.

In the time that I have left, I will acknowledge some of the other contributions that Members have made. Colm Gildernew recognised the importance of community transport. I agree with that, but, again, it is not just community transport within Infrastructure. Community transport is required to get to medical appointments and social situations and interactions. North Coast Community Transport in my constituency often tells me that it is given the bare minimum because funding has been cut. That goes back to my earlier point.

Harry Harvey, rightly, recognises the input of the faith community in supporting these issues. Sometimes, as we move away from faith and church, we forget about the social opportunities that those types of things facilitate. Connie Egan, who represents North Down, talked about chatty benches. I also acknowledge Translink. You might be familiar with its chatty carriage in which they bring together people on a journey along the north coast, which is probably the nicest route — it is in my constituency — to talk about various issues. I acknowledge what Alan Robinson said about some of the great community organisations in East Londonderry, which is also my constituency, that are providing these facilities. I found it interesting that he accused the Health Minister of not doing anything, but most of his contribution was about Communities. Again, it is not a criticism; it is a recognition that this

extends beyond one Minister or one Department. Lastly, I will make a point about what Sinéad McLaughlin said about immigrants.

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

Ms Sugden: That is 100%. Thank you.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the high prevalence of loneliness in Northern Ireland, with almost one in five people feeling lonely at least some of the time and one in 20 identified as chronically lonely; further notes the severe social and economic impact of chronic loneliness, including on people's physical and mental health, such as increased risks of developing heart disease and depression; recognises the urgent need to address loneliness among people of all ages and backgrounds; calls on the Executive to support the development of a cross-departmental loneliness strategy to tackle this issue on a long-term basis; and further calls on the Executive Office to lead on the development of a cross-departmental loneliness strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I ask Members to take their ease while we make a change at the top Table.

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

Ban Petroleum Licensing and Fracking

Mr McGuigan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that tackling climate change is a global priority and, to be successful, must be grounded on the principles of fairness and a just transition away from fossil fuel dependency towards a fairer and greener society powered by renewable energy; further recognises that we need to develop solar, tidal, onshore and offshore wind resources across the island of Ireland and off our coast; believes that a move towards renewable energy with a diversity of sources can increase energy security by reducing reliance on fossil fuel imports, which are more susceptible to

international markets; acknowledges the deep concerns communities have about the environmental and public health risks associated with practices such as hydraulic fracturing; and calls on the Minister for the Economy, as an important first step in moving away from fossil fuel dependency, to introduce a ban on petroleum licensing, drilling and extraction.

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

Mr McGuigan: In October 2020, in the previous mandate, the Assembly passed a motion calling for a moratorium on petroleum licensing. In January 2022, a Department for the Economy paper recommended that the Executive should agree a preferred policy option of a moratorium on all forms of exploration and extraction of oil and gas, to be followed by the introduction of a legislative ban. The previous Economy Minister gave his approval to that position during Second Stage of a private Member's Bill to ban fracking, which was brought by my colleague in front of me, Áine Murphy. Unfortunately, time constraints meant that the private Member's Bill to ban fracking could not progress beyond Second Stage. With no Executive in place for a number of years, neither has the issue of licensing progressed beyond a moratorium to provide certainty.

There are, currently, no active petroleum licences in the North. There are two current licence applications, which are on hold because of the review of the licensing regime. Both applications have faced considerable opposition from politicians, local communities and interest groups. The Hatch report, 'The Potential Economic, Social and Environmental Impact of Onshore Petroleum Development', set out in great detail the environmental risks to the North of even low-level development of petroleum exploration and extraction.

It also found that, since exploration for oil and gas began here in 1965, they have never been discovered in commercial quantities. It adds that, even if they were found, the North would not be able to achieve the economies of scale and low costs of production that would allow for any kind of meaningful impact on energy costs, job creation or the economy. The report warned

of the potential negative impact that exploration and extraction would have on existing industries such as tourism.

I hope that it is the view of the Assembly in this mandate, as it was in the previous one, that tackling climate change is a global priority as well as a priority for us in the North. For that to be successful, it must be grounded on the principles of fairness and a just transition away from fossil fuel dependency towards a fairer and greener society, powered by renewable energy, as the motion articulates.

5.15 pm

We must move away from fossil fuel dependency, so I welcome the current Minister for the Economy's stated position, which is that he will seek agreement on bringing forward legislation to ban fracking and all forms of petroleum exploration. The Climate Change Act commits us to produce 80% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2030 and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. We can achieve that only by investing fully in renewables infrastructure, not by keeping one eye on the finite fossil fuels of the past. Banning petroleum licensing will allow us to join the rest of Ireland, and it will be an important step in moving away from fossil fuels and focusing on renewable energy.

A just transition to renewable energy will not only help to meet climate targets; it will free consumers here from the volatility and price gouging that is associated with the fossil fuel multinationals and market. Fossil fuels are the past. A just transition to renewable energy will be better for the environment, the economy, consumers, workers and energy independence and security. A legislative ban on petroleum licensing is the first step in that direction.

Ms McLaughlin: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "introduce" and insert:

"legislation to ban petroleum licensing, drilling and extraction before the end of 2024".

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Sinéad. You will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms McLaughlin: I am glad to speak about my party's support for not just a moratorium but a complete legislative ban on fracking. In fact, I

think that all parties in the Chamber will be united in their opposition to fracking.

We have all heard from people in communities across the North who have been loud and clear about their opposition to future fracking. Those communities know that fracking is an exploitative practice in local places. Environmental activists and campaigners have led the way in demanding robust action to protect the environment and natural habitats for generations to come. Those dedicated campaign groups that have been sounding the alarm about fracking know all too well that, when fracking takes place, communities suffer the consequences for a long time after the companies have left. The experts, too, have been clear about the environmental and public health implications of allowing the practice to take place again.

A 2017 study found that fracking poses significant harm to health, with mothers who live close to the practice being more likely to give birth to a less healthy child with a lower birth weight. In 2019, a new study found that fracking was linked to higher rates of preterm births, as well as higher rates of asthma. A growing body of evidence is adding to the case for banning fracking purely due to its health impacts.

It is also obvious that climate action and fossil fuel extraction are absolutely incompatible. More than that, to allow even the possibility of fracking in this part of the world is deeply irresponsible, not only to future generations but to our duty to safeguard the natural environment. That was the feeling in this place when we agreed a cross-party motion unanimously in October 2020. Like many across the Chamber, I was disappointed, but unsurprised, when former Prime Minister Liz Truss, in her month-long reign of missteps, backed fracking in yet another example of why no one can ever trust the Conservative Party or its allies on the environment.

The SDLP's record on the issue is clear. In 2015, my colleague Mark Durkan took the pivotal step of enshrining a ban on fracking in policy as part of his strategic planning policy statement. In the previous mandate, we supported the Onshore Fracking (Prohibition) Bill that was sponsored by Áine Murphy, and we agreed with parties around the Chamber that supported its policy intention.

I am glad that the Minister has stated that one of his four key priorities is to reduce carbon emissions. There is no doubt that a ban on fracking fits neatly into his agenda, and there is no reason why any delay should take place. Of

course, energy regulation is not the only pressing issue in the Minister's in tray. We have enormous potential on this island and in this part of the world, but it will take the full power of the Government to seize that opportunity. In this mandate, the Minister must get on with delivering the energy strategy and work with the whole Executive to meet our obligations. Households across the North will need and deserve financial support to assist in the transition to more efficient forms of energy. The Minister has already said that he plans to introduce a wide-ranging energy Bill. While it is welcome that the Utility Regulator's powers are to be examined, it must also bring in the regulation of home heating oil, given our reliance on that form of fossil fuel as a region.

All those steps and many more are vital if we are to meet the targets that have now been enshrined in law. Those are targets that, I think, are in danger of being badly missed, not least due to the impact of stop-start government over the past 15 years. However, while there may be much debate about these measures —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Certainly.

Mr Dickson: The Member will probably realise that, as a representative for East Antrim, I have a particular concern because we have two major projects that have been given approval in the constituency. One is gas caverns under Larne lough and the other is Cloghan Point, which is an oil storage depot. If Departments and Ministers, past and present, are to be serious about taking us out of the fossil fuel world, surely you have to agree that both those projects should be stopped and stopped today.

Ms McLaughlin: I certainly do agree with the Member, and time is of the essence. That is why we are pushing for an actual time for the legislation.

While there may be much debate about these measures in these three years, there is no public support or demand for fracking. It is a practice that virtually no one in this Chamber endorses, but consecutive DUP Ministers have failed to intervene, despite holding the responsibility to do so since 2007. It is good, Minister, that the tide is turning on this.

While I welcome the debate and the opportunity to, once again, speak about our support for a legislative ban, the question now has to be of how long it will take for the Economy Minister to get on and deliver this. In this place, we are in

danger sometimes of feeling that, instead of being legislators, we are professional debaters. That has to stop. We need to get on with legislating in and around this. This motion is in danger of serving simply as self-congratulations on a step that the Minister has already committed to. The time has come for the Executive to step up to the plate and finally start delivering. That is the purpose of our amendment today.

In 2019, two new applications were submitted, and, although a consensus exists across the Chamber, we will only know that the threat of fracking has been removed once and for all once the legislation is actually in place. We know that a paper was circulated to the Executive in the previous mandate from the previous Economy Minister that recommended that a legislative ban should be the policy direction for the Executive. I do not believe that the current Minister should roll back on that now. Instead, we need to follow the example of other parts of these islands, including the South, which has banned fracking since 2017. It is time to close the door on fracking once and for all, not merely through a moratorium but through legislation. I trust that all parties across the Chamber will back this call, and I urge the Minister to get on with it.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Phillip Brett, Chair of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Brett: Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I speak in my role as DUP economy spokesperson. The Committee has not yet considered this matter, so it would not be appropriate for me to speak with any authority on the issue on behalf of the Committee.

The DUP supports the motion. I disagree with the previous Member who spoke, although I respect her, in her comments that the DUP has done nothing on this issue since holding the Economy portfolio. Later in her speech, she went on to recognise that Minister Lyons had submitted a paper to the Executive, and she outlined what that paper stated. Given that it was a cross-cutting and controversial issue, it required Executive approval. To build on that, the former Economy Minister Diane Dodds placed a moratorium on the granting of licensing for exploration. As the Member who spoke previously pointed out, Minister Lyons submitted a paper to the Executive. That paper stated:

"there is no strong economic case to support the exploration for and possible production

of any potential onshore oil and gas resources in NI. Such a course of action also runs contrary to the objectives of the NI Energy Strategy and targets in the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022."

We need to inject some realism into the debate. There are no current active petroleum licences in Northern Ireland. Saying that a moratorium and legislative ban on an activity that is not happening in Northern Ireland will be the silver bullet to the issues that we face is simply not true.

Whether we like it or not, two thirds of homes across Northern Ireland are still heated by oil. That can change only if we support householders to go green in a way that is affordable and accessible. That is where the focus of the motion and, hopefully, the Minister's response, should be. I want to hear, as, I am sure, do hard-pressed households across Northern Ireland, when the Minister will bring forward a support scheme to help those householders make the transition to renewables. There is no point in we in the House saying what we cannot do. We need to be able to articulate to the public what we can do and how we are going to support families and households in doing that.

Yes, warm words from across the House are important, but they are meaningless unless we offer an affordable and accessible alternative for households across Northern Ireland. I trust that the Minister will outline in his summing-up how he plans to swiftly bring forward a strategy to enable households to make the transition to renewable energy as a means of heating their homes. Ongoing delay in that will further undermine Northern Ireland's ability to meet the climate change targets that the House set in the previous mandate.

We will support the motion, but we need more than words. We need action, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister how he plans to actually tackle ensuring that householders across Northern Ireland are able to transition from fossil fuels and how he intends to support them.

Mr Honeyford: I speak as the Alliance spokesperson for the economy. Alliance will support the motion and all bans on fracking, petroleum licensing, drilling and extraction.

I said recently in the Chamber that we live on a beautiful island in the Atlantic Ocean and have a wealth of renewable energy opportunities and resources at our fingertips. In the future, we should have next to no need for fossil fuels, so

now is finally the time to introduce a ban to reassure those local communities that are affected.

As our entire means of power generation continue to positively evolve, Alliance wants to see the transition completely away from fossil fuels and faster movement towards a fairer, greener society that is powered by renewable energy. We need to invest in the diversity of all our renewable sources, and Alliance believes that we must work on that in partnership across the island, taking a shared-island approach in order to develop the scale and energy security that are required. It is also important to continue to develop a system that is connected to Scotland, Wales, France and on into mainland Europe.

We need to address three issues in order to allow us to move at a faster pace and enable the development of renewables. The first is energy security and storage. Energy storage of fossil fuels is all around us, whether it is oil tanks for our homes, petrol or diesel tanks in our cars and lorries, storage tanks at petrol stations or at docks or ports, as has been said. We must quickly address renewable storage, such as how to store additional wind energy for use on days when it is less windy.

The second issue, which is a major problem and which is causing delay in the transition to renewable energy, is a completely outdated planning system. Everywhere I go — I speak to people across the industry — planning delays are raised as the number-one priority. The Minister for Infrastructure needs to address that urgently. We cannot imagine any of our emergency services being called to an emergency but having to sit in traffic, yet we are in a climate emergency, so delivery should not be delayed by being stuck in a planning system. Again and again, we are seeing investment that should and could have been made here moving South.

The Minister for Infrastructure has to get a grip on the issue quickly and reform the planning system to deliver planning decisions in a much shorter time. I am not saying that there should not be consultations; I am saying that we need to have a much easier and simpler process that delivers results. This must be treated as an emergency, and the reform and updating of our planning system must happen straight away.

5.30 pm

I will make a final point about the overall design of our energy system. Traditionally, we have

had three centres of generation here. With the introduction of renewable energy, generation has spread across the region. There needs to be a lead, in the design of the system, on how we work towards our renewable energy goal. If you start to build a house, you follow an architect's designs, drawings and plans. They show you where you are going and give you the platform from which to deliver. It is not a shotgun approach, and it is not a case of saying, "We'll put this here, do that there and hope for the best". Our new energy system needs the same approach: an overall design that brings together all the moving parts from access to the grid to geography to helping to address the planning issues. Areas of need could be targeted, giving a clear understanding of what is needed in particular areas. Most importantly, that approach would allow our renewables industry to get on and deliver, reducing the need for fossil fuels much faster. We live in an exciting time — an era of change — and Alliance wants to see action, rather than words, on delivering renewable energy transformation.

Mr Nesbitt: I support the motion and the amendment. Some time ago, when we first thought about fracking, the Ulster Unionist Party's position was, "No, but". The "but" was a reference to the fact that we were open to persuasion and to saying to those who wanted to frack, "Convince us that it is viable, convince us that it is a good idea, and, above all, convince us that it is safe". In the intervening years, we have moved much closer to a straight, "No," than to, "No, but".

"No, but" was a reference to the fact that, frankly, it was about more than just Nimbyism, more than a case of "Not in my back yard". It is valid to question our attitude to whether we want to exploit our natural resources. When lignite was discovered in Northern Ireland, the immediate reaction was a campaign against it. When we discovered "gold in them thar hills" in the Sperrins, the immediate reaction was a campaign not to allow Dalradian to go ahead. Mr Dickson says no to gas caverns in his constituency, yet they have huge potential. We can generate our own hydrogen, but we will need somewhere to store it.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I thought that you might ask.

Mr Dickson: First of all, the storage proposal is for gas, not hydrogen, and that would require a new and fully explored planning application. I do not wish to be sensational, but I do not want

a hydrogen bomb under East Antrim, thanks very much, Mr Nesbitt. The planning application is for so-called natural gas to be stored. It is to be stored and then used not in Northern Ireland but elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

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

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank Mr Stewart Dickson, who has just made my point for me by saying that he does not want a hydrogen bomb under his feet. There is an element of Nimbyism in our attitudes.

We talked about home heating oil. The Chair of the Committee made reference to the fact that we are much more reliant on it, per household, than the rest of the United Kingdom. However, we do not extract that oil in Northern Ireland; we import it. I remind you of what happened in the Gulf of Mexico on 20 April 2010: the Deepwater Horizon oil spill was one of the greatest environmental disasters of modern times. There was an oil spill because of a blowout on the Deepwater Horizon oil platform, and 4.9 million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico. Three years later, dolphins and other marine life continued to die in record numbers, yet, today, more than two thirds of Northern Ireland households still use oil as their main source of heating. "Not in my back yard" is an issue that we will have to deal with.

Mr Donnelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, happily.

Mr Donnelly: Does the Member agree that there are more fossil fuels in the world than we can safely burn; that the more we extract, the greater the risk of climate catastrophe; and that we need to keep our known reserves in the ground?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think that that is the point I have just made by reference to the Gulf of Mexico. If we continue to extract, there is more risk, and we will have to continue to extract if two thirds of our households continue to use a fossil fuel.

We have moved from "No, but" to "No", because the limited experience in Great Britain is entirely negative. Only one licensee got as far as drilling — Cuadrilla, in Blackpool — and, in 2019, there were a couple of minor tremors that were attributed to the drilling. There were another two minor tremors in 2011. Since then, the North Sea Transition Authority has told

Cuadrilla that it must use a plug-and-abandonment procedure on its two potential wells. That was in August 2023, and it has until the end of this calendar year to comply with that demand.

On renewables, of course, we are very much in favour of solar and wind. As we all know, the difficulty with wind is that it is unreliable, which means that we have to work on storage. There is certainly some healthy development in battery storage. The motion talks about tidal energy. Everything that I hear about tidal is that it is not economically viable yet, so we await somebody to make it so. That would be great for us, because we are an island nation and tidal is potentially our greatest green energy source. I remember SeaGen, an experiment in my constituency of Strangford, which produced a lot more energy than it predicted. Happily, the seals that went out for their post-lunch afternoon stroll under water were not cut in half by the blades. There is a lot of potential in tidal to add to wind and solar. For a nation that had no natural mining resources, we could end up in a really healthy position with renewables.

I will support the motion and the amendment.

Miss Brogan: As Sinn Féin spokesperson on climate and the environment, I am pleased to join my Sinn Féin colleagues in bringing the motion to the Floor calling for petroleum licensing and fracking to be banned in the North. I thank the Economy Minister for being here; for participating in the debate; for listening to the widespread concerns about the environmental and public health risks associated with these practices; and ultimately for taking action on the matter. We need to see legislative change to ban petroleum licensing and fracking here, which have the potential to cause so much damage to our environment and stress to our local communities.

The Hatch report sets out in great detail the environmental risks that we run in the North even with low-level development of petroleum exploration and extraction. The Climate Change Act 2022 commits us to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, a target that we are already hard-pressed to meet. It is entirely contradictory to set that target while allowing space for the development of a future fossil fuel industry here with the production of petroleum via fracking.

We need to focus on the development of solar, onshore and offshore wind and hydroelectric energy production to meet our obligations. We also need to comply with the 30 by 30 commitment made by the former AERA

Minister, which aims to set aside 30% of the land and sea as protected areas for nature restoration by 2030 in order to stall biodiversity loss and create new habitats for wildlife. New policies in agriculture are helping to reach that target, but there continues to be a decline in biodiversity, as shown in the 2023 'State of Nature' report. The answer to the biodiversity crisis is conservation work, not the increased exploitation and destruction of habitats.

In recent weeks, the Assembly has highlighted the issue of water pollution in the North. The scenes at Lough Neagh last year brought into focus the significant issues of water pollution that the practice of petroleum extraction, especially fracking, would compound. Fracking uses a large amount of water and opens up the possibility of water contamination, so we need to do what we can to prevent that type of water pollution. The motion is another step in the response to the climate crisis. It is our duty to ensure that our corner of the world carries its weight in the global crisis. I encourage all Members to support the motion.

Mr Blair: The Alliance Party has stood in the Chamber not just today but several times in the past to speak in support of a ban on all forms of exploration and extraction of oil and gas in Northern Ireland, as well as to make clear its opposition to fracking. On this occasion, I take the opportunity to address the motion from an environmental perspective.

First, I note that the exploration, drilling and extraction of hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland will severely obstruct our efforts to meet the climate change targets set under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. According to recent statistics from the Department for the Economy, only 45% of the electricity consumed in Northern Ireland in 2023 was generated from renewable sources, representing a 5% decrease from the previous year. It is essential that we take significant steps to improve those figures if we are to meet our legally binding target of producing 80% of our electricity from renewable sources by the year 2030.

If we are to reach net zero, it is imperative that we prioritise the transition to utilising clean and renewable sources of energy. That shift would help protect our natural environment, including helping to increase biodiversity and protect our waterways. It would also help reduce our dependence on finite resources that are becoming increasingly scarce. Investment in renewable energy sources, such as solar, wind and hydropower, must therefore be increased. Additionally, there should be investment in alternative modes of transport, such as public

transport networks, active travel opportunities and electric vehicle infrastructure. Those changes would help mitigate the effects that we already experience as a result of climate change and secure a more sustainable future for all of us.

The practice of fracking continues to cause significant worry and apprehension among the residents of Northern Ireland. That includes my constituents in South Antrim, whose primary concern is the drilling activities that will potentially take place in or around Lough Neagh. It is the largest freshwater lake in the UK, a designated area of special scientific interest (ASSI) and home to several nature reserves. It is not an area to be destroyed on the whim of large-profit businesses that care nothing for our natural environment, and I need hardly point out —

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for giving way. He will be aware that some of the drilling activity that we are looking to do is for geothermal energy. Will the Member state whether Alliance supports drilling for geothermal activity, or is it against all forms of drilling activity? That is of particular interest to people in South Antrim, especially those in the area around Lough Neagh.

Mr Blair: I will come to that in one second.

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

Mr Blair: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Before I respond to the Member's intervention, I stress that I need hardly point out the recent environmental challenges at Lough Neagh and the impact that those have had on communities.

I thank the Member for his intervention. We should look at everything on a case-by-case basis. He will know from the tone of what I am saying, however, that my response to drilling is instinctively negative. If the Member compares the areas of Northern Ireland designated for such exploration by some, he will see that we are a many times multiple — over 20% of our land mass — compared with single percentages in the rest of GB, right down to 0.8% in one region.

I am pleased at a local level. My Alliance colleague Councillor Jay Burbank successfully brought a similar motion to Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council in the recent past. It is unfortunate, however, that that has not been replicated in the other council areas.

For instance, my understanding is that the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party and, indeed, the SDLP councillors on Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council opposed and obstructed such a proposal. It is simply illogical not to have cross-party support at all levels of government for a ban to address what is undoubtedly a widespread concern. It was necessary to prevent petroleum licensing and fracking years ago, and we must continue in the same spirit of environmental protection.

While we on these Benches agree in principle with the amendment, which seeks a ban before the end of 2024, the reality is that achieving such a ban in that short time frame is, unfortunately, highly unlikely, but we support the motion and the amendment on the basis of that principle.

5.45 pm

In the interim, and before the legislative ban, the Economy Minister must send a clear message that, in Northern Ireland, it is no longer open season regarding these outdated and environmentally damaging practices. We cannot effectively combat climate change while continuing to support industries that contribute substantially to it.

Dr Aiken: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker —. Or Ms —. I apologise, Principal Deputy Speaker. It has been a long day, as you can imagine.

I echo my friend Mr Nesbitt's remarks: the Ulster Unionist Party will support both the motion and the amendment. Members will be aware that, in our nation, fracking has been under a moratorium, in some parts of it, since at least 2015. That started in Scotland. In Wales, it has been the case since 2018 and, since 2019, there has been a moratorium. There is no indication anywhere across our nation — with the exception of Northern Ireland, because we have not caught up with the legislation yet — that there will be any more onshore fracking or that any onshore fracking will be allowed.

As many Members have noted, the debate is also about how we manage our renewables and where we go in the future with renewable systems. Minister, as you are well aware, one of our biggest problems is the interconnectivity of the grid. Earlier, when you gave answers to various questions, you pointed to the fact that there are significant areas around grid connections in the Province and rural grid connections. That cannot be overstated. The number of problems that face anybody who wants a grid connection for renewables,

whether solar, wind or any other form, is quite frankly scandalous.

The fact that we are paying significantly more for grid connections in Northern Ireland than we would in Scotland, England or Wales, or the Republic of Ireland, needs to be investigated clearly. Without doubt, it is the monopolistic situation here that has been an absolute barrier to the progression of renewable energy across Northern Ireland. Whether in battery storage, novel applications or smart grids, on every occasion the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) have been working to the detriment of Northern Ireland. Questions have to be asked about that.

One of the other significant issues that we have to worry about is our regulation process. I declare an interest: I am a great supporter of the Utility Regulator here, particularly the chief executive of the Utility Regulator. However, quite frankly, Northern Ireland is too small to be doing its own energy regulation. Talk to anybody in the renewable energy business, and you find that one of the single biggest problems is getting a route to market and an understandable method of getting contracts for difference.

England Scotland and Wales, interestingly enough, have their own regulator in Ofgem. Neither Scotland nor Wales decided to go it alone. They have a system that industry can buy into and get renewables rapidly onto the market. We cannot do that. One of the things we have to ask about, going forward, is what we do about reforming the system so that we get a proper, fully integrated energy market.

Mr Honeyford: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Certainly. Over to you, David.

Mr Honeyford: Thanks, Steve. You mentioned SONI, and I am interested in what you meant by that. You talk about Northern Ireland as if our energy market is alone on this island. We have an energy system that is across the island. Are you proposing that we have a regulator for the island? Is that it?

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

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed. No, I propose that we join Ofgem. Let us look clearly at what we need to do. If you look on this island, with renewable energy, the market and the interconnection is not big enough to make it

work in all circumstances. If that were the case, they would not be building new connection grids to Wales and they would not be looking to build a new interconnection system to France, which will then use lots of nuclear energy to fill in the gaps. We need an all-islands solution. The sooner we get to that, the better. It is appropriate that we start thinking strategically if we are to hit our renewable energy targets, which we must, because there is an energy crisis. There is also a climate emergency. We need to deal with those situations.

Minister, when you look at the future of energy generation in Northern Ireland, I ask you to look very closely at how we marry up with the rest of these islands to make it work. Clearly, nobody in the Assembly supports fracking onshore. Let us make a ban happen. Since it is not happening now, we have no difficulty at all in supporting the motion and the amendment.

Mr Donnelly: I rise in favour of the motion, and I thank the Sinn Féin Members for bringing it forward. In February 2020, one of the first acts of the previous Assembly, following its restoration at the end of a three-year deadlock, was to declare a climate emergency. Much of the wording of that motion remains relevant over four years later, such as the statement that the Assembly:

"recognises that we are facing climate breakdown and a biodiversity crisis, which are impacting here and now, and will affect all aspects of our lives in coming years" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 125, p134, col 2].

We only have to look at Lough Neagh to see the damaging impacts of climate inaction.

The previous Assembly made considerable progress on climate legislation through the passage of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, with its emissions targets of net zero by 2050, sectoral plans for key industries, carbon budgets to deliver on the main targets, and plans to have a Northern Ireland climate commissioner and climate action plan. It is essential that that Act is delivered in full. We cannot afford to water down our targets, as we have seen happen in Scotland.

Transitioning away from fossil fuel dependency is often mistakenly seen as an economic negative. That is not the case. New sources of renewable energy require new skills to ensure a fair and equitable transition, therefore creating newer and greener jobs. That transition must be fair, and must not impact on households

financially, as we all need to be able to heat our homes.

Furthermore, as outlined in the Department for the Economy's 'Onshore Petroleum Licensing Policy' consultation document, a ban on petroleum licensing, drilling and extraction would not have a significant impact on jobs or our wider economy. It would, however, play an important role in us meeting our climate targets. We need secure, affordable and clean energy, as was outlined in the Department's previous energy strategy, which looks towards the long-term vision of a net zero carbon economy.

Banning petroleum licensing, drilling and extraction has been recommended by international research from the International Energy Agency and the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. There is broad support for a change in approach from the Department, and I welcome that the new Economy Minister recognises that that should be the case. As we have mentioned, there are far more fossil fuels than we can safely burn. The more that we extract, the greater the risk of climate catastrophe, so we need to keep them in the ground.

Like my colleague Stewart Dickson did, I will touch on one of the most important issues that faces my constituency of East Antrim. In my current role as an MLA, and in my previous role as a councillor for Larne Lough district electoral area (DEA), two projects of huge concern to me and my colleagues have been the oil terminal at Cloghan Point near Whitehead and the construction of the gas caverns under Larne lough. It is clear that the approval of such large-scale fossil fuel projects runs contrary to our climate change commitments and targets, shackling us to fossil fuels for decades to come. I encourage the Minister for Infrastructure to consider how planning legislation can be amended so that climate targets can be a consideration in planning applications, especially those of such scale.

The motion refers to the deep concerns that communities have about the environmental and public health risks associated with practices such as hydraulic fracturing. That is more prevalent in East Antrim than in any other constituency, especially as — I am sure that every Member will agree — the coastline of east Antrim and Larne lough is incomparable in its natural beauty and biodiversity. I am very proud of the local community and its work in opposing these unnecessary projects. That includes the work of organisations such as Stop Whitehead Oil Terminal, Friends of the Earth and No Gas Caverns. I am sure that Members

will remember the successful Stop the Drill campaign in Woodburn Forest a couple of years ago. Those are local people who are campaigning to protect their local environment for future generations. If we are serious about meeting our climate change and net zero targets, we cannot permit the continuation of such projects, with their potentially devastating impact on local communities. We need to stop them as soon as possible.

Although the motion could have been strengthened by greater references to our climate targets and an opposition to wider and cross-cutting projects that will have a disproportionate impact on those targets, I am happy to support the motion. I hope that the Economy and Infrastructure Ministers will do what they can to progress our path towards net zero.

Mr Carroll: In virtually every corner of these Six Counties, there is an environmental disaster that has been ignored, encouraged or caused by successive Stormont Administrations. Look at the illegal dump at Mobuoy, where contaminated waste pollutes Derry's waterways. Look to the Sperrins, which Dalradian, with security provided by the PSNI, wants to strip through toxic gold-mining. We see algal growth in Lough Neagh, with Stormont providing financial incentives for industrial farmers to pollute our drinking water and continuing to allow legal and illegal sand extraction. We saw DAERA grant licences for seven gas caverns, which have the potential to create a dead zone for plants and animals. Recently, we saw DUP and UUP councillors conspiring to grant permission for an oil terminal and biofuel refinery at Cloghan Point at Whitehead. When you total all that, this state is an emblem of how not to treat the environment. It is a glaring example of what happens when the Government put the profits of energy giants, beef barons and all shades of industrialists above our natural resources.

For every issue that I have listed, there are grassroots campaigners in communities across the North who are pushing back against it, determined to save the environment from the ravages of a broken system and ensure the rights of nature. As a wealthy minority, backed by complicit Governments, bring us hurtling towards environmental catastrophe, tireless activists are fighting back against them every step of the way. It is fair to say that the proposals to ban fracking and petroleum exploration would not be in front of us today were it not for the efforts of those campaigners, including those from Belcoo Frack Free in County Fermanagh and so many others.

It goes without saying that I support today's motion, but it is unacceptable for the Executive to run with the hare and hunt with the hound when it comes to our environment. We need urgent action across the board to reduce emissions and stop the earth's temperature from rising to apocalyptic levels. That means keeping all carbon in the soil. Banning fracking is good, but it is not good enough if, on the other hand, the Government allow gas companies to dig gas caverns under Larne lough. The Government should not allow an oil terminal to be constructed at Cloghan Point, and I echo the call for the Infrastructure Minister to intervene and overturn the decision on that harmful planning proposal. Cutting emissions will require an AERA Minister who is prepared to challenge the big farmers, whose livestock drive up emissions and simultaneously fuel the crisis at Lough Neagh. I have not yet seen any evidence that the current Minister is willing to do that. Stormont cannot stand by as the Sperrins, a crucial carbon sink, are blown up in the pursuit of gold.

Sooner or later, the Executive will have to grasp the nettle if they are serious about the future of the planet. Every Department has an obligation under the Climate Change Act to act consistently in reaching its emission targets. From what I have seen so far, many are failing at that basic task. We have an Infrastructure Minister who has still not fully ruled out ending free public transport for people over 60, which would force more people into cars. As we speak, the AERA Minister is talking about pausing much-promised action to deal with the pollution at Lough Neagh, which is intrinsically linked to the need to cut farming emissions and pollution. Those are just some of many examples.

There are logical and sensible arguments for keeping all carbon — oil, gas and petroleum — in the ground. There is no room for error if we are to avoid mass extinction. The economic arguments about job creation from the fossil fuel industry have been absolutely shattered. Frankly, they were always bogus. We only have to look at the Stormont consultation on onshore petroleum licensing, which points to the fact that the economic benefits are negligible. The only people whom it benefits are, as always, the wealthy minority who profit from the destruction of our planet. Air quality, public health and mental and physical well-being are all being sacrificed to line the pockets of a few.

We need a strategy for change, but it must put working-class people in the driving seat. We need a just transition to ensure that those working in the fossil fuel industry, in farming, in

aviation and elsewhere are reskilled and given opportunities for green jobs. We need to ensure that the wealthy minority, whose interests are driving the climate crisis, are forced to pay for the transition to a greener economy so that working people are not punished for the destruction that was wrought by others. The new Executive need to, as a bare minimum, urgently bring forward a climate action plan and firmly commit to meeting the emissions targets set out in the Climate Change Act. I welcome a ban on fracking and petroleum extraction, but I also encourage —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up

Mr Carroll: — activists to keep up the fight and to keep campaigning.

6.00 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for the Economy to respond to the debate. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy): I welcome the opportunity to speak about this important issue. Climate change is one of the defining challenges of our time, and moving away from fossil fuels will be a vital part of the transition towards a greener economy and a more sustainable way of life. Reducing carbon emissions is one of my four key objectives. Reaching net zero by 2050 is both a legal requirement and a moral obligation to the well-being of future generations. I want to see a just transition to net zero meaning that it is used as an opportunity to create a more equal society. Our wealth of national resources such as wind, biomethane and geothermal enables us to become self-sufficient in and even an exporter of affordable renewable energy. Work is ongoing to use those resources to our advantage.

Here, in the Stormont estate, my Department is beginning a geothermal demonstrator project to use the heat beneath our feet. That project, along with another demonstrator in County Antrim, will give us vital information about how to decarbonise the heat sector. We have an abundance of wind on this island. My Department is working to maximise the potential of onshore and offshore with a renewable electricity support scheme. The scheme will incentivise investment in larger renewable electricity projects, guarantee fair pricing for locally produced electricity and encourage a diverse range of renewable resources for secure energy supply. Therefore,

the scheme is an important part of meeting the 2030 legislative target of 80% electricity consumption from renewables. Due to our large agriculture sector, we also have the potential to use biomethane to support our pathway to net zero and, at the same time, contribute to regional balance.

The energy efficiency capital grant opens today. It will help local businesses to reduce costs and build resilience through energy efficiency. Businesses can now apply for a grant to buy and install energy-efficient equipment, including, in certain cases, solar panels. That will help to reduce their energy consumption and carbon emissions.

In addition to the environmental impacts, the past few years have shown us the economic risk that we run by continuing to rely on fossil fuels. The cost-of-living crisis has largely been driven by increased energy costs, leading to higher bills and increased prices across the board. By developing local sources of energy, we have the opportunity to break the link with global commodity prices and become price-makers rather than price-takers.

In meeting our net zero targets, a key priority is to move from petroleum to renewables. The Department for the Economy has the power to grant licences to companies to search for and extract onshore oil and gas. My Department recently consulted on the petroleum licensing system. The consultation opened on 15 January and closed on 12 April. Research carried out as part of the review found that the positive economic impacts are limited and the negative environmental and social impacts are potentially severe, depending on how much petroleum activity takes place. The vast majority of respondents to the consultation supported the move away from fossil fuels. The South of Ireland and Wales have recently banned all onshore petroleum activity, and Scotland has taken a decision on hydraulic fracturing, known as "fracking".

Mr Carroll: I appreciate the Minister's giving way, and I welcome the findings from the report. I am happy to be corrected, but it is my understanding that planning application PLA1/16 — I do not expect the Minister to know what that is: it is the application from EHA Exploration Limited for a petroleum licence for drilling in and around Lough Neagh — remains outstanding while it has not been granted by previous Ministers or by him. Can the Minister confirm whether it is still outstanding or whether it is null and void or give us an update on that either today or in writing?

Mr C Murphy: First, if it is a planning application, it is a matter for the Department for Infrastructure. Secondly, if it is the same issue as the one that, I think, the Member is raising, that is being decided by the council in relation to the application.

As I was saying, it is time for us to act, and I intend to ban all forms of petroleum exploration and production, including fracking. That will help us to transition from fossil fuels to renewables. I will soon ask Executive colleagues to approve a ban, and, if that is granted, I will introduce legislation to the Assembly to ban onshore petroleum licensing. It will require amendments to the Petroleum (Production) Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 and other regulations. The time involved in developing the legislation means that it will be introduced in 2025. In the meantime, my Department will not accept or process onshore petroleum licensing applications.

I will turn to some of the points that were raised in the debate. I thank Members for contributing to it. I am sure that the proposer of the motion will address the issue that was raised in the amendment. The consultation closed about two weeks ago. We have to develop a policy and bring it to the Executive for approval. That would immediately introduce a moratorium from the Department in dealing with any of the issues, and we then have to devise legislation and bring it through. If that can be done this year, that is grand — I would be happy to move on it sooner — but, every time we propose doing something, an amendment is tabled that says, "You must do it quicker". To be honest, it would be helpful if the people who tabled the amendments gave examples of when they held ministerial office and were able to turn such things around within that type of time frame. Otherwise, it is just a bit of grandstanding, as far as I am concerned. I am not overly exercised about it. If we can do it within this year, happy days, we will do that, but I have been here a long time, and I have no memory of the party that tabled the amendment doing things in that superfast way when it ran Departments. Maybe it is just setting a higher standard for the rest of us because it has more faith in us, but that remains to be seen.

Phillip Brett mentioned household support schemes. We will consult in the coming weeks on a proposed funding scheme for low-carbon heat. The funding for 2024-25 is already available through NISEP, which the Utility Regulator operates, but we are, obviously, looking at other issues.

David Honeyford and Danny Donnelly raised planning issues. I absolutely get it that movement in all these areas requires joined-up processes. As I said during Question Time, where we find bottlenecks in the system, we have to make sure that one part of government does not contradict what another is doing. I am happy to talk to my colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to make sure that we move together on issues that are of critical importance to us.

Mike Nesbitt talked about tidal energy, and interesting debate ensued. I say to him that fixed and floating turbines for tidal are under consideration as part of the offshore renewable energy action plan and that my officials are leading on that. While tidal is yet to be developed in a way that can produce the things that we would like, it is nonetheless still under active consideration, as, I am sure, he will be glad to know.

Steve Aiken talked about grid connections and a joined-up system for electricity infrastructure. I had a conversation about that with my colleague Eamon Ryan when we were at the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) plenary, and we intend to meet in the next couple of weeks to develop that conversation further, because there is a realisation that the system has to be there in order to support what we want to do on renewables. The ambition on that side of the border is the same as it is on this side, which is to put ourselves in a space where we are self-sufficient and perhaps even an exporter. In that sense, I hope that connectivity with France or with Wales or Scotland would mean a channel going from here to there rather than the other way round.

Danny Donnelly raised a point about the gas caverns. I am told that those have the potential to store renewable gases such as hydrogen. I know that the debate on that goes on in East Antrim, and I am keen to see it roll on.

John Blair raised a point about immediate action being required. The moment that the Executive approve the policy document that I intend to bring forward in the not-too-distant future is the time for immediate action on a moratorium. We then need to follow through with legislation. In effect, the legislation will enforce the action that we will already have taken. That is why trying to shoehorn legislation into this calendar year, as opposed to letting it be done properly, is, as I say, probably not the most important consideration. Putting the moratorium in place by getting the policy decision taken and following that through with

legislation is, for me, the important matter in all this.

I record my strong support for the motion and for a just transition to a greener economy that focuses on renewable energy and protects our environment. I look forward to legislating to enact a ban on all forms of onshore petroleum exploration and production. The amendment looks for that to happen earlier than is possible for us, but let us hope that we can make progress as quickly as possible, as I said.

The key point is that we need to get a policy document on the back of the consultation, which has just closed, and we need to get that to the Executive and, in effect, take the decision and follow through with legislation at the earliest possible time.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mark Durkan to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Mark, you have five minutes.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* A legislative ban on petroleum licensing and fracking represents a step change that we need to see to safeguard our environment and protect the health and well-being of communities. For a decade, parties across the Assembly have recognised the need to phase out fossil fuels, though some of us recognised that long before others. We have also known that fracking poses a serious risk, from contaminating groundwater to triggering seismic events. The risks associated with fracking are too great to ignore, and Philip McGuigan outlined many of those risks, including environmental and economic risks. As my party colleague Sinéad McLaughlin mentioned, the body of evidence around the health impacts alone should have served as a clarion call.

In 2015, as Environment Minister, I rejected proposals for exploratory drilling in Fermanagh and pledged to review outdated planning policy. I enshrined in policy a presumption against fracking, and I did that pretty quickly. I did so in the face of legal challenge and, indeed, political opposition from across the Chamber, although the opposers were sitting on this side of the Chamber then. I am glad that the DUP has now seen the light. Mr Nesbitt helpfully explained his party's position and journey on the subject of fracking, but I have not received an explanation for the DUP's Damascene conversion.

SDLP Infrastructure Minister Nichola Mallon took up the mantle and removed permitted

development rights for onshore oil and gas exploration, so there should be no doubt where the SDLP stands, and has always stood, on this issue, despite the fact that we have had to remind a few of our councillors along the way. Thanks to Mr Blair for reminding me of that. Those were crucial steps in the shift towards renewable energy and a reduction in carbon emissions and were reflective of more environmentally conscious legislation. The SDLP has been steadfast in its stance against fracking, and while I welcome the fact that the parties across the Chamber now agree with that position, today is not, or should not be, a back-patting exercise; it is more of an embarrassing admission of dither and delay on such a pressing and important issue.

There has been plenty of talk in the Chamber over the past few months about what Ministers and the Executive should or would do, but promises have not been actioned. Ms McLaughlin lamented the fact that, rather than being legislators, we are becoming professional debaters, and I am sure that many members of the public view us as nothing much more than a bunch of master debaters as well.

Our amendment is not just a case of "do things more quickly". We want concrete commitments and targets for delivery. How many things have been getting done for an eternity but never getting done at all? That is across all Departments, and the Programme for Government springs to mind. Therefore, I am glad that we are hearing of movement on petroleum licensing and fracking, but let us see that movement soon. That is what we are calling for.

In 2022, the Department brought a paper to the Executive recommending a moratorium on fracking and gas and oil exploration in the North, and, in February, Minister Murphy confirmed to me at Question Time that he was considering a legislative ban on fracking and hoped to bring forward proposals in the not-too-distant future. That was an already established direction of travel, and I therefore imagine that a body of work has been done by the Department. On that basis, I thought that it would be a reasonable enough request to bring forward the legislation at least by the end of this year. Let us at least get that legislative process started. We must keep step with across the water and the South. We must alleviate fears that still exist in communities here about the imminent threat from the unwanted onshore oil and gas industry, and we must even potentially seek to undo some of the damage that has been done in the past.

I ask Members to support our amendment, which demands delivery and which will, we believe, focus minds. People deserve assurance that hard-won environmental protections will not be undone and that future decisions will be geared towards creating a greener society that supports the economy. We want what is best for the planet and best for people's pockets. As Mr Honeyford said, we need a cross-departmental approach to support a transition to renewables. In our view, the best way to get community buy-in is to ensure that the community derives benefit from renewable projects that are on its doorstep. I urge Members to support the amendment.

6.15 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Go raibh maith agat as sin, a Mark, Sílim. [*Translation: Thank you for that, Mark. I think.*] I call Áine Murphy to make a winding-up speech on the motion. Áine, you have 10 minutes.

Ms Á Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.*] I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I am heartened that there has been a common thread of support throughout the debate for the motion. The importance of the motion cannot be overstated. As many Members may recall, I brought a private Member's Bill to the Floor, back in 2021, to ban the issuing of petroleum licences to companies that intended to use fracking as a method to extract shale gas. Unfortunately, due to time restraints before dissolution, I was unable to progress the Bill to its Final Stage.

To add context, the threat of fracking has hung over Fermanagh for more than a decade, especially in the west of the county. Ever since the threat of fracking first emerged, people have expressed their widespread opposition to the practice. As a Fermanagh native, I am all too aware of the devastating impact that fracking would have on our environment. There is not a community anywhere in Ireland that wants petroleum exploration happening anywhere next or near it. The Hatch report lays out in great detail the risks that even conventional drilling poses to public health and water supplies for little or no economic benefit. Studies have also linked fracking to a host of health problems, including birth defects, asthma and cancer. The practice has been shown to cause groundwater contamination, soil corrosion, earthquakes, noise pollution and significant increases in airborne radioactivity, as well as increased greenhouse gas emissions. It

also has serious consequences for biodiversity, with many wildlife habitats and areas of conservation being impacted by industrialisation or destroyed by contamination. The threat of fracking still hangs over these communities because, as we debate this motion, fracking is still legal in the North.

Evidence has been mounting over recent years on the negative impact that fracking has on nearby communities. My county of Fermanagh is renowned for its beautiful countryside and abundance of fresh lakes, to which thousands of tourists and anglers flock every year. As a county, we rely on the income that is generated through tourism, and I have no doubt that our tourist offering would be damaged beyond repair if fracking was ever allowed to go ahead. Many countries around the world have already introduced legislative bans against fracking, and that is set to continue to grow in the future. In 2022, the Assembly passed the Climate Change Act, which sets ambitious targets for net zero emissions. If any form of petroleum extraction were allowed to take place, it would actively work against meeting our commitments under the Climate Change Act, making it less deliverable. It makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to leave the door open to fracking or other means of petroleum extraction whilst we are required by law to reduce our carbon emissions. A major concern in my constituency is that, due to the different types of definitions of fracking, it could be allowed to slip through a loophole. A ban on petroleum licensing as a whole will reassure communities that fracking is not something that they will ever have to worry about again.

In closing, the people of Fermanagh have fought tooth and nail over the past number of years to prevent petroleum licences from being granted. The fresh leadership in the Department for the Economy provides us with an opportunity to finally deliver a ban on petroleum licensing. I welcome the Minister's commitment to introduce legislation in 2025. Therefore we do not support the amendment, but we will not be pushing for a Division.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that tackling climate change is a global priority and, to be successful, must be grounded on the principles of fairness and a just transition away from fossil

fuel dependency towards a fairer and greener society powered by renewable energy; further recognises that we need to develop solar, tidal, onshore and offshore wind resources across the island of Ireland and off our coast; believes that a move towards renewable energy with a diversity of sources can increase energy security by reducing reliance on fossil fuel imports, which are more susceptible to international markets; acknowledges the deep concerns communities have about the environmental and public health risks associated with practices such as hydraulic fracturing; and calls on the Minister for the Economy, as an important first step in moving away from fossil fuel dependency, to introduce legislation to ban petroleum licensing, drilling and extraction before the end of 2024.

Adjourned at 6.19 pm.