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Contents

Assembly Business

Members' Statements

Road Traffic Collisions: PSNI/Garda Síochána Cooperation 1

Ulster-Scots Culture 2

Arthritis UK: 'From Breaking Point to Recovery' Report 2

Shared Prosperity Fund: Replacement Funding 3

Executive Delivery 3

Lá na Cainte 4

Time to Talk Day 4

Housing: Asylum Accommodation 5

Centre for Democracy and Peace Fellowship Programme 5

Department for the Economy: Two-year Progress Report 6

Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Awareness Week: Máiría Cahill 6

Respite Provision: Lack of Services for Children 7

Ministerial Statement

Religious Education and Collective Worship in Schools 8

Private Members' Business

Academic Selection 16

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance 32

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Infrastructure 42

Private Members' Business

Academic Selection *(Continued)* 48

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Language Body 53

Private Members' Business

Northern Ireland Civil Service: Reform 56

Adjournment

Storm Impact: A20 Portaferry Road.....69

Assembly Members

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

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 3 February 2026

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Brett: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to address factually inaccurate remarks that were levelled at me following yesterday's vote on the motion from the Committee on Standards and Privileges. For the avoidance of doubt, I first became aware of the contents of yesterday's Order Paper when it was published by the Business Office last Tuesday. I first became aware of the existence of a complaint against Mr Gaston when the Committee sent out its report last Wednesday. The first time that I discussed with colleagues the business that was before the Assembly and the contents of that report, which was available to all MLAs, was yesterday. I reject, in the strongest possible terms, the allegations that I broke any confidences or embargoes, and I invite any Member to repeat those false allegations outside the Chamber.

Members' Statements

Road Traffic Collisions: PSNI/Garda Síochána Cooperation

Mr Boylan: Last week, I listened attentively to an emotional discussion on the radio about fatal road traffic collisions in border areas. I commend those who spoke up about their experiences, including Laura Radcliffe, who spoke about the tragic loss of her sister Kathryn, and Debbie Mullan from Road Victim Support NI-Donegal.

The heartbreaking stories that were shared about the experiences of families who have had to contend with two separate police services, one on each side of the border, are harrowing. Laura Radcliffe talked about the current arrangements between Garda and PSNI officers, which make the sharing of information about road traffic collisions harder, because the family hears everything twice. That impacts not only on information-sharing, which should be done in a way that is sensitive towards a grieving family, but on the giving back of the victims' belongings.

In the case of Kathryn Jones, her sister said, during the interview last week, that a family member had to go to the border to meet the gardaí. It was not done in a station; it was very exposed and out in the open. That compounds the grief that families face.

There is currently no agreement in place that allows officers to cross the border to deliver messages regarding road deaths, which is a very practical and insensitive effect of partition in border communities. My colleague Pádraig Mac Lochlainn TD has submitted a question to the Justice Minister in the South about enhanced cooperation between both services to explore whether there are opportunities for exemptions to the current arrangements that would allow a more sensitive approach to be taken. Similarly, I have raised the matter with the Justice Minister here through an Assembly question for written answer. Furthermore, the

way in which information is shared and the format by which personal belongings are returned are areas that also need attention.

If we can work to improve communication between the authorities and bereaved families so that it is in person where possible, we should. If we can explore a better way of returning personal belongings to families, we absolutely must. Importantly, common sense and sensitivity should be the cornerstone of the approach in those circumstances. I commend the good work that is done through cross-border cooperation, but the lived experiences of families need to be reflected on, and change needs to happen to best support the loved ones of those who lose their lives on our roads.

Ulster-Scots Culture

Ms Forsythe: I was incredibly disappointed to watch last week's Communities Committee meeting, especially when I heard my fellow South Down MLA Sinn Féin's Cathy Mason shamefully refer to the Minister's support for Ulster Scots and the marching bands community as "vanity projects". That is incredibly offensive, especially to those of us in the minority unionist community in South Down. The Member went on to lambast the Minister for not providing enough funding for the Irish language or the GAA and called him "sectarian". The mask truly slipped. To her, the Irish language and the GAA are legitimate, but Ulster Scots and Ulster-British identity and culture are simply deemed to be vanity projects.

There are 30,000 members of the marching bands community and over 700 bands in Northern Ireland. In the previous census in 2021, 190,000 people stated an affinity with the Ulster-Scots language. While Sinn Féin demands a £300 million GAA stadium in west Belfast, it cannot accept the pennies in comparison that go to marching bands or the Ulster-Scots community. In our South Down constituency, the Ulster-Scots community is thriving in spite of Sinn Féin. Our bands are outstanding and award-winning. The Schomberg Society in Mourne is incredible at organising cultural events and opportunities for our children and young people to learn Highland dancing, drum majoring and many other skills. People travel across the world to visit here and learn about our local Ulster-Scots culture and heritage.

In reality, I am not that surprised about what the Member said, because, in my constituency, with a Sinn Féin-dominated council, we are well used to being swept the crumbs off the table. Money is pumped into Irish festivals, signs and Irish funding streams, all of which are billed to our local ratepayers, whilst we are cast aside. That is how they treat our culture at a local level, and that is clear now to all in the Assembly. To Sinn Féin, our Ulster-Scots culture is just a vanity project; it is not real. That is the true face of the so-called party of equality and respect.

Arthritis UK: 'From Breaking Point to Recovery' Report

Mr Donnelly: Arthritis UK has issued a landmark warning that Northern Ireland's musculoskeletal (MSK) health system has moved beyond breaking point, with more than 550,000 people — nearly a third of the population — now living with arthritis or another MSK condition. Its new report, 'From Breaking Point to Recovery: Prioritising Musculoskeletal Healthcare in Northern Ireland' brings together insights from over 200 clinicians, patients and policymakers to paint a picture of a system that is struggling to meet demand.

The report outlines a series of stark findings, including that 37% of adults and 5% of children and young people are now affected by MSK conditions.

Most people live with persistent pain, with 79% reporting pain most or all of the time. The impact on work and daily life is profound, with 67% of respondents saying that their condition affects their ability to work. Long waiting lists for rheumatology appointments, which stretch for up to eight years, contribute to worsening physical and mental health. Some 76% say that delays have harmed their mental well-being. Clinicians who contributed to the report described the deep frustration, burnout and what some call "vicarious trauma" as they watch patients deteriorate while they await treatment. The charity also highlights the serious impacts that MSK conditions can have on the economy, as 43% of people with an MSK condition are economically inactive.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, the report offers a pathway to recovery. Arthritis UK Northern Ireland is calling for four major reforms over the next five years: establishing a strategic, region-wide approach to MSK care; improving diagnosis and care pathways; addressing extreme waiting times with expanded capacity; and increasing public awareness and patient education. Key recommendations include appointing a clinical lead for MSK health, enhancing GP training, improving transitions for young people,

integrating mental health support and accelerating the Department of Health's Support While Waiting policy.

Arthritis UK emphasises that, while short-term fixes are insufficient, meaningful change is achievable with coordinated leadership and smarter service design. With the right actions, the region could move from crisis to recovery and ensure that people with MSK conditions receive the timely, compassionate care that they deserve.

Shared Prosperity Fund: Replacement Funding

Mr Stewart: I will address an issue that goes to the heart of fairness, social cohesion and economic common sense in Northern Ireland. As many Members know — they have already spoken about it — from April of this year, Northern Ireland faces a funding cliff edge that is avoidable and totally unjustifiable. The funding to address economic inactivity will fall by 64%, from £25 million to just £9·2 million, as the UK's Shared Prosperity Fund ends and is replaced by the new local growth fund. Let me be clear that that is not because need has been reduced: far from it. It will be devastating for our community and voluntary sector and our charities, which already punch far above their weight.

Northern Ireland has the highest rate of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom at 26·5% and the lowest employment rate for disabled people, yet we are being forced into a capital-heavy, 70:30 funding model that simply does not work for a region where the challenges are fundamentally people-based, not infrastructure-based. The consequences will be stark. It will put dozens of charities and organisations in the community and voluntary sector out of work, place hundreds of highly skilled front-line jobs in jeopardy, remove vital routes into work and take away specialised support for thousands of people each year across Northern Ireland.

Those are not abstract statistics; they are real people — disabled people, carers, women and young people not in education or employment — many of whom are already on the margins of our economy and society. Sadly, no alternative services are waiting in the wings. If those community-based programmes collapse in 2026-27, the infrastructure, the organisations and the people will be gone, and no amount of future codesign will resurrect them. The situation is compounded by the injustice of the way in which it has been handled. There was no consultation or published impact assessment, and organisations were informed days before Christmas and then forced into a rushed, closed competition with a January deadline. It is hard to imagine any other sector being forced into that situation.

I thank organisations such as the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, the YouthStart consortium and the many hundreds of charities and organisations that have campaigned to highlight the injustice. They came to Stormont last week, and I know that they have engaged with many Members across the House. It is not just about protecting those organisations but about protecting people, services and the future.

Thankfully, through my colleague Robin Swann, we have secured a meeting at Westminster tomorrow. I will attend along with representatives from charities and the community and voluntary sector and meet the Minister for Devolution, Faith and Communities, who has overall control of the budget and who made the decision. We will not be found wanting in making the case for Northern Ireland to secure the necessary funding. I ask that the Executive Office do all that it can to work with His Majesty's Government to secure the funding to keep those vital organisations and front-line services being delivered.

10.45 am

Executive Delivery

Mr McCrossan: Today marks two years since the return of the Assembly and the Executive to power-sharing. It has been two years since the institutions were restored after being collapsed not because of crisis or necessity but because of political self-interest. People were told that stability would bring delivery, that restoring the Executive would mean progress and that ordinary families would finally see positive change. Two years on, that promise has not been kept. Across our communities, people are struggling, and the Executive have failed to deliver for them on their basic needs.

Let us be clear about what failure from the Executive looks like.

Waiting lists remain among the worst anywhere in these islands. People wait years for appointments for surgery and even basic assessments. Lives are put on hold while the Executive dither.

Social care is stretched to breaking point. Carers are exhausted, families are left without support and skilled staff are walking away from a system in crisis.

Housing is a scandal. Families are trapped in temporary accommodation and young people cannot afford to pay rent. Homelessness levels continue to rise because the Executive have failed to act.

Childcare is still unaffordable and inaccessible, locking parents, especially women, out of work and opportunities.

The cost of living continues to hammer households. Energy bills, food prices and everyday costs rise while wages and support lag behind.

Schools are being pushed to the brink. Principals are cutting essential services, special educational needs provision is failing children, and classroom assistants are undervalued and ignored.

Our infrastructure is crumbling. Roads, water systems and public transport are neglected because long-term planning has been replaced with short-term fixes.

Economic ambition is lacking. Small businesses are closing, regional investment is stalling, and there is no coherent plan to grow our economy or create good, well-paid jobs.

Public-sector workers remain underpaid and demoralised. Pay disputes are dragging on, morale has collapsed across our public services, and people are losing patience.

Trust in politics has been completely eroded. People see delay, dysfunction and drift, and they are losing all faith. When delivery fails, what do we get instead? This Executive, particularly the two senior parties, retreat into rows, rehearsed outrage and party point-scoring, picking fights with one another to distract from the fact that they are not fixing a single problem that ordinary people face.

Those are real consequences for real people, felt every day in hospital waiting rooms and overcrowded homes, in struggling classrooms and in household budgets stretched to breaking point.

Two years on, the Executive can no longer hide behind excuses, past collapses or institutional fragility: it is not good enough. People did not wait years for power-sharing to return just to get stagnation, distraction and division. They want delivery; they want leadership; and they want the Government here to work. Until that happens, the Executive deserve to be called out loudly, clearly and without apology.

Lá na Cainte

Mr Gildernew: Beidh Lá na Cainte ann an Déardaoin seo chugainn. Lá é a spreagann muid le dul chun comhrá faoinár meabhairshláinte. Cuidíonn comhrá carad. Tá an féinmharú agus an dúlagar ina ngéarchéim dhomhanda. Níl aon chúis amháin leo: is féidir leo teacht chun cinn mar gheall ar strus airgeadais, cliseadh teaghlaigh, an t-uaigneas, nó fiú oícheanta fada geimhridh agus barraíocht de bhrú an tsaoil.

Tuairiscítear gur chuir 290 duine lámh ina mbás féin anseo sa bhliain 2024. Is scanrúil an staitistic é sin. Is féidir teacht roimh na básanna sin, ach daoine an tacaíocht agus an cuidiú cuí a fháil. Meastar nach raibh thart ar 70% de na daoine a chuir lámh ina mbás féin ag baint úsáid ghníomhach as seirbhísí meabhairshláinte. Is é an chéad chéim le leas a bhaint as na seirbhísí sin ná labhairt faoinár meabhairshláinte, cúnamh a iarraidh, agus ár smaointe agus ár mothúcháin a ligean le duine. Cuirim fáilte roimh an fhógra go mbeidh fiosrúchán traspháirtí ann ar an dóigh a ndéantar maoiniú ar sheirbhísí um fhéinmharú a chosc sa Tuaisceart. Tá súil agam go gcuideoidh torthaí an fhiosrúcháin linn ár n-aird agus ár n-iarrachtaí a dhíriú d'fhonn torthaí dearfacha meabhairshláinte a bhaint amach feasta. Ní ar an Roinn Sláinte amháin atá an cúram an féinmharú a chosc; tá cur chuige uile-rialtais de dhíth.

Bheadh obair agat duine a aimsiú sa Tuaisceart nár theagmhaigh an féinmharú leis nó le duine dá lucht aitheantais: comhghleacaí, comhimreoir, comharsa, nó duine muinteartha. Níl aon aicme saor ó ghéarchéim na meabhairshláinte. Níl aon chúis amháin léi, ach má táimid le dul i ngleic le fadhbanna meabhairshláinte, caithfimid labhairt fúthu. Sin an chéad chéim. Mar sin de, abraimis arís go bhfuil muid tiomanta deireadh a chur leis an náire a bhaineas le fadhbanna meabhairshláinte, go labhróimid amach, go nglacfaimid an t-am le bheith ag caint.

Time to Talk Day

[Translation: This Thursday coming is Time to Talk Day, a day that encourages us to promote and engage in dialogue about our mental health. A problem shared is a problem halved. Suicide and depression is a worldwide crisis.

They do not have a single cause: they can arise from financial stress, family breakdown, isolation, even long winter nights and a build-up of life's pressures.

It is reported that, in 2024, 290 people here lost their lives through suicide. That is a terrifying statistic. Such deaths are preventable, provided that people get the right support and help. It is estimated that about 70% of those who die by suicide are not actively engaged with mental health services. The first step to using those services is to talk about it, reach out and share your thoughts and feelings. I welcome the announcement of a cross-party inquiry into how suicide prevention services are funded in the North. I hope that the findings of the inquiry can help us to focus our attention and efforts in order to see positive mental health outcomes in the future. Suicide prevention is not just an issue for the Department of Health; a whole of government approach is needed.

You would be hard pressed to find someone in the North who has not been affected by or knows someone who has been affected by suicide: a colleague, a teammate, a neighbour, a family member. The mental health crisis crosses every demographic. It has no one source, but the first step in tackling poor mental health is to speak about it. Therefore, let us reaffirm our commitment to stopping the stigma, to speaking out, to taking time to talk.]

Housing: Asylum Accommodation

Mr Brett: Last month, the deputy First Minister exposed the fact that the Home Office was withholding hundreds of empty homes across Northern Ireland for use in the claiming of asylum. We are in the middle of a housing crisis. That is not rhetoric; it is the lived experience and reality for thousands of families in my North Belfast constituency. Families are stuck in temporary accommodation; young people struggle to get a first home; parents and grandparents are sharing overcrowded houses; and many are left in properties that are simply not fit for purpose. That is reality and fact. However, at the same time, hundreds of homes are being held empty on behalf of the Home Office. That is completely unacceptable and, frankly, disgraceful.

The Home Office has contracted Mears to secure those properties as the Labour Government continue to fail with their immigration policy. In doing so, Mears has made significant profits that have exceeded the permitted margins, but, more shockingly, hundreds of homes sit empty and unavailable to my constituents, who desperately need them. That equates to just over 1,000 empty bed spaces across Northern Ireland. Let that sink in: over 1,000 bed spaces are lying unused while families in North Belfast languish on waiting lists. That is not inefficiency; it is a moral failure, and taxpayers' money is being used to keep those homes empty.

I want to be clear that this is not about pitting communities against one another. It is about accountability, transparency and common sense. At a time of severe housing shortage, no public authority should be allowed to warehouse empty homes while people are left without a roof over their head.

The Home Office must explain why those properties are not being released back into the housing system immediately. Mears must explain how the situation has been allowed to develop and why it has put profit before people. There have been talks of discussions, reviews and looking at the processes, but families in North Belfast do not have time for talk; they need action, and that is what I am demanding. It goes far beyond one company or one contract, but it speaks to the lack of transparency in the Home Office and how it operates in Northern Ireland. It cannot continue.

It is appalling that people face homelessness and housing stress through this winter while hundreds of properties are left empty. That is an insult to my constituents and every person across Northern Ireland. Today, I call on the Home Office to urgently release those homes back into the housing stock so that they can house my constituents and others. Others may remain silent on the issue, but the Democratic Unionist Party will not.

Centre for Democracy and Peace Fellowship Programme

Mr McReynolds: I take the opportunity to recognise the contribution of the Centre for Democracy and Peace fellowship programme to peace and prosperity, as it celebrates five years of building political, business and civic leadership in Northern Ireland. Supported by leading businesses, the fellowship programme gives leaders from politics, business and civic society a unique opportunity to develop the skills needed to address the social, economic and political challenges of today. In its fifth year and with over 120 alumni, including more than 10 MLAs, the fellowship programme equips fellows with decision-making, design thinking, collaboration skills and the opportunity to gain experience in global best practice.

Guided by an advisory board of senior business leaders from across Northern Ireland who bring strategic insight, operational expertise and a deep understanding of leadership in complex environments, the fellowship embodies their commitment to investing in sustainable peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland.

Together, they help shape a learning experience grounded in real-world challenges, empowering participants with the adaptive thinking and systems leadership needed to drive cooperation and innovation. The focus on entrepreneurial leadership aligns closely with the key Programme for Government priorities and offers unique value to Northern Ireland by supporting the development of collaborative, forward-thinking leaders. My taking part in the fellowship programme was a transformative experience, enhancing my collaboration across sectors and strengthening my ability to serve and lead with purpose.

The Centre for Democracy and Peace fellowship programme is not just an investment in leaders; it is an investment in the future success of Northern Ireland. The fellowship empowers thoughtful leadership that listens and seeks to understand, unafraid to imagine boldly, collaborate bravely and act with integrity, helping to meet the challenges of today and shaping a better future for everyone in the place that we all call "home". I wish everyone involved with the Centre for Democracy and Peace fellowship programme well for the 5th anniversary celebrations this week and wish them many more years of success to come.

Department for the Economy: Two-year Progress Report

Mr Delargy: I welcome the publication of the Department for the Economy's two-year progress report, which provides a clear overview of delivery across the North in the last two years. There are many things contained in that report, mainly around supporting economic growth, increasing skills provision, promoting regional balance, increasing apprenticeships and skills programmes and supporting local businesses to grow and innovate. An important strand of the work has been the Department's focus on regional balance, including delivery through initiatives such as Hidden Heartlands that recognise the economic potential of rural and border communities and support economic development beyond urban centres.

The approach taken by Minister Murphy and Minister Archibald is about supporting communities and ensuring that ordinary people and ordinary communities feel the benefit of economic growth in the North. It is about putting people and communities first. In my city, in the last two years, we have seen a 22% growth in the number of students studying at Magee. That benefits those students, but it also benefits our entire city, because we are now creating an educational ecosystem in which people can study in Derry, live in Derry, work in Derry and build a life in Derry. That is true transformation, and it is the true meaning of regional balance, because, when we create better opportunities for people across our society, it benefits everybody.

Over the next two years, the Department will look at eight pieces of legislation, compared with one in the last 10 years. The most significant legislation is the 'good jobs' Bill, which has the opportunity to transform the lives of workers across the North. This is about fair pay, fair conditions, better union representation and a raft of other positive legislation for ordinary people. I commend the work that is being done in the Department, and I look forward to seeing much more over the coming years.

Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Awareness Week: Máiría Cahill

Ms Brownlee: During Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Awareness Week, we reflect not only on the scale of harm caused by sexual violence but on how our system responds or, too often, fails to respond to those brave enough to come forward. One of the most powerful and stark reminders of why the awareness week matters is the story of Máiría Cahill, a woman who spoke out about sexual abuse that she experienced as a teenager at the hands of an IRA member. Máiría was just 16 years old when the abuse began, and, instead of receiving support and protection, she was subjected to a secretive internal investigation by the IRA and forced into confrontations with her alleged attacker.

When Máiría eventually took the courageous step of reporting the abuse to the statutory authorities, what followed was a series of legal proceedings that collapsed, not because her claims were unfounded but because the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) failed to handle the cases in a way that gave her confidence to pursue them through the justice system. A subsequent independent review found multiple failings by the PPS in how her case and two others linked to it were managed. They included delays, poor communication and a lack of focus on the experience of the complainant. The

review concluded that the victims were let down by the service. That conclusion was a stark rebuke of how a young woman's trust in the justice system was eroded, and it forced the PPS to reckon with the system and its obligations to victims.

What the case laid bare and what Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Awareness Week compels us to confront is that survivors of sexual violence must feel supported, not abandoned, by every layer of the institutions. A failure at any stage, whether through policing, prosecution or community support, risks silencing victims and denying them justice.

11.00 am

Máiría's determination to speak publicly, despite the intense personal and public backlash that she faced, sparked a wider discussion in our society. Her voice has helped to spur on scrutiny of how sexual violence cases are managed, including how prosecutors communicate with victims, handle delays and provide support to complainants to feel safe when participating in the justice system. Her story is not just about one individual. It has become a catalyst for change and for pushing for continual improvements in how the PPS engages with survivors, how we educate people on consent and respect and how we build a system that does not re-traumatise those who report abuse.

We will continue to respect Máiría's courage and that of the many other survivors who share their experiences at significant personal cost. Sexual violence can happen to anyone. We will continue with our commitment to strengthen our legal and support systems so that victims are heard, believed and supported, every step of the way.

Respite Provision: Lack of Services for Children

Miss McAllister: I speak today to highlight the continued failure by the Department of Health and the trusts across Northern Ireland to provide proper respite provision for families and children in need. Just last week, the Health Committee received confirmation that Lindsay House in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust had not reopened for short breaks. That is despite repeated promises that the registration and opening of the Redwood residential facility would enable Lindsay House to resume respite services. Promises were made by the trust and departmental officials at Committee, by the Minister in the Chamber, in written correspondence and in many questions for written answer signed off by the Minister.

I speak on the issue today because it has been ongoing for many years. However, Members will recall that it was brought to light in the 'I Am Not Okay' 'Spotlight' documentary, which aired in September 2024 and shone a significant light on the struggles that face families with a child with severe complex needs. That led to the Minister announcing investment in respite services, alongside a number of promises to families, including those at the centre of the documentary, that they would receive access to the support that they needed. However, despite repeated concerns having been raised since June 2024 to the then Minister Robin Swann about the delayed opening of the Redwood residential facility, it was officially opened only in January 2026. Families have been waiting since 2024 for the facilities to be made ready, all the time with the light at the end of the tunnel being access to respite in Lindsay House.

Last week, those repeated promises were broken yet again. Redwood is open, but no short breaks can be provided at Lindsay House, and there is no foreseeable timeline for that. Families are at breaking point, and time is of the essence. Too many have been left to wait until they have no option but to put their child in residential care. That is something that no parent should have to do. When will the Minister, the Department and the trusts finally get a handle on the children's social care crisis and ensure that families can access the support that they need? No more broken promises.

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. We must move —.

Mr Boylan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Speaker rule on whether the Member's statement made by the DUP Member for South Down was in breach of Standing Order 24A(6)(d), as it was a direct attack on another Member of the Assembly?

Mr Speaker: We had that conversation during the Member's statement. The Member mentioned Mrs Mason at one point, but it was largely a statement about culture, so, on that basis, I did not intervene. I sought advice from officials, and that is the conclusion that we came to.

Ministerial Statement

Religious Education and Collective Worship in Schools

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): On 19 November 2025, the United Kingdom Supreme Court delivered its judgement in the case of JR87 concerning religious education and collective worship in a Northern Ireland school. On 24 November 2025, I gave the Assembly my commitment that I would return at the earliest opportunity to set out my response. Today, I honour that commitment.

As Members will be aware, religious education and collective worship are legally compulsory in all publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland except nursery schools. The JR87 case examined whether, in one school, the teaching of RE and the arrangements for collective worship complied with the rights guaranteed under article 2 of protocol No 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, read alongside article 9, as incorporated through the Human Rights Act 1998. The Supreme Court upheld the original case judge's declaration that, in that case, the pupil's rights had been breached and the current core syllabus did not in itself ensure that religious education was delivered in a manner that was objective, critical and pluralistic. It should be noted that the court's findings related specifically to the circumstances of the pupil involved and to delivery at the applicant's school.

It is essential to be clear about what the court determined and, equally, what it did not. The court did not strike down the legislation that governs RE and collective worship. That legal framework remains firmly and intentionally in place. Schools therefore must lawfully continue to teach RE and provide collective worship. The judgment does, however, identify areas of concern in which action is now required. Three issues in particular demand attention: ensuring that the core syllabus for religious education is objective, critical and pluralistic; ensuring that the right of withdrawal from RE and collective worship is practical and effective and does not place an undue burden on parents; and ensuring that a robust inspection regime is in place to monitor and uphold standards in RE.

I will address each issue in turn, starting with revision of the core syllabus for RE. Religious education in all schools must include the core syllabus specified in article 11 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The syllabus sets out core matters, skills and processes to be taught. The court found that the Department of Education, having assumed responsibility for setting the core syllabus:

> *"must take care that information or knowledge ... is conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner."*

I have therefore decided that it is necessary for the Department to revise the core syllabus. While the court recognised that schools can deliver RE lawfully, where they incorporate broader material beyond the core syllabus, I do not believe that it is reasonable to leave schools to interpret the judgment alone. Different approaches in different settings lead to a heavy burden for schools. The absence of nationally agreed core content standards would also ultimately lead to significant disparities in the nature and quality of RE across schools.

The time is now right for a review of the syllabus. It has been nearly 20 years since it was last revised, and a wider curriculum review is already under way. Further, a wide range of stakeholders, including the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC), have indicated their support for revision of the syllabus, and there is wide recognition of the need for clarity, consistency and modernisation, reinforcing the need for change.

In addition, I am especially mindful of the need to safeguard religious education as an important academic discipline in the curriculum. A useful and enriching knowledge of Christianity and, more widely, the world's main religious and philosophical traditions, studied with academic rigour, will be the ambition of the new syllabus. In that way, we will equip young people with the essential knowledge to understand a vital phenomenon that continues to shape today's world: religious tradition, belief and practice.

All subjects across the curriculum should introduce pupils to disciplines of thought that provide powerful knowledge beyond their immediate experience. RE should exemplify that principle. RE is also about engaging pupils with profound questions of meaning, identity and ethics. It develops analytical skills through interpreting texts, evaluating arguments and understanding historical and cultural contexts. In doing so, RE prepares young people for life in modern society and cultivates qualities that are essential for democratic citizenship. A revised syllabus will reflect those ambitions, ensuring that RE is taught objectively, critically and pluralistically. The revision of the syllabus will therefore, above all, strengthen RE as an academic discipline.

Let me be clear, however: as upheld by the court, Christianity will remain central to the revised syllabus. The reality of Northern Ireland's historical, cultural and legal context means that Christianity should and will continue to be the primary focus of the revised syllabus. It will give continued recognition to the historical role of Christianity in Northern Ireland's education system and society. While religious diversity is increasing, Christianity continues to shape our cultural norms, public holidays and civic life. A curriculum that ignores that reality would fail to prepare pupils for the social and historical context in which they live. Subjects should introduce pupils to powerful knowledge that helps them to understand the world. In Northern Ireland, that includes understanding the Christian tradition, which has profoundly influenced literature, art, law, ethics and political history.

Today, I have published terms of reference for the review of the RE syllabus. That review is separate from the review of the wider curriculum, which is now well under way. To take the work forward, I am appointing Professor Noel Purdy OBE, director of research and scholarship at Stranmillis University College, to chair the new syllabus drafting group. Professor Purdy is a leading educational expert in Northern Ireland and has contributed extensively to educational policy, research and public discourse. I am confident that he will bring academic rigour and significant experience to the process. Mrs Joyce Logue, a former principal of Long Tower Primary School, will serve as the vice-chair of the group. Joyce is a long-serving and deeply respected educationalist and will ensure strong professional leadership and practitioner voice.

My officials will invite an open call for applications to join the drafting group from experienced primary school teachers and RE subject specialists in schools across Northern Ireland, who will contribute their expertise to this important task. There will be representation from every school sector. That approach reflects my commitment to transparency, professionalism and broad educational input. I also want to emphasise that extensive engagement with a consultative group of the main Churches will be a central element of the process. Their historical role in education and their continued contribution to school ethos and community life means that their voices must be heard and respected. There will also be extensive wider public engagement through an open call for evidence and focus group discussions with key stakeholders including children, young people and parents.

I hope that the drafting group will provide me with a new draft syllabus that is consistent with existing statutory obligations and the recent judgement by the summer of 2026. I anticipate that the new religious education curriculum will subsequently be consulted on, with the new regulations being made in the autumn and the new syllabus implemented from September 2027. In the meantime, my officials have written to schools today to remind them that, in delivering RE and using the current core syllabus, they should include additional objective, critical and pluralistic material to ensure that there is no breach of European Convention rights. My Department will also issue interim guidance for the 2026-27 academic year before the summer.

The current legislation provides for an unqualified right of withdrawal from religious education and collective worship. I have concluded that it is neither desirable nor easily achievable to bring about fundamental changes to collective worship. Therefore, I believe that meeting the requirements of the judgement will involve ensuring that the right of withdrawal is consistent with all necessary requirements. In this case, exercising the right of withdrawal was not considered straightforward either for the parent or the school, as no pre-existing alternative arrangements were in place and the parents had to negotiate with the school before withdrawal, which created complexity and risk.

The court concluded that the right of withdrawal must be practical and effective, not theoretical and illusory. Exercising that right should be simple and frictionless. There should be pre-existing arrangements that are ready to be implemented to avoid the need for discussions with parents that risk them feeling that they need to disclose their own religious or philosophical convictions. Today, I am publishing guidance to support schools to meet those requirements and to ensure clarity and consistency across all schools. Parents must be informed about the right of and arrangements for withdrawal when their child is admitted to the school and again annually.

There must be no undue burden on parents. In short, withdrawal must be straightforward, stigma-free and supported.

11.15 am

The right to withdrawal will involve a simple and confidential procedure via a standard form, without parents needing to provide reasons, justifications or declarations of their own beliefs. The school must grant the request promptly,

without negotiation, approval processes or delays. Partial withdrawal from specific topics or activities is permitted. There must be no stigmatisation of the child. Children should participate in meaningful, supervised alternative activity such as independent study, reading or play, integrated discreetly to avoid singling them out. In circumstances where an effective right of withdrawal is in place, schools will be able to continue with their existing practices and routine in regard to collective worship.

The Supreme Court also criticised the current lack of inspection of religious education and collective worship. To address that gap, I intend to introduce legislation in the current Assembly term to ensure robust, transparent and accountable inspection arrangements for religious education and arrangements for withdrawal. I will bring a paper to the Executive over the coming weeks and will ask for their full support in taking forward that important legislation. That will support the implementation of effective processes for withdrawal and the further enhancement of religious education as an important and high-quality element of the curriculum.

This is a measured and responsible response to the Supreme Court judgement. I am taking three key steps. The first is a new religious education curriculum, developed under the leadership of Professor Noel Purdy, supported by Joyce Logue and experienced subject specialists. That process will involve extensive consultation, including with the Churches. The second is guidance ensuring that the right of withdrawal is meaningful, straightforward and fully compliant with legal obligations. The third is legislation to introduce inspection of religious education and arrangements for withdrawal, ensuring transparency and building public confidence.

Finally, the court made clear that this case was not about secularism or removing religion from our education system, nor was it about whether Christianity should be the main or primary faith that pupils learn about in schools in Northern Ireland. Historically and today, Christianity is the most important religion in Northern Ireland, and that reality will continue to be reflected in our curriculum. There was also no challenge in this case to the principle that collective worship in schools in Northern Ireland may focus on the Christian religion or that, in Catholic maintained schools, the focus of collective worship may reflect the distinctive character of the Catholic tradition. This statement and the changes proposed are a product of a judgement of the Supreme Court. It is not my intention to bring about changes to the arrangements for religious education and collective worship beyond the terms of that judgement. I know that there are others who would take a different approach and would seek more far-reaching changes. There will, no doubt, be those who seek a mandate for such changes at the next election. That is the place for such changes to be determined. However, if such changes are to be introduced at some point in the future, they will be for another Minister and another term of the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: We move to questions. I remind Members that it is a period for questions, not statements.

Ms Hunter: Minister, thank you for your detailed statement and for giving the House so much clarity around the issue. Can you outline how you and your Department will ensure that a reformed RE curriculum could be used to strengthen mutual understanding and enhance community relations to end the division and the mistrust that exists in our society? Will you be extending your consultation to non-Christian faiths and to those without a faith?

Mr Givan: I addressed some of those points in the early commentary, but the Member highlights the issue of how we address division. Key to Christianity is respect, tolerance and greater understanding. That is why it has enriched our society for many, many years. It is why those within Church leadership have often been to the fore of seeking to get peace and reconciliation in our communities. The Member is right about how we should take forward religious education and the way that it should foster that spirit of respect in our society.

I am confident that, under Professor Noel Purdy and Joyce Logue, and when we appoint the subject specialists, we will be able to enhance the religious education curriculum. It has been over 20 years since such an exercise was carried out, and I welcome the opportunity that it presents.

Mr Mathison (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement. It should be acknowledged that, although you could have kicked this into the long grass and had an endless review process, you chose to act quickly, which is welcome.

The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 requires RE teaching to be based on the Holy Scriptures. Given that we are moving into a space in which we need an RE syllabus that is objective, critical and pluralistic,

does that requirement in the legislation allow such a curriculum to be delivered? If not, is there a need to look at legislative change to ensure that we can deliver the ambition in the statement?

Mr Givan: The reference in RE to Holy Scriptures will not be changing. It is not required to change. When we talk about objectivity, the key point that came through in the court judgement is that schools, in order to provide the necessary level of objectivity, should be indicating what Christians believe in the same way that they indicate what followers of Judaism and Islam believe. That came through in the court judgement, and it will be reflected in the approach.

Ultimately, however, when you are teaching what Christianity teaches, it is based upon —. I do not use the term "Holy Scriptures". It is a matter of terminology. People refer to "the scriptures", "the Bible" or whatever term they want to use. However, that will be retained because, obviously, the fundamental underpinning of Christian teaching comes from the Bible.

Mr Sheehan: As the previous Member to ask a question said, the Supreme Court was clear that religious education must be objective, critical and pluralistic. Will the Minister explain in clear terms how his approach will ensure that every child feels included and respected, regardless of their faith or beliefs?

Mr Givan: Obviously, we want every child to be able to attend religious education. It is beneficial. When I was at school, I was able to learn about other religious beliefs, which helped to enrich my understanding, particularly of other countries because you get a better grip of the historical and cultural influences that religious teachings have had in them. The key issue is objectivity and how the learning is presented in schools. That will be reflected on as part of the development of the curriculum.

We can now get on with establishing the subject working group. I have identified who will lead that group, and we will make the relevant appointments to it. That will then be developed. There will be an opportunity to engage on that. Specifically, the Churches will retain a unique role in their aspects of the curriculum. However, there will then be a public consultation, and everybody across society will be able to have an input into what that curriculum should contain. It will then be for the Department to take that forward, and, subject to the normal processes, give it statutory underpinning.

Mr Brooks: I thank the Minister for the clarity that he has brought this morning on the way forward. He, like me, will have received a petition last week, which was signed by over 90,000 people and outlined their concern at the Supreme Court judgement. He spoke about the unique role of the Churches in drafting the curriculum. Will he outline that role?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his question. He is right that the way in which the Supreme Court was misrepresented by those who take a hostile view towards Christianity caused unnecessary concern. I sought to allay those fears as quickly as I could, but they have continued with those who have engaged with the process. I trust that what I have said today will continue to allay those fears. There are those who wish to pursue a secular, humanist-type approach to religious education, but that will not be happening in Northern Ireland.

The Churches will continue to have a role. Extensive engagement with a consultative group of the main Churches will be a central element of the process. The group will contain nominees from the Catholic Church and the Transferor Representatives' Council, which has representatives from the three Protestant Churches that transferred their schools to the state. The historic role of the Churches in education, and their continued contribution to school ethos and community life, means that their voices must be heard and respected. The consultative group will contain nominees from those bodies. They will be able to engage as the subject working group develops the curriculum.

Mr Burrows: Does the Minister agree that a lot of the Churches that are thriving at the minute are outside of the four main Churches, and that it is important that they have input into how RE is taught in schools?

Mr Givan: The Member is right: there is considerable growth outside of the three main Protestant denominations in various different evangelical churches and denominations. They will have an opportunity, as will everybody, to participate in the public consultation. There is a unique historical context in that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church led on education. They recognised the value of having children educated. They developed schools, and then, when Northern Ireland came into being, they transferred those schools to the state. The Catholic Church equally valued education, and it retains its specific role in education. It is right that we not only

acknowledge that but celebrate it. They should have a role. However, that is not to the exclusion of other Churches; they will be able to have input into the process.

Mrs Mason: The court warned that withdrawal must not be theoretical or burdensome. How will the Minister ensure that children who are withdrawn will not be singled out or made to feel different?

Mr Givan: I am very clear about how that should be handled. As I outlined in the statement, it should be a very clear and simple process. It should not be subject to negotiation if parents do not want to go into it or have a discussion; they have an unqualified right to withdrawal. However, if children are not taking part in collective worship, they need to have a meaningful purpose. I have been in school assemblies where some children have participated in certain elements and have then withdrawn from a religious aspect. That is where you have a partial withdrawal arrangement. The withdrawal mechanism has to be effective. Ultimately, the right of parents should be facilitated by the school. The process will be much clearer and simpler, and it will be done in a way that does not stigmatise.

The other issue is that, in addition to the legal requirement on schools to ensure that collective worship takes place, I have asked them to hold an assembly without a religious component at least once a month that celebrates other aspects of the school in which everyone can participate.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for bringing this important statement to the House today. The developments caused concern for many across Northern Ireland who value the Christian ethos in many of our schools. Will the Minister confirm whether schools can continue to organise nativity plays and other celebrations throughout the academic year?

Mr Givan: They absolutely can. Indeed, they are legally required to do so. That should be taking place. All publicly funded schools, with the exception of nursery schools, have a legal requirement to provide daily collective worship. That legislation was not set aside by the courts. That is why I welcome the opportunity to provide an inspection process that will make sure that all schools provide collective worship. People have had some concern about Christianity's being taken out of our schools. Far from it; this ensures that Christianity remains central to our schools and collective worship. However, we also need to make sure that all schools comply with the law when it comes to collective worship. The inspectorate will be able to monitor that and provide information to us in that respect.

11.30 am

Mrs Guy: I thank the Minister for the statement. Minister, how will you avoid repeating the mistakes of previous RE syllabus design processes and ensure that, as well as Churches, other faiths and non-faith perspectives are involved in the development from the outset?

Mr Givan: Members will have read the court judgement. It has helped to inform the creation of the subject working group. That is why it is being led by Professor Noel Purdy and Joyce Logue, and we are appointing subject specialist professionals from within the education sector. Churches will have a key role in that, but the court was also critical of the previous way in which the curriculum was drafted: it was drafted directly by Churches. Therefore, I have sought to find a way to make sure that we respect what the court said whilst respecting the important role that the Churches have. That will ensure that there is due recognition, and then there will be wider public consultation.

I do not anticipate any circumstance in which the curriculum would be drafted by the subject working group and the Churches — we have engaged with the TRC and the Catholic Church — would not have a role. I do not envisage any circumstance in which I would put out a curriculum for wider public consultation without having the support of the Churches for what is contained in it. Then, when we put it out for public consultation, everybody will be able to participate in the consultation process.

Mr Baker: Minister, you appear to be heavily reliant on the opt-out system under the new guidance. Do you not agree that the best possible scenario is one where all children are supported in an inclusive curriculum?

Mr Givan: I have outlined how the religious education aspect of the curriculum will be taken forward. In regards to collective worship, I made it clear in the opening statement to the House that you cannot change that collective worship approach whereby a Christian minister or priest participates in a school assembly. We cannot expect them to say that what they believe is, however, somehow disagreed with by other religious beliefs. It is not practical or, in my view, desirable for that to take place in a collective worship scenario.

That is why there will be no change to collective worship. When I look at the Catholic Church and see what happens in Catholic schools, I see that they have to have the Catholic ethos respected, whether or not I agree with it. Parents have a right to choose the school in which they want to have their children brought up. That is protected under European Convention rights. Therefore, we are striking, in my view, the right balance: we will develop the religious education curriculum appropriately, but, when it comes to collective worship, there will be no change. However, that is where we have to have an effective withdrawal mechanism that does not stigmatise and that respects the unqualified rights of the parents without negotiation or discussion. There should be meaningful purpose for the children in those cases. We have then, at least once a term, a wider celebration of an aspect of school life where no child should feel that they need to withdraw.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for making the statement to the House. Minister, will you explain the rationale for legislating for inspection?

Mr Givan: There was some criticism in the court judgement that, for inspection of religious education to be carried out, it required the express approval of boards of governors. That is not the case for other subjects, and, therefore, we seek to correct that. When we develop the curriculum for religious education, we need to ensure that it is academic and powerful. In order for us to monitor that, some form of inspection must take place. Historically, under the law, there was a responsibility on the Churches to carry out the inspection of RE. In practice, that was not happening, or, if it was, it was happening very much on the periphery. It is therefore right that an element of the inspection process should incorporate religious education. Inspection of religious education would also mean being able to monitor the effective application of the withdrawal policies that would operate in schools. It would also mean being able to report that schools were complying with the law and making sure that collective worship was taking place in our schools.

Mr Martin: I thank the Minister for coming to the House and for the speed with which he has made the statement. I also take the opportunity to congratulate Noel and Joyce on their appointments. Minister, you will know that there has been concern amongst principals and boards of governors about a dilution of the Christian ethos in schools in the controlled and maintained sectors. I therefore ask for clarity on whether schools can continue to provide daily Christian worship and on whether Christianity will remain a key part of the curriculum and the syllabus.

Mr Givan: The answer is an emphatic yes. They can. I gave those assurances very quickly after the UK Supreme Court judgement. Today, I have outlined in further detail the way in which we are responding legally and proportionately to that judgement. It is absolutely the case that schools can continue with the practice of collective worship, as has been the case. We now need to have an effective right of withdrawal in place, however. That is the way in which we are responding to that court judgement.

Miss McAllister: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the clarity in it. My son will not thank him, however, because he enjoys having wee jobs to do about the school instead of attending learning in religious classes.

It is important for our children to be critical thinkers and that they be allowed to ask questions. I therefore seek greater clarity from the Minister. How will he ensure that the new school syllabus will allow children to ask questions, that the teaching of Christianity in our schools will not be based on objective truth and that children's questions are answered in a respectful manner?

Mr Givan: Without having to rely on a UK Supreme Court judgement, I hope that all children feel empowered to be able to engage. I certainly was. My RE teacher would tell you that RE was probably one of the subjects in which I was most participative. Young people should feel that they can engage. That should be happening irrespective of the court judgement. I have outlined how we will take forward the curriculum review and have addressed the issue of collective worship. That is a proportionate way in which to do it, but it does ensure and will ensure that Christianity remains the central tenet of religious education in Northern Ireland. That will continue to be the case.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I do not think that Christianity is under assault in schools in Northern Ireland. I am not sure that any serious or objective scrutiny of our education system would bear that out. Lots of parents who either are not particularly religious or are non-religious entirely feel that it is often quite difficult for them or their children to make the choice not to participate in RE and collective worship. That

having been said, I was educated in a Catholic school and taught to think critically.

What you have said is that there will be no change to collective worship, other than potentially some legislation on inspection. There will be a new RE curriculum, however, over which, you said earlier, the four main denominations will effectively have a veto. You said that you would not proceed with it if they were to dissent. Where precisely will the voice of people who are not religious or who choose to raise their children in a non-religious setting be? It is important that, first, you say that you respect their input and, secondly, tell us how you expect their input to be represented.

Mr Givan: I respect the fact that Mr O'Toole does not seek an assault on Christianity in our schools, but he is wrong to suggest that there are not those in our society who are engaged in an assault on Christianity being taught in our schools and on collective worship. I have spoken to numerous principals who have told me that parents have demanded that there should not be collective worship practices in schools and that there should not even be nativity plays put on. Those principals often feel the pressure that is being put on them by a very small but very vocal minority. I am ensuring that that noisy minority will not be the determinant factor. The majority of people support the current practice of collective worship and of Christianity being at the core of religious education, and I will ensure that that continues. I will ensure that the Churches continue to have a specific role in that process.

All people will be able to engage with the public consultation and provide feedback, but I do not want to create the impression that those who would seek to have a secularist, non-religious aspect to religious education will be able to sway me to a different outcome in the matter, because they will not.

Mr Kingston: I thank the Minister for his statement and for confirming that Christianity will remain the central tenet of collective worship in schools. Will the Minister outline the process for bringing forward legislation on inspection?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. I propose to bring proposals to the Executive over the coming weeks and to ask them to agree to removing the exemption from the inspection process for RE. That would allow for a Bill to be drafted, introduced to the Assembly and enacted before the end of the Assembly term.

Mr McReynolds: Minister, will you advise whether the new syllabus will provide guidance to ensure that, when schools bring third parties in to deliver religious education and collective worship, they do so in a way that is objective, critical and pluralistic?

Mr Givan: Schools will continue to be able to bring in third parties for religious education and acts of collective worship. I trust very much that, when our school leaders and principals bring people into a school, they will ensure that those individuals act responsibly. Indeed, that is the case. If there is evidence of someone having been brought into a school and having said something inappropriate or acted inappropriately, that should be reported through the normal processes, and I would anticipate the school taking the appropriate actions.

That is very different from somebody saying that they disagree with a Christian minister coming into a school and putting forward their Christian beliefs. There are those who do not agree with that. If a parent complains that a Christian minister has done that, the school should not empower that parent by having that Christian minister or other organisation removed. That would be to have that minority — that vocal individual — dictate to the majority in the school, and we should not facilitate that.

Mr Buckley: Christian-based collective worship and RE were an integral part of my school upbringing, and, indeed, that of many of my constituents, and we deeply value its meaning, purpose and worth. We would be deluding ourselves, Minister, to think that there is not an attempt by some in the Assembly and by activist organisations to undermine the principle of Christian collective worship. In that context, Minister, will you give assurances to the House that, under your leadership as Education Minister, you will ensure that there is no demeaning, undermining or banishment of Christian collective worship in our schools?

Mr Givan: I am happy to give the Member that assurance. I agree with what he said. The number of people who engage in such hostile activity is small, but that small number can, nevertheless, have a disproportionate impact. We need to be able to withstand that. This approach strikes the right balance in respect of the Supreme Court judgement. It properly respects the Christian ethos in our schools and reflects, historically and culturally, the Northern Ireland of today. I believe that it is the right way to take things forward. Let the working group get on with the job, and let us appoint the specialists to draft the curriculum. We will

engage with stakeholders and the wider public through the proper processes and get to a point at which we can bring forward a revised curriculum. Collective worship, as it is currently practised in our schools, can continue. It is legal; indeed, it is a requirement in law.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, how will you guarantee consistency and legal compliance in the delivery of RE across all schools prior to the new syllabus and inspection processes being in place, given the Supreme Court's finding that the existing framework on its own is insufficient?

11.45 am

Mr Givan: Part of the issue is that RE has not been subject to wider inspection. We will correct that, and that will help to ensure consistency in the application of the curriculum. We are addressing that. I have provided schools with interim guidance and information to which they can refer. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has material that, in the interim period, addresses the issues that the Supreme Court highlighted around objectivity. Material is available. I encourage schools to access that material in relation to the religious education that they currently deliver. We will put the guidance on a firm foundation when we work through the process of establishing the curriculum.

Mr Carroll: Minister, revising the core syllabus is welcome, but many will be concerned that Christianity will remain central to our education system. There should be the right to religious freedom for everybody, but, in my view and that of many others, we should have separation of Church and state.

Minister, your proposals do not take into account falling church numbers and the fact that people are generally moving away from religious ideas and Churches for a range of reasons. Will your Department monitor the number of pupils who opt out? If a large number of pupils want to opt out of collective worship, does he agree that that would indicate that a more radical rethink of the role of religion in education would be required?

Mr Givan: I am happy to look at the information and collect the data on withdrawal, because that information would be helpful. I suspect that it would point to the very small numbers who engage on the matter. In the Member's other comments, he highlighted that religious education should be open to all, but, if the solution to making it open to everybody is that we must accommodate those who do not want religious education or collective worship in our schools, it would not be open to all. That would deny it to the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland and their children. I do not support what the Member presents, and I do not believe that the wider population would support the position that he has adopted.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister. I ask Members to take their ease before we move on to the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Academic Selection

Mrs Mason: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the continued use of academic selection and transfer tests as a means of determining post-primary school transfer within our education system; recognises the extensive body of evidence from educational experts, including the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which highlights the negative impact of academic selection on children's well-being, educational outcomes and social mobility; further notes that research consistently shows that transfer tests cause undue stress and anxiety for young people and disproportionately disadvantage those from lower-income and working-class backgrounds, deepening educational inequalities; affirms its commitment to an education system based on equality, inclusion and the principle that all children, regardless of background or ability, should have the opportunity to reach their full potential in a supportive and non-selective environment; calls on the Minister of Education to take steps to phase out the use of academic selection and transfer tests in post-primary admissions and to develop and implement a fair, inclusive and non-selective system of post-primary education that ensures equality of opportunity for all children; and further calls on the Minister to prioritise action to tackle educational underachievement and close the attainment gap, particularly for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

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 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.

Please open the debate on the motion.

Mrs Mason: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* For many 10- and 11-year-old children across the North, the type of school that they attend after primary school is determined by a high-stakes exam. At a time when children are preparing for the daunting transition to post-primary school and the move into a new environment in which they will no longer the big fish in a small pond, many face the added pressure of sitting a selection exam. The very thought of the test causes undue stress for children and their families. For many, the pressure begins the moment they enter primary 7, and, often, it begins much earlier, all because of a brutal system in which a child's educational pathway is effectively decided at just 11 years of age.

That pressure is driven by a persistent narrative that children will receive a higher-quality education if they attend a selective school. Yet, despite those claims, research shows selective systems have no clear overall advantage over non-selective systems. As a result of those claims, many families feel obliged, in the interests of their children, to put them through a non-statutory, unregulated and privately run transfer system that operates without proper oversight, evaluation or safeguards. That is unfair on parents, and it is unjust for children. How can it be right that an exam taken at 11 years of age continues to determine the educational future of so many of our young people?

We know that academic selection has a damaging impact on children's self-esteem and mental health. That cannot be denied. We have heard that straight from the mental health champion, Siobhán O'Neill. Preparation for transfer tests often comes at the expense of key areas of the curriculum, including art, play and physical education, which are all required for development and well-being. We have heard from families that intensive preparation continues in classrooms in which not all the children are sitting the exams. What does that do? It creates a two-tier classroom environment in which some children are prioritised and others are implicitly sidelined. That division alone clearly undermines confidence and self-worth.

The harm deepens when the results are issued, effectively sorting children into two groups: those who are deemed to be suitable for grammar school and those who are not. At 11 years old, children are told explicitly or implicitly that they are less capable than their peers and should, therefore, be educated elsewhere. That is not fair, and it is not acceptable.

Research consistently shows that academic performance is closely linked to family income and background. Children from working-class and lower-income families are far more likely to

attend non-selective schools, while children from more affluent backgrounds are disproportionately represented in grammar schools. In reality, the system pressures parents into paying for private tuition simply to give their child a chance in the test, and many families cannot afford to do so. When access to opportunity depends on a family's ability to pay, it cannot be credibly described as fair. It reinforces a two-tier education system.

Free school meals entitlement is a widely accepted measurement of disadvantage and shows that the most disadvantaged pupils in the North overwhelmingly attend non-grammar schools. Pupils are also less likely to attend a grammar school if their primary school serves a community with higher levels of deprivation. Children with special educational needs (SEN) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in those schools. That is not inclusion; it is an elitist system that is reinforced through selection.

Despite what the Minister has said before, this is not a debate about a lack of political consensus. There may not be political consensus in the Chamber, but there is clear evidence of consensus on the harm caused by academic selection and its failure to improve the outcomes for all children. The inconsistency in the Minister's position is striking. We are told that he cannot act on academic selection because consensus does not exist, yet he is pushing ahead at extreme pace with the TransformED programme, which closely mirrors reforms in England, including the promotion of a so-called knowledge-rich curriculum, one of the core claims for which is that it will tackle educational underachievement and place all children on a level playing field. The Minister cannot credibly argue for a level playing field on the one hand while, on the other, continuing to support an archaic system of academic selection that sorts children at 11 years of age and entrenches inequality from the outset.

Ministers are elected not to wait for consensus but to lead on the basis of solid evidence and the aim of giving every child the best opportunities in life. We are repeatedly told by the Minister that the focus should be on making every school a good school. Of course every school should be a good school — nobody disputes that — but, at its core, it should be about raising standards for all, which does not sit with academic selection. We cannot build equality on a system that ranks children and schools from the outset and creates winners and losers. An unequal admissions system will always undermine efforts to raise standards across the system. Doing nothing is a choice; in this case, it is a choice that leaves some children paying the price.

Crucially, despite repeated claims about the effectiveness of grammar schools, most studies show no clear advantages to selective education once family income and background have been taken into account. Outcomes are no better overall than in non-selective systems. We must ask ourselves this: if academic selection does not deliver better results, what is the justification for putting children through such pressure and harm? If the stress is real, the inequality is clear and the outcomes are no better, we must confront a simple truth: academic selection has failed our children not because change is impossible but because it is being avoided. It is time for that to end.

Ms Hunter: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "environment;" and insert:

"expresses concern that the Minister of Education's programme of educational reform will be unsuccessful in addressing educational disadvantage without an end to academic selection; acknowledges the progress made in the Republic of Ireland in addressing educational disadvantage; calls on the Minister of Education to produce a time-bound plan to end academic selection and transfer tests in post-primary admissions and to develop and implement a fair, inclusive and non-selective system of primary education that ensures equality of opportunity for all children; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister for Communities to deliver action to tackle educational underachievement and close the attainment gap, particularly for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): You will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Hunter: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to speak to our amendment and to talk further about the impact of academic selection on the health and well-being of children in Northern Ireland. I thank the Members who tabled the motion. It rightly expresses concern that the Minister's programme of educational reform will be unsuccessful in tackling educational disadvantage unless we confront the reality of academic selection in the North. That concern is well founded and well researched.

Minister, I acknowledge what you said in the Chamber yesterday about academic selection. It is one of those things on which we cannot find common ground. That is sad, but I understand it. One thing that, hopefully, we can agree on is the motion's recognition that the education of our children is shaped both inside and outside the classroom and highlighting the importance of working closely with your colleague the Minister for Communities:

> *"to deliver action to tackle educational underachievement and close the attainment gap, particularly for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds."*

We know that the home that a child returns to matters. How the family operates matters. We all know that our children do not grow up equally. Some children grow up in rich or middle-class homes; some grow up not knowing where their next meal is coming from. Some grow up in dysfunctional homes, while others do so in complete stability. The system is not fair.

As Members have rightly said, the fact that we ask 10- or 11-year-old children to sit high-stakes exams that tell them whether they are a success or a failure — as Cathy said, a winner or a loser — is really hard on them. I have spoken to children after they got their results, and some were so disappointed in themselves. That is really hard to see. We then move on to organise the rest of their education around one exam at one moment in time with no chance to resit. That is why I asked you that question yesterday, Minister. It is really important that, if children are given one moment to prove themselves in what might be in an unfamiliar environment, which I find very cruel, we at least grant them the opportunity to resit.

I can cast my mind back to my experience in 2006, when I sat my 11-plus. Before going into the exam hall, we did breathing exercises, in a circle, and played relaxing music before going to sit the exam. As an adult looking back, I think that it is bizarre that that was normalised. It is depressing that, to this day, we still force our young people to sit those exams.

12.00 noon

Evidence has shown that, during the transfer process, around half of pupils report feeling anxious or stressed; one in six struggles with sleep; and one in eight says that the experience has had a long-lasting negative impact on their confidence and well-being. That is terribly sad. The transfer test is not an opportunity for resilience-building. It is a way for young people to feel boxed into whatever grade they come out with; it is a way of understanding that they are one of two things: a smart kid or a not-so-smart kid. Parents are feeling stuck between a rock and a hard place. They want their child to do well and feel obligated to have their child sit the exam while they struggle with the morality of not wanting them to. Teachers to whom I have spoken see that every year. In fact, over 90% of teachers surveyed believe that the transfer test has had a negative impact on children's mental health. When the professionals who are closest to our children tell us that it is causing damage, it is important that, certainly, the Committee and we, as elected representatives, listen.

This is the importance of our amendment: academic selection doubles down on disadvantage. It simply does not identify ability: it reflects the advantage of the child, the home in which the child is growing up and the child's access to resources. Only 14% of pupils in selective schools are entitled to free school meals, compared with over one third in non-selective schools. That shows the divide between working-class children and children who come from middle-class homes and are more likely to have access to tutoring, familiarity with exams and, of course, parental resources to help shape the outcomes that their parents desire. We are sorting our children along socio-economic lines by the time that they are 11, and then we act surprised when the attainment gap later in life persists. That will go on to shape their lives and, as the Health Minister has said, even their health outcomes. The whole thing feels grossly unfair.

Today is an opportunity to learn from other areas. Our amendment speaks of the importance of the steps that the Republic has taken. The motion acknowledges —.

Mr Burrows: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: Yes, certainly.

Mr Burrows: Did the Member enjoy a grammar-school education? Can she give any insight?

Ms Hunter: I have to be frank: I did. I benefited from a grammar setting. I went to Loreto College, Coleraine, and the Dominican College in Portstewart. I am well aware of the privilege. I come from what I describe as a middle-class home, and I had access to tutoring and opportunities. I returned from America just

before I sat my exam and, thanks to my parents' paying for tutoring, spent my entire summer preparing for it. Yes, I acknowledge the privilege that I had, the home that I come from and how I benefited from the transfer test. I am lucky to have parents who supported me and my well-being throughout that time. Other children are not so lucky, Mr Burrows. I am here to speak to that.

The Republic ended widespread academic selection decades ago. In its place, it invested in universal access to school-based supports. Recently, the Committee learned about some of the steps that the South is taking to tackle educational disadvantage through targeted disadvantage programmes, such as delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS). I found that very interesting, Minister. The result is a system that values excellence but does not label children as "failures" before they become adolescents or rely on selection to drive improvement.

We tabled the amendment to highlight how disadvantaged children feel that they are not being given a fair chance to flourish. The motion asks us to be honest about what evidence already tells us. We have to be brave enough to learn from elsewhere and be serious about building an education system that works for every child, regardless of their background. Ending academic selection is not the whole answer, but, without it, there is no credible route to true educational equality. I commend the amendment to the House.

Mr Brooks: We all recognise that this issue is one that raises strong opinions and passions; one on which views can be polarised. Education shapes not only the future of our children but the economic, cultural and civic health of Northern Ireland. Individuals and families will have different but equally valid experiences — positive and negative — of our system: experiences and views that cross political and religious divides. That is why passions are so strong.

Let us be honest, however, about what academic selection is and is not. It is not a judgement on a child's worth. It is not a declaration of lifelong success or failure. It is not a denial of opportunity. At best, academic selection is about matching children to the educational environment in which they are most likely to thrive at a particular stage in their development. Of course, it can be stressful, and not everyone is successful, even within their own expectations, but such is the nature of exams throughout children's education.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that it is about sorting children into the appropriate school environment for them. Is he saying that he stands over our current system of testing as being an accurate, objective and reliable measure for assessing a child's ability and that that ability is innately fixed at age 11?

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

Mr Brooks: There are many aspects of the current system that are not optimal, but I do not think that the Member would be willing to facilitate the system that I believe to be optimal. There is therefore an understanding that we have an issue with getting consensus on the best way forward, but I absolutely believe in the principle of academic selection.

Northern Ireland is often described as having one of the more unequal societies on these islands, and that has been said today. Paradoxically, we also have a record of social and occupational mobility that matches or, in some ways, outperforms that in other parts of the UK. For generations, children from working-class families, many without an academic tradition at home, have used grammar schools as a ladder of opportunity. I, as the son of a fitter in Shorts and an entry-grade civil servant, was able to attend one of the best academic schools in the country.

Mrs Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Brooks: Not at the moment, thank you.

In my year, my school was one of the most in demand, yet that demand was dictated, at that stage, by academic ability, not by whether my parents could afford to pay private fees or buy a house in the right catchment area. At my school, I was not in a minority either. At Grosvenor, I went to school with friends from Ballybeen, Tullycarnet, Cregagh and the Newtownards Road. I know that the Members opposite, particularly those with whom I sit on the Education Committee, believe that the system is elitist and somehow keeps the working classes down. My ideals are far from their Marxist or socialist ideals, but I do care that people from backgrounds such as mine have the chances that I did, and that makes me want to defend opportunities for others from working-class backgrounds.

I support academic selection because I believe that it is a vehicle for social mobility, but I am

not blind to the inequalities that exist or their impact on skewing selection. As we have heard today and will hear again, critics claim that academic selection entrenches inequality. We must note — I am sure that we will hear about it today — that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the OECD did not explicitly rule out academic selection. Rather, they talked about the inequalities and how they affect the system. Inequality does not begin at age 11, however. We know that it begins much earlier, as a result of poverty, housing insecurity, poor health outcomes and a lack of access to early years support. Blaming selection for an inequality that it did not create is inaccurate and counterproductive. Inequality does not exist because a middle-class parent can pay for their child to have tutoring. That may exacerbate inequality, but, by then, the die has already been cast. That is what we must address.

Mr Baker: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brooks: Yes.

Mr Baker: Does the Member not agree that the same schools are doing all the heavy lifting? If some schools take on all the children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those who face inequalities, those with special educational needs and newcomer children, that is really unfair and makes it difficult for those children to get on the same education pathways.

Mr Brooks: I certainly agree that some schools face more challenges than others, but that is a reason that the answer, if we are serious about having equality, is not to level down aspiration but to level up support, particularly in early years education and childcare, in primary schools that serve disadvantaged communities and in community-based educational supports. That is a long-term objective and commitment, but I believe that this Minister has done more than anyone to develop and underpin those supports in a challenging financial climate.

Another argument that we will hear is that selection damages children's confidence. Any assessment system must, of course, be handled with care, but the solution is not to abandon assessment altogether. In life, young people will face exams, interviews and competitions. Our responsibility is to ensure that those experiences are fair, proportionate and humane, not to pretend that they do not exist. We already hear frustrations from private industry, public services and emergency services that they find many in today's generation of recruits to be lacking in resilience. The solution is not for children never to experience adversity.

I recognise that children develop at different rates. Academic selection at the age of 11 is not perfect, but nor is a single, one-size-fits-all comprehensive model. No system will ever achieve the eradication of families seeing some schools as being better than others, and there will always be a measure of those with more money being able to ensure that they get what they need. To me, an exam seems to be a fair —.

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

Mr Mathison: I am happy to confirm at the outset that the Alliance Party supports the motion and the amendment, and we thank the Members who tabled the motion. I will address the comments that Mr Burrows made to Cara Hunter during her contribution. I will clear it up before he engages in that again: I am the product of a grammar-school education. I will not pretend that I have a story about going to a school of hard knocks. I am the son of a GP, and I went to the local grammar school. The system worked perfectly for me, but I do not think that we should make educational policy based on one Member or another's anecdotal experience of the education system. That is a very lazy way to make policy. We need to make policy based on the evidence of the outcomes that it delivers for children across the system.

Before getting into the detail, I also want to address the phrase "academic selection". It is a phrase that I am not really comfortable with. It creates an impression that we have a system that is able to select children based on innate ability that is identified at the age of 11. I am not sure that the current system of testing with SEAG is robust or provides objective measures of ability, nor do I think that it is desirable to try to fix a child's ability and potential at that stage of their educational journey. That seems to me to be completely at odds with the ambitions that we should have for all our children and young people.

While many will argue, as Mr Brooks has done today, that our process of academic selection promotes social mobility, the evidence concludes otherwise.

Mrs Dillon: I appreciate the Member taking an intervention, particularly so early in your speech. Do you agree that that is a very unhelpful conversation? It almost alludes to an idea that, if you have gone to a high school, you

are not socially mobile. That is simply not true. I will namecheck my former school, St Paul's High School, Bessbrook, which is one of the best schools in the statelet. Also, I represent St Joseph's College, Coalisland, and many of its former pupils come from socially deprived areas and have done very well in their lives. Academic selection and grammar schools do not guarantee social mobility.

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

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for her intervention. Absolutely, I agree. In these types of debates, so many lazy assumptions are made that one thing equals success and another does not. We should simply look for success for all our children and young people. We should aspire to the notion that every school should be a good school, rather than try to siphon children off according to some preconceived notions of academic ability.

I will probably be up against time now. With regard to social mobility, Ulster University research recently highlighted that about 37% of pupils in non-selective schools are entitled to free school meals compared with 13% of pupils who attend grammar schools. Therefore, any idea that we are not segregating children to some degree based on their economic background does not hold water.

I want to bring in an element that other Members have not touched on, which is the financial and budgetary element. The demographics are changing, and we are seeing a decline in pupil numbers. We anticipate potentially a 25% reduction in primary-school numbers in the next 10 to 15 years. That connects to academic selection in a profound way, because, while there is a cultural assumption that grammar school should be prioritised and that that is where you should seek to send your child, ultimately, grammar schools and selective schools could just lower the threshold every year and simply become full schools. Then, the non-selective sector would have a smaller pool of pupils that it is trying to attract to their schools. In a system where money follows the pupil, that could have profound impacts on a non-selective school's budget. We have to be serious about that, if we are serious about tackling the financial crisis in education.

When announcing the TransformED proposals last year, the Minister said very clearly, in a statement that I agree with:

> *"The message is simple but powerful: more time for deeper learning and less pressure to teach to the test." — [Official Report (Hansard), 9 September 2025, p11, col 1].*

I cannot disagree with that. However, I also cannot connect that to the approach that we take at primary school, when sometimes from P5 and certainly from P6 and P7 onwards, there is almost an exclusive focus on teaching to the SEAG test — an exclusive focus on numeracy and literacy — to the exclusion of other areas of the curriculum. If we want to have more time for deeper learning, we need to put our money where our mouth is and do that at all stages of the education system; indeed, Lucy Crehan, when carrying out her review of the Northern Ireland curriculum, spoke to that directly. She acknowledged that, while it was not in her remit to deal with academic selection, it has an impact on the curriculum in primary school and it is not a positive one: in fact, it is quite the opposite.

12.15 pm

As a party, Alliance has a vision for the future of our education system, one where pupils can succeed when they receive high-quality teaching in a supportive learning environment where there are high expectations of all pupils no matter what their economic background is and where that is combined with a nurturing and caring environment where there is a focus on pupils' mental well-being. That vision of success for our young people, regardless of their economic context, where they were born or the postcode area in which they grew up does not require us to engage in any form of testing of children in a high-stakes test at age 10 or 11 to somehow identify a sense of innate academic ability. Children should learn together with children from a diverse range of backgrounds in their community, where they can learn from one another and truly be prepared to live rich and fulfilled lives in society.

Back at St Andrews, agreements were made that have effectively allowed academic selection in by the back door in Northern Ireland. We had the opportunity —

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

Mr Mathison: — to reform, and we missed it. It is now time to —

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

Mr Mathison: — grasp the nettle.

Mr Burrows: I oppose the motion not because I defend only grammar schools but because I defend all schools and the right of everyone in Northern Ireland to have choice. That is number one. The bedrock of our democracy is that people can choose. That, of course, is ideologically inconsistent with much of what the Members who tabled the motion believe in. They would admire many communist and Marxist states. Choice is important.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burrows: I will not give way at the moment to the Member who told me to "Shut up" on the radio this morning.

Let me talk about choice. Recently, I was in primary schools in Bangor, where many people told me — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Sorry, Mr Burrows.

Members will not engage in debate across the Chamber. Interventions will be sought and agreed to, not assumed.

Mr Burrows: The principals had great pride in telling me that many of the parents choose not to send their children to a grammar school, even if they have passed the selection, but to Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College, because it is an outstanding school that is bucking the trend and the perceptions of non-selective schools.

The party opposite talks about choice and the right of girls to choose to wear trousers, which is one that I agree with.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for giving way. Before he moves on from the point about choice, will he agree that, if you do not achieve the requisite score in your transfer test, a range of schools is immediately ruled out and you do not have choice? If the nearest non-selective school says that you must put it down as your first choice, once you have done that, you are ruled out from applying to other schools with the same criteria, and your choice is, in fact, limited.

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

Mr Burrows: There are various pathways. I will come back to that in a moment.

This man will not tell girls in my constituency that they cannot choose to attend St Louis Grammar School or Dalriada School. That is their choice. If they want to aspire to that, I will support it.

I will champion Catholic grammar schools, which have been let down by political representatives who do not champion them. I served in Derry/Londonderry — whatever you want to call it — for many years. I saw the social mobility of people who went to the excellent Catholic grammar schools in that city. Look at what St Columb's College has produced: Seamus Heaney, John Hume and Phil Coulter.

Mrs Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Burrows: I will not give way any further.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burrows: No, I will not give way any further.

In West Belfast, Mr Sheehan's constituency, St Dominic's Grammar School has produced wonderful pupils who have been some of the brightest minds of our country.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burrows: No, I will not give way.

They include Mary McAleese and, of course, Ms Flynn *[Interruption.]* If I may, I will make my points.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): There will be no debate across the Chamber, please.

Mr Burrows: Those schools feel that they need someone to champion them, and, as a unionist representative, I am happy to do that.

We also need to talk about the stigmatisation that we bring about by having this discussion on selection. The notion that selection is bad reinforces the fear that, if you do not pass the 11-plus, you are somehow lesser than the people who pass it. Many non-selective schools in systems around the world still have streaming. That can involve a degree of informal selection that lacks the objectivity and fairness of a selection process.

It also comes down to choices. We are spending our time debating selection. Whenever I speak to parents and pupils in

schools around the country, that is not what they talk about. They talk about the state of their schools. They talk about the buildings and the crisis that we have due to the number of pupils with special educational needs. They talk about the fact that we cannot attract males into the teaching profession. You talk about stress: the biggest stress that children face these days is from social media and screen time. That is what we should be discussing today, not this false debate on academic selection.

We should give people maximum choice: levelling up, not levelling down. This debate is, at its heart, an ideological one. It looks down on schools that are not grammar schools, instead of saying that all schools can be excellent schools and there are many different pathways through life that give people the choice and the opportunity to reach their full potential. We need to better support children who go through selection, offer them more pastoral support and destigmatise the issue of passing or failing. It is not about that; it is just a different pathway in your life.

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burrows: No — yes, I will give way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allen: I thank the Member for giving way.

Mr Burrows: I thought that I recognised the voice.

Mr Allen: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he recognise the value of continued assessment when approaching the transfer from primary to post-primary education?

Mr Burrows: Yes, absolutely. Anything that we can do to remove the cliff edge on selection will remove the stress. That is why I have concerns about removing AS levels, which come later in secondary schools. The cliff edge can be detrimental to well-being in the school.

For all those reasons, I oppose the motion. I support choice. We can better serve all our pupils and their parents across Northern Ireland and give them that choice.

Mr Baker: I do not know how to follow that. Maybe the Ulster Unionist Party need a more robust leadership content.

Academic selection warps our whole education system. You do not want any child to feel like a failure. You want to give them all the best opportunities in life. However, the reality is that this is not about grammar schools or comprehensive schools; it is about a process that makes you feel like a failure. I do not have to go too far to find that, because it made me feel like a failure when I did the 11-plus back in 1993. It took a long process for me to get to where I am today. Some might say, "He is talking nonsense. That is about privilege: he is an MLA and a former mayor". I got lucky, but not everybody gets lucky; they really do not. That luck did not come from one particular thing. It was because I went to school that had teachers who looked out for all the kids. That is why I intervened earlier to say that the same schools are doing the heavy lifting.

There were a lot of challenges in my school. It was not simply about getting the books out and getting your GCSEs: there was so much more going on. Grammar schools probably do not have to face that. It is great that their school leaders get those grades, but many of our schools are getting young people from a grade E or F to a grade C. That is how it was with me. I went from the prospect of having no GCSEs, except for maybe the practical ones — art and PE — that I was good at, to getting the rest of them by the skin of my teeth. That is what I meant about having a bit of luck. You build confidence with that bit of luck.

We took part in the Speaker's Book Week event, and I remembered reading 'The Lord of the Rings' one summer back in the 1990s. That was the first book — it was a big book — that I read from start to finish. It engulfed me and made me believe that I could do A levels. I went on and did really well in my A levels. Some of my friends whom I grew up with went to grammar schools but did not come out with the same A levels as I did. I went on to get a degree and then to do a trade, and then I found my way here.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Baker: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr Brooks: Does the Member recognise that the story that he is telling us is one that I recognise from schools such as Ashfield in my constituency and proves the point that it is not condemning young people to failure if they do not do well in their 11-plus, because there are schools that bring them on, just as your school did for you?

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

Mr Baker: That is why I said that I got lucky. I could easily have fallen through the cracks like many young boys whom I went to school with. Some of them, sadly, are no longer with us. No, I do not recognise that. I really do not.

I did not have the opportunities that other ones might have had who took the different pathway of grammar school. It is how you feel. It is that feeling of failure, and that stays with many young people throughout their whole educational career or pathway or whatever you want to call it. That has a knock-on effect. The evidence shows all of that. The Children's Commissioner and the Children's Law Centre will tell you that. All of the evidence will tell you that it fails all of our young people. It works for some, yes, absolutely.

I have shared my story before, and I am proud to share it, because it inspires other young people. When I was Mayor of Belfast, I made a wee video. I set my phone down afterwards, and it went viral. A family reached out to me to say that their young lad had failed and had not left his room for three days. That is what the test does. The child had not left his room. I invited the family down to the parlour and said, "If I can get here, anyone can get here". Last year, the young lad wrote to me to say that he had got all of his GCSEs. You may take that as a success story, and it is, but, again, he got lucky. It should not be like that. We should all be able to get the same education and the same pathway, and the exam does not do that because it makes us feel like failures.

Despite all the evidence and research on the impact that it has on our young people, I have no faith that the Minister will address it, because he picks and chooses evidence to suit his narrative. In recent months, the Minister has outlined his plans to make substantial changes to A levels and GCSEs, and he is on record saying that pupils are being over-tested in schools and that he plans to remove teaching to the test. He said at our Education Committee:

> *"So much time is being spent in preparation for exams, time off school when it comes to even your mocks, being coached as to the technique when it comes to answer questions. All of that is taking away from the ability to actually sit in the class, engage in the subject matter and to learn about it. Parents who have the money will pay for tutors to get children caught up. My approach will benefit the working class more than the current system."*

Children being tutored to that test flies in the face of academic selection. The Chair of the Education Committee said the same thing. We need to stop chasing league tables. We need to start looking at the future of our young people, and that means every one of them. We need to support all of our school leaders, because, as I said at the start, too many schools are doing the heavy lifting, and it is just not fair. It breeds inequality, and we have to stamp it out because that is what we are here to do. We are meant to be leaders in doing that, and we need to support all of our children.

Mr Martin: I was not planning to speak in the debate, but I am passionate about tackling educational underachievement.

I will start off with Danny's comments. To a degree, I agree with him on some of his points that it is a stressful test. There is no doubt about that. I suppose all tests are stressful, and children will face tests at some point in their lives. However, I disagree with him in that, if we are looking at negative impacts on children in schools today, the transfer test does not stack up against, for example, mobile phones or social media. Those things roll on every day for children. I honestly believe that they have more impact on children than the transfer test. I have a couple of kids who have gone through the test and one who is facing into it.

12.30 pm

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for giving way. The issue of mobile phones is a fairly recent phenomenon, and we have not seen all the evidence around that yet. There is, however, plenty of evidence that academic selection is harming children and that it does not create or promote the social mobility that we are talking about. How many kids from the Shankill get to grammar school or university? How many of their parents can afford £35 or £40 a week for private tuition?

Mr Martin: I thank the Member for his question. I do not have figures on the latter part of his question, but what I say about the former is that I am simply making the point that any testing is stressful. We are talking about emotional impacts on children, and phones and social media have greater emotional impacts than the transfer test.

Some of the debate has been framed in a way that says that ending academic selection will somehow deal with educational underachievement or, as the motion suggests, it frames it in terms of educational disadvantage. I want to address that. Many Members will be aware of the 'A Fair Start'

report, and I believe that Noel Purdy and Joyce Logue were on the panel that the Minister mentioned earlier. I looked at the research that was commissioned for 'A Fair Start'. They were tasked to look at that. They did research with a large sample of 1,500 parents on the main causes of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland, and number one was the level of family and parental support. Out of 14 causes, academic selection came twelfth, with only 3·5% of parents saying that it was the main cause of educational disadvantage or underachievement in Northern Ireland. Those are the views of parents, and I accept that, but that is a ranking.

Some of the things that they cited are the things that the Assembly should be looking at. In dealing with educational disadvantage, the Minister is addressing poverty. I agree with the Members opposite that poverty is a driver. All the research suggests that, so we have to address that.

Mr Mathison: Will the Member give way?

Mr Martin: To the Chair of the Education Committee, of course, I will.

Mr Mathison: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be brief. The same 'A Fair Start' report stated that academic selection was a "systemic inequality". Should we not be trying to tackle that?

Mr Martin: I thank the Member for his question. The 'A Fair Start' report cited a whole range of causes. I am simply making the point that, in how we deal with educational underachievement or disadvantage, academic selection is not the key driver. It is things such as poverty, parental aspiration and the level of parental support. If we want to close a long tail of underachievement, that is what we address. This might be a sound bite, and it might be covered today in terms of academic selection being a contentious issue, but, if we are serious about tackling educational underachievement across our sectors for Protestant and Catholic kids in Northern Ireland, those are the things that we should be focusing on.

I have one and a half minutes left. I will give the Floor to the Members opposite. When I read the motion, I thought, "OK, so we're going to end academic selection". What do we do after that? How do kids choose which schools to go to? We will have the same schools; they will just be called different things, so what is that process? It is OK to say, "End academic selection", but how does a school that was previously a grammar school choose its intake for the following year? Does it do it on the basis of where the school is, as with primary schools, in which case house prices will rise? Do you want to create a situation in which, instead of there being maybe one or two private schools in Northern Ireland, there will be a proliferation to eight, where you can be assured that the only kids who will get to those schools are the ones whose parents can pay? That cuts off social mobility. It is OK to have a sound bite, but what happens next is significantly more complex. A problem that the Assembly would not have to deal with but the Education Minister certainly would have to is how those schools then select. That could increase the level of disadvantage based on wealth more than leaving the current system in place.

The Chair of the Committee said the right thing — you can frame my having said that later, Nick — when he quoted the DE policy, Every School a Good School, from way back in 2009. That is what the Assembly needs to do. It needs to create the conditions that mean that every school should be a good school or an excellent school or a brilliant school. This Education Minister is doing all that he can to achieve that.

Mrs Guy: There is so much to say about the transfer system here. There are ideological points, statistics and research findings, but, at the heart of the system, there are 10- and 11-year-old primary-school children. To be honest, if I were to look at it through that lens, the system would break my heart. To illustrate that, I go back to my daughter's first practice test, which she did in our kitchen during lockdown. One of the comprehension questions was on a topic that she loved. She wrote an answer that was expressive, thoughtful and full of detail. As we went through the marking scheme, I had to explain to her that, although I loved her answer, and the extra thought that she had put into it, it did not matter. It would not earn her any more marks. As such, I told her that she would have to restrict her answers. For me, that moment felt like an affront to the very idea of education, because it was now about teaching to the test — sterile, regimented and repetitive — at 10 years old.

Let me be absolutely clear that participation in the process is not endorsement. Parents do not engage with academic selection because they believe that it is right but because they have no real choice. We navigate the system that we have, not the system that we wish that we had, because, as parents, we want our children to be happy, settled and able to attend the same school as their friends. As politicians, however, we have a different responsibility. We cannot

simply ask, "What works for us or for people like us?". We have to be more ambitious than that. We have to want the best outcomes for all children. The current system does not deliver those outcomes. Far from being a ladder of opportunity, academic selection entrenches inequality and underachievement.

The independent review of education was clear about that. Grammar-school intakes differ significantly in socio-economic profile from those of non-selective schools. Just over 12% of grammar-school pupils are entitled to free school meals, compared with around 35% in non-selective schools. The same disparities exist for pupils with additional needs and for newcomer children. Members will be quick to speak about how they personally benefited from a grammar-school education, and I do not doubt that they did. I do not doubt the quality of the education that is delivered by grammar schools or the commitment of their staff, but that is not the point. The debate is not about trashing grammar schools but about whether a single high-stakes test at 11 years old is fair, effective and evidence-based. It is not.

The independent review of education cited research showing that the old, state-run system had the potential to misclassify up to two thirds of pupils by as many as three grades. That is not a small margin of error but a fundamental flaw. It dispels the argument that selection ensures that those with academic promise can fulfil that promise while others can pursue vocational opportunities. That argument might be more defensible if we had genuinely strong vocational and technical pathways, with parity of esteem, but we do not. There has been no meaningful reform in that space. Strengthening vocational pathways appears to be largely absent from the Minister's curriculum review. That should concern us all, particularly given the skills shortages that we face.

Testing children at 11 on a narrow range of subjects under intense pressure is simply not a reliable predictor of future academic success. We know that because the evidence tells us that. That is why the independent review of education's recommendation to move away from a one-off test towards a broader pupil profile that is informed by statutory assessment and adaptive testing deserves serious consideration from the Minister and the Department as a way in which to phase out selection at 11.

It is important that we also highlight the system's emotional cost. The mental health champion has described the transfer test as a "failure experience", one that damages self-esteem and self-worth. I saw that reality up close on Friday, when a parent came to my home after her child had underperformed in the SEAG test owing to anxiety. That child now has to carry not only anxiety but the label of failure. She is unlikely to attend the same school as her siblings and will likely be separated from her friends. I ask Members this: whose interest does that serve? Not the child's, not the family's and certainly not the education system's. If we truly believe that every child deserves to thrive, we cannot defend a system that sorts children so early, so crudely and at such personal cost.

Mr Butler: As a former long-term member of the Education Committee, at which this topic raised its head on numerous occasions, I am delighted to take part in the debate today. I say that for a reason, to which I will come back in a minute or two. I also declare a number of interests. Like Mr Baker, I did the 11-plus — I do not know whether it was called the 11-plus in your day, Danny — but did not pass the test. I did not get to go to Wallace High School or Friends' School, but I thank God that I went to Lisnagarvey High School, because it turned me into the man that I am today. I did not enjoy the day that I got my result. Based on my personal experience, I think that we should always be up for reform and improvement of any system that we have, particularly for children and young people

I also declare an interest in that the third of my five children recently navigated the test. My two older children did the AQE test, and, this year, our P7 pupil sat the SEAG test. My young daughter did not suffer mental distress. She was not overanxious. I do not diminish the fact that some pupils are, but is it really the test that causes the problem?

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: I will, if you are brief, Pat.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks very much for giving way, Robbie. I hear what you say, and I understand it. There are kids who sail through the test and have no problem, but there are other children who do not: that is the problem. The mental health champion, who was appointed by your Minister, Robin Swann, stated clearly that academic selection is “unethical and harmful”.

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

Mr Butler: Thank you for being brief. I go back to a point that was raised about me personally when we had this debate in around 2020. I was

accused of not caring about the mental health of young people, which I took personally. If your accusation, Pat, is that I do not care about the mental health of my daughter and the young people of Northern Ireland, I will go toe to toe with anyone on that. I have the highest regard for the mental health champion, who is the best person for that job, but it is OK to disagree even with professionals.

It is about how we address academic selection and attach a value to it. What do I mean by that? There have been missed opportunities, one of which was in the review of education. When I, as the education spokesperson for this party, had my first meeting with the wonderful group of people who led that review, there was a missed opportunity. In the first meeting, I asked the group whether it would look at the Dickson plan as an alternative to the P7 test. The answer at that meeting was, "No, that is not on the table". That may have been because of the terms of reference set by the Minister at that time, but it signalled to me that there is a bit of a glass ceiling. I am not afraid, and the Ulster Unionist Party will not be afraid, to talk about the glass ceiling, but we will not take away a pathway that parents and children can understand and that the system supports.

I accept that there may be some disadvantage. However, the party that tabled the motion, the party that tabled the amendment and the Alliance Party have never brought an alternative solution to the Assembly. That is what brought me down to the Chamber for the debate. We get private Members' Bills and motions on academic selection, and we talk about the issue. However, only one party in the Chamber has brought a workable solution, and that is the Ulster Unionist Party. We recognise that some of the points raised by Members are absolutely valid. Is this the best that we can do? No, it is not. However, we have all inherited a system that has served the majority of people well. Can we improve it? We absolutely can.

I go back to a point that was discussed a few minutes ago. If we removed academic selection, there would be a postcode lottery. Parental choice really matters. It matters to the SDLP, Sinn Féin and Alliance. Guess what? It matters on this issue too. Parental choice exists in every aspect of children's education, including transport, special educational needs —

Mrs Guy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: — free school meals and which school your child wants to go to. I will take a question.

Mrs Guy: In my speech, I did offer an alternative. The independent review of education offered an alternative — a way in which to phase out academic selection by bringing together a different pupil profile, informed by statutory assessment and adaptive testing. Would you give consideration to what the independent review has said is an alternative to the current system?

A Member: That is still selection.

Mr Butler: Yes, that is still selection. To be fair to the Alliance Party, it is the only party that supported the Ulster Unionist Party's suggestion back in 2021, which, I think, is a better suggestion than that which the independent review body brought forward. Whilst we put a lot of store by what professionals say, most people here are parents and have lived experience. In fact, lived experience is one of the best tools that we can use.

To finish, if you have been talking about an issue for years, when you bring such a motion to the Floor, come with solutions.

12.45 pm

Mr Carroll: We are constantly told that the North has a world-class education system. In my view, that is only true if you ignore the tens of thousands of working-class children who constantly get left behind every single year. The teachers, education workers, classroom assistants and the people who work in the canteens are all working in a Trojan manner, but the system is clearly broken, failing pupils every single year.

The 11-plus, as it is being referred to, was abolished in 2002, with the last government-run test taking place in 2008. Since then, private companies have ensured that academic selection continues, and it is totally unregulated.

Today's motion recognises what countless studies have proven: academic selection is a tool of social division that entrenches educational inequality. That cannot be disputed. I support the SDLP amendment that rightly notes that any programme to address educational disadvantage will be extremely limited without an end to academic selection.

The evidence is damning: research consistently shows that transfer tests do cause unnecessary stress and anxiety for young people, regardless of whether one or two or five children did not feel stressed or anxious. The transfer tests

disproportionately disadvantage children from lower-income and working-class backgrounds. Academic selection in communities such as mine and that of my colleague from West Belfast opposite means that children can be branded as failures — I do not think that they are failures — at 10 or 11 years old, when they have barely started their education. I do not know how anybody can defend that system. It also means that working-class parents, who do not have the money, spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on private tutors, getting money from family, a credit union or, in some cases, other nefarious ways.

I speak as somebody who went to a Catholic grammar school, but grammar schools, in many cases, have become the preserve of the middle classes, while our children are funnelled into under-resourced, non-selective schools. I do not know how anybody can support that system. The facts speak for themselves: only 11% of children attending grammar schools are entitled to free school meals compared with 32% in non-selective schools. That is a huge indicator of poverty and class. The system does not identify talent; it identifies wealth. It perpetuates the myth that, if you have not passed a test by the age of 10 or 11, you are somehow a failure and your future is predetermined. How can anybody stand over that system?

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Sure, I will.

Mr Brooks: I do have to say that the only people whom I hear routinely talking about those children as "failures" or being labelled "failures" are those arguing against the system. The system puts children into non-selective but often very good schools, but you do not hear us describing that as failure. It is only from those on the other side of the argument that we keep hearing that those children are labelled again and again as "failures".

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): You have an extra minute.

Mr Carroll: Thank you. I would say this to the Member: you do not really listen to the people who have been through that system and who feel like a failure because society has branded them as such. You need to reach out to those people and listen to them a bit more and not make it about yourself. Many children who do not make it to grammar school carry that stigma for life. We have heard that today, so the Member needs to listen to other Members and other points of view in the debate. I do not know what he is chuntering —. I will give way again. Do you want to come in?

Mr Brooks: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Carroll: Do you want to come in? OK, fair enough.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called for an end to academic selection. The OECD and others have criticised it. The Equality Commission has highlighted how it deepens educational inequalities. International evidence is clear. Even if the Member to my right will not listen to me, he should note that international evidence is clear that education systems that segregate pupils by ability at an early age exacerbate inequality rather than reduce it. The Minister may claim that —

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Sure, I will.

Mr Butler: Will the Member accept that all schools segregate children based on ability, whether it is a high school or grammar school, because the children are streamed as soon as they go into year 8, so there is streaming and segregation anyway?

Mr Carroll: I will come back to that in a second.

The Minister may claim, as he did in a previous debate, that there is no public consensus on ending selection, despite growing calls to actually end it. I can tell you what there is consensus on: working-class communities across the North, from all communities, from all backgrounds, on both sides of the divide or from all sorts of corners, are sick of seeing their children being written off at 11 years of age. It is time that we put aside the tired defence of, quite often, middle-class privilege and build an education system that serves all our children, not just the fortunate few.

The motion calls for exactly that. It calls for:

> *"a fair, inclusive and non-selective system"*

that gives every child the opportunity to "reach their full potential". Our children deserve better, and, for that reason, I support the motion.

Does anybody else want to come in? Go ahead. There are two of you. Take your pick.

Mr Brooks: I am interested to know who the Member thinks better reflects working-class communities: the parties that sit on the Executive or the party with one Member.

Mr Carroll: I do not understand your point.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the Minister of Education to respond to the debate. Minister, you have 15 minutes in which to respond. I am mindful of the break for the Business Committee at 1.00 pm, but we will see how we get on.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will declare the same interest that seemingly everybody else who spoke in the debate declared: I did not pass the 11-plus. However, my father and mother never once said to me, "Son, you're a failure".

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Givan: Not once did they ever say, "You're a failure", and I suspect that the parents of Mr Baker and Mr Butler did not either, yet people who advocate for abolishing academic selection label those who did not pass the 11-plus as failures. Do they realise the impact that their words have on those who are listening? Do they realise the impact that that terminology has on children who did not get the result that they wanted? They should reflect on that.

The issue has been discussed for many years, and the reality remains unchanged: there is no societal consensus on academic selection. This debate has confirmed that. There is no agreement on the best path forward among schools, principals, teachers, parents or young people. It would be interesting to know how many of those who advocate for change have gone into the grammar schools in their constituencies and said to the principals, "Remove academic selection from your criteria". Has Michelle Guy gone into Wallace High School and Friends' School, or written to their boards of governors, to demand that they remove selection from their access criteria? Have Sinn Féin or SDLP representatives done that? Schools choose to include academic selection in their criteria. They can abolish academic selection. How many of the advocates of change in here have gone into schools and said, "You're wrong. Change your process". None of them, bar, I suspect, Mr Carroll. If there was honesty in the debate, we would have seen it in the way in which Members engage with schools in their constituencies.

The independent review of education in Northern Ireland described academic selection, alongside community division, as being:

> *"the most controversial educational issue in Northern Ireland."*

It stressed that "most controversial" does not mean "most important", but stated that meaningful and lasting change cannot be delivered without broad consensus. That lack of agreement is not new. As far back as 2001, the Burns report recommended ending state transfer tests. The subsequent public consultation clearly demonstrated that there was no consensus on the way forward in either political or public discourse. Society was, and still is, deeply divided on the issue. Every year, thousands of parents choose to enter their children into the SEAG transfer procedure. Of course, it is not, now, a state test. Entry is a matter of individual choice.

In the absence of consensus on the issue, we face a choice. We can continue to expend time and energy on a debate that polarises parents, divides schools and entrenches public disagreement, or we can focus our collective efforts in areas in which they will have the greatest impact, thereby improving outcomes for children. That means focusing on what happens every day in classrooms and having reforms that strengthen teaching and learning; modernise the curriculum, assessment and qualifications; and build a system that supports every child to thrive. It means investing in high-quality professional development for teachers and ensuring that schools have the resources that they need to raise standards and tackle educational disadvantage. That is where we can make the most meaningful difference to children's well-being and life chances, and to the overall performance of our education system.

The debate on selective versus non-selective systems is the wrong debate to have. Across the world, we see high-performing and low-performing selective systems and high-performing and low-performing non-selective systems. It is easy for Members to cherry-pick examples of either model. The Netherlands, Switzerland and Singapore have selective systems with very strong educational outcomes. The Republic of Ireland, which is rightly mentioned in the motion, has a predominantly non-selective system, and it performs strongly. In contrast, Wales, which has a fully non-selective comprehensive system, performs below Northern Ireland and below the OECD average in reading, maths and science. Members, what does that tell us? It tells us that

structures alone do not determine educational outcomes. The evidence on whether selective systems improve academic outcomes is mixed and heavily shaped by context. The same is true of non-selective systems. No system is successful because it is or is not selective. Systems succeed because the fundamentals are right. The real question is not, "Does the system select?" The real question is whether the curriculum and assessment are right; the governance is effective and coherent; the teaching and learning are of the highest quality; and all pathways offer genuine high-quality routes into the economy. Those are the factors that raise standards, those are the levers that improve outcomes for children, and those are the areas where our energy and focus will make the greatest difference.

The motion focuses on the negative impact of academic selection on children, outcomes and social mobility. It calls for a fully non-selective post-primary system that provides equality of opportunity for all. Equality of opportunity is a critical aspiration, but we must ask: is that actually what happens in non-selective systems? Do comprehensive systems create the utopia of perfect social mixing and equal opportunity and schools that are free from concentrations of disadvantage? Quite the opposite. When formal academic selection is removed, selection often reappears in other ways that are less visible, less accountable and harder to address. In many non-selective systems, high-performing comprehensive schools draw overwhelmingly from affluent neighbourhoods. Access to quality education becomes shaped by the ability to afford a house in the right postcode. It becomes a postcode lottery, not a meritocracy.

Research also shows that, even in fully comprehensive systems, pupils are usually streamed within the schools themselves: banding, setting, tracking, reinforcing social and economic differences, and replicating the very inequalities that the system is designed to remove. I attended Laurelhill Community College, where I sat exams and was streamed into upper, middle and lower streams. I witnessed the very same issues that people talk about — stigmatisation and failure — at Laurelhill. It depended on the band for which you were selected, based on your academic results in a comprehensive non-selective school.

Geography continues to reproduce advantage and disadvantage, regardless of whether formal academic selection exists. Community patterns and housing markets shape which children end up in which schools. At the same time, in many non-selective systems, private schooling expands significantly. Families with the means to do so opt out of the state system in pursuit of perceived quality or social advantage. Across OECD countries, nearly one in five students now attends a private school. Contrast that with Northern Ireland, where private schooling barely features. In the Republic of Ireland, which is mentioned in the motion, there are around 75 fee-paying private schools. In Northern Ireland, there is, of course, no academic selection at primary level, yet we still see significant variations in social composition between schools due to housing and community patterns. Some primary schools have no pupils who are entitled to free school meals; others have more than 80%. Of our 781 primary schools, 75, around 9%, have free school meal levels above 50%. That compares with just 7% of post-primary schools. The social composition of schools reflects the social geography of our wider society.

In practice, comprehensive systems often replace academic selection with social selection. Academic selection may disappear on paper, but selection reappears through postcodes, parental choice, private schooling, internal streaming and housing patterns. That does not move us forward; it simply changes the rhetoric.

The motion refers to the OECD, but we should be clear about what OECD research consistently tells us. It is not that structural arrangements determine outcomes but that teaching quality matters more than any structural design of a school system. Its major 2025 report, 'Unlocking High-Quality Teaching', makes that point unequivocally. It states that refining and improving teaching practices is the most powerful lever for better student outcomes. The central drivers of improvement are teacher practice, pedagogical skill and supportive school environments. That is what matters, not whether a system is comprehensive or selective. OECD research consistently positions teaching and learning, rather than system design, as the key determinant of educational improvement. Again and again, international evidence shows that the strongest predictor of student achievement is the quality of teaching and instruction. That relationship holds across countries, contexts and time.

1.00 pm

I will keep moving, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I want to conclude the speech.

Let us look honestly at the outcomes in Northern Ireland. The independent review of education highlighted something deeply important: there are significant variations in pupil outcomes between schools that, on paper, appear to be very similar, including schools with comparable levels of disadvantage. The review found that the highest concentration of underperformance is in schools where free school meal entitlement sits at around 30% to 40%. In those schools, the gap between the highest and lowest performing schools was staggering: around 72 percentage points at GCSE and nearly 70 at A level. That is an extraordinary variation between schools that serve broadly similar communities.

One of the aspects that I want to get to is how we improve our schools. For eight years, we had action short of strike by the main teaching unions, and that fundamentally weakened the inspection system. It made it harder to identify issues early, harder to support schools properly and harder to secure improvement for pupils. What happened when I brought forward a Bill to safeguard inspection and put in place the same basic arrangements that operate across the UK and Ireland? Did Sinn Féin support the Bill? Did it stand behind the principle that every child has the right to attend a good school and receive a high-quality education, or did it prioritise the rights of adults above the rights of the children whom our system exists to serve? Those are the real questions. Those are the issues that determine whether we genuinely improve outcomes for young people. Structures matter far less than what actually happens in classrooms and less than the accountability and support mechanisms that keep standards high.

That is why I have been taking forward TransformED. That is why we are addressing issues to do with curriculum, assessment and qualifications, and that is why we will be able to address educational underachievement and disadvantage. The work of TransformED will make the most impact when it comes to addressing the issues that concern Members. I appeal to Members not to be distracted by the arguments about academic selection, which go over old ground where there is no consensus, but to focus on tackling the key issues that I am taking forward through TransformED, which has the support of our professionals across Northern Ireland and is reflected in all the working groups that I am taking forward. Members, when we determine whether children thrive, what drives that achievement, opportunity and social mobility? My aim is simple and unwavering: it is that every school in Northern Ireland is a centre of excellence with high expectations and that every child, whatever their background and wherever they live —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Will the Minister finish?

Mr Givan: — learns in a positive, ambitious and supportive environment. That is fairness, inclusivity and equity in practice, not just in principle. Those are reforms that will benefit all children, change lives and raise standards and that will give every child in Northern Ireland the opportunity to succeed. That is the path to a fairer system and a stronger society, and it is the path that my Department is committed to delivering.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for the response, Minister.

Members, the Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The debate will continue after the question for urgent oral answer, when the first Member to be called will be Mark Durkan to make a winding-up speech on the amendment.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.03 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Capital Budgets

1. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any action that his Department is taking to ensure that capital budgets are spent and not recycled year after year. (AQO 3038/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Finance): The Executive apply a zero-based approach to allocating capital in Budgets. That means that Departments must justify their capital requirements for each Budget period. Departmental budget allocations include earmarked funding that must be used for the purpose provided and general capital allocations over which Departments have discretion in how they are used.

Departments then have flexibility to move funding in-year between capital projects within their general allocation. Any reduced requirements relating to earmarked funding must be returned for allocation by the Executive. Departments should also surrender, at the earliest opportunity, any general capital allocations that cannot be used in the financial year.

Individual Departments cannot carry forward unspent capital into the next financial year. The amount that the Executive can carry forward under the Budget exchange scheme is limited to 1·5% of the final capital budget for that year. For 2025-26, that limit will be approximately £31 million. To reduce the risk of capital funding being lost, Departments were asked, as part of the January in-year technical exercise this year, to confirm any further capital easements that had arisen since December monitoring.

Mrs Dodds: That is all very interesting, Minister. I note that, in your statement to the House on 12 January, you referenced the delivery of the maternity hospital: are you aware that the maternity hospital is now two years late in that it cannot be used? It is unsafe — signs tell people not to drink the water — and remedial work will start at a cost of £6 million and involve another delay of about 28 months. That will be four and a half years after the handover of the hospital. As Minister of Finance, what are you doing about that scandalous waste of public money?

Mr O'Dowd: I presume that the Member is referring to the allocation in my statement on the draft Budget. I was responding to bids from the Department of Health in that instance, and it will be a matter for that Department to acknowledge why and for what purpose those bids were made.

The objective remains to deliver the children's hospital. I am fully aware of the commentary on that. The Minister of Health has addressed the Chamber on the matter on a number of occasions. To deliver the hospital will require further investment. It remains an Executive priority, so it is only right and proper that we make allocations to it. The proper use of that money is down to the Department of Health, and the Minister of Health will have to stand over its use, as will his accounting officer.

Miss Dolan: Minister, what happens if any late easements arise before year end?

Mr O'Dowd: Departments are aware that they must surrender all reduced requirements immediately and certainly before the final monitoring round of the year. To avoid capital being lost to the Executive, however, Departments have been advised to inform DOF immediately of any emerging easements. If further easements arise, I will consider bringing to the Executive recommendations for their reallocation. As I said, we carried out a further exercise this year as a result of Barnett consequentials and capital easements from Departments. I hope to make an announcement on that in the near future.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, have you undertaken any assessment of the cost of the redesign of any capital projects that have been delayed?

Mr O'Dowd: That is a matter for the sponsor Departments. Any further increase in costs that is met will have to be matched by a business case to support the increase in spend on the project. Again, those are matters for individual Departments, their Ministers and their accounting officers.

Social Value

3. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Finance how his Department ensures a consistent approach to social value in the public sector. (AQO 3040/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Speaker, may I have an extra minute to answer the question?

Mr Speaker: Certainly.

Mr O'Dowd: The procurement policy note (PPN) 01/21 on social value in procurement was revised in February 2025 following reviews by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and key stakeholders, including the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, Departments and centres of procurement expertise (COPEs). The reviews identified the policy as having made a real difference to how contractors incorporate social value into their business models. However, they also identified some unintended consequences for small and microbusinesses that were finding it more difficult to compete with larger companies for contracts where social value was a scored criterion. Key changes were made to remove barriers for those businesses.

The policy ensures a consistent approach to social value in the public sector and mandates that, for services contracts above £500,000 and work contracts over the UK threshold, at least 10% of the total award criteria must be allocated to social value. The PPN further outlines requirements to incorporate social value in procurements under four themes: increasing secure employment and skills; building ethical and resilient supply chains; delivering climate action; and promoting well-being. To help maintain consistency in the scoring of social value, model criteria have been developed. That consistency also helps with reporting social value outcomes, which are monitored through the SIB portal.

The social value procurement policy also requires Departments to develop a social value strategy to align social value objectives with their procurement pipelines and to look for other opportunities across their operational and policy responsibilities to improve social and economic outcomes. My Department is the first to publish its social value strategy and recently published its first progress report on the implementation of that strategy.

The public procurement policy statement (PPPS) published in June 2025 sets out the Executive's priorities for a more streamlined, simplified and accessible procurement environment. It has four principles, including social value. The social value principle has six objectives, each of which is accompanied by a specific action and descriptor to ensure clarity and consistency in the delivery of the objectives.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your comprehensive response; it is greatly valued. Do you agree that, in the absence of a statutory duty on public authorities to consider social value in their spending decisions, the current policy-based approach risks inconsistency and could be changed at ministerial direction? Will you consider supporting legislation that would place such a duty alongside a duty on your Department to provide guidance and training on a statutory footing?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will have heard me set out the comprehensive criteria that are used. As a result of the work that has been carried out, there has been success not only in my Department, with its role in procurement, but in other Departments. We are seeing success. As legislators, we will say that legislation has its uses, but it is not always necessary. If evidence is produced that statute is the best way forward, I will be more than happy to look at it.

Miss Hargey: Minister, you highlighted some of the challenges regarding social value in procurement in the PPN. Will you highlight some of the opportunities and benefits?

Mr O'Dowd: Policies and strategies have their value, but, unless they deliver, they are just documentation. In this instance, over 7,200 people who were long-term unemployed or disadvantaged in the labour market have gained employment and over 370 social enterprises have been part of the supply chain in public-sector contracts. There have been over 11,700 hours of volunteering with the voluntary and community and social enterprise sectors, 27,700 hours of health and well-being initiatives and 2,600 hours of digital inclusion initiatives, and almost 700 environmental action plans have been delivered. It is making a significant difference in our society.

Mr Harvey: The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland delivers huge social value through excellent front-line services in the hearts of our communities. Has the Finance Minister an assessment of how much value that sector delivers in Northern Ireland?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have an assessment in front of me, but the voluntary and community sector has proven its worth time and time again; indeed, I will meet the sector again tomorrow in relation to the local growth fund and the challenges that that will bring. I think that all Members can agree that the voluntary and community sector makes a huge difference across our communities.

Special Educational Needs Reform Agenda

4. **Mr Brooks** asked the Minister of Finance how his Department is addressing the ongoing budgetary pressures facing the Department of Education in the delivery of the special educational needs reform agenda. (AQO 3041/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The proposals that I have brought forward for consultation follow political engagement and have been developed against the backdrop of an exceptionally constrained financial position. They do not provide the level of funding that I would wish to see directed at our public services; instead, they reflect what is possible with the funding available. In that context, it has not been possible to provide any Department with the funding that it has requested.

The proposals set out in the draft Budget that I have brought forward provide over £9·7 billion in resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) funding for the Department of Education over the period 2026-27 to 2028-29 that has not been earmarked for specific purposes. That will enable the Education Minister to determine how much of that funding he wishes to direct towards the delivery of the special educational needs reform agenda. The draft Budget also provides a general capital allocation of over £1 billion in funding for the Department of Education over four years until 2029-2030. Again, that will enable the Education Minister to determine how much of the allocation he wishes to put towards special educational needs provision.

There is also a £24 million allocation in earmarked capital DEL funding in the Budget specifically for special educational needs. The Department of Education was also successful in securing a total of £27·5 million in funding for special educational needs from the public-sector transformation fund, as announced in March 2025. In total, the Education Minister’s return to the Budget exercise included resource DEL bids of over £860 million for 2026-27. Compared with a baseline figure for his Department of around £3·1 billion, that represents a very significant uplift.

I acknowledge the increasing pressures on DE as a result of growth in demand for SEN support and other pressures on schools, and I will continue to work with the Education Minister and other Executive colleagues to find solutions.

Mr Brooks: I thank the Minister for his answer, but the continued stress on the Education budget, especially when it comes to capital need and increasing SEN demand, is very real, and the sector has been shocked and stressed by the Finance Minister's draft multi-year Budget cuts to Education. Does the Minister agree that the Budget needs to prioritise front-line services? If he will not listen to the Education Minister, will he listen to our school leaders?

Mr O'Dowd: It is not a case of me not listening to the Education Minister; in fact, I had a constructive meeting with the Education Minister last week. I am doing a round of bilaterals with all Ministers in preparation for, I hope, agreement of a three-year Budget. The Education Minister set out his pressures to me.

Let me put it in this context for you and others. The Education budget is currently £3·1 billion. The Education Minister has stated that he has pressures of £800 million next year. That is a 28% uplift. It is a huge uplift. When you look at the scale of that, you will see that it is the totality of the budget for the Department for the Economy. That is the scale of the challenge that the Education Minister, I, as Finance Minister, and the Executive face in trying to balance a Budget that does not have enough funding in it as a result of decades of austerity and in trying to deliver public services moving forward. If we continue with positive engagement at Executive level and the Executive continue to make their voice heard to the British Government on the need to properly fund this place, we can make progress.

Civil Service Reform

5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on any actions that his Department is taking in relation to Civil Service reform. (AQO 3042/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: Civil Service reform must be embraced not just by me, as Finance Minister, but by every Executive Minister and senior leader across the Civil Service. If responsibility for transformation is left to just one Minister, one Department or one permanent secretary, the opportunities that it offers will not be realised. It has to be a collective responsibility, with all Ministers and Civil Service leaders working together to deliver the changes that, we all agree, are necessary.

For my part, I am fully committed to the reform of the Civil Service, and the people strategy 2025-2030 is my Department’s key programme

in that regard. The interventions in that strategy will strengthen NICS capacity and capability through the job families and professions framework; strategic workforce planning; streamlined recruitment and HR operations; updated HR policies; enhanced line manager capability; and accelerated digital upskilling. Furthermore, my Department also leads a number of other wider reform programmes and initiatives that will support Departments to deliver more effectively.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. *[Translation: Thank you, Minister.]* More staff than five years ago, more expensive than five years ago and poorer delivery than five years ago: that is the Northern Ireland Audit Office's damning verdict on our Civil Service's value for money. Can the Minister explain why three quarters of the reform recommendations that the NI Audit Office made in 2020 have not been implemented? How many will be implemented before the end of the mandate?

2.15 pm

Mr O'Dowd: I am conscious that we are going to have a debate on the subject later. I will be able to go into more detail on my response to the Audit Office report. I am also acutely conscious of the protocols with Audit Office reports. When an Audit Office report is published, it goes to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which publishes its report. That report comes to me, as Minister of Finance, and I then collate responses to it and respond to the PAC. I have to be conscious of those protocols and get the balance right, because Member has every right to ask such questions.

There are huge challenges in transforming an organisation of the scale of the Civil Service. It employs over 25,000 people; it has been operating with and without political leadership for a number of years; it has come through COVID; and it is operating in a very constrained budgetary framework. All that works against its ability to transform. However, the strategies that I have outlined to you today, which I will detail further in the debate later this afternoon, give us the opportunity to put momentum into the programme of change in the Civil Service that everybody accepts is needed.

We also have to acknowledge that the vast majority of civil servants are here to deliver and make change and want to play their part in making this a better place for everyone in which to live and work.

Mr Dunne: How does the Finance Minister intend to provide the political leadership that has been called for by the Auditor General and Senior Civil Service unions to urgently reform workforce planning in the Civil Service, given its rising vacancies, increasing sickness, growing reliance on agency staff and overtime and, as outlined in the Audit Office report, continued failure to deliver the scale and pace of reform that is required to demonstrate value for money. As of last week, the Audit Office's report is publicly available.

Mr O'Dowd: On the Member's last comment: there are protocols in place that I, as Finance Minister, have to follow in relation to Audit Office reports.

My reading of the Audit Office report is that there needs to be collective political leadership around the Executive table. Clearly, I have a role in that, as do other Ministers. As Finance Minister, I have a role in providing the strategies that other Departments should be implementing, particularly in relation to the people strategy, which I launched earlier this year. Sorry, it was last year — we are only in February. That is a significant step forward and will take time to bed in, along with other strategies that have been developed around it. Integr8, when we move to it, will be a great tool for helping to transform our Civil Service.

Mr Delargy: Minister, you have outlined some of the key work that you have already done on the issue, but improving skills and workforce planning are at the heart of any reform. What has your Department done, and what plans do you have, to reskill, upskill and make sure that the Civil Service is future-proofed?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said, each Minister and their accounting officer and senior team can and should review their workforce strategy and workforce complement and how they can deliver the services that they are required to deliver, as a Department, with their staff complement and budget. There is nothing to stop any Minister or accounting officer from making decisions now on the much-wanted efficiencies and strategies etc. They have the tools in front of them to do that, and I will continue to give them further tools in that regard.

My Department is taking a proactive and structured approach to ensuring that the Civil Service has the right people with the right skills for the future. We have published a new strategic workforce planning guide, which sets out a clear and consistent approach for all

Departments, and we have established a monthly community of practice to support its implementation across organisations.

In addition, work on the job family framework is being advanced. A full draft has been completed, and it has undergone initial pilot validation. Together, those steps will help to plan the Civil Service workforce more effectively and build capability for the needs in the years ahead.

Dr Aiken: The transformation board has moved from being an interim transformation board to being a new quango with the NIO and NICS working together. What is your assessment of how well it is working, particularly bearing in mind that you used to be the responsible officer for it? Who knows who its responsible officer is now?

Mr O'Dowd: The fact that we have already started to spend that transformation money across a range of projects shows that the transformation board is delivering its side of the bargain. I hope to be in a position, in the near future, to bring a paper to the Executive on the second tranche of that funding after deliberations by the transformation board. I do not think that the transformation board is the problem; it is part of the solution. Obviously, the final accountable organisation in transformation is the Executive.

Construction and Procurement Delivery: Value for Money

6. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the processes in place to ensure that Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) delivers value for money. (AQO 3043/22-27)

Mr Clarke: CPD operates on a full cost-recovery basis for its procurement and project delivery services under an agreed memorandum of understanding with its clients. The hourly charges for its services are published on the website and are in line with 'Managing Public Money'. CPD's clients are provided with estimates of fees at the initiation of a project, and the estimates are monitored throughout the project. It operates under a range of published key performance indicators, and its performance against those is published annually. It is also subject to internal and external scrutiny to ensure that its functions are efficient and cost-effective. CPD meets Departments biannually to review service delivery and charges over the previous six months.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that answer. However, it did not really answer my question about value for money. It is not good enough to suggest that CPD is in full cost recovery. I have been a member of the Commission in this Building for some time, and I am not speaking on behalf of the Commission. My concern is that, between that and other public procurement, we can clearly evidence that we are not getting value for money in how those projects are costed. Indeed, a number of years ago, the PAC published a report criticising the CPD. What I am really trying to get from you, Minister, is this: will you carry out a review of CPD to determine whether it offers value for money to the taxpayer or to itself?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member wishes to share with me the clear evidence that he has in that regard, I am more than happy to take a look at that and examine it in closer detail. There is transparency around CPD's work. There are accountability mechanisms in place etc. However, if the Member has evidence that he wishes to bring to my attention, I will commit to looking at it.

Mrs Dillon: Minister, can you tell us what CPD has delivered and give us an update on how that works for public services and those who deliver the services?

Mr O'Dowd: Each year, CPD publishes a report that details the procurement activity that is carried out by all nine centres of procurement. In the 2024-25 report, two CPD centres of procurement expertise awarded 330 contracts with a value of over £1·2 billion, which represents 24% of the total value of contracts awarded. In 2024-25, CPD's supplies and services division had the highest value for service contracts awarded, representing 33% of the total value of service contracts. The collaborative arrangements mechanise the potential for aggregation by CPD and its clients through category management on an agreed range of supplies. These include, for example, the supply of 100% renewable green electricity, banking services, IT equipment, property management, minor construction works and waste and recycling services.

Public Office (Accountability) Bill

7. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance to outline his Department’s position on the Public Office (Accountability) Bill. (AQO 3044/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The Public Office (Accountability) Bill and its principles are a positive step forward for public services. In ensuring transparency

and enhancing public confidence and trust, it is important that the public sector here is held to the same high standards as its counterparts in Britain. However, I acknowledge the concern that has been expressed by families who were affected by the Manchester stadium attack. They have raised serious concerns about whether the Bill will be able to hold to account a number of agencies, including MI5. It is vital that there is full transparency and that the public have confidence in the Bill. As the Member will be aware, the Assembly and Executive do not have devolved powers with regard to those agencies. Therefore, decisions will have to be made about how we move forward with that Bill. Obviously, we want to have confidence in our public bodies through the Bill. There also has to be a clear indication, however, that agencies, including MI5 and others, can and will be held to account.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you for that answer, Minister. I am slightly concerned that there is a motion in your name in the provisional Order Paper for next week, asking for legislative consent for the Public Office (Accountability) Bill. That is notwithstanding the fact that there are real concerns that there are carve-outs for MI5 and other state security agencies. That has prompted concern, as you have said, including for the Manchester Arena families. That is very troubling, frankly, given your Department's record in relation to other legislative consent motions (LCMs) and, indeed, the rates fiasco last week. Why have you put forward an LCM when there are still such outstanding concerns about the operability of the Bill, what it means for security agencies and, indeed, whether it is going to proceed at Westminster? It has been pulled by the UK Government, but we, apparently, are proceeding with an LCM next week.

Mr Speaker: I do not think that we are, but the Minister can answer that.

Mr O'Dowd: The Ceann Comhairle has, helpfully, responded to you. We are not. We were working to time frames, and, throughout that period, I was scrutinising what was happening at Westminster and deliberating on the Bill here. That LCM has now been removed from the Order Paper.

Ms Murphy: Minister, will you expand on the origin of the Bill?

Mr O'Dowd: The Bill has its origins in the Hillsborough law, which was advocated for by campaigners after it was found by the Hillsborough Independent Panel that police officers lied and changed witness statements in order to protect reputations and that investigations were undermined by a lack of duty of candour. The Bill represents a package of measures to address those failings and others, such as those in the Grenfell tower fire, the infected blood and Horizon scandals and other examples over many years. The Executive agreed that the Bill should form part of our collective response to the infected blood inquiry. However, as I have said, growing concerns have been raised in recent times, in particular by the families of the victims of the Manchester Arena attack, who were concerned that organisations and agencies such as MI5 and their agents were not properly covered by the Bill. Given the history of those organisations here in particular, I believe that it is only right and proper that, if a nurse, a teacher or a social worker are to be held to higher standards, the same should apply to those who operate in the world of MI5.

Rates: Online Service

8. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the new online rates service. (AQO 3045/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The new Rates Online service, which was launched on 13 January 2026, represents an important step forward in how we provide services to the public. For the first time, ratepayers can create an online account to view and update their rates information, notify Land and Property Services (LPS) of any changes that affect their liability, and make payments with confidence through a modern and secure platform. Rates Online has been designed to improve the customer experience by expanding opportunities for people to self-serve, increasing transparency around their rating details and offering clearer digital channels for engaging with LPS. It modernises how individuals and businesses can access and manage their rating information and reduces the need for paper-based processes.

It may be of interest to the Member that it costs somewhere in the region of £600,000 annually to print and issue rates bills. Any reduction in that cost will be very welcome.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreaga sin. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for that answer.]* Do you intend to put in place plans that will increase the general public's awareness of the new service?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. LPS has plans in place and is taking a coordinated approach to increasing

awareness of the new Rates Online service. Those plans include engagement with key stakeholders and representative bodies in order to promote the service and gather feedback to ensure that it meets customer needs.

Mr McMurray: Minister, you will be well aware of the floods that occurred in Downpatrick in 2023. Since Reval2026 was paused, I have been contacted by businesses in the town. They were offered a discount as part of the revaluation of the rates on account of being flooded, but that has since been lost. What can you do for the business owners who still have to deal with the impact of flooding?

Mr O'Dowd: I have to admire the Member for jumping from rates bills to rating. If he has constituents who are concerned about the level of their rates bill, I encourage them to engage with their local valuer to see whether there is any exercise that LPS can do to assist them or to ensure that they are receiving all the assistance and discounts to which they are entitled.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move on to topical questions.

Reval2026

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance, having acknowledged that the U-turn performed on rates valuation, particularly for the hospitality sector, was welcome, whatever the Highway Code advises and however planned or otherwise it was, but having pointed out that most people will suggest that the situation could have been avoided had the Minister and his Department intervened earlier, perhaps by phasing in the introduction of the revaluation, by introducing targeted reliefs or by having some other method of avoiding what is now a very tricky situation, in which the entire revaluation has been paused, acknowledging that the hospitality sector was right to ask for it to be paused and that the SDLP campaigned for a pause, whether he is confident that there will not be any form of judicial review or other consequence that could impact on his Department. (AQT 2001/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: I thought that the Member might have started off topical questions by welcoming the anniversary of our working together. The leader of the Opposition and I have now been duelling at the Dispatch Box for a full year. I thought that he might have noted that, but he did not.

Dr Aiken: Many happy returns, Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you very much.

The Member is now questioning whether he should have called for the stopping of the revaluation process. Is that down to the fact that other sectors are now raising concerns about its implications or to the fact that he had not fully analysed the outworkings of the petition that he launched, of the council motions that his party lodged and, indeed, of the motion that he has tabled for debate in the Assembly calling for Reval2026 to be stopped? Perhaps he should have taken more time to consider the implications of his call to action before he made it. I am satisfied that I have taken the correct decision and that we will now take the time to analyse and decide on the way forward. I analysed my options before I made my announcement, and perhaps that might be the way forward for the Member in the future.

Mr O'Toole: First, happy anniversary, Minister. I was remiss in not wishing you a happy one-year anniversary. I enjoy holding you to account, and I enjoy the back and forth with you.

The motion that he talked about that stands in the Opposition's name is no longer proceeding, a little bit like the LCM on the Public Office (Accountability) Bill that he mentioned earlier. He should therefore update his records in that regard.

The SDLP and I, and others in the Chamber, were entirely right to call for you to pause the revaluation. It sounds as though you are now having second thoughts about the pause that you introduced. It was the right thing to do, Minister, because you would have shut down the hospitality sector had the revaluation proceeded. The question that I asked was this: would it not have been better if you had had your second thoughts before the thing was published in the first place, before businesses were forced into uncertainty, before you were forced to perform a U-turn and before your officials were forced to scramble around? The question that I am asking now is this: what is next, Minister? The pause is welcome, but businesses, workers and high streets need to know what comes next. When will you update the House?

Mr O'Dowd: As I set out during my statement yesterday, I was aware of the revaluation

implications from October. I believe in open and transparent government, and I believe that that information should have been published. I had already set aside about £10 million in the draft Budget to work with and support small to medium-sized enterprises. The level of concern, however, was such that, after analysing all the information in front of me and its implications, I made my decision. I stand by that decision to stop Reval2026. The question that I put back to the Member is this: what consideration did he give to the implications before he launched his campaign, before his party lodged council motions, before he tabled a motion in the Assembly and before he went off and got his photograph taken in every hostelry in South Belfast?

Executive Progress

T2. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister of Finance, given that it is apparent that some sections of opinion, including colleagues in the Opposition, have adopted a wrecking-ball narrative when it comes to the Executive, as we mark the 2nd anniversary of their restoration, to assess the general progress that the power-sharing Executive have made. (AQT 2002/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. I share his concerns about some of the commentary about the Executive and the Assembly, not only on the role of this institution in delivering and supporting public services but on its wider role of being a framework for the delivery of change that this society requires and so much calls out for.

That commentary often ignores the achievements that have been made over the past 20 to 25 years. However, no political institution, politician or political activist should rest on their laurels about what has been achieved — we have to continue to move forward.

Here is just a short canter through some of what has been achieved. As a result of negotiations with the Treasury since restoration, Caoimhe Archibald and I secured an extra £1·4 billion for services here. *[Interruption.]* We heard an announcement from the Health Minister last week that 200,000, I think, more people on the elective care list will be seen this year than in the previous year. That in itself is a huge achievement. It is a credit to the health service, and, indeed, to the Health Minister and the Ministers around the Executive table who put a specific focus on it. Allocations to the Department for Infrastructure have contributed to the funding and unlocking of waste water capacity at over 5,000 properties across the North, more than was anticipated in the original plan. *[Interruption.]* We have seen the introduction of the childcare subsidy scheme. The Executive have prioritised public-sector pay. Of course, there will be challenges on a range of other issues, and Ministers deserve to be held to account on those, but I ask for a balanced debate rather than one with a singular focus.

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.]* I thought that some Members of the Opposition were trying to gazump me and ask my supplementary question, judging by the chuntering in the background. Minister, will you elaborate specifically on the progress that your Department has made in this period?

Mr O'Dowd: I mentioned the achievements of Dr Archibald and me on the additional £1·4 billion in public funds, and we have not stopped yet — engagement with the Treasury and the British Government continues. There is the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill, which is a credit not only to my Department but to the Assembly. A total of £129 million has been announced for transformation projects. My Department has supported businesses by restoring the Back in Business rates exemption, which is attracting new businesses to the high street. We have extended the small business rate relief scheme. There has been a 20-month Civil Service pay deal, and we have progressed the Fiscal Council Bill and the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill. Work continues across a range of issues. Some of it may not excite some of the commentators out there, but all the work that my Department and others are involved in makes long-term, positive change to people's lives.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

T3. **Miss Hargey** asked the Minister of Finance, following on from his previous comments, to provide an update on the recent small business rate relief scheme consultation. (AQT 2003/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The consultation closed last week, and my officials are analysing the responses. An initial view is that those responses broadly welcome the proposals that I set out. I hope to make further statements to the Assembly about the next steps in the near future.

Miss Hargey: Thanks very much, Minister. You previously said that you have set aside £10

million for that in the three-year Budget, and let us hope that all parties can sign up to that. What else have you done to support small businesses since the Executive got back up and running two years ago?

Mr O'Dowd: We have seen the expansion of the small business rate relief scheme. We have seen the continuation of the vacant properties rate relief scheme, which brings businesses into properties that have been vacant for over a year. We have seen the continued rate relief on stand-alone ATMs, which is particularly important for rural communities. I have other proposals on business expansion that I hope to bring forward in the near future. I touched on those yesterday during the debate on Reval2026. Where businesses physically expand, they are immediately hit with a higher rates bill. I would like to see a rates holiday for that expansion, as I think that that would encourage more businesses to expand. That would be good for those businesses and, I suspect, for the construction sector.

Construction: Building for the Future

T4. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Finance, given the worrying slowdown in the construction industry and the fact that the public sector should supply much of the work to develop infrastructure such as the A5, what he is doing to ensure that Northern Ireland builds for the future. (AQT 2004/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: The best way forward for all sectors is for a three-year Budget to be agreed so that Departments have certainty about their allocations. Planning as far in advance as possible is key, particularly for capital programmes. We face challenges in delivering capital projects, a lot of which are not unique to here; you have only to look at England and the South of Ireland to see similarity across a range of issues that delay capital programmes. It is not a matter only for me, as Finance Minister, although I clearly have an interest in the matter; there needs to be a focus across the Executive on how we remove barriers to development while maintaining our support for and protection of the environment and ensuring that public money is used wisely.

Mr Frew: I thank the Finance Minister for his answer. Will he assure the House that he will ensure that the three-year Budget is not simply three one-year Budgets? How will the three-year Budget, if planned correctly, diminish costs and delays and speed up the construction industry?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with the Member: it cannot be simply three one-year Budgets; it has to be a three-year programme of transformation and delivery. The draft Budget that I have published allows us to do that. As I said to one of his colleagues, we have had constructive engagement at a bilateral level with Ministers about moving to a three-year Budget. I think that it is fair to say that all Ministers want to see a Budget that is transformational, provides first-class public services, removes inefficiencies and ensures that every penny that we have is used to deliver public services and support our economy. A crucial area of that is about delivering capital quicker than is the normal practice. As I said, some of the challenges that we have are not unique to this place. We can learn from other jurisdictions about how we can overcome those challenges.

Public Services: Financial Sustainability

T5. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department has identified any public services that are no longer financially secure and sustainable under current funding, and, if so, whether he will name them. (AQT 2005/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: I am happy to provide the Member with a list of the efficiencies that my Department has made over the past number of years to ensure that public funds are used in an effective and efficient manner. The way in which the Executive are established means that I have only certain powers, which certain Ministers will be blessed to hear. I cannot go into other Departments and tell them what to do, as much as I would sometimes like to. It is up to each Department, Minister and accounting officer to outline the efficiencies that they have made. If there are services that are either no longer required or are unsustainable, it is up to them to defend whatever decision they make in that regard.

Mr Bradley: Thank you very much, Minister, for your answer. It pains me to think that the Executive cannot identify programmes that are no longer sustainable, rather than putting the blame onto the Departments and telling them to come up with a solution.

Mr O'Dowd: The Executive have set out their priorities and direction of travel and are doing what matters most for people through the Programme for Government. When we agree a three-year Budget, Ministers will have to decide, based on the Programme for Government and their Budget allocations and

priorities, what can move ahead. If there are collective decisions to be made by the Executive, they will make them. There may be decisions that the Executive wish to take about a future direction of travel, but I do not want to pre-empt any of that.

Mr Speaker: Keith Buchanan is not in his place.

Procurement: Simplification

T7. **Mr Baker** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the steps that his Department has taken to simplify the procurement process. (AQT 2007/22-27)

Mr O'Dowd: We have cut red tape on low-value procurement. Public bodies, including our schools, can now buy what they need quickly and locally, so long as it is under £50,000, or under £65,000 when it comes to utilities.

There is no more jumping through hoops: they can simply get quotes by email, without having to use the eTenders system. I have also removed bureaucracy for the community and voluntary sector.

2.45 pm

Earlier in Question Time, I set out how the procurement exercise works. Procurement is an area in which there are significant savings to be made through the removal of bureaucracy and through simplification, while protecting public funds. I have presented a number of papers to the Executive in that regard, and I assure you that the team in my Department is more than willing to work with and support other Departments in their understanding of those papers.

Mr K Buchanan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for not being in my place to ask my question. I popped out for longer than I had anticipated.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Buchanan.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Infrastructure

Potholes: Road Safety Fears

Mr Speaker: Jonathan Buckley has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for Infrastructure. I remind Members to ask questions and not make speeches.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the steps that she will take to address road safety fears arising from the extent of potholes throughout Northern Ireland.

Ms Kimmins (The Minister for Infrastructure): My Department provides some of the most essential infrastructure services to our society. Through the additional funding provided to my Department in December monitoring and the delivery of my commitment to do all I can to make our roads better, I have been able to reprioritise funding in my Department.

That allocation has allowed us to programme an additional 40 schemes to the end of this financial year. Importantly, those are larger-scale resurfacing projects that future-proof roads from the type of potholes that we see now. In recognition of the importance of the rural road network, I committed an additional £4 million to target funding on rural roads. As an MLA from a constituency with a vast rural area, I am also acutely aware of the particular impact on our rural roads and will continue to work with Executive colleagues in multi-year Budget discussions to prioritise road funding, including that for rural roads.

Better roads is one of my seven foundations for the future, and I am working on a package of further funding to remedy the impact of the recent severe weather conditions on our roads. That commitment follows my announcement of the recent launch of a transformative new approach to road maintenance for consultation. I also recognise the impact that staff and contractor capacity can have on our ability to deliver and act responsively, particularly at this time of year. Because of that, I have prioritised staff recruitment in this year's budget and going forward. I am pleased to say that the Department will be proactively launching further

recruitment initiatives this year, such as the apprenticeship model.

I will continue to do everything that I can with what I have to maintain and improve our road network, which is vital for connecting communities and businesses. Road safety is a high priority for my Department, and we are committed to working proactively to make sure that our roads are safer and address the needs of all road users. As Members are aware, on 27 January, I launched my Department's latest road safety action plan to 2027, and it supports the ongoing work of the road safety strategy in the longer term. However, I recognise that today's issue is about the immediate conditions that we are experiencing on our roads right now.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. There has been a huge influx of Members wanting to ask questions, so try to keep them brief. Minister, try to keep the responses brief. I will try to get as many of you in as possible.

Mr Buckley: There has never been a more dangerous time to drive on our roads. The Minister says that she has a plan, but it is evident to everybody that it is not working. The Department's transport budget is around £850 million a year. Our constituents know that, in times of emergency, you prioritise that which matters. Will the Minister commit to a further reprioritisation of her Department's budget to deal with road maintenance? That is a people's priority, and I urge the Minister to get on and help those who clearly need assistance.

Ms Kimmins: I absolutely have been doing that. It is important to note that the figure at today's prices that is needed to properly maintain our road network is £1·6 billion. Therefore, £850 million is nowhere near what is needed to maintain our roads to the standard that we all expect. However, I have been proactively working with officials in the Department to see how we can maximise our resources, including our staff and the funding that I am given. As I outlined in my initial answer, I have been working to get additional investment in this financial year. I hope that Members on the Benches opposite will support me with those bids, because they are crucial.

As I have outlined, we are looking at a longer-term strategy, because this is not the first time that we have been here. We are continually here. We see more and more extreme weather every year. We are trying to deal with it as responsibly as possible. In the last three months, we have had 49,000 defects in our roads: that did not happen overnight. It is because of significant underinvestment in our road network for many years and significant underinvestment in our Executive Budget.

I am committed to doing all that I can and working with my officials to see how we can best respond and maximise. We have to prioritise the defects that have a safety-critical aspect to them and ensure that we do it in the most timely fashion. That is what we are doing.

Mr Boylan: Minister, we have all been contacted by constituents regarding the deterioration seen on our roads in the past couple of weeks. Do you agree that that needs an urgent response?

Ms Kimmins: Absolutely. That is what we have been working towards. As I said, we are constantly looking at what else we can do. We are looking at how we can reallocate money within the budget that is there, and we have to point out the difference between resource budgets and capital budgets, because they are different things.

Every Department is stretched. However, I will not be found wanting in my action and activities to deal with that. We all drive on the roads. We see it every day, and my office is inundated with people highlighting the issues. I have to do as much as I can with what I have. If there is anything else that we can do, as I said, it is important that we do that urgently, and I will be relying on Executive colleagues for their support.

Mr McReynolds: Minister, a regular complaint that I receive in my constituency office is about quality of repair. Will you tell us how your Department ensures good quality of repairs in the first instance, rather than calling out to go back, to call out to go back?

Ms Kimmins: Absolutely. When I launched our draft road maintenance strategy, I highlighted that. We want to pre-empt and get ahead of roads breaking down into some of the conditions that we see today so that we can deal with it sooner and it will not require us to go out and come back and go out and come back.

What we are dealing with now is a significant deterioration in a very short time, particularly over the past couple of weeks, with such a freeze and thaw and then the very heavy rain. We saw, I think, the highest rainfall in January ever, according to some of the news reports this week. That has had a significant impact on

the structural integrity of our road surfaces, so I am keen to get ahead of that. We are trying to do that in advance of next year by ensuring that we use the mapping that we are doing through the digital survey. We are also using that to inform how we best target resources.

The other thing that it is important to say is about responding to reports as they come in. If there are issues that are particularly critical, we will get a temporary repair to make it safe until we can get out to do that permanent repair. There is a bit of a process, and I know that that may seem as if people are not responding properly, but that is why we have to do it. We need to make sure that we get to as much as possible as quickly as possible.

Dr Aiken: The Ballycorr Road in Ballyclare suffers from potholes that have now become pot-trenches and are about to become pot-canyons. When those are mapped out on the system, the Ballycorr Road now just looks red. What do I say to my constituents, who continuously complain about the lack of interest that DFI is showing in the road and the damage that is being done to their cars day in and day out?

Ms Kimmins: As a representative engaging with me now on that — I am sure that you have engaged with my Department — you will understand that we have to look at all of the schemes that are required and prioritise them in relation to funding. That is always a challenge. That does not solve the issue there and then, but we all have a responsibility to say, "We are reporting it; we are trying to get it prioritised until such time".

I assume it is on a list to be completed.

Dr Aiken: Oh, it is.

Ms Kimmins: Keep engaging with the Department to see where it is, because I assure you that we are continually working through that.

The situation that we are in now is obviously adding to the workload. We have a limited number of staff. However, we are trying to get out to as much as possible. It is so important that, for everything that is seen, even the public can report it, because the more information we have, the better it is for the Department to be informed and to deal with that. Do continually engage with the Department so that you are informed on where that sits so that you can relay that to your constituents.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, under your leadership, your Department has been described as "the sticking plaster masters" when it comes to road maintenance. The state of the roads in West Tyrone is a disgrace. Will you tell the House how much your Department has paid out in compensation for vehicle damage caused by poor road conditions in each of the past two years?

Ms Kimmins: Roads are in bad condition across the North, as we all know; that experience will, I think, be shared comprehensively here today. I am happy to write to the Member with the figures. My Department has had numerous questions for written answer asking for those figures.

There is no doubt that the number of compensation claims is increasing, and I have stated that previously. That is not just under my leadership; it has been happening for some time. That is down to the fact that we are continually playing catch-up when it comes to maintaining our roads. We are responding and reacting, rather than being able to invest. That is why we have taken steps to deliver a new road maintenance strategy to improve the sustainability and resilience of our road network. That is what I am trying to do.

We should not be sitting at the end of the year trying to get more and more money to deal with the issues in the shorter term; we should be able to plan ahead. That is why a multi-year Budget is critical for this, for our waste water infrastructure and for health, education and all the other issues that are important to our constituents. I will continue to work on the issue, and I will work with anybody who wants to work with me.

Mrs Dillon: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to address what, I accept, is a difficult issue.

Minister, can you give us the assurance that all divisions are looking at potholes and road defects across the piece and that they are prioritising those that pose the greatest risk to the safety of road users?

Ms Kimmins: Absolutely. That is how we inform the prioritisation of the defects. I was speaking to someone this morning who said that they saw a pothole that was not as severe earlier in the day as it was a number of hours later because of the heavy rainfall and the volume of traffic on the road. Things can break down very quickly, escalating the significance of the problem. Where that is happening, elected

reps should feed that back to us so that we can respond as quickly as possible to make sure that the roads are safe, which is the key issue, and that the road network is maintained.

Mr Martin: Minister, you recently announced your intention to purchase a scanning vehicle to let you know where all the potholes are in Northern Ireland: I kindly suggest that you do not need one, as Stephen Nolan has been giving us daily morning updates. In fact, yesterday, the BBC health correspondent for Northern Ireland, Marie-Louise Connolly, took to X to say:

> *"POT HOLES - on the upper and lower Ormeau Road are dangerous. Cars are swerving to avoid them - and they're causing damage ... please, please whoever is in charge of filling them in do so."*

Minister, do you agree that you do not really need a pothole scanner but you do need to get a grip of the problem?

Ms Kimmins: I would like to see where I have called it a "pothole scanner". That is not what we said. It is a digital survey to look at the condition of our roads, footpaths and the network as a whole. People can dress it up in whatever way they want for a headline. We are trying to get ahead of the issue and to show that we are using innovations in technology to better target our resources so that we do not have to send people out to the same road two or three times to pick up defects as they arise. We are trying to see where the network will potentially break down so that we can target our investment properly.

Mr McMurray: I have raised before the issue that the A roads in Newry, Mourne and Down are some of the worst for potholes. Just the other day, I was contacted by a distraught constituent whose daughter had burst her vehicle's tyre on a pothole on the A2 outside Rostrevor. The B8 Hilltown Road is so appalling that people take long detours to avoid it, and those who cannot avoid it have to slow down significantly. A colleague of Mr Buckley was even in touch about Millvale Road in Ballyward being washed away — it is now closed. Minister, when will you sort out the roads in South Down?

Ms Kimmins: The Member has just outlined the scale of the problem that we are dealing with and how difficult it is to get everything done at once. As I said, we are trying proactively to find other ways to maximise our resources. Even if we had all the money in the world, we might not have all the people to deliver that tomorrow.

It is about trying to find ways to progress it as quickly as possible. We have to prioritise, as every Department does, but we are working extremely hard to find a way forward. As I said, even before we had this urgent debate, as it has been called, I was working with officials to find ways to deal with the problem in the aftermath of the weather over the past couple of weeks, during which we saw such significant deterioration, but also to help us to plan ahead for the coming years.

Mr McHugh: Minister, given the high quality of the roads in the Republic of Ireland, I am sure that you wish that you had access to the same budget as they have there. If you had a comparable budget, what solutions would you be working towards to address the issue?

3.00 pm

Ms Kimmins: I could say lots of things about that, because many benefits would come from uniting with our counterparts in the South. For a lot of the issues, investment is key. As I said, staffing is probably the key issue to address in order to build our capacity to respond to other issues and deliver bigger schemes. I would prefer to do big road resurfacing schemes that improve the entire road network rather than have to respond to potholes here, there and everywhere. For me, that is not the best use of our money, but we are dealing with years and years of underinvestment.

I have made it a strong priority to ensure that, where I am able to, I target the investment that I get at the right places, and I am putting it into our roads. I did that following the December monitoring round, when, as I mentioned, almost £30 million went into roads. Likewise, I am working to try to get additional funding from the Executive before the end of the financial year, and as soon as possible. It is therefore critical that we get as much funding as we can so that we can deliver. We are, however, looking at how we can continue to build our capacity so that, in the future, we can build a more sustainable and resilient road network right across the North.

Mrs Dodds: Minister, people who are listening will be disappointed. Your answers are about what we may be able to do rather than about what we can do. I direct your attention to something that your Department can and should do. Just a few weeks ago, a pothole appeared on the Lurgan Road out of Banbridge,

and around eight to 10 cars were seriously damaged. One constituent called into my office to say that the damage to his wheel cost him £1,000 to fix. The damage was reported on 28 January, but he is not expected to have first contact from your Department until 13 February. Moreover, your website states that the average time for payment of claims for such repairs is four months. Will you ensure that your Department speeds up making such payments so that people who are out of pocket because of the dangers on our roads are paid damages sooner?

Ms Kimmins: I have mentioned today lots of things that we are working towards. My key message is that I am being proactive in getting additional investment from Executive colleagues. I will use that investment to deal with such issues in the immediate and short term. I am also working in my Department to find ways in which to maximise our capacity.

On your question about the claims process, in order to investigate a claim thoroughly, officials have to check highway inspection records, repair records and other records that the Department already holds. They also need to confirm whether a contractor or any other third-party organisation is involved and check invoices and receipts for repairs. In some instances, they have to arrange site inspections. Loss assessors are also employed on occasion to provide expert advice on the extent and likely cost of the damage. Furthermore, in some cases, there are personal injury claims, so medical records from external bodies may have to be examined. We therefore have to ensure that the process is thorough. I presume that Members agree that, when we are dealing with public money, we have to go through such processes.

I appreciate that four months is quite a lengthy period, but, as I said, increased numbers of claims are coming in. We are trying to deal with and respond to the issues in hand as well. The process takes time. Where we can speed it up and streamline it, we absolutely will. We do not want anybody to be waiting any longer than they should, but we also have to ensure that all the checks and balances are in place.

Mr McAleer: Minister, what were the December monitoring round allocations for roads maintenance?

Ms Kimmins: As I have said, maintenance of rural roads was a specific priority. Out of that monitoring round, I was able to allocate just over £4 million to patching for the remainder of the financial year. I also mentioned the 40 schemes that will be programmed in over the next three months, many of which are already on the ground and being delivered. It is important to note that, had we not been able to get that money through December monitoring and had I not prioritised roads maintenance, we would not have been able to deliver those 40 schemes in this financial year. The allocation ensures that my Department is able to maximise the contractor capacity that is available, in addition to my Department's capacity, to address the concerns that exist about road conditions following the exceptional weather that has been experienced in recent weeks.

It is important to say that I have asked officials to engage with contractors to see whether there is more that we can do, with the resources that they have, to enhance the response to what we are dealing with. As I have said, the best way to give confidence to the contractors and the public that we can invest more in capacity and deliver more adequately is to have a stable, long-term funding pipeline, which we would get from a multi-year Budget.

Mr Wilson: Today, I viewed photographs of the Maytown Road in my and your constituency. It resembled the surface of the moon, given the shadows cast by car headlights. That is a very concerning sight for the motoring public. Minister, would it require a small step or a giant leap for you to declare a roads emergency?

Ms Kimmins: I do not know the criteria for a roads emergency. That has come up time and time again. I am focused on finding solutions to deal with the issues that we face in the short, medium and long term. That is the only way in which we will see real progress. We can all give examples of where work needs to be done; for me, it is about how we make sure that that work is done. I am working on that with officials, and I am committed to doing so in the long term.

Ms Egan: New potholes appear in my constituency every day, and the timescales from when they are reported to them being fixed seem to be getting longer and longer. Do you know the average time frame within which potholes on our roads are repaired? What can you do to speed it up?

Ms Kimmins: As I said, there is a prioritisation process: we try to address the most safety-critical defects first, because we want to ensure that the roads are as safe as possible; resources are targeted to those potholes in the first instance. However, roads can continue to

deteriorate, and, as I said when giving an example earlier, I appreciate that that can happen rapidly — within a day in some cases, given certain weather conditions and heavy traffic. I encourage elected representatives to continue to feed in as much as possible, particularly with images, because that allows us to make decisions even quicker. I am not putting the onus back on others, but, as I outlined, we cannot have staff on every road at every hour of the day. Therefore, we appreciate that information coming in, as it helps us to better prioritise.

Mr Stewart: The roads in East Antrim are in a dangerous and diabolical state, and people are losing faith. Constituents contact me, as do your officers, to say that the website simply cannot keep up with the number of reports that are going through the nidirect portal. The website removes reports of potholes before they have been repaired. Compensation claims are not being logged, and your officers are having to log claims over the phone. What is your assessment of the website? When will we see further investment in my constituency of East Antrim?

Ms Kimmins: We have been made aware of issues with the website, such as error messages coming up. We are working with IT to try to resolve the problem as quickly as possible. If constituents or elected representatives are unable to use the website properly, I encourage them to, where possible, contact their local section office directly for a response.

Mr McNulty: Minister, the South Armagh business improvement group has reported 230 potholes that are causing damage and danger. County Armagh — your county — is becoming known as the "pothole county" because of its multiple craters in multiple locations that are akin to the far side of the moon. Thankfully, resurfacing works were completed on the Armagh Road coming out of Newtownhamilton, but those works stopped at the Keady junction as if that were the end of the world. Technology and investments aside, Minister, will you send somebody out with a can of yellow paint and a bit of tar to fill the potholes on the Armagh Road coming out of Newtownhamilton?

Ms Kimmins: I am not too sure what the question was — I could not really hear it — but I assume that you are reporting potholes in that specific area. If those have not been reported already, we can certainly take that away and ask for them to be looked at.

Mr Brooks: I hope that the Minister is aware of the totally unacceptable and entirely avoidable circumstances at the Ballygowan Road: on Wednesday, a funeral limousine was wrecked; and on Saturday afternoon and evening, many cars were damaged. I am interested in hearing what the Department has learned from that. Many Members report issues to local section offices between nine and five but, beyond those hours, rely on the emergency out-of-hours service. Given the danger to life posed by some of the defects, is there a target response time for the emergency out-of-hours service, particularly at weekends?

Ms Kimmins: The issue was raised with me today, and I have spoken to officials about it, because I recognise that, as I have said, things can deteriorate quickly and do not always happen during nine-to-five hours. It is important that elected reps, if they cannot get a response through the helpline, contact the local section office or one of the section engineers — we should all have contact details for them — who take such things very seriously and will respond.

I know of an example, given to me this morning, of the PSNI having to be contacted. If a road needs to be closed, that may be the appropriate avenue. I say that not to put extra pressure on the PSNI but because it has the power to close a road, whereas we do not. The first port of call is to go through the emergency line or to contact your local section engineer, who can probably respond in a more efficient manner.

Mr Clarke: Minister, you have referred in your responses to pressure on finances. How can you then justify the amount of money that you spend on consultants for the likes of active travel, when people just want basic things such as pothole repairs. I will give you an example. In my constituency, they are building a footpath from Crumlin to Glenavy, which is costing tens of thousands of pounds and no one in the area wants: people just want good roads.

Ms Kimmins: We could spend all day comparing the different schemes that there could be, and there are different viewpoints on that. The Minister and the Department have a responsibility to take in and look at the views of a wide range of people. A lot of the work that we do has to go through consultation.

I recognise that consultants' fees can be high, but that applies to all areas of government and is not specific to my Department. We continually look at where we can make efficiencies and savings. It is incumbent on all

Ministers to look within our Departments to see whether we can make further savings to live within our budgets, because that is what we are expected to do. Given the overall Executive Budget, it is particularly difficult, but we have to be prudent and ensure that we show due diligence. I continually look at the budget to see where else we could make savings that could ensure that I could invest more in our roads maintenance and in new schemes for resurfacing while delivering on all my other ministerial responsibilities, including active travel.

Mr Honeyford: I will take a slightly different approach. Many of our roads have been opened by utility companies, and the reinstatement work that is then done breaks down. Our constituents should not pay twice for the repair. What work has the Department done to make sure that such work is done properly the first time? Has the Minister considered full-lane resurfacing — surfacing the whole side of the road — rather than allowing work to be carried out on a strip of road that then breaks down, which causes a lot of problems?

Ms Kimmins: That issue has come up time and again. We are looking at different approaches to enhancing the resources needed to target pothole repairs and, as I have said in the draft roads maintenance strategy, bigger stretches of road so that we do not continually go back, because that is a waste of time for our staff. It is about how we can improve the resilience of the road network.

We are also looking at how we can recruit more staff, as I have said, to enhance resource capacity, and looking at doing things ahead of winter periods so that we are prepared, through surface dressing etc, including in rural areas. We are doing a number of things. We are also looking at other approaches and at what is happening elsewhere. It is about making sure that we efficiently use the limited resource that we have so that people see better results on the ground.

Mr Dunne: Our roads are in crisis. Across Northern Ireland, they are lined with wheel-wrecking potholes. We have had over 10 years of limited service by the Department; it has certainly been very limited in the past year. The long-awaited roads maintenance strategy amounted to little more than a Google street view map car going around looking for potholes.

Minister, the dogs in the street know where the potholes are. My constituents certainly feel them daily, when hitting them and then getting repair bills. When will we see action and less of the excuses and inaction?

Ms Kimmins: I have not given any excuses. I have told you exactly what I am proactively trying to do. Support from Executive colleagues is required to get investment into my Department so that I can deal with the issues at hand. I will not be found wanting when it comes to the work that I am doing.

We are in a situation, but a lot of things have been out of our control, not least the weather. It is important to say that, even if we had got ahead of this two weeks ago, we would have seen a further deterioration of the same roads last week when we had very heavy rainfall. We have the same people out tackling lots of issues as a result of the storms. They are also out gritting. All of that has had an impact on the integrity of our roads. However, as I said, we have been working closely with officials to see what else we can do, how we can maximise the resources that we have in the Department and what additional investment we can get to tackle the issue in the here and now.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: The convention is that we give 30 minutes to a question for urgent oral answer, but we have exceeded that. We do not have a rule on it. If the Minister is prepared to stay on, there is about another dozen questions.

Ms Kimmins: Thirty minutes is enough.

Mr Speaker: You are not prepared to stay on. OK.

Members, I am sorry that I was not able to get more of you in, but that is how it is. Thank you.

Members, take your ease while we change the Chair for the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Academic Selection

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the continued use of academic selection and transfer tests as a means of determining post-primary school transfer within our education system; recognises the extensive body of evidence from educational experts, including the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which highlights the negative impact of academic selection on children's well-being, educational outcomes and social mobility; further notes that research consistently shows that transfer tests cause undue stress and anxiety for young people and disproportionately disadvantage those from lower-income and working-class backgrounds, deepening educational inequalities; affirms its commitment to an education system based on equality, inclusion and the principle that all children, regardless of background or ability, should have the opportunity to reach their full potential in a supportive and non-selective environment; calls on the Minister of Education to take steps to phase out the use of academic selection and transfer tests in post-primary admissions and to develop and implement a fair, inclusive and non-selective system of post-primary education that ensures equality of opportunity for all children; and further calls on the Minister to prioritise action to tackle educational underachievement and close the attainment gap, particularly for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.
— [Mrs Mason.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "environment;" and insert:

"expresses concern that the Minister of Education's programme of educational reform will be unsuccessful in addressing educational disadvantage without an end to academic selection; acknowledges the progress made in the Republic of Ireland in addressing educational disadvantage; calls on the Minister of Education to produce a time-bound plan to end academic selection and transfer tests in post-primary admissions and to develop and implement a fair, inclusive and non-selective system of primary education that ensures equality of opportunity for all children; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister for Communities to deliver action to tackle educational underachievement and close the attainment gap, particularly for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds."
— [Ms Hunter.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Mark Durkan to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. You have five minutes.

Mr Durkan: I am on my feet already. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Members and the Minister for their contributions: there have been thoughtful contributions on both sides of the debate. At the heart of the issue are children and their welfare. Regardless of people's ideological views on academic selection at the age of 11, I do not doubt that all of us have the welfare of children at heart.

Let me be clear: it is our view and not just our view that academic selection is damaging, outdated and unjust. Testing children at 11 or 10 and dividing them into winners and losers has done and is doing lasting harm to confidence, opportunity and social cohesion. Ending it is the right thing to do, but how we end it matters just as much as why we end it. That is why the debate cannot ignore the past, particularly the actions in the Education Ministry by the party that tabled the motion: Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin set out to abolish the 11-plus. That was a noble aim, and, in principle, it was one that many of us shared. What followed, however, was not reform; it was chaos. The test was removed without a properly planned and properly resourced alternative. There was no broad political agreement; no system-wide transition; and no clarity for parents, schools or pupils. Instead of replacing academic selection, Sinn Féin simply outsourced it. Private, unregulated transfer tests emerged to fill the vacuum. Selection did not disappear; it went underground. Once again and even more so, it was the children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who paid the price: those whose parents could not afford tuition and those without the luxury of a quiet space to study or do a practice paper or parents with the time or capacity to help them. While we admired and supported the aim, it was not courageous reform. It abolished something in name while allowing it to continue in practice with even less accountability and greater inequality.

We cannot build an education system on gestures. We cannot dismantle something as entrenched as academic selection by pretending that wishing it away will make it so.

That approach failed children, parents and schools. However, let us be honest: the inability or maybe even unwillingness at that time to build consensus, listen to concerns and plan properly undermined public confidence in change itself. It has allowed defenders of academic selection to say, "Look what happens when you try to reform", and that, sadly, has set progress back years. However, acknowledging those failures certainly does not mean accepting the status quo.

Academic selection remains wrong. My daughter has just come through the process, and I again saw — it is 13 years since I saw it with her older brother — the anxiety that it causes children and the consequent pressure that it can put on parents knowing how much they want something and how hard they have worked for something and that it will all boil down to how a paper goes on a particular day. The process still tells children at age 10 or 11 that they are not good enough, still reflects privilege more than potential and still damages our ambition to be a society in which background does not determine destiny. I know that it does not always do that, but, sadly, it usually does. We have heard figures to verify that today.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: I will not get an extra minute. Sorry.

The lesson from the past is not that we should abandon reform but that reform must be done properly. Ending academic selection requires political maturity, a shared plan, sustained investment and genuine engagement with teachers, parents and communities. It means strengthening all post-primary schools, valuing vocational and academic pathways equally and ensuring that no child feels written off at the age of 10 or 11. If we truly want to end academic selection, we must accept that unilateralism and brinkmanship will not deliver it, and, if others oppose change entirely, they must answer for the harm that the current system continues to do.

Education reform should never —

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

Mr Durkan: — be about who gets the headlines. It should be about who gets the chance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call Pat Sheehan to make a winding-up speech on the motion. Pat, you have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* For fear of being interrogated about what type of school I went to, I will say that I did the 11-plus, sailed through it without stress, went to a grammar school and then left it and went to a non-grammar school. I then went on to further education and later did a degree in higher education. I have been around the block, as they say. I have lots of experience, but I would not want policy to be built on the experience that I or other individuals have. If you can pull 4,000 or 5,000 others together and get academics in to do proper research, we can use that as evidence of how the system is working.

I know that the issue prompts strongly held views, but, be that as it may, as legislators and policymakers, we have to look at and listen to the evidence. That is our job. Probably no other area of public policy has had such a volume of research evidence, and that evidence is overwhelmingly negative in relation to academic selection.

There is no argument about whether our grammar schools produce excellent outcomes; of course, they do. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party has talked about St Dominic's a couple of times today. My mother attended St Dominic's, as did my two sisters and some of my nieces. I know that it is an excellent school, but fewer than 15% of its pupils are on free school meals. That is a theme that runs through the grammar schools. We are told that academic selection is about giving kids from a disadvantaged background a hand-up and some social mobility, but the evidence shows how few of our children who are entitled to free school meals attend those grammar schools.

Mr Brooks: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Yes, I will give way briefly.

Mr Brooks: I do not dispute that there are inequalities that I would like to see changed. What I contest is that they are not caused by academic selection or the test. The small rooms and the other aspects that Mr Durkan talked about will exist throughout a child's education and will influence their education. It is those things that we need to change and address, and the Minister is trying to do that. It is not the academic selection that is the cause of those.

Mr Sheehan: There are many things that need to be changed, and one of the primary issues is academic selection.

Grammar schools produce good educational outcomes — I accept that many of them do — because they get the cream of the crop. They get the students with the best ability and the students whose parents who have been able to pay for private tuition for them. I asked this earlier, David: how many kids from the Shankill get to go to grammar schools? How many kids from the Shankill have parents who can afford the £35 or £40 an hour for private tuition? That gives kids from advantaged backgrounds a leg-up too.

Just because our grammar schools produce excellent results, it does not mean that we have the world-class education system that I often hear unionists talk about; far from it. In fact, we have the longest tail of educational underachievement on these islands. Sir Bob Salisbury, the renowned educationalist, said a few years ago that we have the longest tail of educational underachievement in western Europe. We certainly have the most segregated education system in terms of advantage and disadvantage.

The education system just 30 miles down the road is a hell of a lot better than the education system that we have here. The results coming out of the education system in the South far exceed the educational outcomes here. It has shown that a non-selective system —.

Mrs Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Yes, I will give way briefly.

Mrs Dillon: I appreciate the Member giving way. Does the Member agree that there is plenty of social mobility in that education system and that many children and young people from deprived, working-class areas do well through the education system in the Twenty-six Counties?

Mr Sheehan: Yes, I agree with that. The system in the South can raise standards without selection, while reducing early school leaving and supporting children to stay engaged in education. Selection is not a requirement for excellence; it is a barrier to it.

Mr Martin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: I will give way very briefly. If you are not brief, I will tell you to sit down.

Mr Martin: I do not want to incur your wrath, Pat. You espouse the education system in the South. I agree that the delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) programme has done a really good job, but do you want to see an education system in Northern Ireland that has 35 times more private schools than there are currently? Is that the system that you aspire to?

Mr Sheehan: I am not a total supporter of the system in the South, and I would like the issue of private schooling to be dealt with.

I want to focus on the long tail of educational underachievement. One of the big claims about academic selection is that it promotes social mobility: is that true? Does it? We hear people say, "The working-class boy done good. He got his 11-plus", and the boy may have got to Methody, Campbell College or wherever, but the evidence tells us that it does not promote social mobility.

We have only to look at how few children on free school meals qualify to attend grammar schools. What is it about the clear evidence that unionists do not want to accept?

3.30 pm

It is clear that arguments defending academic selection rarely draw on empirical evidence and instead rely on egalitarian rhetoric that serves only to obscure systemic inequalities. The argument is also made that parents should have the choice to send their children to whatever school they want. I heard Jon Burrows make that claim earlier in the debate. In reality, parents do not have the choice. Rather, it is the grammar schools that decide which pupils to take. It is not just academic selection but the cost of the uniform that is a barrier to children's attending some grammar schools. In Committee, we heard evidence that some schools' uniforms cost up to 800 quid. For the parent who is on benefits or on a low income, that automatically rules their child out of going to that school.

One of the biggest issues in the debate is that unionism not just rejects the evidence but is not even prepared to look at it. A former DUP Minister of Education set up the 'A Fair Start' expert panel on educational underachievement among Protestant boys, but — guess what? — academic selection was not part of its remit. The current DUP Minister commissioned Lucy Crehan to carry out a review of the curriculum. Despite the fact that there is clear evidence that primary-school teaching is distorted and warped

as a result of preparation for the selection test — guess what? — Lucy Crehan was told that academic selection was not part of her remit. Why? It is because there is none so blind as those who do not want to see. That is how the DUP and the UUP approach the issue of academic selection.

Some Members have dismissed the notion that children are harmed by academic selection. What do the experts say? The mental health champion, Siobhán O'Neill, has said that academic selection is "unethical and harmful". There is a whole body of research by reputable international organisations and individuals that supports her assessment.

I am asking Members to study the evidence, which is overwhelming. Academic selection has nothing to offer our education system. It does not promote social mobility. According to the experts, it is harmful, unethical and leads to inequality. Academic selection also distorts and warps the primary-school curriculum. Its abolition is not a panacea for our education system, but it is about fairness, evidence and putting children first. If we truly believe in equality of opportunity, we cannot keep defending a system that does the opposite. I appeal to everyone — anyone who has an open mind — to look at the evidence.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 30.

AYES

Dr Archibald, Ms K Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Miss Dolan, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Egan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Finnegan, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Mrs Guy, Miss Hargey, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McGlone and Ms McLaughlin

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms D Armstrong, Mr Beattie, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Burrows, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Erskine, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Martin, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brooks and Mr Martin

Ms Ennis acted as a proxy for Miss Brogan.

Mr Clarke acted as a proxy for Mrs Erskine.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 30.

AYES

Dr Archibald, Ms K Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Miss Dolan, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Egan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Finnegan, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Mrs Guy, Miss Hargey, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Ms Mulholland, Ms Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Reilly, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Tennyson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Finnegan and Mrs Mason

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms D Armstrong, Mr Beattie, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Burrows, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Erskine, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Martin, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Robinson, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brooks and Mr Martin

Ms Ennis acted as a proxy for Miss Brogan.

Mr Clarke acted as a proxy for Mrs Erskine.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the continued use of academic selection and transfer tests as a means of determining post-primary school transfer within our education system; recognises the extensive body of evidence from educational experts, including the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which highlights the negative impact of academic selection on children's well-being, educational outcomes and social mobility; further notes that research consistently shows that transfer tests cause undue stress and anxiety for young people and disproportionately disadvantage those from lower-income and working-class backgrounds, deepening educational inequalities; affirms its commitment to an education system based on equality, inclusion and the principle that all children, regardless of background or ability, should have the opportunity to reach their full potential in a supportive and non-selective environment; expresses concern that the Minister of Education's programme of educational reform will be unsuccessful in addressing educational disadvantage without an end to academic selection; acknowledges the progress made in the Republic of Ireland in addressing educational disadvantage; calls on the Minister of Education to produce a time-bound plan to end academic selection and transfer tests in post-primary admissions and to develop and implement a fair, inclusive and non-selective system of primary education that ensures equality of opportunity for all children; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister for Communities to deliver action to tackle educational underachievement and close the attainment gap, particularly for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

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

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

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Language Body

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Ladies and gentlemen, I have received notice from the Minister for Communities that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that they must be concise in asking their questions. It is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed. Minister, over to you.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. With your permission, and in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I will make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) language body meeting that was held at the Monaghan Peace Campus on 3 December. The Executive were represented by me and by junior Minister Reilly as the accompanying Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Dara Calleary TD, the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Reilly, and I make it on behalf of both of us.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the NSMC language body and its two constituent agencies, the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. A number of topics were discussed, with decisions being taken where appropriate. As part of opening remarks, Ministers acknowledged the work of the language body and the positive impact that the agencies have had on the language and cultural sectors on both sides of the border. Following opening remarks, I, as chair, introduced a number of items that form the basis of this statement.

The first item to be discussed was the language body progress report. The Council noted the progress reports that were received from the chairs and chief executive officers of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, as well as the key achievements of the language body since the previous sectoral meeting. Achievements included the delivery of the first tranche of online entries for the Irish language's first comprehensive monolingual dictionary; the provision of support to over 90 groups to promote the Irish language in the arts sector; the supporting of tuition in Ulster-Scots music and dance in over 200 community settings and 100 schools across Ulster; and the delivery of

36 talks promoting the Ulster-Scots language to schools and community groups, which reached more than 1,000 people.

The second item to be discussed was corporate governance matters. The Council addressed a range of governance matters and approved the language body's 2026 business plans, budgets and 2026-28 corporate plans, all of which were prepared in line with the guidance from both Finance Departments and agreed by sponsor Departments and both Finance Ministers. The Council also noted that the consolidated annual reports and accounts for 2022 and 2023 have been certified by both Comptrollers and Auditors General and laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas and that the audit of the 2024 accounts is nearing completion.

The next item on the agenda was a presentation from Foras na Gaeilge on its online Irish dictionary. The Council noted Foras na Gaeilge's pioneering work in developing the Irish language's first online, single-language dictionary, and its plans for the continued development of an online Irish-English dictionary.

The fourth item to be addressed was staffing complement. The Council agreed that officials should continue to work with each agency to ensure that appropriate staffing is in place to deliver on the objectives outlined in their corporate and business plans.

The next item to be addressed was board appointments. The Council approved the appointment of board members to the language body.

The final issue to be addressed was the date of the next NSMC language body meeting. The Council agreed to hold the meeting in spring 2026.

I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Before I call the first Member to speak, I will make a declaration of interest from the Chair. When I was a chief executive at Dublin City University, I helped to secure funding for the first online Irish language dictionary. Unfortunately, that was a good few years ago, so, by the sounds of the Minister, it has taken a long time for it to get there.

Mr Durkan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. *[Translation: I thank the Minister for his statement.]* There has been continued failure to publish and implement the Executive's Irish language strategy, which has been the subject of court proceedings. Does the Minister accept that that prolonged delay not only undermines the work of Foras na Gaeilge and wider Irish language provision but exposes the Executive to further legal risk and risks unnecessary public expense? Can he state, clearly, when the strategy will be published, or explain why he remains unable or unwilling to meet his obligations?

Mr Lyons: First, I do not believe that that hinders the work of Foras na Gaeilge or other language bodies. Indeed, we had the progress report, and the Member will be able to see the continuing work in that sphere. Secondly, on the Member's question about costs, I am not the one who is taking action. I did not initiate that action, but we have to respond to it. Unfortunately, cost and expense will come with that.

The Irish language strategy did not come up during the NSMC language body meeting, but, as I have set out many times, the cross-departmental working group has been established. The work of that group has gone out to Departments to get the actions that that group would like to see taken — the actions that Departments can afford to take. As soon as that comes back to the cross-departmental working group, it will come to me. At that stage, it will be analysed, and then it can be taken to the Executive for a final decision and publication.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): Thank you for your statement, Minister. Your progress report lists a number of outputs and actions, such as the number of groups supported, the number of talks delivered and the settings that have been reached. What outcome measures are being used to assess whether that activity is translating into sustained or increased language use, community impact or educational progression? Will those outcome metrics be shared with the Committee for Communities?

Mr Lyons: I will make sure that any of that information that we hold is shared with the Committee for Communities. The work that is being done is so broad and is delivered in so many settings that it is impossible to quantify its total impact. I am happy to go away and see what specific information we can share with the Committee. The Member raised a good point: we want to make sure that the money that is being spent has the intended impact. He will see that some of that information has already

been provided and is published, and some of that was in the update. I will, however, ensure that the Committee is furnished with that information.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council language body. During his discussions at that meeting, did anyone accuse him of being "sectarian" or say that he "does not do Irish language"?

Mr Lyons: No, because there were grown-ups in the room who had the ability to articulate their views and make their points without resorting to name-calling.

Ms K Armstrong: In your statement, Minister, you talked about the business plans for the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. If you can, it would be useful if you would outline the objectives that those groups have identified for 2026-28 and explain how you will be involved in monitoring whether the outcomes are achieved.

Mr Lyons: There are extensive outcomes in the business plans. If the Member does not have those, I am sure that we can provide them to her, because extensive work will be carried out in both areas, and we want to achieve many outcomes. I could go through a number of those, but it would take some time, so it would be better for me to furnish her with that information. I am happy to do that.

Mr Allen: One of the items on the agenda was the staffing complement. Will the Minister expand on the role that his Department has played in relation to the staffing complement and outline how much funding has been provided for that?

Mr Lyons: Ultimately, it is up to the agencies to make the case for the funding that they require to make sure that their staff are in place and to use their budget in a way that delivers on the objectives in their corporate plans and business plans for that year. An increase in staffing complement was agreed so that the agencies can continue with the work that they need to do. The staffing complement had been static for many years, but their work continues. We will continue to work with each agency to ensure that appropriate staffing resource is in place so that we can deliver on the corporate and business plans.

Mrs Mason: Minister, groups have been provided with support to promote the Irish language in the arts sector. Will you give some examples of projects that will benefit from that funding to promote the Irish language? For clarity, I ask that question as a grown-up woman.

Mr Lyons: I am very glad to answer the Member's question and any other question that she might want to put to me. I think that it is always better if we can act in a grown-up and mature way. I look forward to that in the future.

I think that 90 different projects were funded in that way. I am more than happy to get information on those and highlight the projects in Northern Ireland, perhaps even in the Member's constituency.

Mr McHugh: Minister, it is well known that your party has blocked a change to the funding formula that would see more funding go to Foras na Gaeilge. That has caused a great deal of frustration among Irish language groups. Was that issue discussed, and will you confirm whether you are still blocking any reform to the funding formula?

Mr Lyons: Of course, we need to make sure that the funding formula is fit for purpose. We need to make sure that it is affordable for us. There are many demands on all Departments, including my Department. All those issues need to be taken into consideration. However, that does not prevent the Irish Government from putting more of their resource into, for example, some of the projects that Foras na Gaeilge provides. They are at liberty to do that; indeed, they have done that. They put in additional money, as each jurisdiction is entitled to do. If Governments want to put in additional resources, they can do that. The Irish Government have done that. I do not want to sign up to something that will put an additional burden on us, because I recognise that the Finance Minister, who has just walked into the Chamber, wants me to make sure that I keep within my budget.

Ms Mulholland: Thank you, Minister. Part of what I wanted to ask was about the funding for Irish language groups through the medium of the arts, which Mrs Mason talked about. Foras na Gaeilge initially said that some of its youth festival schemes across the island of Ireland were at risk because of the funding formula. That was this time last year. What has changed, and is there any way forward or hope that you can see for youth arts projects that are conducted through the medium of the Irish language?

Mr Lyons: The Member might be aware that significant additional resource has been put in place by the Irish Government. That has helped to provide support to over 90 groups to promote the Irish language in the arts sector. Obviously, it will be up to Foras na Gaeilge to decide on how to spend its budget and on whether it wants to put more into those specific programmes, as it is up to the Irish Government to decide whether to allocate any additional resource for that purpose. I said to Mrs Mason that I am happy to provide that information to her; I will also share it with the Member.

4.15 pm

Ms Ferguson: Minister, I am sure that you will agree that the development of an online Irish dictionary is to be warmly welcomed. Will you confirm the quantum of funding from the Department to support that initiative?

Mr Lyons: It is the role of the Department to provide the funding to the bodies. The bodies then decide how much is put towards their individual work streams. It is not directly up to me to involve myself in any of those programmes or to allocate funding. That is why we have the language body and the agencies in place. However, I can provide her with the exact amount that has been spent on the initiative. After the meeting, I had a very interesting conversation with Minister Reilly, who was educated through the medium of Irish, about the importance of the dictionary. We recognise the practical and positive benefit that can come from the dictionary, and no doubt the agencies will take that on board as they seek to do their work.

Mrs Dillon: I declare an interest as the mummy of a Gaeilgeoir. I will not presume to speak for the Finance Minister, but I am fairly certain that he would not refuse financial assistance from the Free State Government in whatever form it comes to help people in the North and make their lives better. That would not be an issue.

Minister, you talked about the workforce issues and the fact that you have put in additional funding. Will you outline the current vacancy rate in each body and the impact that it is having on the outcomes?

Mr Lyons: I am afraid that I do not have the information about the vacancy rate in each of the bodies. That information was not presented to us as an issue, but I will certainly find it out for the Member and respond to her in writing.

Mr Carroll: Minister, we have an unacceptable situation in which children in the North who are raised through the medium of Irish, including my children, are disadvantaged compared with children in the South. One concrete example is that a lot of the programmes that are available for children on TG4, including 'Francach an Bhóthair' *[Translation: 'The Highway Rat']* , a very good programme based on the Julia Donaldson book, are available constantly in the South on TG4 but disappear intermittently in the North if you are watching using the app. Has the Minister come across that issue? Will he raise it at the next meeting? Will he outline any steps that he can take to ensure that children in the North who are raised through the medium of Irish are not disadvantaged and have access to the same programmes and literacy development as kids of a similar age in the South?

Mr Lyons: It is not an issue that has been brought to my attention, and it was not raised at the North/South meeting. I am more than happy to find out for him whether the issue has been raised and whether the agencies are doing anything on it. However, I suspect that it would fall into the remit of the Department for the Economy and its responsibilities for broadcasting.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you, Minister. That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while the Finance Minister moves into position.

Private Members' Business

Northern Ireland Civil Service: Reform

Mr Kingston: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'Leading and Resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service'; recognises the dedication of civil servants in delivering public services under increasing strain; believes that reform is necessary to ensure value for money and effective public service delivery; and calls on the Minister of Finance to bring forward a time-bound plan to reform workforce planning within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, reduce reliance on agency staffing and improve efficiency.

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

Brian, please open the debate on the motion.

Mr Kingston: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The DUP is pleased to bring the motion to the Assembly. We are calling for the much-needed reform of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. How our public services are managed, funded and delivered impacts on every person, every business and every corner of Northern Ireland, so it is incredibly important.

Let me be clear: the motion is not about criticising the men and women who make up our Civil Service. We recognise the dedication of the civil servants who deliver public services under increasing strain. As we witnessed in the past week in the face of widespread flooding, many on the front line deliver vital services in challenging circumstances and with limited resources. However, accepting that many work hard does not take away from our responsibility to ensure that the system itself is fit for purpose.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service has 24,500 staff. The staff and the structures need to be managed and coordinated better. With millions being spent on shared services, the management of Civil Service staffing and human resources lies with the Finance Minister. Last week's Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report, 'Leading and Resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service', sets out a plethora of serious concerns and the failings of the Department of Finance to take action and get a grip. The report highlights weak workforce planning, a growing over-reliance on temporary and agency staff, rising costs and a lack of strategic clarity about the skills that are needed to deliver public services effectively.

When it comes to delivering effective public services, every pound matters. Money spent inefficiently or wasted completely is money that is not available for front-line services, infrastructure investment or supporting the most vulnerable. The report shows that, as of April 2025, almost 5,000 agency workers were employed across our Civil Service — more than double the number in 2019 — at an eye-watering cost in excess of £500 million over the past five years. The conclusion to be drawn is clear: the system is not delivering best value for money. In the budget context in which the Executive operate, that cannot continue. We need to plan for the better integration of the voluntary and community sector, in recognition of how it delivers high-quality public services on the front line with high levels of skill and specialism.

The Audit Office report highlights persistent high levels of sickness absence that cost £48·8 million in 2024-25, with an average of 13·4 working days lost per staff year, up from 12·6 days in 2018-19. There are no targets or action plans in place to address that. Department of Finance officials have said that it is up to each Department to manage it, yet, when we ask a Department, it says that that is managed by the Department of Finance shared services HR. It is clear that, when nobody believes that they are responsible, nobody is managing it. Alongside soaring costs and reduced workforce, staff are being failed, as the many HR issues that they face are not being picked up by anyone.

Alongside all that, there are nearly 5,500 vacant posts across our Civil Service, and over 3,000 staff are temporarily promoted, which points to systemic workforce planning failures. The constant roll-forward of the same thing never gets to the root cause of the issues and fails to identify the true level of vacancies or need. Without reform, those problems will persist, costs will continue to rise and outcomes will not improve. We need to see reform.

The DUP believes in making Northern Ireland work, and the public deserve better. We need a Civil Service that is properly staffed and focused on outcomes not just on processes. That means having the right people with the

right skills in the right roles to match those skills: that is common sense. The ethos must be one that is ingrained with delivering high-quality public services and real value for money. That also means reducing dependency on agency staff, improving long-term workforce planning and ensuring that the leadership is equipped for and passionate about driving reform rather than managing decline.

The motion calls on the Minister of Finance to put forward a clear, time-bound plan to address the issues. That is particularly urgent given that the Audit Office findings follow up recommendations first made in 2020, only a minority of which have been fully delivered five years later. Endless reviews with no meaningful change will not deliver transformation in outcomes. Any plan must be purposeful, measurable and, most important, accountable. This is about making Northern Ireland work better. It is about ensuring that our infrastructure and public services are resilient, efficient and capable of meeting future challenges. It is about embracing new ideas, modern ways of working and a culture that rewards innovation, initiative, outcomes and responsibility. Above all, it is about accountability to taxpayers, service users and future generations. The Executive cannot keep recycling the same approaches and then complain when the outcomes do not improve. It is time to do things differently and better. Reform is necessary to ensure value for money and effective public service delivery.

There cannot continue to be a cry of "British austerity" and going to His Majesty's Treasury to ask for more money. It must be about a combined approach that looks not just at sustainable funding. Of course, we believe that Northern Ireland has been underfunded: that has been the analysis of the Department of Finance for some years. We are suffering because of that underfunding, and our public services have suffered because of it. We want adequate funding, but we must also rise to the challenge. It is important that it is not just about how much money we have but about how we spend that money. We must spend it in the most efficient way, driving productivity across our public services and trying to eliminate waste where it occurs. That is the best use of public money.

We need to drive efficiency and reform; we need to rightsize the Civil Service; and we need to get the right people with the right skills to help us to drive forward delivery in every Department. That will be critical. It is not just about how much we have; it is about how we use that money and how we drive delivery in every Department. The Finance Minister has a critical part to play in driving reform through his Department's roles in managing HR and the Northern Ireland Civil Service. We need to see progress, and we need a timeline and targets with measurable outcomes.

As we work towards planning for a multi-year Budget, now is the perfect time to plan to transform how our Civil Service operates; strip out the unnecessary bureaucracy; transform the culture away from siloed working, which holds back so many services and strategies; and recognise the value of the staff and the partnerships with the voluntary and community sector and invest in those rather than in escalating agency costs. We have talented staff in roles that do not allow them to use their skills. The people strategy refers to a skills audit: that would be important in maximising the human resources that we have already.

For too long, there has been a lack of progress. The time to take action is now. We call for the much-needed reform of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to maximise value for money in the delivery of high-quality, front-line public services. As I said at the start, how our public services are managed, funded and delivered impacts on every person, business and corner of Northern Ireland. Finances are tight not just in the public sector but in all of our communities. We call on the Finance Minister to take action today and to commit to transforming our Northern Ireland Civil Service. I hope that Members will support our motion.

Miss Hargey: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Sinn Féin will support the motion, because it is right that the Assembly engages seriously on the pressures facing the Civil Service and our public services more generally. However, our support is not uncritical, and it is not a blank cheque. Any reform must be rooted in better outcomes in delivering public services, fairness to workers and honesty about the financial and demand constraints under which all Departments are operating.

The Audit Office report reflects what civil servants have been experiencing for many years: a system under sustained strain from workforce pressures, structural weaknesses and chronic financial instability and underfunding. Yet, throughout the period, civil servants have continued to deliver essential public services, including through the pandemic and other societal shocks that we have seen such as Brexit and as far back as the financial crash in 2008. That has especially been the case for our workers on lower pay scales who

are often at the front line and coalface of delivering services.

They deserve our recognition and respect and, of course, should not be blamed. We fully recognise the dedication and professionalism of civil servants across the North. Reform must never become code for job losses, eroding terms and conditions or shifting responsibilities on to workers for failures that sit elsewhere. If change is to succeed, it must support workers, not punish them.

4.30 pm

Sinn Féin agrees that change is necessary, but change must mean improvement, not austerity by another name. It must focus on smarter workforce planning, on skills development and on reducing inefficiency, but, importantly, while protecting staff, it must also enhance the quality of our public services and deliver real and improved outcomes for our people and our communities.

Work has already started in the Department, and there has been a clear effort to lead by example as an employer. Under Conor Murphy, steps were taken to tackle over-reliance on agency staffing and to extend sick pay to agency workers, thus addressing a long-standing injustice. That approach has continued under this Minister, who has a focus on long-term workforce planning, the living wage principles and improved workplace well-being. Those are reforms that strengthen the Civil Service rather than weaken it. Reform cannot be separated from the wider funding context, however. Indeed, the British Government's failure to provide sustainable funding continues to undermine effective workforce planning. The need for proper funding for public services here is an area on which the House unites. We know that expecting transformation under those conditions is unrealistic and unfair, so we must all redouble our efforts to look at achieving a fair funding model.

The Finance Minister has also produced the first three-year Budget in almost a decade. That also allows for better and longer-term planning. The Audit Office report points to progress that is being made on the enhanced governance work, on the new people strategy and through apprenticeship and work placement programmes, which the Audit Office highlighted. Any time-bound plan for reform must therefore be developed in genuine partnership with workers and trade unions, address the drivers of agency resilience and be underpinned by fair funding.

Reform must also be about having better systems and, of course, better leadership. On the issue of leadership, it is important to state that this is not just an issue for the Finance Minister. That may not be to what the Member was alluding, but the Audit Office report highlights the need for sustained collective leadership. That means all Ministers in the Executive pulling together as one team and all the civil servants in the senior management team providing leadership across the Civil Service, both downwards and upwards. Achieving reform must also involve Members across the Assembly.

In the spirit of collective leadership, we will support the motion, because reform must strengthen our public services, respect and support the workers who deliver them and, importantly, confront the funding failures in the way in which the Executive are funded now and into the future.

Mr Tennyson: Like others, I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion about the recently published Audit Office report on the Civil Service and how it is led, structured and resourced. The Alliance Party will support the motion, because we recognise the need for Civil Service reform.

At the outset, I commend the commitment and dedication of civil servants at all levels of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. They serve our society and public services daily, often behind the scenes and without thanks. Doing so is a particularly large challenge in Northern Ireland in the context of the shocks that we have endured from Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic and, indeed, these institutions being in abeyance a number of times. Their work and their role therefore cannot be overstated.

It is also true, however, that, since the previous report, 'Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service', was published in 2020, only five of its 23 recommendations have been fully achieved, with 13 partially achieved and five remaining unachieved.

It is clear that this report must not gather dust in the same way. We need to go much further in implementing the recommendations that it sets out.

The report is damning about the lack of progress in strategic workforce planning and about improvements to operational resourcing and vacancy management. It notes that there is:

"an inability to deliver the scale and pace of workforce reform required across the NICS."

Members have known for some time of the need for reform, and I agree with other Members who have said that it is an issue of collective leadership across parties and Departments. I recognise some of the big structural issues facing the Civil Service, the most obvious of which is its ageing workforce. That is contributing, through sickness and other things, to the high number of vacancies, which, in turn, contributes to more stress among remaining civil servants. Not only do we have a significant vacancy problem in the service, but it takes an average of seven months for recruitment in the service to complete from initiation stage to appointment. That is a stark statistic and much slower than in the private sector. The long-standing gaps caused by vacancies are further exacerbated by slow recruitment and put pressure on existing civil servants elsewhere in the system.

There are also very obvious skills gaps in the service. While programmes such as the graduate management scheme have been welcome in helping with succession planning, we need to go much further. The report notes a particular challenge in the Civil Service's recruitment to generalist roles when there is an increasing need for specialist skills. I do not doubt the challenge in competing with private-sector employers for specialist skills in accountancy, economics or other professionalisms, but we need to look very closely at how we can compete more strongly for those professionals in order to protect the sustainability of the service.

It is not possible to entirely divorce this debate about reform of the Civil Service from the need for broader political reform. One of our challenges is a silo mentality in Departments, which we have all acknowledged at various points in the Chamber. We have seen that even in the lack of collegiality in the Executive around the Budget and management of the Budget in-year. Those are political failures that cannot be laid just at the door of civil servants. If we are to reform significantly how the Civil Service is structured, I believe strongly that that has to be accompanied and supported by significant political reform.

While I am supportive of reform of the Civil Service in principle, I am of the view that that reform must be used to strengthen the service to improve public services and be done with the resources that we have available to us. It is often easy for parties and politicians in the Chamber — I am not innocent in this regard — to point to the machinery and the civil servants behind the political operation for the pace of change and things that have gone wrong. Part of the leadership issue is about us taking much greater political accountability for failings. I caution that no reform of the Civil Service should be an attempt to shirk our responsibility in the Chamber for decision-making. I absolutely support the motion. I want to see us work collegiately together to bring about that reform in the interests of our public services and people in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Toole: The SDLP supports the motion, and I am pleased to speak on it. I speak as someone who was a civil servant for many years of my career, not in Northern Ireland but across the water. Let me say at the outset that I have talked about this and, in a sense, campaigned on it a bit since I became a politician in the North, including while serving on the Finance Committee and the previous version of the Finance Committee with you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has become consistently apparent that one of the fundamental structural challenges to improving public services in Northern Ireland is the difficulty in reforming and improving delivery in the Civil Service. That is not arguable any more — the point is proven.

That is not an attack on the Civil Service writ large or individual civil servants. Let me say very clearly that individual civil servants, for the most part, work really hard; there will be exceptions in any workforce.

Not only are they the people who answer the unreasonable and, sometimes, petty questions and queries from us, as elected representatives, but they are the people who, as civil servants, are out ensuring that the roads are safe, bridges are tested for safety, food is safe to eat, the environment is properly regulated — although we need more of that in this part of the world — cars are properly tested, and all those things. They literally make the place run. They do it for relatively modest pay and to serve the public. However, when it comes to the leadership level, it is true to say that you would be hard-pressed to find a person who is engaged in the public policy debate who would say that the leadership of the Civil Service has confronted the kind of cultural change and improvement that was expected after the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scandal and other scandals in the past decade, because it has not, I am afraid. That culture has been allowed to fester, as it were, for far too long.

That is not to say that positive work is not happening. There is a people strategy, and

there are outcomes. However, as the NIAO report makes clear, progress is not quick enough. I have a couple of specific points to make. In the Finance Committee, we have been looking at specific issues. Later this year, when the PAC has processed or dealt with the NIAO report and gone through its formal processes, we will look at that in a more detailed and thematic study and review in the Finance Committee.

I will pick a few specific themes. We know that there is an age profile challenge in the Civil Service. That is not to say that we do not want people who are over the age of 55 or 60. In many cases, we do: we want lots of them. The problem is that they tend to retire sooner than their counterparts in their 20s, 30s and 40s, so we need to lower the age profile. We also need to radically understand what is happening with sickness absence in the Civil Service. Frankly, it is far too high. It may be that that is related to the age profile. There may be cultural questions. It may also be that there are unfair pressures on civil servants in particular Departments.

It is also the case that, as Eóin Tennyson mentioned earlier, politicians have a tendency — I am someone who believes very strongly in Civil Service reform — to focus on the machinery or tools of government and, perhaps, not reflect enough on themselves. The two main parties in the Assembly both decided to collapse these institutions. They made those decisions for political reasons; one in 2017 and the other in 2022. That meant that the 23,000 civil servants who operate the region had no political leadership in many cases. The accounting officers and people who ran the Departments were unable to set recruitment plans. They were unable to have one-year budgets, let alone the multi-year budgets that the Finance Minister is bringing forward.

We need better from the Civil Service, but, as political leaders, we also need to show leadership. We cannot collapse the political institutions every five minutes. We have to get real about the leadership that we offer. There is a challenge of accountability and seriousness about public service here. Let us start, as public servants and political leaders, to offer that leadership to civil servants and incentivise them to get on board with the kind of transformation, reform and improvement that we need in our public services and society. It is not enough for us to wag our fingers and say that they need to do better without, first, doing better ourselves. I say that to civil servants who worked hard and brought us through the pandemic.

Multiple things need to change in the Civil Service. The Northern Ireland Civil Service leadership has profound questions to answer. I do not have long enough to go through them all, but I am sure that we will have longer to go through them all in our inquiry later this year. For now, my party supports the motion.

Miss Dolan: I will begin my remarks by recognising the dedication and hard work of our civil servants. The motion quite rightly highlights that delivery of our public services has come under increasing pressure in recent years. A significant cause of that has been a decade and a half of austerity measures that have been enforced by the British Government. While there have been positive developments in pay awards for civil servants recently, including the pay floors being raised for the lowest-paid staff in order to meet living-wage standards, there is no doubt that constrained budgets over many years have damaged the ability to recruit and retain workers.

Single-year Budgets have also detrimentally impacted on long-term and strategic planning for the Civil Service. Therefore, it is vital that we see a multi-year Budget agreed for the start of the next financial year. That will support progress on the Civil Service's people strategy, which sets out the plans and directions for the organisation in the coming years and how it can build the necessary capacity to fulfil the recommendations in the Audit Office report.

4.45 pm

The reality is that, with several thousand staff vacancies, the Civil Service is working at reduced capacity, which puts more pressure on existing staff. In order to retain staff and recruit into the workforce, we need to see pay uplifts that meet the rising cost of living, as well as opportunities for progression and a proper work-life balance. The recent expansion of the apprenticeship programme and initiatives such as the pilot scheme to target recruitment in the north-west are welcome developments in trying to attract new workers.

Decentralising jobs is another aspect of reform that can appeal to new candidates and play a role in creating a fairer distribution of jobs and delivering better regional balance, on which we have already seen progress with the Connect2 hubs.

Ms K Armstrong: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the key aspects of reviewing the Civil Service is the potential for a reduction in numbers. In order to do that, we need to ask

whether our alternative partners, which could be delivery mechanisms, can afford to replace our Civil Service. Community and voluntary services and other businesses are having their grants cut, so we have to be careful when we are considering reform and decide whether it is better to keep services in-house in the Civil Service or move them out to other services that can be funded appropriately.

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

Miss Dolan: Thank you very much for your intervention. We cannot use the community and voluntary sector as the cheaper option.

There has been some progress in recent years, and the people strategy is a welcome step on the road to building a better Civil Service. Its ability to do so, however, will also be underpinned by public spending decisions by the British Government and those of us who are elected to this Chamber working together to enable longer-term planning through a multi-year Budget.

Mr Frew: The DUP motion:

> *"recognises the dedication of civil servants in delivering public services under increasing strain".*

As the third-largest employer in Northern Ireland after the Departments of Health and Education, all of which are funded from the public purse, there must be ongoing close scrutiny and review of the Civil Service to ensure good value for money and to increase funding for front-line public services. Time and again, reviews of the Northern Ireland Civil Service have highlighted problems with efficiency and the slow pace of reform that need attention.

We welcome the publication last week of the Audit Office report, 'Leading and Resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service'. The report assesses progress against the 23 recommendations from a 2020 Audit Office report and concludes that just five have been achieved, 13 have been partially achieved and five have not been achieved. The report also assessed progress against the 12 recommendations in the Public Accounts Committee's report on the Civil Service, which was published in 2021. Again, the trends are similar: of those 12 recommendations, the Audit Office report concluded, just five had been achieved, five had been partially achieved and two had not been achieved. Progress has been limited.

Our motion calls on the Minister of Finance to:

> *"bring forward a time-bound plan to reform workforce planning within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, reduce reliance on agency staffing and improve efficiency."*

Nearly 5,500 vacant posts have been declared by the Civil Service since 31 March 2025. There is a greater reliance on temporary staff: nearly 5,000 agency workers were employed as of 1 April 2025, which was more than double the number recorded in April 2019. There is something going wrong there. I know that having temporary staff can sometimes mean that there is more flexibility and mobility not only for the Civil Service but for those staff. However, there are also real weaknesses for people who are on temporary contracts. It is important that those hard-working people get the resilience and support that they need. In order to pay for mortgages and other things, you need a well-grounded job or place of employment. That is really important.

The other issue is sickness levels. No one here would begrudge people time off for sickness — of course not. However, the difference between the public sector and the private sector is stark. That cannot be by chance. There has to be a look at why more people take more sickness days off in the public sector than in the private sector. Most politicians do not want to grapple with that; of course they do not. It is not a popular message. We do not want people to be going off sick, but we also need to look at it.

I asked this question, which was answered by the Minister on 21 January 2025:

> *"To ask the Minister of Finance, in relation to the figures in the NISRA Annual Report 2023-24, why the percentage of working days lost due to sickness absence was 4.8 days for not temporary promoted staff, whilst only 1.8 days for temporary promoted staff."*

I am not suggesting for one moment that we temporarily promote everybody working in the public sector and that that will solve the issue of sickness or bring reform. However, my question looks at the role that the Finance Minister has in fixing that problem because, in his answer to me, when I asked about any analysis that had been carried out, he said:

> *"To date, there has been no analysis carried out to this level of detail into absence levels*

of staff on temporary promotion compared to staff not on temporary promotion."

It goes to the heart of the matter. What is the Finance Minister doing to resolve the issue, to lead the Civil Service and to reform it into something that is much more effective and much more efficient for our people?

Mr Burrows: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sorry that I was a little late for the start of the debate.

There is no doubt that we need strong leadership and real change in the Civil Service. I echo what everyone else has said: the motion is not a criticism of the hard-working men and women who are the rank and file of the Civil Service. It is about culture and about senior leadership, but I want to start with political leadership. It is unhelpful for any type of transformation if the Stormont institutions are not in existence for a period of time. That is not helpful. The lack of focus, particularly on this side of the Chamber, on issues not in Northern Ireland is not helpful. These are the deep-down issues that we need to be focused on, and I want to make sure that I acknowledge that.

Let me say with real sincerity that there is an absence of real accountability in the culture in Northern Ireland. That has maybe come from our peace process. Sometimes just existing and not excelling is OK. We need to have real accountability as a culture in the Civil Service and in all aspects of our public life so that there is proper performance management. You can still be compassionate with sickness — I have had periods of sickness and have battled hard to overcome them — but there is a lack of real accountability around issues such as performance, absence management and honest conversations. Those need to be trained in our Civil Service at all levels of line management. That is the first thing.

In a second, I will come on to how we record and measure sickness, because there is a perversion in that system, but my second point is about how we reward those who turn up time and time again. I have spoken to many people who have said, "I have not taken a day off in 10 years, and that has never been acknowledged". If we want to change the culture, it is important that we acknowledge those who turn up and that we reward and recognise that. Likewise with promotion: I do not know the inside track of the Civil Service, but I know from experience in the Police Service that there is often a feeling that we have got our promotion system entirely wrong. The wrong people get promoted, and it is not done really on merit.

I want to talk about sickness and one reason why you might have high levels of sickness. Yes, there are issues with stress, with demands and with making sure that there is good, supportive leadership, but the way that sickness is calculated can often be perverse. One day's sick is one incident, and seven days' sick is one incident. I have spoken to people who have said to me in all honesty, "There was no incentive for me to come back to work any quicker. If I am going to go sick, I might as well get my seven days out of it". We must have a system that properly measures whether you have hit a point of unsatisfactory sickness absence.

We also need an entire culture of training people in how to have proper sit-down conversations around issues of welfare and performance.

We shirk from those in Northern Ireland. I listened attentively to someone on the radio recently talk about performance management for people in the Civil Service in England being much higher than here. People do not want to have uncomfortable conversations. If your performance is not good, why is that? Is there a welfare issue? Is there an issue with training? Is there an issue with your level of engagement or commitment? That is a culture that needs to be brought in at all levels. Skill people up to have those conversations.

I want to say one final thing about the Civil Service, about that very senior leadership and how it transcends in what I have seen since I have come here. Committee after Committee, report after report: mumbo jumbo. It is full of flannel. A report that could give you the nub of an answer in a concise, precise and relevant way is dressed up and camouflaged with hundreds of words, when actually, at the end of it, you cannot understand it. I have gone through some education. I have three degrees, and I cannot understand it. Actually, I have a degree in one of the things that was being discussed.

Let us cut the mumbo jumbo. Let us cut the claptrap. Let us have a system that rewards those who turn up, rewards merit and says to those at the top of the organisation, "You get eye-watering salaries. You're paid more than anyone here. Do your job or find a different job." We need to have real accountability at every level but also real reward for those who are working. We need to change; we need to stop focusing on things in Gaza and around the world and to focus on things here in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Burrows: Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Gerry Kelly.

Mr Carroll: Carroll.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Carroll, sorry. Freudian slip there.

Mr Carroll: No problem.

On the face of it, there does not seem to be much wrong with the motion, but I am —.

Mr Brett: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Hold on. *[Laughter.]* You are getting ahead of yourself, Mr Brett.

I am concerned about the agenda behind the motion and the politics towards the Civil Service, having listened to him — through the Chair — and other DUP members on the Finance Committee and throughout the Building generally. It starts from the position that the public sector is bloated, is too big and needs to be reduced. We should reject that argument, confront it and challenge it head on. We have a gap of several thousand healthcare workers across the system, and we need to plug that gap and employ more nurses, porters, care workers and every type of healthcare worker, if we are to meet the needs of all communities across the North. The best way to meet the challenges is to fund and increase staff numbers in the public sector more generally and in the Civil Service.

It is often repeated in this place and elsewhere that the public sector is too big and bloated. I invite Members to consider how much worse the COVID pandemic would have been — it was a bad pandemic; it was a terrible pandemic — had we not had a publicly funded healthcare system. It did not get everything right, of course, but it responded, for the most part, to lots of people's needs and the healthcare demand that was in place because of the pandemic. The Civil Service or the public sector more generally cannot decide to pick itself up and move to another part of the world to get further or bigger government grants or to further exploit workers in the Global South or wherever else. Quite often, though, private companies do that here. Therefore, I warn against adopting a strategy that sees everything in the private sector as wonderful and glorious, and refrain from a neo-Thatcherite policy that, I would argue, does not meet the needs of our communities more generally or public-sector workers specifically.

The word "efficiency" is used in the motion. I am opposed to an approach that uses that word to justify more job losses in the Civil Service or in the public sector more generally. Every job loss, compulsory or not, means extra pressure on Civil Service workers. Many whom you talk to following the redundancy programme of a few years ago talk about having to do two or three jobs because of direct lay-offs and redundancy packages or because people were not replaced when they retired. What impact does that have on people's health? I will also mention the fact that many civil servants have second jobs at weekends or in the evenings, working as taxi drivers or delivery drivers for fast-food companies, because their wages are not high enough. That is not talked about enough. Some at the top end of the Civil Service are paid excessively and too much, but the vast majority of people in the Civil Service — a huge chunk of them at least — can be described as the working poor.

If the Members to my right are talking about reducing the spend on agency staff as a way to reduce inefficiency, I would agree with them on that. That was referred to by some in supporting the motion. We are talking about hundreds of millions of pounds being spent by the Department of Finance on agency staff despite platitudes about reducing that spend. That is a colossal waste of money, as it is funnelled to the private sector. Moreover, agency workers are denied their rights. The Minister should therefore end the policy.

5.00 pm

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Yes.

Mr Frew: I said in my contribution that we rely too much on agency staff. The Member is therefore in agreement with my party more than he thinks or would like to admit.

Mr Kingston: You are lost for words.

Mr Carroll: Not quite, but I am almost speechless.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Mr Carroll, you have an extra minute.

Mr Carroll: Mr Deputy Speaker, please check the Member's previous comments for accuracy. I believe that they were very inaccurate.

We also need to address the over-focus — I level this at the party to my right and to others, including the Committee for Finance — on leave of absence and sick days for civil servants. That is not driven by concern for workers or their health. There is very little focus on why people are sick for longer periods. I am not a doctor, but I guess that it is because of increased anxiety and depression, the mental health crisis, the housing crisis and the fact that hundreds of thousands of people are on health waiting lists. The focus is on productivity, meeting targets and ticking boxes rather than on looking at the complexities of people's lives, at why workers are depressed and at why they are sick and off work. I have already done so in the Finance Committee, but I warn against taking that kind of approach. Mr Frew compared the number of days taken off in the private sector with the number in the public sector. Part of the problem is that people in the private sector generally have fewer rights. There is less union recognition. People are therefore scared to take time off. We should not be encouraging people to go into work if they are sick. We should warn against any idea that the private sector is a panacea. It has huge problems. As I said, people are frightened to take days off.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Minister, over to you. You have up to 15 minutes.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate. I am grateful for the tone of the debate, which has been supportive of our Civil Service workers, who are doing their job in challenging circumstances. In that spirit, I begin by recognising the people behind the system. Just last week, I had the pleasure of presenting long-service awards to civil servants with decades of service — 50 years and more — who have quietly done a job for the people here, day in and day out. I was pleased to see other Ministers from across the Executive in attendance at that event in recognition of civil servants' valuable contribution. Their dedication is the foundation on which we are building further change and improvement.

Everyone in the Chamber wants the Civil Service to be the best that it can be. I therefore welcome the Audit Office's follow-up report. At this stage, the Public Accounts Committee retains primacy over it, so I have to be careful not to pre-empt or prejudge any evidence that may be given at a subsequent PAC hearing. My comments today therefore reflect work that has been started, published or reported on. I am keen to maintain the momentum that has been built up by that work, but I am cognisant of any potential PAC processes and the protocols to be adhered to in that regard. The report reinforces the need for reform, which must be embraced not just by me as Finance Minister but by every Minister and every senior leader across the Civil Service. If responsibility for transformation is left to one Minister, one Department or one permanent secretary, the opportunities that it offers will not be realised. It has to be a collective responsibility, with all Ministers and Civil Service leaders working together to deliver the changes that we all agree are necessary.

The Audit Office report confirms that, of the 23 recommendations set out in the previous report in 2020, five have been achieved, 13 have been partially achieved and five remain not yet achieved. Of the 12 PAC recommendations, three have been achieved, seven have been partially achieved and two remain not yet achieved. It is important to set out the context of what has happened during that time. We have to remember the impact of COVID and how our world was turned upside down during the pandemic. It also has to be recognised that the Civil Service stood up and was counted during the pandemic. Naturally, our focus turned to keeping people safe, supporting the most vulnerable in society, issuing grants to businesses and community groups and doing what we could to protect lives and livelihoods in the most difficult of times. There was limited bandwidth during the pandemic for Civil Service reform.

Our response to the Audit Office report must be anchored in the Civil Service people strategy 2025-2030, which a number of Members have acknowledged and which I launched last year. It is a comprehensive, outcome-focused change programme that is already addressing the Audit Office findings and those of the PAC and incorporating lessons from previous inquiries. Its aims are pragmatic and precise, and the actions in it have set time frames: a decisive shift from reactive to planned workforce management and a better match of skills to meet the size and shape of the organisation, so that efficiency, effectiveness and value for money rise together.

I acknowledge what a number of Members have said about what the term "efficiency" means to them. To me, an efficient organisation is an organisation that supports its workers and delivery of services; it is not about asking

people to do more with less. Critically, the people strategy is aligned with Integr8, the transformation programme that will modernise process delivery and data use and provide an integrated HR and finance technology solution to replace legacy systems. Integr8 will streamline processes; embed modern best practice; reduce manual reconciliation; enhance user experience; and create a single source of truth for roles, skills and costs. HR components will go live from late 2027, locking in the benefits of the reforms that I will describe by giving leaders the data and tools to plan and deliver with confidence.

Members have called for a time-bound plan to reform workforce planning across the Civil Service. I can set that out clearly today, mindful of my previous comments about the role of the PAC in future reports. My Department now has in place the foundations for an agreed strategic workforce plan vision: published guidance; a cross-departmental working group; an active community of practice; a piloted critical-roles tool; and, crucially, the affordable baseline agreed last November. The next phase is delivery.

I agree with Members that review upon review upon review becomes tiresome for the public, us as legislators and staff; it is now time for delivery. My Department has asked all Departments to begin strategic workforce planning now, using the guidance and data already available rather than waiting for perfect conditions. That, in some ways, responds to Mr Kingston's concern that he gets one answer from me and another from other Departments. Guidance is now available to all Departments. There is a responsibility on senior civil servants to sit down with one another and engage on that guidance, if there are concerns or misunderstandings about it. I will certainly play my part in that as a political leader.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving way in the spirit of debate, given that it is the Executive's two-year anniversary.

There is a bit of a debate about the accountability of Civil Service leadership and, in particular, the head of the Civil Service. Minister, I appreciate you engaging in the debate today. The Minister of Finance has responsibility for overall Civil Service reform, and there is lots to do. However, for the head of the Civil Service, the line management structure and whom she reports to is not clear at all; in fact, there has been lots of reporting and concern about that. Is she the main person who answers to you on Civil Service reform? Do you have regular meetings and catch-ups with her? How does that work? It would be helpful for you to clarify that.

Mr O'Dowd: In my view, the head of the Civil Service reports to TEO. There is not the same structure as you will see in other organisations. Review of that reporting mechanism is important, even, I am sure, for the people who work in the system. Taking the personality element out of it, whoever is head of the service will want a clear reporting mechanism.

Mr Burrows: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: One sec.

I am content to play my part in that, but the people appointed to those roles often inherit mechanisms that sometimes makes their roles more difficult.

Mr Burrows: That seems astonishing when we are talking about accountability. It is a bit like the situation with the ombudsman. Nobody really knew who the ombudsman was accountable to: was it the Secretary of State, the King, the Justice Minister or the Executive Office? Are we unclear as to who the head of the Civil Service, who earns an eye-watering, six-figure salary, is directly accountable to and who performance-manages said head of the Civil Service?

Mr O'Dowd: In my view, the reporting mechanism is to TEO. We can share the finer details of that with colleagues after the debate. There is also the danger of political interference, so you have to get the balance right in all of those things. I am more than happy to share afterwards any information in relation to accountability mechanisms around the head of the Civil Service.

Departments have asked to appoint senior owners and resources to keep the ability to carry the work forward. The Audit Office has said that Departments must produce their strategic workforce plans by March 2028, enabling those to be drawn together for the first Civil Service-wide plan. That creates the structured, system-wide approach to workforce planning that the motion calls for. Put simply, strategic workforce planning is how we move from firefighting to foresight. It helps us identify inefficiencies, eliminate unnecessary agency use and ensure that our workforce pipeline matches the service.

A number of Members have questioned the dramatic rise in the number of agency workers. That relates directly to the Department for Work

and Pensions (DWP) contract with the Department for Communities. Members will be aware that DWP has a contract here. Approximately 2,624 of the 4,939 agency staff here work directly to DWP on a contract with the Department for Communities in relation to benefits and other matters. It is not a cost to the block grant. That cost is directly picked up by DWP.

My Department is finalising a new workforce model, the Civil Service job families framework, which gives a single, consistent structure for how roles are defined across the Civil Service. That is foundational to Integr8 because the framework is the job architecture captured in the new HR and finance technology solution to be delivered under the Integr8 programme, enabling recruitment, talent, learning and workforce analytics functions to operate effectively. That standardisation will streamline recruitment, reduce duplication and allow more targeted hiring. For staff, it will create clear career pathways, improve transparency and support targeted learning and development, with many of the benefits realised where Integr8 services and technologies are live and job families have become the backbone of how people develop careers in the Civil Service.

In relation to Mr Burrows's comments about how people are promoted in the Civil Service, promotion is based on merit and merit alone.

In parallel, the professions framework, designed through engagement with heads of profession and other stakeholders, will enforce professional leadership, consistency and standards across the Civil Service. Its accompanying policy and guidance have been prepared, and the framework is anticipated to be launched before the end of 2025-26.

My Department is simplifying and streamlining recruitment to get the right people with the right skills into priority teams faster. Apprenticeships; student and work placements, including routes for those furthest from the labour market; Civil Service skills academies; and graduate management programmes are in place. The administrative officers (AO) pilot in the north-west concluded in December with a 12-week process. Almost 900 people were interviewed over three days, leading to more than 200 offers, starting in January 2026. Recruitment of that size and scale has never been done before over such a short period, but that shows what can be achieved with a willingness to embrace new ways of doing things. It is important that civil servants are given the space to be innovative and try new things without facing constant barrages of criticism.

In addition, digital requisitions are now in use from March 2027. Outsourced aspects of recruitment will transfer back to NICS to further streamline service delivery. Those steps will enable NICS HR to reduce recruitment time, improve job matching, shorten the time to hire and fill roles promptly, lessening the reliance on agency cover. They widen access support candidates' panels with clear criteria aligned to job families so that pace is matched with fairness.

In 2025-26, my Department updated many HR policies. Work was under way on a comprehensive review of the recruitment policy. We are also developing a new employee mobility policy. As part of the people strategy, a two-year road map, we are developing a comprehensive Senior Civil Service strategy. We continue to deliver leadership learning, focusing on inclusive leadership and team effectiveness. Those changes improve effectiveness. We are consulting trade unions on a pay and reward strategic framework. The 2025 pay award has been implemented, including adjustments to allowances.

I have mentioned Integr8 a number of times. It is the enabler that will hardwire reform into daily operations by adopting modern best practice in an integrated HR and finance technology solution. It will reduce cycle times, standardise reporting and improve leaders.

5.15 pm

I emphasise our commitment to working closely with our trade union colleagues. Their support for partnership working matters, as does Members' support. We are engaging constructively with Civil Service trade unions across jobs, families, professions and pay and reward policy renewal. We are listening carefully, testing ideas and collaborating, so that change lands well for staff and, ultimately, improves the public services that they deliver. The people strategy is built for outcomes that people can feel: faster recruitment, inter-priority teams, and more continuity in the services on which people rely. A clearer skills pipeline, assured governance and efficiency and effectiveness means standardisation and digitalisation and a reworking of process times.

Why is it taking time to do that? Transforming an organisation as large and complex as the Civil Service requires sustained commitment and resourcing. I have outlined the external factors, as have other Members who spoke in the debate. With the people strategy as a road map and Integr8 as the engine, we have the

governance, milestones and tools that we need to finish the job transparently, at pace and to standard. Colleagues, I share your frustration, as do civil servants, at the time that it has taken to transform the organisation. As I said, however, I believe that we now have the tools at hand to transform it. Further actions can and will be taken. I am conscious that the PAC has a role to play, but I do not want the momentum on the work that we have carried out so far to lapse as we wait for yet another report on how we should reform the Civil Service.

If, as looks likely, the Assembly supports the motion — I am supportive of it — I will do all that I can within my mandate to keep momentum behind transforming our Civil Service and supporting our civil servants.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you, Minister. I call Phillip Brett to make a winding up speech. Phillip, you have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Brett: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I open my remarks by concurring with other Members who paid tribute to our civil servants and front-line workers. I say that not just because I am going home to a civil servant, but because, on my way home, I will be contacting civil servants in DFI Roads and our Education Department. They answer the phone to us public representatives outside their working hours on numerous occasions.

My party tabled today's motion not to overlap with the work of the PAC but because we have had ongoing discussions with and interest from parties about finally delivering the changes that the Civil Service needs. It is not about making people unemployed or having forced redundancies; it is about delivering a better service, not just for those who work in the Civil Service but for the public who pay for us and for the Civil Service.

As other Members have articulated, the overwhelming majority of those who work in our public service do so diligently and out of a sense of duty and public service. The processes within which they currently operate, however, are not as streamlined as they could be. I could pick numerous examples, but I am thinking of one that is topical: the pedestrianisation of a street in Belfast city centre. It took civil servants five years to deliver that. There were four consultations and three public meetings to deliver an outcome that had already been agreed and was universally supported. As politicians, we need to give leadership to our civil servants to let them know that they have the ability to get on and make decisions. On that front, I welcome the Minister's commitment to deliver a time-bound plan for how to implement some of the recommendations in the NIAO report.

I do not think that it is acceptable, and I do not think that members of the public who are watching at home would say that it is acceptable, that the average number of days lost to sickness, per employee in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, is 13·4. It is not acceptable that staff are under such pressure in their work environment that they feel that they have to have that level of sickness. The public who fund that level of sickness absence get up every day to go to work and do not have the luxury of that amount of sick pay each year. We need to be able to lead by example on that.

I would have been interested to hear from the Minister about the public-sector transformation board and how the £215 million that was secured as a result of the restoration package will fund the ongoing work in the next tranche. The Minister mentioned some of the work that is ongoing that will be funded through the public-sector transformation board. It is important, however, that we learn lessons, particularly from the people from the Imperial Civil Service who sit on that public-sector transformation board, and from the recommendations that they have implemented.

After a few days of robust debate and clear disagreement among parties, the clear consensus amongst all Members that they want to see the Civil Service deliver better is welcome. All Members want to see better support for our public-sector workers and better outcomes for the public. It is important that we send a clear message that the motion has passed unanimously. Ultimately, when the next report on this is done, the test will be whether we have delivered the changes that we all want to see.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'Leading and Resourcing the Northern Ireland Civil Service'; recognises the dedication of civil servants in delivering public services under increasing strain; believes that reform is necessary to ensure value for money and effective public service delivery; and calls on the Minister of Finance to bring forward a time-bound plan to reform workforce planning within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, reduce

reliance on agency staffing and improve efficiency.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): We shall dwell a pause of two marching paces until the Minister arrives for the next item of business. Members, take your ease.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Storm Impact: A20 Portaferry Road

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Kellie Armstrong to raise the matter of the impact of storms on the A20 Portaferry Road. I call Kellie Armstrong, who will have up to 10 minutes. Over to you, Kellie.

Ms K Armstrong: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for attending the Adjournment debate to address an issue that is not only about infrastructure but about public safety, community confidence and the basic expectation that government agencies should work together when lives are at risk.

The A20 Portaferry Road is a lifeline for the Ards peninsula. Thousands — commuters, schoolchildren, carers and local businesses — rely on it daily. I declare an interest: I live on the Ards peninsula and use the A20 every day. As all of us who use the A20 have seen repeatedly, that vital route is uniquely vulnerable when storms coincide with high tides. The recent storms, including storm Bram, have once again exposed the fragility of the road and the gaps in our response systems. During storm Bram, a school bus travelling along the A20 was engulfed by waves. Children who were on their way home from school being stranded by coastal flooding and hit by waves should never have happened, and it was avoidable. The road should have been closed earlier, and the fact that it was not highlights a failure in coordination between DFI Roads, the PSNI, local schools and the media.

It is not a new problem. In fact, the Assembly has debated the dangers of the A20 before. In the Adjournment debate on 12 March 2024, Members highlighted long-standing concerns about road safety along that exact stretch and emphasised the need for proactive measures and better planning. The issues raised then — poor visibility, unpredictable tidal surges and the need for timely interventions — are the same issues that we are dealing with today. Local news reports have also repeatedly documented the battering that the road takes during storms, with waves overtopping the carriageway and debris making it dangerous and impassable. These are not isolated

incidents but predictable events that occur when severe weather and high tides align.

Minister, this is where the wider context matters. We are already living with the consequences of climate change, such as more frequent storms, more severe tidal surges and more pressure on our coastal infrastructure, yet the Executive have still not agreed the third climate change adaptation programme. It has been sitting with the Executive for months. Let us be honest: the delay is the Executive's refusal to allow it to progress. At a time when communities such as mine on the Ards peninsula are facing the very real impacts of climate change, it is simply unacceptable that the vital adaptation plan is being held up for political reasons. Ministers and Members cannot, on one hand, express concern about flooding, coastal erosion and infrastructure resilience and, on the other, block the very programme that is designed to help us to prepare for and respond to those challenges. The delay has consequences in our communities and for roads, such as the A20, and the people who rely on them.

When we know that a storm is coming and that the high tide will coincide with it, the public expect there to be a clear, coordinated plan to close the A20 before people are put at risk. That requires DFI Roads, the PSNI, schools and the media to act in unison with shared information and responsibility. Today, I ask for clarity on three key points.

First, what proactive system is now in place to ensure that the A20 is closed before the conditions become dangerous? We know that the Met Office yellow warnings or higher give us advance notice; we know the tide tables — in fact, they are published online, and I look at them regularly — and we know the road's history. There is no reason for having last-minute decisions or for vehicles to be caught out. It is not acceptable to say that it is up to only the PSNI to close a road. The Minister has a responsibility for road safety.

Secondly, how will communication between agencies be improved? Schools must be informed early so that they can reroute buses. The PSNI must be ready to enforce closures. The media must be briefed promptly so that the public receive accurate and timely information. It cannot be a chain of individual decisions; it must be a coordinated response. Why is that not happening?

Thirdly, what contingency plans exist for the alternative internal peninsula route? When the A20 is closed, the alternative route must be clearly signposted, well communicated and safe. Residents have repeatedly raised concerns about the narrow roads where cars cannot pass safely, never mind an oil tanker, a milk tanker or a school bus. They have concerns about the lack of signage when diversions are put in place. That is a basic requirement, and it should not be left to chance. It is something that the Department for Infrastructure should have planned for and support should have been put in place to maintain road safety.

The people of the Ards peninsula deserve reassurance that lessons have been learned, not only from storm Bram but from every storm before it. They deserve to know that their children will not be on buses travelling through dangerous conditions with waves crashing over them. They deserve to know that their commute will not become a gamble. They deserve to know that government agencies are working together and not in silos.

The A20 will always be vulnerable to the impact of storms, especially when the waves come over from Strangford lough. As a resident who uses the road every day, I avoid the main route when the weather is bad, as I know that any wave could carry sand, seaweed, stones and, at times, part of the sea defences on to the road. However, Minister, our systems, planning and communication do not have to be vulnerable. With proper coordination, early closures and clear contingency routes, we can protect the road and the people who rely on it. It is not good enough to say that it is up to the PSNI to close a road or for the Education Authority to leave it to a driver of a school bus to make decisions about road safety; it is up to government to put in place emergency and contingency processes to protect all road users. It is certainly not good enough for some parties to wring their hands about flooding while blocking the very climate adaptation plan that would help us to prepare for it. The people of the Ards peninsula deserve better than political games when their safety is on the line.

I look forward to hearing about the concrete steps that the Minister and the Department for Infrastructure are taking to ensure that the events that took place during recent storms are not repeated and that the A20 and, indeed, all coastal routes are managed with the urgency and seriousness required.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): All other Members who speak will have approximately five minutes. I call Michelle McIlveen.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my constituency colleague for securing the Adjournment debate and the Minister for attending it.

The fact that the Portaferry Road has now been the subject of two Adjournment debates since the restoration of the Assembly underlines the strategic importance of the route. As has been said, the A20 Portaferry Road is a vital lifeline for communities across the Ards peninsula and beyond. Local constituents and businesses are hugely concerned about the recurring damage to the road and the need for earlier notification about the road closures.

While there are alternatives along the peninsula, as Ms Armstrong said, they are often unsuitable for the traffic that is diverted on to them, with many requiring considerable resurfacing and drainage work to make them safe.

5.30 pm

Storm Chandra last week and earlier events such as storm Bram brought heavy rain, tidal surges and severe winds that caused significant flooding and closures along the Portaferry Road. Entire sections of the carriageway were impassable. Residents and commuters were cut off by floodwater, debris and wave overtopping, and emergency services were left battling unpredictable conditions. We all saw images of vehicles stranded amid rising waters. As has been said, those events are not one-off occurrences but symptomatic of a shifting climate reality.

The coastal alignment of the A20, hugging the shores of Strangford lough, makes it especially vulnerable to tidal surges, wave action and rising sea levels. That is one reason that, when I was Minister for Regional Development, I established the coastal forum with the then Minister of the Environment, Mark Durkan. As the Minister will know, I have kept a keen interest in the running of that group. I was disappointed to note the gap between its meetings.

Coastal erosion is hugely significant for the entire Ards peninsula. I am acutely aware of the fact that the Department has had to repair road undermining and sea wall damage along that very route for some time. During my time as Minister, a structural survey was carried out at my behest, and works were subsequently undertaken.

It is a matter of record that severe weather events have repeatedly led to sea defence repairs to the Portaferry Road section, but we cannot and should not treat the issue as one of maintenance alone. To give credit where it is due, I thank Stephen Gardiner, the local section engineer, and his team. They have worked tirelessly, looking to undertake local improvement works and trying to access the money to do them. Following the previous Adjournment debate, which focused on various issues along the road, those works will include carriage resurfacing schemes in the vicinity of Portaferry and along stretches of the A20 and adjacent access roads. Resurfacing can go only so far, however, when the road's very foundations are threatened by relentless coastal forces.

That brings me to a key point: we must look at ring-fencing money for sea defences. Too often, coastal protection is the first thing to be squeezed in budget rounds, leaving front-line infrastructure vulnerable and the taxpayer ultimately paying for more reactive repairs than proactive protection.

I ask the Minister for a number of things, the first of which is to establish a dedicated, ring-fenced sea defence budget in the Department for Infrastructure that is targeted at strategic coastal road protection so that the issues on vital routes such as the A20 can be addressed. As the Minister will know, I have raised the matter recently in questions for written answer. Thus far, I have been disappointed with her responses. Secondly, I ask the Minister to develop a long-term coastal resilience strategy for the Ards peninsula based on robust climate modelling that anticipates future tidal and storm risk instead of reacting after damage occurs. We need to be much more proactive, not reactive. Finally, I ask the Minister to work with communities, councils and engineers to identify where enhanced defences can be installed before the next major storm hits.

Looking beyond sea defences, we must examine whether fundamentally different transport solutions might deliver resilience and economic benefit for our area. That is why I continue to raise the prospect of having a fixed crossing between Portaferry and Strangford. I know that the prospect of a bridge annoys Ms Armstrong, but we need to be bold and consider long-term infrastructure options. We should not ignore them simply because they are difficult; we should look at them because of their likely impact.

I am conscious that I have run out of time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I can let you have a little longer.

Miss McIlveen: Will you let me continue? Very good.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I always say that the timings are approximate.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

A bridge would provide an alternative route off the peninsula that does not depend on a coast-hugging road that is vulnerable to storm surge. It would improve traffic flow for local residents, visitors and emergency services. There is little doubt that a bridge would boost tourism and local commerce by making lower Ards and the rest of the peninsula more accessible all year round.

Importantly, in the context of the debate, a bridge would take the pressure off the A20 when that road is closed or unsafe. It would also provide a safer route. As local representatives, we are aware that the A20 is a notorious accident black spot that, sadly, has claimed many lives. Such a project should be carried out in tandem with the maintenance of a resilient infrastructure that future-proofs our transport network. We need to be ambitious in our planning to deliver for our communities safe, reliable roads and transport links that are capable of withstanding whatever nature throws at them.

Thank you very much for that.

Mr Nesbitt: I was very interested in what Michelle had to say about a bridge. If you spoke to road engineers today, they would probably tell you that they would build the A20 down the centre of the peninsula as a spine, with the side roads coming off it like ribs. However, we are where we are.

I have a great fondness for the A20. My fondness dates back to my membership of the Tufty Club. Here I look to see whether younger Members look puzzled — the Minister looks puzzled. The Tufty Club on road safety included a cycling proficiency initiative for schoolchildren, going back to the '60s — for Hansard, that is the 1960s. My reward for joining the Tufty Club was being allowed to cycle, under supervision, from Greyabbey down to Kircubbin on a wonderful, sunny, summer's day. It is a beautiful road on the shores of Strangford lough. At times, it offers wonderful glimpses of the Mournes and, of course, the iconic Scrabo Tower in the background. Sadly, it is also a road that has more than its fair share of road traffic collisions and fatalities. It starts at Teal Rocks: you are just out of the conurbation that is Newtownards on the A20, and you are into a bad bend where there have been repeated accidents. Nothing seems to be put in place to deal with that. It needs attention. Among those of us who have the honour of serving Strangford — I have that honour — and those within our local council chamber, the safety and accessibility of the road is well recognised as one of the most often highlighted local transport issues. In many respects, that is understandable, given that it is the most vital piece of infrastructure on the peninsula.

Not long after I was elected, I began engaging with others on coastal erosion, along with my late friend the great Angus Carson and, latterly, peninsula councillor Pete Wray. I pay particular tribute to Sandra Henderson of the County Down Rural Community Network. She manages the Ards peninsula coastal erosion group, of which, I know, some in the Chamber are members, as I am. It is a great group and very representative: elected representatives, community representatives, local business people, government officials, Ards and North Down Borough Council and the National Trust all come together in common purpose. That group has achieved a lot. When we started, responsibility for coastal erosion was shared by no fewer than five Departments and arm's-length bodies (ALBs). We now have it down to two Departments: Infrastructure and Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. However, I still think that we need to have a Department that leads on it. We also need to replace the coastal erosion policy, which dates back to 1967 and the secretary to the Ministry of Finance of the day, Sir Cecil Bateman. Some of us have seen that. It was typed on to an A4 page on an old Adler typewriter and had a scrawl from Sir Cecil saying, "Nothing to see here". The evidence in 2026 is that there is a lot to see here.

I am pleased that the group has made all that progress, but there is much more to be done to ensure sufficient investment in the road infrastructure and a limitation of the dangers during adverse weather events. I think about the recent storm Bram, when the coastguard, as well as the Fire and Rescue Service, were called out to rescue the men, women and children who were forced to abandon approximately 30 vehicles as the storm pushed an already high tide on to the road. I am incredibly grateful to our emergency services for their efforts at that time and on the many other occasions on which they have put

themselves at risk for the safety of our community.

I note that the Department is planning to spend £16,000 through Translink. I note that DFI Roads has no five-year plan, and I would be very happy to see the Minister address that. I also welcome the Department acknowledging the damage at Mount Stewart and Greyabbey after storm Bram, with a promise of repair following necessary consents. However, rather than being reactive, we really need a proactive five-year-plus plan to address the needs of the A20 and the people, like Kellie, who rely on the Portaferry Road day and daily.

Mr Mathison: I will not speak for long, because the issues have been covered very clearly by other Members but also because I am hosting an Education Committee event and have lots of stakeholders who are looking to speak to me about curriculum reform. I will probably have to dip out after this speech. I have a number of questions for the Minister, and I will certainly watch the debate recording to hear those answers. That can, maybe, be followed up in writing if need be.

It has already been referenced that severe weather events are becoming more and more common and are only likely to become more so as the impacts of climate change become more obvious. It is coastal communities and coastal road users, as Kellie so clearly articulated, who are often the most immediately and severely affected during severe weather events and storms. I am very grateful to Kellie for securing this Adjournment debate today, which follows on from the debate brought by Michelle McIlveen in, I believe, 2024, because that stretch of road has been severely impacted. There have been some issues around road safety and tragic fatalities, but the recent weather events have had a profound impact on the road and have reduced the confidence of road users when it comes to using the road safely when we enter any period of bad weather.

There are two main issues that I want to highlight. First, as has been referenced already, there is a need for clear action when it comes to the approach taken to road safety in advance of severe weather events. We are all aware of the horrendous incident back in December, when school buses and multiple other vehicles were stranded on that coastal road. Emergency services could not access those vehicles because it was not safe to get to them, and it was the local first responders who stepped up to help in the initial stages. That was a terrifying experience for the schoolchildren on the bus and for all the road users who were caught up in that. I would have thought that, with a proper early warning alert system, that could have been avoided.

We need clarity on who is responsible for that to ensure that the relevant agencies, Translink, local schools and the public, through whatever channels can be utilised — perhaps through the local council — can be given early warnings about the safety of using that road or otherwise and that can lead to early decisions on road closure. Those decisions can be revised, but, given the incidents that we saw, the public need confidence that those systems are in place. I am keen to hear from the Minister what systems currently operate in DFI on that engagement and those early alerts and what can be done to improve them.

The second issue that I want to raise is the longer-term picture for the road. A serious issue is arising. Coastal erosion has been a common theme among the other contributors today, but it is also about the severe weather incidents that are battering that road. The road was never designed to carry the volume of traffic that it currently carries, but there was probably no understanding that the impacts of coastal erosion would be so severe. There are genuine concerns about the long-term stability of that road. I understand that a stretch of road coming out of Newtownards is already earmarked for emergency repair by DFI, and anyone who uses that road regularly will be aware of the multiple sections where the verge at the side is clearly unstable, where the sea wall is damaged and where the stability of the road is undoubtedly questionable.

I would really like the Minister to set out the strategic long-term plans for the road; how it is being protected from coastal erosion for the future; how the sea wall will be strengthened and enhanced; whether there are sections of coastal defences and rock armour that need to be repaired; and, indeed, whether rock armour is the appropriate response or whether other engineering interventions can be delivered to defend that road against erosion. Ultimately, is the road safe and stable in the medium term, and, if not, what are the Department's plans to provide a safe and sustainable road to carry traffic from Portaferry to Newtownards? I welcome clarity on all that.

I will finish with a reference to the Tufty Club. You will be pleased to know, Mike, that it carried on right into the 1980s. I thoroughly enjoyed the lessons involving Tufty during my primary-school days.

5.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): I call Harry Harvey. No doubt, you were in the Tufty Club as well.

Mr Harvey: I sure was. *[Laughter.]* First, I thank my constituency colleague for securing this evening's Adjournment debate. The Portaferry Road has been brought to the attention of the House on many occasions in relation to road safety concerns, but, unfortunately, to little avail. Like many of my constituents on the Ards peninsula, I feel that the Department is all too often tone deaf when it comes to the dangers that are presented by the Portaferry Road. In this instance, the danger is due to the impact of adverse weather on the road, as has been highlighted in the debate.

Setting aside ongoing concerns about speed and general poor road maintenance, the impact of recent storms, during and after those weather events, has shown the vulnerability of that key transport corridor to the natural elements. Most recently, storm Chandra closed the road when water pooling and debris made it impassable. All too often, that is the case. Just before Christmas, storm Bram also closed the road, with significant flooding, particularly in the vicinity of the sailing club. Dozens of cars had to be abandoned due to floodwaters, and a bus full of schoolchildren was left stranded. Motorists affected on that occasion reported the water being as deep as 2 to 3 feet in places, with the coastguard and other agencies having to attend the scene.

It is acutely evident that strategic investment is required to ensure that the Portaferry Road can withstand more readily coastal waves and spray. We all acknowledge that a low-lying coastal route such as that will never be totally storm-risk free. However, we should not be in a position in which that transport corridor, which serves the entire Ards peninsula, is so poorly equipped to combat storm weather that it closes every time that we have bad weather. On the occasions when closure is necessary, an improved or upgraded diversion route should be available that can withstand the volume of vehicular traffic that is usually found on the A20. During adverse weather, diverting traffic along narrow, rural roads that motorists are unfamiliar with is another disaster waiting to happen. DFI should consider that issue as part of its contingency planning for any future A20 closures.

Road drainage is an area that I call on DFI to consider in respect of flooding along the Portaferry Road. I am not an engineer, but surely we can consider options that limit the impact of tidal surges, such as better drainage. Better drainage is necessary along sections of the coastal wall, and other areas are in desperate need of reinforcement for the benefit of road safety and the protection of infrastructure.

In recent years, the prevalence of winter storms has undoubtedly increased. Their impacts are taking a toll on the Ards coastline, with erosion and the destabilisation of infrastructure, such as the A20 Portaferry Road. A road as vital to the community as the A20 should not fail at the first sign of a storm. I join other Members in calling on the Department to urgently consider what can be done to ensure that that key transport corridor in my constituency can become more resilient during adverse weather events.

Mr O'Toole: I am obviously not a representative for the very scenic and wonderful constituency of Strangford, but I know it pretty well. I grew up just across the lough on the Lecale peninsula, and I know the A20 road pretty well. I have engaged with my colleague Councillor Joe Boyle, who works, as other representatives do, on the issues that are caused by disruption on the A20.

All the way down the Ards peninsula, at the southern tip, there is reliance, as Mike Nesbitt said, on the A20 to get to school, work, daily activities and other vital appointments, whether they are at the Ulster Hospital or in Belfast city centre or Newtownards. The road is critical. As is often the case, the storm disruption that disrupts the A20 might often disrupt the ferry crossing from Portaferry to Strangford, which puts even more emphasis on planning, preparing and building in resilience for the residents of areas along the A20 from Portaferry up to Kircubbin, Greyabbey and all the way to Newtownards.

It is clear that climate change is happening. You just need to go to an area that experiences coastal erosion and is also low-lying and exposed. Storm damage, when it comes, is very likely to disrupt everyday life. People who live along the A20 are in that category. In recent months, storm Bram and storm Chandra have disrupted everyday life for residents in that part of the world.

I think that, earlier today, there was a session for elected representatives on weather warnings. I am sure that that brings in the Minister's Department. It is becoming an issue that we all, as public representatives, have to be more aware of and prepared for because, whether it is sharing the infographics on social

media or getting a quick response from NIE Networks, Translink, DFI Roads and all the other relevant statutory agencies, it is going to be a more fundamental part of our lives. For those of us who live in areas where everyday infrastructure is almost certain to be disrupted, there needs to be better planning, so it would be helpful to hear from the Minister what structures will be put in place to improve the regularity and consistency of the response. I am sure that the response is very serious and that her Department works very hard at that. However, if, for example, as Michelle McIlveen said earlier, a more focused set of work on coastal communities that are impacted on by storm-related disruption could be put in place or restored, that would be welcome.

Mike Nesbitt talked about a five-year plan. Clearly, specific interventions are needed. For example, you have only to drive through Kircubbin to see the fragility of the sea wall there and how vulnerable it is. You do not need to be an expert on coastal erosion, storms or retaining walls, or to be an engineer, to see quite how fragile things are when you drive through Kircubbin. People there and, obviously, further down the peninsula in Portaferry need to know whether there is an investment plan. I do not know what that plan is or what the right interventions would be at different parts of the A20. However, if there is to be one, it would be helpful for the Minister to tell us whether any consideration has gone into making a bid to the multi-year Budget, which I hope is passed, even if it needs change. I might not be hugely supportive of lots that is in it, but we need a multi-year Budget of some kind. It would be helpful to understand what the investment proposals are with regard to the A20.

More generally, we need to support rural communities, which are not going to experience huge new dualled roads or get high-speed rail. There is not going to be a new dual carriageway going down the Ards peninsula. I do not think that there should be one. The Ards peninsula is not going to be included in the all-island strategic rail review. No one is expecting that. All that the people of Greyabbey, Kircubbin and Portaferry are asking for is that there be considered and planned investment in that road, which they rely on. As Mike Nesbitt said, if engineers were looking at the road now, it would probably not be built in that location. However, that is where it is, so it needs to be properly planned for and defended and its resilience invested in. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Minister, I look forward to hearing from you. You have up to 10 minutes.

Ms Kimmins (The Minister for Infrastructure): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.]* I thank Ms Armstrong for instigating this important debate. The impact of storms on the A20 is an important concern for Members across the Chamber. I have listened intently to the comments and issues that have been raised. When it comes to what you and your constituents are having to deal with, particularly in the aftermath of storms, the concerns are very clear.

Since I was appointed as Minister a year ago today, I have been very focused on what I can do to improve people's lives because, for me, people are central to everything that we all — particularly my Department — do.

The Department's focus on weather-related preparedness activities is an important part of that. Those are aimed at reducing the potential adverse consequences of storms, particularly on our health and safety, economic activity and the environment.

It is no secret that we continually operate in a constrained financial position. Without continued investment in our infrastructure it will be more difficult to do all that we need to do. However, I try to maximise what I am able to deliver with the budget and the resources available to me. As Members will be aware, following the restructuring of central government Departments in May 2016, my Department assumed the lead role in the strategic coordination of the response to severe weather emergencies and took responsibility for key functions, including working with other organisations to ensure that emergency preparations are as good as they can be and providing knowledge and expertise to inform the actions of any multi-agency response to severe weather emergencies.

The frequency of extreme weather events — we had another one last week, and we have had warnings over the past couple of days of further potential events — has resulted in the need for ongoing, continuous improvement of our emergency response to weather events. With every incident, we are continually learning, and we are looking at what we can expect in future. There have been some excellent examples, and it is important to highlight where there was good work following storms Éowyn, Amy and Bram, which some Members have mentioned, when many roads were closed

because of fallen trees and flooding. The staff in my Department work extremely hard to ensure that we are clearing obstructions and reopening roads as quickly as possible and that we work properly in cooperation with all the other organisations to ensure road-user safety. A lot of that work goes unseen, and it is important to highlight that, particularly as many of our staff potentially put themselves at risk when dealing with such incidents.

We know that the storms continue to increase in frequency, and so does the risk to road safety and the associated disruption and cost, particularly on our coastal routes, which are more susceptible to the impact of high winds, as Members have explained, with sea walls being overtopped and the associated debris and flooding. Whilst we all have a responsibility to keep ourselves safe when we travel, we also appreciate our role in contributing to that responsibility, and that is important to me.

The A20 is an essential feature of life for those who live on the Ards peninsula and the many thousands of people who use the road daily, including the Members who are here. It is also a popular tourist drive, and traffic volumes can be much higher in holiday periods and on summer weekends. As we all know, the road runs parallel to the shoreline at Strangford lough for a significant length. While that gives it a rich and beautiful character, it makes it particularly susceptible to the impact of storms, which we have seen manifested recently during and after storm Bram in December and, last week, when storm Chandra hit.

I am very aware of the impacts of storms on road users on the A20 and on our coastal roads — on all roads — across council areas. We routinely review our response to storm events, and I am keen to take forward any actions for improvement that are within my Department's remit. A number of Members talked about the importance of closing the A20 in a managed way. It is important to outline the processes involved in that.

Roads are closed in emergencies by the PSNI under article 32 powers on preventing danger to or from traffic or warning of an obstruction. The PSNI will place or direct the placement of signs to instruct traffic initially on-site. My Department's powers in relation to road closures extend to closures in a non-emergency capacity. However, we will also commit resources in support of PSNI closures, such as the closure of roads due to a road traffic collision or to provide a more robust closure in order to fully protect the travelling public. The Department also uses the TrafficWatchNI website, social media and variable-message signage to communicate closures, as far in advance as we can, to the travelling public. Traffic information and CCTV monitoring technology is used to assist in the management of any traffic disruption. Regular coordination meetings are held, particularly during storm events, in order to update partners and work alongside our partners, including the blue-light services, the Education Authority, Translink and councils. Those meetings are chaired by the PSNI in instances that have been assessed as "risk to life".

6.00 pm

As I said, we are the lead Department for the strategic coordination of the overall emergency response to storm impacts on roads as well as the response to significant flooding, which is why that multi-agency response is so important and why pre-planned arrangements for a more coordinated response to severe weather warnings are critical. Once we receive a weather warning, officials in my Department assess the likely impact of the forecast conditions and take whatever steps they can to ensure that resources are in place to respond to incidents as quickly and as safely as possible. At times, my Department's response may involve working alongside multi-agency partners to maximise staff capacity to deal with all the potential impacts in advance and as we experience them. As I mentioned, we will get the messaging out as best we can. There is always ongoing work to decide when the best time to do that is, and, as I said, we are constantly reviewing messaging after every event to ensure that we improve and enhance our response.

Following recent storms, there have been numerous reports of flooding, fallen trees and other obstructions that our out-of-hours contractor will help address. We have seen recently where issues have been quickly resolved. In addition, inspections of coastal defences have been undertaken, and, where damage was caused, emergency repairs have been done where possible, with other localised repairs programmed for the future.

I will go into a wee bit more detail on that, because I know that Members are keen to hear what we have done and what we plan to do. As with everything, a lot of it can be budget-dependent. Any longer-term repairs come out of the structural maintenance budget, which covers overall roads maintenance.

My Department is responsible for maintaining the road/sea line boundary with Strangford

lough, including the supporting element for the road, which is the retaining-type structures. The current arrangements for the boundary between the carriageway and the sea along the A20 are varied. The main feature is a masonry sea wall, separated from the carriageway by a narrow grass verge, typically ranging in width from about half a metre to a metre. The boundary is largely a masonry wall, ranging in height from 0·3 metres to 0·7 metres. On occasion, as Members will be aware, storm damage has led to rock armour being placed behind the wall in the more exposed areas. In addition, there are areas of rock armour separated from the carriageway by a verge, although that verge tends to be significantly wider at such locations.

As I said, numerous reactive repairs have been carried out to coastal defences in recent years following the ongoing damage that has been caused, primarily during the storms that we have mentioned. That spend equates to about £173,700 over the past five years. After storm Bram, however, we identified approximately £650,000 worth of damage to the coastal defences in the County Down area. The cost of repairs and clean-up is expected to be in the region of £650,000. The sea defences immediately adjacent to the carriageway are often maintained as part of the road network, which is why repair costs come out of the structural maintenance budget, and are frequently an integral part of the road structure. That tends not to be the case where the sea defences form part of other structures such as a harbour. Where erosion threatens the road structure, DFI will monitor the threat and seek the most appropriate remedy in partnership with other bodies. The carriageway not only functions as a means of access that is vital for economic, social and educational activity but facilitates critical infrastructure such as our water, sewers, power and telecommunications. Managed retreat, particularly for A-class roads such as the A20, is therefore not deemed appropriate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Minister, have you got much more?

Ms Kimmins: No, I am nearly done.

There have been several requests to install a crash barrier. There is, however, also the desire to keep the open nature of the vista from the road over Strangford lough.

We can clearly see the competing issues that we have, and a range of bodies is involved. Members mentioned the coastal forum, and I was pleased that we were able to reinstate its meetings just before Christmas. Minister Muir and I co-chaired the meeting of the forum just before Christmas, and I look forward to its work programme continuing.

Very quickly, I will address a few other points. I am happy to respond in writing on anything that I have not been able to cover in detail. Flood protection measures, which Harry Harvey mentioned, and gully cleaning form part of our ongoing work on flood management and of our routine maintenance to try to get ahead of some things as best we can.

Members will know that the feasibility of a bridge has been looked at. Like anything, we can keep that under review. A significant cost has been suggested: I think that the figure is in and around £300 million and potentially more. When we look at the likes of Narrow Water bridge, however, we see that not all such things remain a pipe dream. If there is good support and a strong economic case for it, why not? I am happy to keep that under review, albeit it is budget-dependent.

I thank Ms Armstrong for bringing the Adjournment debate to the House and all the Members who contributed to it. I will continue to work alongside all my Executive colleagues to get additional investment so that we can be more prepared in the future and deal with the issues that have arisen. I am grateful to Members for the conciliatory tone of the debate, and I look forward to working with you all going forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Thank you, Minister.

Adjourned at 6.05 pm.