



# Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 1 July 2024  
Volume 162, No 3

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 1 July 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statements

### Good Jobs Employment Rights Consultation

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister for the Economy that he wishes to make a statement.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** In February, I outlined four key objectives for the economy, one of which is to increase the proportion of the working-age population in good jobs. Ensuring that workers and their families can rely on a decent and secure income is important in its own right. Good jobs also help to attract and retain people in the workforce, thereby reducing our high level of economic inactivity, and there is compelling evidence that good jobs boost workers' productivity and health.

Today, I am launching a consultation on how to ensure that our employment framework supports good jobs. The consultation seeks views on four aspects of a good job as defined by the Carnegie framework.

The first theme is "terms of employment". Over recent years, we have seen a growth in insecure and precarious forms of employment. An extreme example is zero-hours contracts, which do not guarantee the worker any hours at all. Some businesses have a genuine need for short-term or emergency cover. However, zero-hours contracts deny workers many of the rights provided by a regular employment contract. They do not ensure a stable income for workers and their families, nor do they provide workers with certainty over when and how many hours they will work so that they can plan their finances and their family responsibilities. The consultation therefore seeks views on how to ensure that flexible contracts meet the interests of the employee as well as the employer.

There are potential lessons in that from the South of Ireland. Legislation there restricts the

use of zero-hours contracts to very specific circumstances where work is of a casual nature, done in emergency circumstances or needed to cover routine absences of staff. People who regularly work more than their contracted hours can be placed on a contract with a band of hours that reflects their actual working pattern. People are paid compensation when they are called into work but do not receive their expected hours or if they are required to be available but are not called into work. I am seeking the public's view on those and other potential ways of tackling the problems associated with zero-hours contracts.

I also want views on tackling bogus self-employment. That refers to a situation where a person is, to all intents and purposes, a worker but is contracted on a self-employed basis. That miscategorisation denies the worker basic protections such as holiday pay, the national minimum wage, family-related leave and pay and redundancy rights. The consultation seeks evidence on the sectors where that is a problem and on the best way to deal with it.

Members should be aware that this is a complicated issue, which interacts with tax law, including reserved matters, so the cooperation of the British Government may be necessary.

Agency workers are another category of people who are often called upon to fill short-term absences or to react to peaks in demand. The casual nature of that employment relationship means that it is important to have checks and balances in place. My Department is seeking views on closing the so-called Swedish derogation. That is a legal loophole that permits agency workers to be paid less than their permanent counterparts, even after 12 weeks on the job.

The consultation invites submissions on how to strengthen the enforcement powers of the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate (EAS), which regulates the private recruitment sector. Members will be familiar with the disgraceful practice of fire and rehire. Some employers use that tactic to put pressure on

workers to accept reduced terms and conditions in order to keep their jobs. I want to hear views on what action could be taken to combat that practice here.

The second theme is pay and benefits. Minimum wage legislation is currently reserved in London. In preparation for that power being transferred to the Assembly, I have commissioned research into how it could be used to promote the living wage. In terms of our existing powers, I am consulting on legislation that will ensure that tips are passed on to workers in full.

Calculating holiday pay entitlements can be complex, particularly for people who work irregular hours or seasonally. That creates a risk that individuals will not receive their correct entitlement. The calculation of holiday pay has been the subject of several high-profile court cases over recent years. I am therefore seeking views on how to make it easier for employers and workers to calculate holiday pay.

While remote working has many benefits, it has muddied the line between when someone is working and when they are not working. It is important that people can properly switch off outside their working hours and get proper rest and relaxation. I am therefore consulting on how to strengthen workers' right to disconnect.

The chapter of the consultation on voice and representation seeks views on how to ensure that workers have a voice in the decisions that affect them. Trade unions play a critical role in articulating the interests of workers and in ensuring that workers share in the benefits of economic growth alongside employers and society as a whole. However, various outdated restrictions make it difficult for labour to organise, so the consultation seeks views on lowering the bar on trade union recognition from 21 to 11 workers, making it easier for trade unions to enter workplaces and reducing the notice period for industrial action from seven to five days. In addition, trade unions can currently use only postal ballots to survey their members. Therefore, I am consulting on allowing trade unions to ballot their members using modern technology.

The fourth theme of the consultation is promoting a healthy work-life balance. A good job allows an individual to balance their work with their family and private life. The consultation seeks views on allowing a statutory request for flexible working to be made on the first day of employment, rather than having to wait 26 weeks, and to enable two statutory flexible working requests to be made in a rolling

12-month period. It also asks how we can support workers who need to take time off to care for a loved one. The consultation proposes giving carers the right to take up to one week of unpaid leave per year. It is also my goal to ensure that carers can avail themselves of paid leave. My officials estimate that, initially, that could cost £6 million for the HMRC system-change costs and an annual administration fee payable to HMRC to administer the statutory payment, plus up to £60 million a year in payments, which would have to be funded from our block grant. That would be a significant level of funding in the context of the financial constraints imposed on the Executive. I am committed to working with my Executive colleagues to make sure that we find the best way to support carers. The consultation will therefore be used to seek further views on the role that carer's leave could play in a wider support than the Executive can offer carers.

Currently, there is no distinct right to leave and/or statutory pay for working parents whose newborn requires neonatal care. The consultation proposes to give working parents of newborns admitted to neonatal care an additional week of statutory leave and/or pay for each week that their child is in hospital, up to a maximum of 12 weeks. The leave element would be a day-1 right.

The consultation proposes stronger protections for pregnant women against redundancy, as well as extending the current protected period from the date when a woman returns to work from maternity leave to 18 months after giving birth. It proposes similar protections for parents taking adoption leave or shared parental leave. Before making any such employee redundant, an employer would be required to offer a suitable alternative vacancy where possible.

Under current law, employees can take one or two consecutive weeks of paid paternity leave within the first eight weeks of their child's life or adoption placement. That leave must be taken in a single block and cannot be split.

The consultation proposes to allow paternity leave to be split into non-consecutive weeks of leave so that it can be used in a way that best serves the needs of the parents. It also proposes to abolish the 26-week qualifying period and to make paternity leave a day-1 right.

The package of measures promotes good jobs through the comprehensive modernisation of employment law, which includes tackling zero-hours contracts; protection for agency workers; proper holiday pay; the right to disconnect;

better trade union representation; more flexible working; and better leave entitlements for carers and parents whose newborns are in neonatal care. Those changes and others that are in the consultation document will benefit workers, businesses and society as a whole. In implementing the changes, we need to be mindful that micro and small businesses, many of which operate on tight margins, make up the vast majority of our businesses. My Department will therefore use the consultation period to assess the impact of changes on smaller businesses in order to ensure that they can continue to thrive as part of a good economy with good jobs.

Given the wide range and detailed nature of the package, I have extended the consultation period from the standard eight weeks to 13 weeks. It is important to note, however, that we have only two and a half years left in this mandate, so my Department, the Committee and the Assembly will have to work at pace to ensure that the Bill is delivered within the available time. The purpose of my good jobs agenda is to ensure that working people can provide their families with a decent and secure income and meet their family and caring responsibilities. The consultation will help us to draft a Bill that furthers that good jobs economy. I look forward to working with Members, the business community and trade unions as we design and implement this important Bill.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Sinéad McLaughlin, I remind Members that this is an opportunity for questions, not statements, and that Members should be concise.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Minister, I really welcome the consultation. It is very comprehensive, and I look forward to engaging on all aspects of it.

There are huge disparities between Carers NI's financial modelling on paid carer's leave and your Department's financial modelling on it. How do you account for those differences? Will you assure the House that you are not rolling back on the commitment and ambition for carers to get paid and be supported for the valuable contribution that they make to our society each and every day?

**Mr C Murphy:** I thank the Member for her remarks about the overall piece of work, and I am very much looking forward to getting it out there and getting responses back to it. If there are disparities, I am very happy for them to become part of the consultation so that we can tease them out. We in the Department certainly recognise that we have to deal with HMRC. You

have to pay for anything that is outside what it currently provides, and you have an ongoing administrative charge with it. There is an estimation of what the cost may be, but this measure is demand-led, so these are estimates of the potential cost to the Executive. It is my ambition to have paid carer's leave, but, clearly, we recognise the financial constraints that we are in and that we have to wait to see what the consultation throws up to us. That is an ambition that we have, and we will have to work with Executive colleagues on the back of the consultation to see how we can develop that.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for his statement and for providing the consultation information to the Committee in advance of publication last week.

Mr Speaker, the consultation covers a lot of ground. There are quite a large number of proposals and calls for evidence, and I hope that you will indulge me if I ask a bit of a longer question on behalf of the Committee for the Economy. Some of the proposed legislation would, apparently, simply replicate in Northern Ireland measures that are already in place in the rest of the United Kingdom. Those include access to unpaid carer's leave and neonatal leave and further protections from redundancy for pregnant women. The consultation also refers to other matters, including zero-hours contracts, hire and fire and working time directive compliance. Does the Minister agree that it is important that there is an in-depth consultation on job quality and data collection and that those are surveyed? Will the Minister explain why he did not simply split the consultation and the subsequent legislation into a UK alignment Bill and a wider trade union reform and other matters Bill?

**Mr C Murphy:** It is the case that the bulk of what we are dealing with here is devolved to us. We have to set the standards for our own economy and our own particular circumstances. We are, largely, a small- and medium-sized enterprise economy, and we have to recognise that. This is a fairly comprehensive consultation package.

The Member will know that we need to move towards legislation very quickly on the other side of that consultation. We have to get that consultation going with the Committee.

**12.15 pm**

Some matters can be addressed through guidance or other measures. We will certainly look at that if the consultation throws that up,

but we have responsibility for our own employment law and for modernising that, and we have responsibility to set those terms in ways that benefit our own economy and set of particular circumstances.

**Mr McGuigan:** I thank the Minister for his statement and for bringing forward the consultation on what will be significant proposals on important issues for workers and families. Will he provide an update on the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2022?

**Mr C Murphy:** The Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act requires the existing entitlements for parents who sadly experience the loss of a child to be extended to parents who suffer a miscarriage. It also requires the overall right to pay for that leave to be made a day-1 right. My Department consulted on those issues in late 2022. I wish to take into account the outcome of that consultation before determining the next steps. In the meantime, my officials are continuing to engage with HMRC on the IT system changes that are necessary to bring the new right into operation by April 2026.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, Minister, for your statement. There is certainly plenty in it that my party will hopefully support when it responds to the consultation.

Does the flexible working right from the first day of employment cover working from home?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes. There is a recognition that the system of work has changed for everyone since the pandemic. A variety of people work from home. Some of the proposals cover your entitlement to be off when you are at home in order to recognise that you have your own space for rest and relaxation, but also to try to recognise that the system of work is not the one that we had five or six years ago, and that many people work from home directly. The consultation has begun and is fairly wide-ranging. It will throw up particular questions that may not have been anticipated, although quite a bit of pre-consultation has been done to bring it this far. If other issues are thrown up that relate to specific areas like working from home, we are happy to consider those as part of the consultation and include them in the response on the other side of it.

**Ms Ferguson:** Will the Minister provide an update on the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act 2022?

**Mr C Murphy:** The Assembly passed the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act in 2022. Under that legislation, my Department can bring forward regulations to introduce a new right for workers who are victims of domestic abuse to access 10 days' paid leave. I fully support that progressive legislation, which will provide valuable support to victims of domestic abuse. I want to progress that alongside the wider work on the employment rights Bill. That is why I intend to launch a consultation on how the Department can shape the regulations that are needed to introduce that important new employment right later this week.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions to the Minister for the Economy.

### **North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety**

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement.

**Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health):** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement about the twenty-fifth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the health and food safety sectoral format, which was held in Armagh on Thursday past, 27 June 2024. I chaired the meeting, junior Minister Aisling Reilly MLA attended as the accompanying Minister and Stephen Donnelly TD, Minister for Health, represented the Government of Ireland. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Reilly, and I make it on behalf of both of us.

I will begin with health. The Council welcomed the ongoing engagement between the Departments of Health in both jurisdictions in the context of the North/South Ministerial Council health and food safety work programme, and noted that a review of that work programme is ongoing. Ministers noted that a revised work programme will be developed by sponsor Departments in the coming months and then presented at the next NSMC sectoral meeting.

The Council welcomed the continued cooperation of both Departments in the health sector since the last meeting.

That cooperation includes the following: progress following the successful implementation of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act

(Northern Ireland) 2021; continued progress on the development and implementation of strategies to prevent harm related to alcohol and drug misuse in both jurisdictions; continued engagement on opportunities to cooperate on common elements of substance abuse strategies across both jurisdictions; the potential for further collaboration on issues connected with alcohol and drug use, such as the sharing of learning through the North/South alcohol policy advisory group; the update on obesity prevention, including partnership through Safefood; suicide prevention initiatives in both jurisdictions, including joint working on the self-harm registry and the potential for further joint working on suicide prevention; updates on the All-Island Congenital Heart Disease Network; the update on cross-border emergency planning and emergency response and the fact that both Health Departments will work collaboratively to seek ways to cooperate further on emergency planning and emergency response; the pharmacy update, particularly the information regarding the upcoming all-island medication safety conference; and the update on joint funding applications under the PEACE PLUS programme.

During the meeting, Ministers received a presentation on cancer care and cooperation delivered by officials. The Council welcomed the significant developments by both jurisdictions in improving cancer services for people on the island of Ireland, including the continued cooperation and expansion of radiotherapy services at Altnagelvin Hospital and further cooperation on services provided through the North West Cancer Centre; the ongoing work of the Ireland-Northern Ireland-National Cancer Institute (NCI) Cancer Consortium and its role in securing Health Research Board funding to support the priority thematic areas of the consortium, with the overall aim of advancing cancer research and innovation across the island in partnership with the NCI; the award, in June 2023, of Government of Ireland funding to the Cancer Fund for Children, including funding through the Shared Island Fund, to develop a second therapeutic residential centre that will be accessible to children and their families across the island of Ireland; and the ongoing and concerted effort and engagement in improving cancer research and clinical trials at an all-island scale and the fact that both Administrations are working together to develop projects to improve cancer services for patients across both jurisdictions, including efforts to identify funding streams to facilitate that work, including the exploration of further opportunities to avail themselves of Shared Island funding.

The Council went on to note the scale of the climate and biodiversity crisis and the opportunity for the health sector to support biodiversity throughout its estates. Ministers noted the role of the health sector in promoting the physical and mental health co-benefits of actions to support biodiversity and address climate change; the intention of both Departments of Health to engage in discussions on climate change and loss of biodiversity; work to develop shared areas of interest to protect biodiversity and address climate change on the island; and the commitment to report on that at the next NSMC sectoral meeting.

On food safety, Ministers welcomed the achievements of Safefood since the last meeting and the valuable contribution that it makes through its various activities. They include a progress report from Safefood on the high-level achievements and updates in relation to its public health role to promote food safety and healthy eating advice to the public and those involved in providing food on the island of Ireland. The body has developed and delivered various public health campaigns across all media; developed various all-island networks and programmes to promote food safety and healthy eating; promoted new working partnerships and all-island collaboration; and developed and distributed various resources in educational settings. Further, the body has carried out research, including research relating to meat thermometers; handwashing; food hypersensitivity; the use of antimicrobials in animals; convenience foods; costs of a healthy food basket; food offered to children in social activity centres; whole-system approaches to childhood obesity; plant-based dairy alternatives; children's diets; food supplements; portion-control tools; fiscal and pricing food policies; and building sustainability into national healthy eating guidelines.

The Council approved Safefood's 2024 business plan and recommended budget/grant provision, and noted the position regarding Safefood's business plans and budgets for 2017 and 2018 and the 2017-19 corporate plan.

Ministers noted that the business plans for 2019, 2020, 2022 and 2023 and the corporate plans for 2020-22 and 2023-25 will be presented for consideration at a future meeting following approval by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland and the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland. The Council noted that the Safefood annual report and accounts for 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 have been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas.



Ministers welcomed the commencement by Safefood of a process to identify suitable candidates for appointment to the Safefood advisory committee, and the NSMC will be invited to consider nominees at a future meeting. The Council welcomed Safefood's progress and leadership on climate change. It noted further planned sustainability work and plans for further alignment of many operational public health programmes and activities towards the achievement of the UN sustainable development goals that are relevant to Safefood's remit.

Finally, the Council agreed that the next NSMC health and food safety meeting will be held this autumn.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. North/South collaboration on health is extremely important to my party and was, indeed, the subject of an Opposition motion last month. I welcome the progress across a range of issues, as outlined by the Minister. With specific regard to the progress on the strategies to prevent harm —

**Mr Speaker:** I remind the Member that we need a question, not a statement, please.

**Mr Durkan:** — related to alcohol and drug misuse, will the Minister commit to exploring and exploiting opportunities to improve addiction services by looking at them on a cross-border basis?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his statement and his question. I can commit to that, yes. Cross-border cooperation on alcohol and drug misuse, which does not respect a boundary or a border, is something that I discussed with Minister Donnelly last Thursday in Armagh. I would like to see that work brought forward in the work programme that is being developed for our consideration in the autumn.

**Mrs Dillon:** I thank the Minister for his statement, in which there is a lot of positive stuff. Minister, as you know, we met the Oireachtas Committee last week, and I thank you for taking a few moments to come up and meet us. On both sides of the border, North and South, women's health has, as you know, suffered greatly as a result of inequalities. Did you and Minister Donnelly have any conversations about women's health? If not, are there plans for the issue to be included in the upcoming work programme in order to address all aspects of women's health, including maternal health, reproductive health, cancer

and heart health? All those issues are a real challenge for women because of inequalities.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for her question. I have to be honest and say that women's health, as a specific agenda item, was not discussed in great detail. Cancer was discussed in considerable detail, in particular the need for this Administration to bring forward a cancer research strategy. I would like to think that that will, of course, include a section that is relevant to women's health. As it happens, I will have a Zoom call with my Welsh counterpart later this afternoon, and, certainly, women's health will be part of that agenda.

The Member knows that I am keen for this body and its Executive to look at the idea of gender budgeting, the impact of how we spend our money and what that means for men and women, because there are areas in which the outcomes are, frankly, grossly imbalanced, and that needs to be addressed. The way to start that is to collect the data, which we are not necessarily doing.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you, Minister. My question follows on from what your statement said about cancer. We all know that cancer does not respect boundaries, persons or anything else and that all-island cancer research is a good thing, but we need our own cancer research strategy for Northern Ireland. Will you commit to bringing one forward in this mandate?

**Mr Nesbitt:** If I heard the Member correctly, she asked for a commitment to bring forward a cancer research strategy within this mandate. I hope to please the Member by going a little further: I would like to do that within this calendar year — that is my objective — and, certainly, within the mandate.

**Ms Bradshaw:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that part of it was about the discussion on the scale of the climate and biodiversity crisis and the opportunities for the health sector. I am particularly interested in the decarbonisation of our healthcare sector. What firm action will be taken?

## 12.30 pm

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for her question. I wish to explore that with senior officials. I noted the discussion that we had on what the health sector can do on biodiversity and climate change. I then stayed on as Minister O'Dowd's accompanying Minister for the sectoral meeting on infrastructure. I am not criticising the officials who were there for the

health meeting, but there was a detailed presentation at the infrastructure meeting about what can be done on biodiversity. I brought that back with me from Armagh, and I want to inject it into the Department of Health to ask, "How can we learn from it? How can we mirror it? How can we expand on our current plans?".

**Mr Chambers:** I thank the Minister for his statement, and I trust that the meeting served as an opportunity for an early face-to-face engagement with his ministerial counterpart in the Republic of Ireland. Cross-border cancer treatment is an area of collaboration that appears to be working well. Will the Minister commit to tasking his officials with continuing to do all that they can on cross-border cooperation to ensure that patients receive cancer care and treatment that is as timely as possible?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his question. I can absolutely give that commitment. It was the first time that I had met Stephen Donnelly, and, for my part, I thought that we got on extremely well. I look forward to working with him. I will have no difficulty doing so and will enjoy working with him. He is obviously well across his brief and has some great ideas. I talked about my proposed initiative for the autumn to tackle health inequalities, and he told me about something that he tried in his jurisdiction that did not work as well as was intended, because its delivery was not as he had envisaged it would be. It was affirming for me to realise that what he had intended to do is pretty much exactly what I intend to do.

To return to the specifics of the Member's question, yes, cooperation on cancer care and research has to be done on an all-island basis. As, I think, I have said before in the House, it is not a question of whether we should cooperate but a question of what our capacity is to cooperate. That is the only inhibitor.

**Ms Flynn:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that there may be some potential for all-island cooperation on future suicide prevention initiatives. Will the Minister detail some of the current initiatives? I will write to him this week about a private Member's Bill on suicide prevention training that I hope to bring to the House. It may be something to explore at the autumn meeting.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member. As with a lot of issues, it is about data collection, about understanding the data and about recognising that there are common threads, but behind data is the human cost. Every data set is about the

human cost of somebody who has taken their own life. Every suicide has to be regarded as preventable.

I want to build on an initiative that I started in my constituency a number of years ago. I was contacted by a mother whose 23-year-old son had taken his life. She wanted to hold a vigil in Conway Square in Newtownards to remember him. A lot of people turned up, but we realised that they had come not in solidarity but because they had also lost loved ones to suicide. Those of us who organised the vigil felt that we could not just leave it there, so we started the Ards Suicide Awareness Group. We go into schools. We give money towards resilience and mental capacity training, and there are reflective benches in all the large housing configurations in Newtownards. We sponsor safeTALK training, which is an awareness campaign that empowers people not to be counsellors but to listen to people and to signpost them to services. I want to develop such initiatives with the Government of Ireland as we go forward.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. He rightly referred to the North West Cancer Centre. What further work is planned to ensure that the centre becomes one of the leading and best cancer centres on this island and in the world?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his question. I think that it already is. My assessment is that the North West Cancer Centre is at the leading edge. As for what further can be done, there are two issues. First, we have to scope it out. Officials will do that as part of the work programme that I discussed, which they are working on to present at the next meeting in the autumn. Secondly, we have to ask about the budgetary ability, particularly for our Department of Health, to invest further in the North West Cancer Centre, because, as Members are aware, the budget settlement to date has proved to be disappointing for my Department.

**Mr Gildernew:** I wish the Minister well in his new role. Minister, you will be aware of the desperately sad plight of people here who need to use paediatric pathology services. The lack of such services in the North means that families have to travel to England in the worst of circumstances. Did you have an opportunity to discuss that issue on a North/South basis with your counterpart, Minister Donnelly, and, if not, will you commit to doing so in the autumn?

**Mr Nesbitt:** The Member raises a very important point. I confirm that we did indeed

discuss that issue specifically. I hope that the Member will permit me not to go into the detail of that discussion, because, I think, Minister Donnelly wished to take some points away to consider them with his officials and bring those back in the autumn. I think that we agree that it is a big, horrible ask to require parents to travel by plane or ferry to Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool in such horrible and tragic circumstances. In my view, if it were possible to have a pathology centre, in Belfast preferably but, if not, in Dublin, that would relieve a lot of that stress and strain. It is in that area that we are moving, if I may put it like that. I am not, however, comfortable rehearsing my conversation with Minister Donnelly without first speaking to him again.

**Mr McGlone:** Thank you for your statement, Minister. Was there any discussion with Minister Donnelly about a replacement for the cross-border healthcare directive to help to tackle our waiting lists?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member. No, there was no substantive discussion, and the reason for that is simple: there is nothing in my budget to permit such a replacement. It was a successful scheme. Well over 4,000 people applied to it, and just over 4,000 went through it. The satisfaction level was high. As I have said before, I have no political or ideological objection to reintroducing the scheme, but it is a question of capacity in our budget to do it. At the moment, it is not on the agenda.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for his statement. All-island healthcare makes sense. It should be about cooperating and sharing resource, expertise, innovation and medical facilities. Does the Minister agree that Daisy Hill Hospital is in prime position to become a cross-border centre of excellence, given that more than a million people are within an hour's drive of Newry city's hospital?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Many hospitals, including Daisy Hill Hospital, the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen and Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry/Londonderry, are in that position.

**Ms Kimmins:** Minister, thank you for your statement. I am glad to see the progress on the all-island cancer work in particular, off the back of the motion that the Assembly passed two weeks ago. The Oireachtas Committee on Health was up last week, as you know. I took the Committee members to Daisy Hill last week, and they were very interested, as were the staff, in the opportunity to share capacity. Can you give a commitment, if that matter has not

been discussed, to follow up on it? Certainly the Dáil Committee was very interested in how we can work together on hospital networks across the island.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member. In her last few words, she mentioned something important: the word "network". I am coming towards the end of my deliberations and consultations with senior colleagues on a reconfiguration plan for our hospital network, and I hope to have something detailed to say about that in the immediate future, ahead of going into pre-consultation. That plan needs to consider where all-Ireland work is appropriate, and I will look to explore and maximise that. Once again, it is about capacity, and, if we can maximise capacity in cooperation, so much the better; I am absolutely for it.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement by the Minister of Health.

## **Provisional Out-turn 2023-24 and June Monitoring 2024-25**

**Mr Speaker:** The next item of business is a motion to suspend Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4).

Apologies. I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that she wishes to make a statement.

**Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance):** You were giving me heart failure there; I thought that I had the wrong folder.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a statement on the outcome of the 2023-24 provisional out-turn and the Executive's June monitoring exercise. I have carefully considered whether the June monitoring round should proceed during the pre-election period, and my view is that that process represents normal and routine Executive business. There is also an urgent need to provide certainty to Departments, and even a short delay presents risks. Not proceeding could have resulted in Departments taking decisions that would not have been needed had an additional allocation been confirmed. Proceeding as we have done allows for proper Assembly engagement without the need for the House to be recalled during recess.

Before turning to the current year, I will update the Assembly on the 2023-24 provisional out-turn and the resulting carry-forward under the Budget exchange scheme. Tables accompanying the statement set out the

provisional out-turn position for each Department. Members will recall that, owing to the funding provided from the reserve in 2023-24 as part of the financial package, the Executive are unable to carry forward any resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) underspends. To minimise the risk of funding being lost, the Executive agreed an overcommitment of £14.1 million based on anticipated departmental underspends, which allowed an additional allocation of that amount to the Department for Infrastructure.

As a result of that action, the departmental resource DEL underspend of £19.3 million was reduced to £5.2 million. Adjusting for a reduction in anticipated regional rates income and removing earmarked funding that must be returned to the Treasury results in a small overspend of £0.5 million in non-ring-fenced resource DEL. That small overspend is offset by a late Barnett consequential of £41.6 million that the Treasury exceptionally agreed could be carried forward to 2024-25. Therefore, no resource DEL funding has been lost due to underspends, and the £41.1 million is being carried forward into 2024-25. The usual Budget exchange limits apply to all other expenditure categories.

On conventional capital DEL, £9.1 million will be carried forward, reflecting departmental underspends and central adjustments and including £1.6 million of late Barnett consequentials.

On financial transactions capital (FTC), although the total underspend is £10.8 million, the Budget exchange scheme allows only £0.6 million to be carried forward into 2024-25. The remaining underspend of £10.2 million is not lost but rather reduces future liabilities, as my Department has agreed with the Treasury that any FTC underspends can be used to offset the required repayment of 80% of allocations.

Ring-fenced resource DEL may be used only for non-cash depreciation and impairments costs; it cannot be used to fund other services. Due to Budget exchange limits, only £8.6 million can be carried forward into 2024-25. It should be noted, however, that, of the total underspend of £443.4 million, some £373 million relates to student loan impairments and is mainly a result of the funding model used by the Treasury rather than of underspend by the Department.

#### **12.45 pm**

I will now turn to June monitoring. First, I will address commitments made by the Executive in

agreeing Budget 2024-25. Members will recall that Budget 2024-25 set aside £25 million for actions relating to a childcare strategy. Since then, the Executive have agreed the Education Minister's proposals to utilise that funding, which will be transferred to the Department of Education as an earmarked allocation. The Executive also agreed in Budget 24-25 that £1.6 million of capital DEL late Barnett consequentials would be provided to DAERA for Lough Neagh initiatives. That earmarked funding will also be provided as part of the June monitoring round.

Given the funding available for allocation, Budget 2024-25 concluded with all resource and capital DEL allocated and £21.3 million of unallocated financial transactions capital. The agreement of the interim fiscal framework resulted in an additional £23.9 million from the application of the 124% adjustment factor to the spring Budget. While Barnett consequentials from Westminster Main Estimates will not be confirmed until they have been introduced in Parliament, on the basis of previous indications, I have anticipated £185 million resource DEL from that source. There is a risk that the amount ultimately received could be lower. However, given the pressures facing Departments and the need to provide them with any additional funding as early as possible in the financial year, I am content that that is an acceptable risk. Not doing so could result in Departments taking actions that are not required, thereby causing further detriment to our public services. Combined with carry-forward from 2023-24, an adjustment for an error in comparability factor and reduced requirements, that has resulted in £257.9 million of resource DEL, £59.1 million of capital DEL and £23.6 million financial transactions capital being available for allocation in this monitoring round.

Under legislation, the salaries of statutory office holders are met directly from the NI Consolidated Fund. However, Budget cover is still required and must be funded. The Department of Justice requested an additional £1.1 million for judicial salaries, which will be provided in this round. Members will be aware of the ongoing issue of the Education Authority (EA) pay and grading review. I have been working collegially with the Education Minister, and I thank him for the positive work that he has done to find a way forward for the workers. I am pleased to advise that £43.7 million will be provided for that in the June monitoring round, which will allow the staff, some of whom are amongst the lowest paid but play a vital role in supporting our children and young people, to move onto the new pay scales from the start of

the financial year. The Executive have also committed to provide funding for a non-consolidated recognition payment in lieu of back pay to eligible staff in 2025-26. That will be funded from the repurposed funds in the financial package. However, utilisation of the funding for that purpose will occur only if the Treasury does not agree to my request to reprofile funding from the financial package.

Having taken account of those two issues, the Executive had £213.1 million resource DEL, £57.5 million capital DEL and £23.6 million financial transactions capital available to address pressures. Given the pressures identified in the Budget, it will come as no surprise that the resource and capital bids in this monitoring round far outweigh the level of resources available. For every £1 that we had to allocate for day-to-day funding for public services, we had six times as many demands, with bids totalling some £1.27 billion. Similarly, for every £1 that we had to spend on capital, we had nine times as many demands, with bids in excess of £520 million. There is simply not enough funding available to do all the things that we wish to do. I have been pressing and will continue to press the Treasury for better funding for public services, but, until that happens, the Executive must live within the funding provided to them.

As Members will be aware, delivering a balanced Budget for 2024-25 was a requirement of the financial package. Any overspend this year would automatically be deducted from next year's block grant, making an already challenging year even more difficult. I am sure that we all want to avoid that position. I hope that the allocation of over £200 million resource DEL to Departments will help to mitigate some of the worst impacts.

Full details of the bids and allocations are set out in the tables that accompany the statement, but I will highlight a few specific resource DEL allocations. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will receive £4 million for bovine TB programme delivery and an earmarked allocation of £1.5 million for the environmental improvement plan, which is aimed at addressing the water quality issues at Lough Neagh. The Department for the Economy will receive £2 million for the inescapable pressure of the shortfall in the higher education teaching grant. The Department of Health will receive a general allocation of £121 million resource DEL to help to address funding pressures, with a further allocation of £0.9 million to enable it to fund additional healthcare training places in physiotherapy, occupational therapy, social

work and nursing. In addition to earmarked funding for the EA pay and grading review, the Department of Education will receive a general allocation of £29.5 million to address a range of pressures relating to the Education Authority and schools, including supporting special educational needs provision. The Department for Communities will receive £10 million resource DEL to deal with a range of pressures, including increased demand for the discretionary support Supporting People programme, as well as for homelessness interventions, which will support some of the most vulnerable. The Department will also receive £0.5 million specifically for the arts to provide funding to that important sector. An allocation of £35 million resource DEL has been made to the Department of Justice to help to address a range of pressures across the Justice family, including a pressure that is associated with an increased PSNI pension contribution. The Department for Infrastructure will receive £6 million resource DEL to help it to meet a range of pressures, including increased personal injury claims and higher surface water drainage costs. The Executive Office will receive earmarked allocations of £1.5 million resource DEL to enable the Communities in Transition programme to extend its contracts up to March 2025 and £0.5 million for central good relations. Finally, £0.6 million resource DEL has been allocated to the Department of Finance to allow critical work on the planning and preparation for the next census to be carried out.

The Executive have agreed capital DEL allocations totalling £57.5 million. Those include £10 million to the Department for Communities for the cladding safety scheme and £20 million for new-build social housing. Delivering on our housing targets is crucial given the demand for homes, and I will continue to work constructively with Executive colleagues on that important issue. I met the Communities Minister last week and encouraged him to consider whether greater use can be made of the available FTC in order to increase the supply of social housing, building on the schemes that the Department currently has in place. I gave him my commitment that my officials will work constructively with his on that. An allocation of £15 million has been made to the Department of Education for minor works, including for special educational needs and urgent health and safety works. An allocation of £12.5 million has been made to the Department for Infrastructure to help it to avoid having to pause critical infrastructure projects.

Only minimal funding was available for ring-fenced resource DEL, and, historically, further

funds are received later in the financial year. The Executive have agreed not to meet any of those pressures at this time but will revisit them in future monitoring rounds. All financial transactions capital bids of £3.2 million have been met, leaving £20.4 million of unallocated FTC. I ask all Departments to consider how that available funding can be utilised.

To increase transparency, the statement is accompanied by tables outlining the detail of changes to departmental budgets. Further tables will be published on the Department of Finance website in due course. Under the heading "Technical Adjustments" in the attached tables are various Treasury-earmarked funding streams and Budget cover transfers from Whitehall Departments.

Those reflect areas such as tackling paramilitary activity, the immigration health surcharge, new deal funding, the NI protocol/Windsor framework, city and growth deals and Fresh Start funding for shared education and housing. In total, those amount to £161.3 million in resource DEL, £2.9 million in ring-fenced resource DEL and £120 million in capital DEL.

It is clear that all Departments are under significant financial pressure. That is evidenced by the vast quantum of bids far exceeding the funding that we had available to allocate. Indeed, the Education, Health and Justice Departments all submitted bids totalling more than the overall amount that we had to allocate. Within the constrained finances available, the Executive must strive to balance funding pressures across all Departments.

While the Executive do not have the funding to do everything that they might wish to do, today's allocations of over £300 million across resource and capital DEL will help to alleviate some of the pressures that Departments face. Working together, we will be better placed to meet the challenges that we face head-on. I want to work with all my ministerial colleagues to have one voice in making the case for more investment in public services. I have been making the case for increased levels of funding in public services and will continue to do so. I commend the June monitoring outcome to the Assembly.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, this is a shabby and disgraceful use of Civil Service resources, three days out from an election. You have brought the Northern Ireland Civil Service and your Department into disrepute. I admit that there are many important allocations in your statement, but, throughout it, you say things

such as although there is a risk, you are willing to accept it. Does that not fly in the face of your statement that this is normal and routine business? Does it not also fly in the face of the idea that this is normal and routine business when, in page 9 of the statement, you say that you may not even be able to complete the additional payment for education workers because the Treasury may not agree to it?

Minister, many of the allocations are welcome. We wanted and needed a June monitoring round, but it could have happened in four days' time, after the UK general election. Why have you done this today? Is that not a shabby indictment of Stormont?

**Dr Archibald:** It will come as no surprise to the Member that I do not agree with his analysis. I have been clear for some time about my preferred time frame for doing June monitoring. I have, of course, considered carefully whether June monitoring should have proceeded during the pre-election period. My view, and that of my Department, is that this process represents the normal and routine business of the Executive.

Given the financial pressures facing all our Departments, it was vital that they had confirmation of additional funding allocations as soon as possible. As Finance Minister, I could not, in good conscience, stand by and let Departments take potentially unnecessary decisions that could have caused harm to our public services, knowing that there was money available to allocate. My focus has been on doing the right thing, giving Departments and the bodies that they fund, including organisations such as health trusts, which are under immense pressure, certainty on additional funding. That is why, today, my Executive colleagues have backed my proposals and agreed June monitoring. Proceeding as we have done also allows for proper Assembly engagement without the House needing to be recalled.

**Ms Forsythe:** I thank the Minister for her statement, which sets out a range of different financial settlements. In particular, I welcome the £43.7 million that was agreed to settle the Education Authority pay and grading review. I commend the work of the Minister, alongside the Education Minister, in achieving that. In light of the announcements that have been made in the statement and the £121 million additional resource DEL for Health, has the Health Minister's position on whether he will support your Budget changed?

**Dr Archibald:** That is a question for the Health Minister, but I can confirm that there was unanimous support in the Executive for June monitoring.

**Miss Brogan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister.]* I welcome the announcements in the Minister's statement. The funding will be greatly appreciated by all Departments, which have suffered from having very tight budgets. Will she confirm whether any money from underspends will be returned to the Treasury?

**Dr Archibald:** Due to the funding that was provided in 2023-24 through a reserve claim in the financial package, the Executive were unable to carry forward any resource DEL underspends. To minimise the risk of funding being lost to the Treasury, the Executive agreed an overcommitment of £14.1 million, based on anticipated departmental underspends.

That allowed for an additional allocation of that amount to the Department for Infrastructure. As a result of that action, no non-ring-fenced resource DEL funding has been lost due to underspends, and £41.1 million of resource DEL is being carried forward into 2024-25 from a very late Barnett consequential last year. That happened due to the collegiate efforts of Executive Ministers working together to make sure that it did. Similarly, no conventional capital DEL funding has been returned to Treasury. A small amount of FTC has been returned, but that is being used to offset future liabilities for FTC repayments.

**1.00 pm**

**Mr Tennyson:** Minister, we understand that you wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 30 May to request a meeting to agree June monitoring. Can you shed any light on why it took until 1 July for that meeting to happen?

**Dr Archibald:** That question would be better posed to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I have been clear about my preferred time frame for June monitoring for some time and have communicated that to the Finance Committee. For me, it was very important that we were able to make these allocations to give Departments certainty on their spending and allow them to take decisions to live within their budgets.

**Ms Kimmins:** I commend the Finance Minister on her statement and the timely manner in which she published the allocations. It is

important that we get allocations to Departments as quickly as possible. Will the Minister outline what funding has been provided to the Department of Health, where it is badly needed?

**Dr Archibald:** There is no doubt that the Department of Health faces huge challenges, as do all Departments. The Department of Health, particularly tackling waiting lists, is an Executive priority. The Department of Health bid for £414.9 million resource DEL, which is a greater amount of money than was available to allocate. I have committed to working collaboratively with the Health Minister and am pleased with the positive engagement that I have had with him so far. I hope that the allocation of £122 million, including £0.9 million for health professional training places, will go some way towards easing the many pressures that face the Department. That is the largest allocation to all the Departments and represents 57% of the funding that was available for allocation through June monitoring.

As was the case with the Budget, it was simply not possible to meet all the bids that Departments made. Like other parts of the public sector, our health service is suffering because of decisions taken by the British Government on how they fund public services. At the end of the week, on behalf of the Executive, I will make the case to the incoming British Government that we need to see proper investment in our public services.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you for your statement, Minister. When officials from the Executive Office came before the Committee for the Executive Office, I raised concern about the quality of the information that we, as a scrutiny Committee, were given about the monitoring bids that went to your Department. Whilst I very much welcome the extra money for Communities in Transition and the good relations fund, I would like a wee bit more information on how the information that your Department receives about allocations across Departments will be made more robust, going forward.

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for that question. The Department receives bids through the monitoring round process. There is considerable engagement between my departmental officials and the officials who deal with budgets in the other Departments with a view to understanding the nature of the bids: whether they are inescapable or high priority. That is the basis on which we make decisions about what to allocate. It is an iterative process

whereby my officials gather information from the other Departments and use that information to best understand the pressures that those Departments face and therefore to best understand how we can balance meeting the demands across the Departments. Each Minister has a responsibility for their Department and the services that it delivers. My responsibility, as Finance Minister, is to try to ensure that there is the budget to deliver all our public services, across the Departments.

**Mr Gildernew:** Minister, thank you for your statement and for the additional allocations that you have announced. Can you outline the resource and capital funding that is being provided to the Department for Communities, le do thoil [*Translation: please*] ?

**Dr Archibald:** I am glad that the Executive have been able to agree a £20 million allocation for new social housing in the June monitoring round. There was a very limited pot of capital available to us and a huge volume of bids, so I was pleased that a significant proportion of that could be allocated to social housing. I understand that the additional funding will help to deliver around 200 new social homes. We are all very aware, however, of the constraints that existed in our capital budget this year, and, of course, if further capital becomes available in-year, social housing is an area that, hopefully, we can return to for further allocations. I have also written to the Communities Minister to encourage him to look at other sources of funding to see whether there are opportunities to increase the supply of new social and affordable homes this year.

The Communities Department also received £2 million of FTC in June monitoring to develop a scheme that provides support for social enterprises to help individuals to move out of temporary accommodation. That is a very welcome development, and I hope that the Department is able to build on such schemes.

I spoke about the volume of resource bids that we received from Departments compared with the funding that was available, but I was pleased that the Executive were able to agree an additional £10 million allocation to the Department for Communities to provide further support for a range of areas where there is significant need. I know that the Member has previously raised with me areas such as homelessness, the Supporting People programme and the discretionary support scheme. I was also pleased that the Executive were able to provide a small additional allocation in June monitoring for the arts, which we have a significant interest in.

**Mr Durkan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for her statement.*] I welcome some of the content of the statement, but, like my colleague, I question the timing of it. Does the Minister agree that all school support staff should access full entitlement to their hard-earned pay award, and will she work with the Education Minister to ensure that staff who claim universal credit can access payment in full without experiencing additional hardship, as was suffered by health workers just last week?

**Dr Archibald:** I thank the Member for his question. Finding a solution for education support workers was a priority for me, and I am glad that, working with the Education Minister, we have been able to agree the allocation today. The Education Minister is taking the lead in engaging with trade unions on that, and, if any issues arise, I am sure that he will bring them to my attention and to the attention of Executive colleagues. I will be happy to take on board any issues that arise.

**Mr Chambers:** I very much welcome many of the allocations. Unfortunately, however, significant questions remain over the deliverability of pay awards for 2024-25. Looking at the Department of Health, can the Minister of Finance confirm that nothing has been allocated to fund even the most basic pay award for our health workers this year?

**Dr Archibald:** The Member will be aware that the financial package from last year, which included £584 million for public-sector pay awards, did not have a recurrent element for public-sector pay awards. Therefore, it was for individual Departments to plan on the basis of the funding that was available to them in-year to meet the pay awards that they had agreed in their Department. There are undoubtedly huge challenges across all Departments, given the funding that is available to us. We made some progress during our engagement with Treasury and got an uplift to 24% in our level of need. That provided some additional money in June monitoring, but we will engage with the incoming British Government and make the case that we need proper investment in our public services that shows that we actually value our public-sector workers.

**Ms Flynn:** The Minister touched on the positive allocation for the increase in pay for education workers. Will she comment further on the funding that has been provided to the Department of Education?



**Dr Archibald:** The Department of Education's opening budget for 2024-25 saw an increase of 11.6% compared with the opening budget set by the Secretary of State for 2023-24, and that recognised that, despite the increase in funding this year, Education, like many other Departments, faced considerable budget pressures. Therefore, £29.5 million of resource and £15 million of capital have been allocated to the Department to address a range of issues, including supporting special educational needs, which we all recognise is an issue that really needs attention. That is in addition to funding for the Education Authority pay and grading review. I have been working collegiately with the Minister of Education to find a way forward for workers, and I am very pleased that an allocation has been agreed by the Executive. It will allow those staff, who are among the lowest paid in the sector but who play a vital role in supporting our children and young people, to move on to those new pay scales.

We were also able to confirm the allocation of £25 million for childcare based on bids and proposals from the Education Minister.

**Mr McGlone:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for her statement.*] DFC was able to fund only 400 social house starts for 2024-25. That represents a decrease of 73.4%. The £20 million allocation is welcome. How many starts will that provide?

**Dr Archibald:** We all agree that it is far from ideal that we are not meeting our social housing targets. I am sure that every single one of our constituency offices hears day and daily from people who need homes. I understand that the additional funding will provide for around 200 additional new starts. That is a way off our target, so I will continue to work constructively with the Minister for Communities and other Executive colleagues, including the Minister for Infrastructure, to ensure that we have the ability to deliver on our targets.

As well as for funding to deliver day-to-day public services, we will collectively make the case to the British Government for proper investment in infrastructure, because that is where they have fallen far short in recent years. This year, out of our capital budget, we were able to fund only inescapable pressures identified by Departments. That is not where we need to be in order to deliver infrastructure.

**Mr Frew:** Following on from the Minister's answer to Paula Bradshaw, and Paula Bradshaw should know this, there is a duty

under the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 for a Northern Ireland Department to provide the relevant Assembly Committee with a written or oral briefing on the Department's submission to the Department of Finance for each monitoring round no later than seven days after that submission is made. Can the Minister tell the House whether that duty has been fulfilled by all Departments?

Given what the Minister said about there being unanimous support at the Executive for the June monitoring round allocations, is it not hypocritical of the Department of Health and its Minister to support an allocation of £121 million of resource DEL in the June monitoring round but then vote against the Budget?

**Dr Archibald:** I am unable to confirm what each individual Department has provided to the relevant Committee. I hope that the Member is satisfied with the engagement that he has had with my officials who, I know, attend the Finance Committee very regularly to brief him and other Committee members on budgetary matters. I encourage other Departments to ensure that their Committees are briefed about the budgetary situation.

We all recognise the challenges facing all Departments, including the Department of Health. I am more than fit for a robust challenge from any of my ministerial colleagues about their budgets, but I am committed to working collectively with them to try to get the best outcome and to make the case as a united Executive about the need for additional funding for public services.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Minister for her statement. The allocation of an additional £122 million to the Department of Health is very welcome and demonstrates that the Ulster Unionist Party was entirely correct in its stance that the allocation for this year was well below what was required. Unfortunately, however, although the allocation narrows the budget deficit for patient-facing services, it does not close the gap. Can the Minister therefore give us a commitment that, when further funding becomes available, particularly to deal with the health service's financial pressures, we will be given appropriate prioritisation, because we need it by need and not by apportionment?

**Dr Archibald:** I say to the Member that that is how allocations are made. They are made not on a proportional basis but following an assessment of the bids and after trying to understand the need in each Department. I

acknowledge that we have not been able to allocate as much money to any Department as we would like to be in a position to allocate. As I said in response to other Members, I will make the case to the incoming British Government that we need to see proper investment in public services. That has been seriously lacking over the past number of years, particularly over the past 14 years, during which we have seen an agenda of austerity and cuts from the Tory Government.

I hope that we will get a change of approach, and certainly I will be making that case to the incoming Government.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement.

**1.15 pm**

## **Executive Committee Business**

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

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

*That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 1 July 2024.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no debate on this motion. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that it requires cross-community support.

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 1 July 2024.*

**Mr Speaker:** I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated as there were Ayes from all sides of the Chamber.

### **Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2024-25; and Supply Resolution for Excess Votes for 2016-17, 2018-19, 2020-21, 2021- 22**

**Mr Speaker:** The next two items of business are motions on Supply resolutions for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates and Excess Votes. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and I will call on the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on the motions as listed in the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so or when the time allocated for the debate has expired, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

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

*That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £25,255,627,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the*

*Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, for the year ending 31 March 2025 and that resources, not exceeding £28,772,794,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 2 of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2024-25 laid before the Assembly on 19 June 2024.*

*The following motion stood in the Order Paper:*

*That this Assembly approves that sums be granted out of the Consolidated Fund not exceeding £397,000 for the year ending 31 March 2017 and not exceeding £45,000 for the year ending 31 March 2019 for use by the Public Prosecution Service; that resources not exceeding £11,409,000 for the year ending 31 March 2021 and not exceeding £10,721,000 for the year ending 31 March 2022 be authorised for use by the Department of Education — teachers' superannuation; and that resources not exceeding £7,380,000 for the year ending 31 March 2023 be authorised for use by the Department of Education; as detailed in the Statement of Excesses 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 document laid before the Assembly on 19 June 2024.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The Minister will have one hour to allocate at her discretion between proposing the motion and making a winding-up speech. A representative of the Opposition will have 10 minutes in which to speak, as will the spokesperson for the Finance Committee. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes.

**Dr Archibald:** This debate covers the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2024-25 and the Statement of Excesses for 2016-17, 2018-19, 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, both of which are associated with the Budget (No. 2) Bill, which will be introduced later today.

The Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2024-25 presented before the House relates to the supply of cash and use of resources for the

current 2024-25 year and seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2024-25 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies as set out in the Main Estimates, which were laid in the Assembly on 19 June. The Main Estimates are based on the departmental spending plans set out in the Executive's Budget 2024-25. The restoration of the Executive on 3 February 2024 meant that there was an exceptionally tight time frame in which to develop the Budget. It was always clear that this was going to be an incredibly challenging Budget, and that did not allow for the level of engagement that I would have preferred. Ideally, I would have liked to have published a draft Budget and put it out for 12 weeks' full consultation. That would have helped to inform the Executive's decision on their final Budget. Unfortunately, that was not an option due to time constraints.

Following Executive agreement, I announced the Budget via a written ministerial statement on 25 April. Demand for allocations far outstripped the funding available. With increased demand on services, and rising costs, we simply do not have the Budget to do everything that we would like to do to provide the public services that people deserve. I accept that Executive agreement was not easy. We all had to compromise, but that agreement enabled the Budget to progress. The Budget 2024-25 was subsequently agreed by the Assembly on 28 May following an extensive debate. I will not repeat the same detail in today's speech. The Main Estimates position is set out in the detailed document that has been provided to Members. The Budget (No. 2) Bill reflects the same position. Should the Bill proceed as planned, it is anticipated that it will receive Royal Assent in late September/early October. In the meantime, the 65% Vote on Account, which was agreed by Members in April, provides Departments with the authority to utilise resources and access the cash necessary to deliver services.

The Main Estimates for 2024-25 highlight areas of expenditure or income relying on the sole authority of the Budget. That is where the authority of statutory powers has not yet been obtained through legislation. 'Managing Public Money' provides for that as an interim measure, enabling expenditure until such powers are in place.

The Executive met today to agree the outcome of the June monitoring round, and I made a statement on that just now. Any changes to departmental budgets due to the outcome of June monitoring and any further monitoring rounds that take place in 2024-25 will be

reflected in the spring Supplementary Estimates.

In addition to the Main Estimates for 2024-25, I have proposed a Supply resolution for the Statement of Excesses for the years 2016-2017, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, which was also laid on 19 June. Excesses have arisen as a result of breaches of budget control limits or cash limits over prior years, and that requires expenditure to be regularised by the Assembly. Those Excesses were identified by the Public Accounts Committee, and a report was published by the PAC, providing more detail on its findings. The Supply resolution for the Statement of Excesses that I am providing simply implements the exact recommendations made by the Public Accounts Committee.

I am looking forward to putting the 2024-25 spending plans for this year on a legal footing, and I request the support of Members for the resolution of the Main Estimates for 2024-25. That, together with the Budget (No. 2) Bill, which I will introduce today and we will debate tomorrow, will ensure that services continue to be funded for the remainder of this financial year.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the leader of the Opposition, Matthew O'Toole.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my colleague the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee for speaking on behalf of the Committee. Given the procedural restrictions of "one Member, one speech", as it were, I felt that it was important that my responsibilities as leader of the Opposition and as Chair of the Finance Committee and the fact that this is a timed debate should mean that I should not give both speeches. I suggest that both roles be looked at by the Procedures Committee going forward.

Today, we are looking at the Supply Estimates, and, tomorrow, we will debate the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. When we came back in February after the collapse of these institutions, as after previous collapses, we were encouraged to believe that there would be a more coherent, systematic and strategic Budget-making process. However, today, we stand up to debate the Estimates document, having just had a statement on June monitoring on 1 July, as I said, three days before a UK general election. In my view, that is in flagrant breach of pre-election guidance published by the Executive Office just a few short weeks ago. It is clearly not strategic, not planned or not forward-looking to have our debates on public

finances happening at this point. As the Minister said, we are debating limits that are now, in a sense, out of date.

We will not, as an Opposition, divide the House on today's Estimates, but we will use the opportunity of today's debate and tomorrow's debate on the Budget (No. 2) Bill to make some specific points around the lack of a strategic plan for the rescue and recovery of our public services and, indeed, the lack of a meaningful multi-year Budget.

In the monitoring round that we have just heard about, the Minister made a succession of commitments. Some of those commitments, as she said, are made at risk. They are made at legal risk because the UK Treasury has not laid Main Estimates in the UK Parliament. That is because there is no UK Parliament until the general election on Thursday. So, it is important to acknowledge, first, that, rather than the monitoring round happening as routine business, it is happening in anything but a routine context. Not just is it in contravention, in my view, of the clear pre-election guidance that was issued by the Executive Office just over a month ago but, in addition to that, it is happening at a time when there is "demonstrable and real legal risk". Those are not my words but the words of the Minister's departmental officials. Indeed, she herself used the word "risk" in the oral statement that she has just given, where she has acknowledged that there is specific risk around the allocations because they are not based on a Main Estimates document that has been laid by the UK Treasury in Parliament. That is because, as I said, there is no Parliament. In addition, she said at different times in her oral statement that there is risk that the amount that is ultimately received in the monitoring round could be lower. That is not normal or routine. She said:

*"I am content that that is an acceptable risk."*

All those risks would, of course, be mitigated if we were to wait a few days and have clarity from a new UK Government.

Of course, with regard to the additional payment — the welcome additional payment, of course — that has been made to education workers, the Minister said in her monitoring round statement:

*"utilisation of the funding for that purpose will only occur if the Treasury does not agree to my request to reprofile funding from the financial package."*

That does not sound to me like routine business, given that there is no Parliament and that Treasury Ministers are operating in a shadow context. I would not call that normal or routine.

I wanted to use my remarks to highlight the unusual nature of the monitoring round that we have just had, which is connected, because, as we hear in the Finance Committee, all Budget processes are connected to one another. The monitoring round is making allocations that are not reflected in the Estimates document that we are technically debating or the resolution that we are being asked to vote on. Nevertheless, they are welcome allocations. I will not go through them all. The Minister did that in some detail, both in the Chamber and with her colleagues the First Minister and deputy First Minister in front of the cameras outside. Of course, I would add in parenthesis that it is relatively unusual to have a monitoring round statement accompanied by a press conference with the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the Great Hall at Stormont. I am not aware of that happening on too many occasions. That also underscores the fact that there is nothing normal or routine about doing a monitoring round in this way: at legal risk, three days before a UK general election. I think that I have made my point in that regard, but I will keep making that point. I will make those points in correspondence with the head of the Civil Service.

I will talk about the specific Estimates that we are debating. It is important to acknowledge that, when we returned in February, we were in very unusual circumstances. Stormont had been collapsed for the previous two years. Before that, we had two years of a pandemic. Before that, we had three years of collapse. I hope that the new-found commitment to stability from the two leading parties in the Executive will continue, but, in order to deliver on the commitments that the Executive parties have made on rescuing public services, we will need to see not just a monitoring round a few days before an election but a properly thought-through multi-year Budget that is aligned to a Programme for Government. That is not too much to ask. The people of the North have been promised a Government for all. They have been promised leadership and a plan to deliver the rescue of public services, which are in a state of collapse, in many cases. They have not got that yet. They have had a series of disconnected allocations, many of which are, in and of themselves, welcome, but they do not, in any way, represent a strategic plan to rescue and recover public services. That will come only

when we have a Programme for Government that is aligned to a multi-year Budget.

As and when a new UK Government are elected later this week, my party will call for an improved financial settlement, as, no doubt, will others, whether they do or do not take their seats at Westminster. In that regard, I will join the Finance Minister and other parties in the Chamber to get the best possible financial settlement for Northern Ireland. We will also call for a multi-year comprehensive spending round, which will allow the Minister and others in the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver properly thought-through, serious, strategic multi-year Budgets that are allied to an outcomes-based Programme for Government. That is what we, as the official Opposition, will call and press for, because, so far, since we returned in February, we have had disjointed allocations — sometimes, made at the last minute, as with today's announcement — and a series of legally meaningless motions brought to the Assembly by Executive parties. By all means, do a last-minute monitoring round in breach, in my view, of the pre-election guidance. Get the cameras into the Great Hall and tell people about the money that you are allocating just days before an election, but be honest with them that you have not yet delivered a proper plan to recover public services.

We, as the official Opposition, will continue to be constructive and robust in calling for that plan. We have not seen it yet — it has not been published today — but I hope that, at some point in the months to come, the people of Northern Ireland will have a proper plan.

**1.30 pm**

**Ms Forsythe (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance):** The Committee received a briefing from officials on the Main Estimates and the Statement of Excesses at its meeting on 19 June. On behalf of members, I thank officials for that. Additionally, the Committee was briefed on the Budget (No. 2) Bill that the Minister will introduce later today and which will have its Second Stage tomorrow.

Members will be aware that, since the resumption of Assembly business in February, the Budget process has been anything but normal. While the Finance Committee has worked hard to assert its overarching Budget scrutiny role, members are concerned that other Statutory Committees have not been afforded the same scrutiny opportunities for their respective Departments' budgets. The Committee is aware that the Department of

Finance did not commission Estimates memoranda from Departments for that exercise, despite that being part of its guidance. Another Statutory Committee raised that as an issue, and the Finance Committee will pursue it with the Department. Such guidelines are in place to create greater transparency in the Budget process, and they are important tools for Committees in their scrutiny of Departments' budgets.

At its meeting on 19 June, the Committee noted the Statement of Excesses. However, as that is primarily an issue for the Public Accounts Committee, I will not offer any Committee view.

The Financial Reporting Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 delivered a number of changes to how financial information is presented in the Estimates and the associated Budget Bill, including clearer alignment of financial information between Budgets, Estimates and accounts and the expenditure of arm's-length bodies and separate controls in the Budget Bill regarding departmental expenditure limits, annually managed expenditure (AME) and non-Budget expenditure. The Committee believes that, while those changes are helpful, there is much more to be done to ensure that budgetary information that Statutory Committees receive is fulsome and timely. The Committee will continue to press for greater transparency and clarity for Committees at every stage of the Budget process.

Members will recall that, in April, the Assembly was asked to agree a larger than normal Vote on Account — 65% of the 2023-24 Budget — that would be sufficient to last until after the summer recess. Today's Main Estimates will begin the process to take us beyond that, and the Budget (No. 2) Bill will provide legislative authority to the Main Estimates, if they are agreed today.

Members will know that it is no secret that the 2024-25 Budget is extremely challenging, even with the additional support from the Executive restoration package settlement and the progress that has been made on a fiscal floor. While the June monitoring round will provide much-needed further funding, it is not sustainable for Departments to rely on the capricious nature of Barnett consequentials to keep them afloat. The Committee will play an active part in ensuring that Northern Ireland gets a better Budget allocation from the UK Government and a revised fiscal floor that is much more reflective of our very different needs.

I turn to table 5 of the Main Estimates document. The Committee noted expenditure in excess of £28 million for which sole authority is sought. As Members are aware, the use of sole authority allows the Assembly to approve expenditure and for it to be legislated for in the Budget Bill where there is no other legislative cover. With respect to the Department of Finance, sole authority is sought for the Fiscal Council. The Committee has pressed and continues to press for legislation to put the independent Fiscal Council on a legislative footing. Considering the work that is required from the Executive restoration package settlement, the Fiscal Council's position must be regularised as soon as possible. The Committee hopes that legislation will be forthcoming before the end of 2024. While the Committee understands the difficulties that the absence of an Executive has caused, the use of sole authority is less than ideal, and the Committee will be watching closely to see how items requiring the use of sole authority in the Main Estimates are legislated for.

The Main Estimates highlight the planned expenditure for 2024-25 and the provisional out-turn for 2023-24 for each Department and body. Members will be aware of the debates that there have been on comparing the opening position for 2024-25 with the provisional out-turn for 2023-24. When briefing the Committee, Department of Finance officials indicated that it is more appropriate to compare like with like; that is the opening positions for different financial years or the closing or actual out-turn position for different years. The sizeable in-year funding flows that we see make that the most sensible way to compare Budgets. The Fiscal Council has indicated that the dependence of many Departments on those in-year allocations is symptomatic of our inadequate block grant and provides a strong case for raising our fiscal floor to reflect our actual financial needs.

I now turn to the Department of Finance's Estimates. The Department has made a request for resources of a net cash requirement of £282 million and a further request for resources net cash requirement with respect to pension schemes that it manages of £83 million. As Members will be aware, Finance is one of four Departments that have an additional request for resources (RfR) covering pension schemes, the others being Health, Justice and Education. The Department's Main Estimates reflect its position as an administrative Department that provides shared services across Departments. As such, the significant majority of its budget is used for administrative rather than programme purposes. The Committee has taken a specific interest in the

Department of Finance's contingent liabilities outlined in the Main Estimates and liaised closely with the Department on them. The Committee also notes the superannuation and other allowances contained in the Department of Finance's second request for resources.

While the Committee is aware that the Main Estimates Supply resolution debate reflects a largely technical exercise, it has applied an appropriate degree of scrutiny. On the basis of members' agreement at our meeting on 26 June to accelerated passage for the Budget (No. 2) Bill, the Committee for Finance supports today's Supply resolution motions.

I will now add some add comments as DUP finance spokesperson. The Democratic Unionist Party and Gavin Robinson MP have long led the charge for a new needs-based funding model for Northern Ireland. With that campaign now mainstream, the Government have been forced to accept a new definition of our need going forward. However, fundamental problems remain unresolved. While other parties welcomed the financial package presented by the Government on the return of devolution earlier this year, it was the DUP that made it clear that what was offered fell well short of what was required to put public finances on a stable footing. The failure to baseline the formula from the CSR period in 2022 will lead us to a further cliff edge in just two years' time. At that point, funding levels will again drop below what is required to fairly and sustainably fund our services here. We in the DUP believe that that situation is unacceptable, and we are committed, as we have been, to working on that on a long-term basis.

In the meantime, every party here needs to be honest and realistic about our finances in Northern Ireland. Just as every household knows when it needs to tighten its budget across spending streams when it has less money, the Northern Ireland Executive need to tighten their budgets across every Department when they have less money. This is a challenging Budget. We would like to see more money, and our DUP representatives will continue the fight for more. In the meantime, we need to see every Department take active steps to acknowledge its budget, act responsibly and do its best to deliver within it.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve to know that all their Ministers will do their best to spend responsibly, despite being dissatisfied. How else will the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive ever prove to the UK Treasury that we can manage more funding well? This process is not ideal, but we need to do our best

to make it work for those we represent. Every Minister and their Department need to be open, honest and transparent with their Statutory Committee, the Assembly and the public. We need to do our best to deliver value for public money and make Northern Ireland work at its very best. We support this step.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Nicola Brogan. Miss Brogan, you have seven minutes, as have all other Members from here on.

**Miss Brogan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker.*] I start by thanking the Finance Minister for the work that she has done on an extremely challenging Budget and for bringing forward the Main Estimates, which will give effect to that Budget. I also acknowledge the announcement made earlier today in which the allocations for June monitoring were outlined. There is an urgent need to provide funding certainty to Departments. Even a short delay to those funds being released presented risks for Departments and their work going forward. Proceeding now allows time for Assembly debate and scrutiny in advance of the summer recess and allows Members to discuss these important issues. Departments and the groups that they support urgently require certainty on funding for the immediate future, and the Minister has delivered that.

While the British Government's 14 years of austerity Budgets have represented a relentless assault on low-paid workers, I am pleased to see that the Minister continues to stand by their side, providing £43.7 million for education support staff, who do vital work that often goes unrecognised and has been undervalued for far too long.

Minister Archibald has also continued to demonstrate her and Sinn Féin's commitment to health. Once again, the Department of Health has been prioritised, with more than half of the total June monitoring allocation going to that Department. That will, of course, be welcomed by the Department, the health and social care trusts and the healthcare workforce.

As a member of the AERA Committee and Sinn Féin spokesperson on the environment, I welcome the £1.5 million that Minister Archibald has designated to DAERA for Lough Neagh initiatives. The lough is of huge environmental, economic and historical significance to all of Ireland, and we have worked on the issue of blue-green algae blooms with various stakeholders, so I personally thank the Minister for the additional support.

I also welcome the Minister's commitment to continue to battle with the Treasury to secure proper funding for the people of the North. It is now accepted that the North has been chronically underfunded for years, and I appreciate the Minister's ongoing work to increase that funding.

In producing the Main Estimates, the Minister has dealt with an extremely complex task in the most difficult of circumstances. I commend her for remaining true to her principles and the commitments she gave when taking on the role. I am content that the Minister has done and will continue to do all in her power to shield as many people here as possible from Tory austerity. I commend and support the motion.

**Mr Tennyson:** I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the Supply resolutions for the Main Estimates and Statement of Excesses.

The Estimates, based on the departmental spending plans set out in the Executive's Budget for 2024-25, lay bare the enormous challenges facing every Executive Department. By this stage, the context is well rehearsed: 14 years of Conservative chaos at Westminster has damaged our economy and starved public services of vital investment. However, the decade of stop-start government in this place has also robbed us of key opportunities to stabilise and transform our finances. Indeed, the timing of the return of the Executive has placed us in an invidious position where we have not been able to consult fully on the Budget before the Main Estimates. What is required is not just a change of Government at Westminster but an equally significant change of attitude in the Assembly, with a focus on reforming our institutions so that never again can they be held to ransom by a single party.

As I said when we debated the Budget, it is not about whether we believe that the sums of money before us are sufficient — we all know that they are not; it is about whether we believe that this represents a fair attempt at allocating what are so obviously insufficient resources. Irrespective of our views on the Budget, it is vital that the Estimates and the Budget Bill proceed at pace to ensure that Departments continue to have legal authority to draw down cash, otherwise they will be constrained by spending limits put in place by the previous Vote on Account.

Of course, the Estimates simply present an opening picture and will be updated as additional funding becomes available through future monitoring rounds. Indeed, I am pleased that the June monitoring was agreed this

morning by the Executive, allocating essential additional funding for health, housing, Lough Neagh and our education workers. However, I am bemused that June monitoring has occurred only now, on 1 July, particularly when we know that the Finance Minister wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 30 May requesting a meeting. That such significant funding was held up by either inertia or dysfunction in the Executive Office raises questions about its effectiveness and scrutiny. At one stage, it looked as though the Education Minister was forced to kite-fly his June monitoring bids in order to force his colleagues' hands to convene a meeting. That is not good enough, but I am glad that the situation now appears to have been rectified.

The Main Estimates highlight that over £28 million in spending for vital projects, including welfare mitigation, the Fiscal Council and tackling violence against women and girls, continues to rest on the sole authority of the Budget Act. The use of the so-called black box has ballooned far beyond the intended £1.5 million limit in the absence of an Assembly in five of the last seven years. In the interests of good governance, it is imperative that more appropriate statutory powers are legislated for by the Executive over the coming months and years.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Member for giving way. The Member has brought up an interesting point about the black box. I am glad to see that that has reduced significantly from the £1 billion that it used to be to a much lower figure. However, I remind the Minister and, indeed, everybody else on the Finance Committee that the figure should be less than £1 million.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Tennyson:** I agree entirely with the Member.

**1.45 pm**

I turn to points that were raised in the debate and in response to the Minister's statement. Mr Aiken claimed that the Ulster Unionist Party's position was vindicated, and I want to challenge that. It had been suggested that we delay the Budget and, as a consequence, the Main Estimates to ensure that June monitoring could be included at this stage. Not only was that approach prohibited by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, therefore, not possible, it would have carried significant risk for no practical benefit. That has been borne out today, because we have been able to allocate additional funding to



the Department of Health without following the wisdom previously expressed by Mr Aiken. His approach would have carried the significant risks of prolonged uncertainty, starker and deeper cuts later in the financial year, overspend and Treasury recalling the £559 million in debt forgiveness. All the while, as we know from our experience today, the amounts in June monitoring could be allocated anyway and provided for in the Supplementary Estimates. I am grateful that the Ulster Unionist Party is not in charge of our purse strings at this juncture.

The DUP asserted during the debate that all other parties welcomed the financial package. Whilst all other parties welcomed the progress that was made on the financial package, we were all clear that it did not solve all the issues or provide sustainable finances for Northern Ireland in the long term. Indeed, if the DUP wishes to take a cursory glance at Hansard or at my media appearances, it will see that that has been our position.

I also remind Members that it was the DUP's boycott of the Assembly. The rest of us said consistently that there was no good reason for the Assembly and the Executive to be collapsed. The DUP made clear that it was boycotting the Assembly not over finances but over academic arguments about Brexit. It has much to answer for in regard to the position that it took and the damage that it caused to our public services. None of us on these Benches will take lectures from the DUP about the damage to our finances.

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

**Mr Tennyson:** I will indeed.

**Mr Kingston:** When the DUP took a stand to restore our place in the UK internal market, the Member's party was calling for the rigorous implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol, which the EU then agreed to renegotiate. Will the Member and his colleagues not take the opportunity to apologise to the people of Northern Ireland for calling for the rigorous implementation of a document that was damaging to our place in the UK economy and that, subsequently, the EU agreed to renegotiate? It was the DUP that secured those improvements to our economic situation.

**Mr Tennyson:** I will address those comments before returning to the substance of the debate. You can smell the burning rubber all over the Assembly from the U-turns that the DUP has conducted since 2016. Unlike the DUP, the

Alliance Party has been consistent. We warned the DUP that there was no such thing as a good or sensible Brexit and that it would be hoist by its own petard. We warned the DUP not to trust Boris Johnson, because it would be thrown under the bus —

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Tennyson:** — whatever was written on the side of it.

**Mr Speaker:** I encourage the Member to return to the content of the debate. It is not a debate on Brexit.

**Mr Tennyson:** I will return to the debate, but, in fairness, the Member raised the point, and, with respect, Mr Speaker, he was not challenged on its substance.

**Mr Speaker:** He may be guilty of diverting you, but that does not mean that you have to take the diversion *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Tennyson:** I will return to the substance of the debate, Mr Speaker, because I think that I have answered the Member's points adequately.

There is no doubt that the challenges facing our finances are huge. We have, however, made significant progress in obtaining concessions from Treasury that our funding formula was not fit for purpose. The interim fiscal framework is a gateway to obtaining a properly baselined fiscal floor that reflects our relative need and the fiscal levers that we require to deliver sustainable finances. If, however, we are to be taken seriously as a negotiating partner, we must continue to show leadership and engage in responsible, mature government, even when the choices are difficult. That is why the Alliance Party supports the resolutions, and we urge other Members to do so.

**Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I speak on behalf of the Committee. First, I apologise to the Minister that I was not in my place for her speech. I also declare an interest: as a farmer, some aspects of the finances may implicate me to some degree. I welcome, however, the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2024-25, which set out detailed spending plans for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. DAERA is not part of the Statement of Excesses, so I will not refer to that document.

Looking at the overall picture for DAERA in purely comparative terms, we see that, relative to last year, the total net resource budget for 2024-25 is significantly lower, at about £624 million, than the total provision for 2023-24, which was approximately £764 million. The total net capital budget for 2024-25 is £95 million, compared with about £97.5 million for 2023-24. Those allocations do not come close to what is needed and to what DAERA bid for. For example, there were capital bids from DAERA for £155 million, including earmarked funding, of which only 61.2% are marked as inescapable and pre-committed. The total allocation is well below that, at £95 million. We expect extra in-year funding, of course, but it is a concerning start that DAERA will need in-year provision of about £150 million of resource funding just to match last year's budget.

The Committee has held meetings with the Minister and DAERA officials on the budgetary pressures in 2023-24 and into 2024-25. I highlighted those pressures in the Chamber on 9 April. We further heard from officials on 6 June about DAERA's allocations and the June monitoring round bids. I will come to those shortly and again later on.

I will focus now on the subheading detail under the total net budget. Food and farming allocations are relatively stable compared with last year in both resource and capital terms, with resource funding of about £443 million, compared with £444 million last year, and capital funding of about £64 million, compared with £60 million last year. That does not mean that there is enough to do all that is needed or desired, but that area has at least received allocations similar to the overall funding for 2023-24 as a starting point.

The same, however, cannot be said of funding for veterinary and animal health, which is down on last year's opening allocations by £20 million of resource and about £6 million of capital. The Committee has heard about the increase in bovine TB, difficulties with vet recruitment and the need to monitor other animal diseases and improve animal welfare. This Budget will not support the Minister in that regard.

The resource allocation for rural affairs is about £19 million, compared with about £17 million last year. Capital funding is up from £2.7 million to £4.6 million. With the loss of EU funding in that area, however, it is doubtful that that funding will be sufficient to make up the shortfall.

It is of concern to see the resource budget for the environment, marine and fisheries at an allocation of about £66 million, around £8 million lower than last year. The capital budget has remained similar at around £20.5 million, compared with around £19 million. On its visit to Kilkeel last week, the Committee heard of the investment needed in the fishing industry. We still wait to see a draft climate action plan, a plan for Lough Neagh and an environmental improvement plan. With a reduced resource budget, the Committee will be keen to discuss where the money is coming from.

What does all of that mean in practice? While any financial allocation is helpful, this allocation does not meet requirements. At a briefing on 6 June, we were advised by officials that the outcome was extremely difficult for the Department. There is no additional funding to take forward new work. Statutory obligations such as TB compensation and funding for the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) are not covered, and there are unfunded contractual pressures, such as pay and pensions and rising utility costs. There is no funding to reverse the 2023-24 decisions that were taken to help DAERA live within last year's budget.

The Committee heard from officials that the Minister has agreed reductions in funding for the food, farming and rural affairs group, the veterinary service animal health group and the strategic planning and corporate services group in order to create £2.4 million for additional work by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), the environment, marine and fisheries group and the climate change and science innovation group. It is of huge concern to the Committee to hear that the Minister is relying on June monitoring and potentially subsequent monitoring rounds to meet statutory and contractual elements, including a specific bid for bovine TB compensation.

It is an understatement to say that there is a challenging financial time ahead. However, the lack of a Programme for Government makes it more difficult to support and scrutinise the Minister's spending decisions. The Committee's scrutiny has also been hampered by having no sight of the Department's business plan for 2024-25 or that of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. We were to receive a written briefing tomorrow, but the Department has cancelled that due to slippage in the time frame.

I will finish there on behalf of the Committee and briefly make a few comments on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. We have highlighted

the concern to assist in the reduction and eradication of bovine TB. It is important to the entire community that we deal with that issue.

The second issue is climate change. A huge issue was made when the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 was passed, but there is now no or, I should say, very little specific funding to support it. We heard that the Minister has reallocated some funding to help with that, but there is nothing for a just transition.

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

**Mr Elliott:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the Assembly takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Paul Frew. The top Table will now be changed.

*The debate stood suspended.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Infrastructure

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** We will start with listed questions.

### Grass Cutting

1. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what savings he anticipates from the reduction of grass cutting for the 2024-25 financial year. (AQO 680/22-27)

4. **Mr Brooks** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the work he is undertaking with other agencies and public-sector bodies to improve the maintenance of grass areas in local communities. (AQO 683/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure):** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 4 together.

My Department's approach to verge management has recently changed to increase the focus on environmental benefit without compromising on road safety or our duties to deal with noxious weeds. That change occurred because I recognise the environmental benefits of road verges. Our approach seeks to allow wildflowers and wildlife to thrive. By reducing the areas of verge cut on many roads to a single swathe or, where possible, without compromising on road safety, reducing to a single cut later in the season, it is possible to increase the focus on environmental benefit.

Only the areas that can be left uncut without compromising on road safety are left unmown. That approach will deliver benefits in promoting biodiversity. However, it is not designed to be a cost-saving measure. The changes that I have made are for environmental reasons, rather than to cut costs. Given the size of the network, recent inflationary pressures and the safety requirements, there will not be any significant savings. Regardless, my Department works with other agencies and public-sector bodies. It has a memorandum of understanding with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council to pilot biodiversity on a number of road verges in the area. The aim is to lower the fertility of the soil and adopt a cut-and-collect approach to grass cutting to allow for the establishment of native wildflowers.

Other enhanced verge maintenance, including additional grass cutting and landscaping of

verges and roundabouts, is undertaken by councils, based on their own local arrangements. My Department continues to work with councils. I encourage others to adopt an approach to the maintenance of grass areas that is similar to the one that I introduced last year.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, I accept the biodiversity aspect of your answer, but will you write to your divisional offices to enforce that message to them? I think that, in my constituency of South Antrim, the road verges are running the risk of compromising road safety. Many of the road verges in South Antrim are not being cut, particularly at road junctions and rural schools. There is a real risk to road safety in that regard.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I encourage the Member to contact — I am sure that he has — his divisional office first. However, if he wishes to write to me directly, I am more than happy to engage with the divisional offices about any areas that he has significant concern about.

The message is quite clear: the policy cannot compromise road safety. Sight lines etc must be maintained. I accept that my colleagues across the North are operating under huge financial strain and that there are staffing issues. I am sure that they are doing their best to ensure that sight lines and safety are the number-one priority, but I am happy to follow up on any individual cases that the Member has.

**Mr Brooks:** I thank the Minister for his response so far, which has, largely, addressed my point. I am receiving an increasing number of complaints about grass cutting because, when it takes place in an area, it looks more hacked than mowed. Although I understand that there is a change in emphasis, surely, if we are going to do a job, it is worth doing it well. We should take some pride in our communities.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I fully accept the Member's point. We operate a number of systems. We have our own operatives, who work for DFI, and we have a number of private contractors that carry out work for the Department. Both should always strive to ensure that we maintain our areas to the highest standard.

I accept that grass is much more difficult to maintain when it is cut only once a season and is longer. There will have to be a capital investment in my Department and by some of the contractors as we move forward with the scheme. We want to ensure that we lift the grass as well as cut it. Lifting the grass removes

the nutrients from the soil, and wildflowers grow better in soil with fewer nutrients. We will have to make those investments during my period in office. As we award new contracts, some of our contractors will have to make those investments as well.

**Miss Brogan:** Will the Minister consider a wildflower planting scheme for road verges to promote biodiversity and reduce maintenance costs?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes. We wish to expand on the scheme that I introduced last year, or even the year before. As I said to Mr Brooks, it takes time for us to prepare the ground properly for that. As I said, we will have to invest in new equipment. We will also have to ensure that the soil is ready for planting wildflower seed so that they grow and prosper, and the biodiversity comes from that. The aesthetics of that will be quite pleasing as well.

**Ms McLaughlin:** The A6 has had cones on it from Dungiven to Drumahoe in Derry for the past three weeks for grass cutting. Is there any way that that can be sped up on what is a main arterial route? The delays that are happening on that main road are shocking.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will follow that up with my officials. I am not sure why it is taking that length of time to provide that service in the area: it may be weather-related.

**Mr Kingston:** As the Minister may recall, I wrote to him regarding the Comber greenway, with thanks to my colleagues from Strangford. I run along the greenway, and there is a section, about a mile from Comber, the responsibility for which falls to his Department, that is heavily overgrown by plants. It is a health and safety issue because, as he will know, it is a shared greenway for cyclists, runners, walkers and people with prams. That section is very narrow because of the extent of the growth. I understand all the issues around the environment and plants, but it is a dangerous section —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Question, please, Brian.

**Mr Kingston:** I ask the Minister to instruct his officials to look at the width of the path, which is less than a metre. Groups of cyclists like to go past at great speed.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will certainly ask my officials to look at that. It would be useful if the Member were able to identify the exact location for me.

## **A2 Shore Road, Rostrevor**

2. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the A2 Shore Road, Rostrevor will fully reopen following last year's landslide. (AQO 681/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I recognise the inconvenience that has been caused by the temporary closure of one lane on the A2 Shore Road in Rostrevor, due to a landslide that was caused by severe weather in November 2023. My Department is finalising a design to put in place a temporary solution to move the concrete blocks on to the roadside verge, in order to allow the road to be reopened to two-way traffic. We will then appoint a contractor to take that forward as soon as possible. I am aware that the embankment is under the control of the Forest Service and is in an area of outstanding natural beauty. My Department will continue to liaise with colleagues in DAERA, the Forest Service and the NI Environment Agency to progress those works.

**Ms Forsythe:** I thank the Minister for his response. Some eight months on from the slippage, I am sure that he understands the frustration that is expressed regularly in my constituency office. He also knows that I believe that the roads in South Down are some of the worst in Northern Ireland and that I have been consistent in taking every opportunity to raise that. Whilst I welcome the commencement of some of the works, can he give me an update on when the resurfacing from Kilkeel to Newcastle will be scheduled?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I cannot confirm the exact timing, but I will ask officials to contact the Member in relation to that. The reality is that many of our roads, across all our constituencies, are in a dire state as a result of over a decade of underinvestment. I can assure the Member that I am doing all that is in my power to secure additional funding. We are also looking at how we can use our funding in the most effective and efficient way in relation to improving road surfaces. I suppose that one area has to be the worst of all, but I am not sure that we can award that accolade just yet. I have more information to gather before I can hand out such an unwelcome accolade.

**Ms Ennis:** The partial closure of the A2 Shore Road at Rostrevor has caused much chaos locally. I welcome the Minister's commitment to

a plan to make sure that both lanes will be opened. Will he explain why it has taken so long to put in a temporary solution?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The area involved, as I said, is in an area of outstanding natural beauty, so we have to be mindful of that when we are planning or seeking on-site inspections to determine how we are going to solve the issue permanently. It is quite a difficult site to work in, and we have had to bring in geotechnical engineers to examine it. Once a plan is in place, I can assure the Member that we will move ahead as quickly as possible.

Another area where there has been a significant landslide may come up in this Question Time. It is worth noting that major weather events are having an impact, not only on the quality of road surfaces but on the surrounding landscapes. We are seeing more landslides on to roads, which are proving quite expensive and technically difficult to repair.

## **Coleraine Railway: Phase 3**

3. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much funding has been allocated to phase 3 of the railway line between Coleraine and the north-west. (AQO 682/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** My Department approved the business case for phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine project in November 2022 and issued a letter of offer for £97.7 million to take forward that important project for the north-west. I fully recognise the need to address regional imbalance and to better connect our communities, including those that are in the north-west. This year, therefore, I have ring-fenced £4.7 million in my budget to ensure that the Coleraine to Derry phase 3 project proceeds as quickly as possible. That budget allocation is additional to the £5.3m that has already been spent on the project. It will allow Translink to progress the project as planned and to ensure that there is investment in public transport across the entire region. Work has commenced on producing the required 55,000 railway sleepers for the project and on the procurement of the technical and engineering teams that are required to take the project forward to the main works start date of 2026.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, £4.7 million is a far cry from the £97 million that you told the House had been approved for the project. You say that the project is proceeding as planned, but it was planned to start in 2025, and this is the second 12-month slippage that we have seen in your

first months as Minister. Can you say that phase 3 will proceed as a matter of urgency and that you will do more to get more money for it?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Mr Deputy Speaker, you would be forgiven for thinking that there is an election in the air. *[Laughter.]* You would nearly think that there was an election in the air, because Mr Durkan has been promoting the inaccuracy — the falsehood — in the local papers that I delayed the upgrade, and I saw in this morning's 'The Irish News' that I have delayed the upgrade.

**Mr Durkan:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr O'Dowd:** I did not say that it was you; I said that it was in it.

That is a complete falsehood. It is a complete inaccuracy. If you are going to be a constructive Opposition, state the facts. The facts are that I have been in post for four months and that, when I came into post, I committed to ensuring that the upgrade would go ahead. How do you ensure that an upgrade goes ahead? You ring-fence the budget for it. I ring-fenced the budget to make sure that it can go ahead.

I am sure that you are not as soft as you walk. You know as well as I do that there is no three-year Budget in place, and you know as well as I do that you can ring-fence only one year of a budget. What have I done? I have ring-fenced one year of a budget. What else have I done? I have made sure that the project will go ahead. Do you know what I will do next year? I will ring-fence the necessary budget to allow the project to go ahead.

You are on your election trail, and that is fair enough — we all do it — but do not try to rob the eye of the electorate by telling falsehoods. *[Interruption.]* I am the only Minister —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Minister, please address your remarks through the Chair. Yes, we have all had a little bit of fun, and, yes, that is election behaviour, but you know as well as I do —.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I certainly do.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** That is it. OK.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Mr Deputy Speaker, the only person who has secured any progress on this upgrade thus far is me. The only person who has secured a budget for this project thus far is

me. I will ensure that the project is delivered in its entirety.

**Ms Ferguson:** I very much welcome our Minister's announcement of phase 3. Minister, will you provide an update on the feasibility study on constructing a new railway line from Portadown to Derry?

**Mr O'Dowd:** We have secured funding for that programme through the UK's Union connectivity review. The programme also fits in with the all-island rail review. That is important investment for moving on to the further steps that are needed to ensure that we deliver on commitments not only to address regional imbalance but on the exciting programme of work that is outlined in the all-island rail review. I hope to be able to present that all-island rail review to the Executive later this month. That has to be done in conjunction with my colleagues in the Cabinet in Dublin, as it is a joint project. These are exciting times for our railway service, including that to Derry.

**Mr Blair:** Does the Minister intend to progress work on the Knockmore line in this financial year and, if so, how?

That connection of Lisburn, Antrim and the International Airport would be of vital benefit all the time, not just at election time.

## 2.15 pm

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not have all the information about the Knockmore line in front of me, but it is an important connection that we have to move ahead with. There are feasibility studies that my Department is required to carry out to open up the rail network as it should be opened up and to correct the mistakes that were made 60 years ago. I am looking at funding opportunities for how we can do that, not only in my Department but North/South and towards Britain. I hope to make positive announcements on some of those matters in the time ahead, but I assure the Member that I am focused on ensuring that we open up our rail network again.

**Mr McNulty:** Minister, in the context of the all-island strategic rail review, will you give us an update on the reopening of the Armagh to Portadown rail link, please?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Again, a feasibility study has been carried out of that exciting opportunity. My Department has significant investments to make in the time ahead to correct regional

imbalances in roads. The next phase of major investments from my Department will have to be in our rail network. I will make decisions on progressing that throughout my time in office, but some of those decisions will not come to fruition until I leave. However, I assure the Member that I will put in place the foundations to ensure that the next Infrastructure Minister — maybe even the following one, because this will take several decades to deliver — has a master plan to deliver a modern rail network across the island.

## Shared Rural Network: Planning

5. **Mrs Erskine** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will undertake an evaluation of the effectiveness of the planning system in assisting in the delivery of the shared rural network programme, compared to the rest of the UK. (AQO 684/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** My Department maintains a positive working relationship with mobile operators and remains committed to working constructively with the industry and other key stakeholders to consider relevant matters as appropriate through the auspices of the DFE-led Barrier Busting Taskforce. The Barrier Busting Taskforce planning subgroup aims to identify barriers relating to the planning system and to investigate best practice in mobile network development; how the planning legislative guidance frameworks compare with other jurisdictions; and how local development plans can take account of the changing nature of mobile telecoms development. It is at an early stage in its deliberations, and many of the issues raised by the industry will be considered by the subgroup. In particular, it will be important for the planning subgroup to collect evidence on what is leading to perceived delays in the processing of planning applications for mobile network infrastructure, which are processed by local councils. Any recommendations arising from the outworkings of the task force and its subgroup will be brought to me and other stakeholders in due course.

**Mrs Erskine:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome the fact that it is cross-departmental, but I am aware of seven planning applications that have been taken out of the system for the shared rural network programme. In rural areas, that will have a major impact on mobile connectivity and our ability to grow our economy, businesses and all of that. Outdated planning policy is hindering the project, so what exactly will the Minister do

to solve that issue quickly, before we are left behind?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for her supplementary question. I am not sure who has taken those seven applications out. Is it the operators or the councils? I do not know, but I know this: there is no point in having a multi-Department task force that has key stakeholders on it and me standing here and telling them what the answers are. Let us wait for their report. I met them recently, but let us wait for the report and the information coming back from them, and then I will take action where, I believe, it is required.

The vast majority of the applications are dealt with by councils, so you might want to speak to some of your council colleagues about how the process operates at different councils. If there is a requirement for a change of policy, we can look at that, but let us wait for the evidence from the task force.

## Road Deaths

6. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his plans to reduce road deaths. (AQO 685/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** It is a matter of deep regret that we continue to see so many lives lost on our roads. We must remember that each life lost is not merely a statistic but a family member, a parent, a child or a friend. As of 23 June, 31 people had lost their lives on our roads this year. Those deaths cause so much pain to families and tear communities apart. This month, I brought a revised road safety strategy to the Executive for their agreement. A digital advertising campaign is nearing completion, and, last week, the British Heart Foundation became the latest organisation to partner with us by pledging to Share the Road to Zero.

The Share the Road to Zero strategy is an important document in refocusing minds and energies on creating safe roads, safe vehicles and safe people. However, it is only the collective efforts of us all that will truly make a difference. My officials are working alongside those in other Executive Departments and the emergency services to ensure that we have a single, agreed and collaborative approach to road safety. Once the outworkings of the Budget are fully known, officials will work with road safety partners to agree a forward action plan covering engineering, enforcement and education.

**Ms Ennis:** I thank the Minister for that response. I am glad to hear him talking about a collective effort. I agree that it will take everybody shouldering responsibility to deal with this. Will the Minister outline what measures are being taken to address some of those illegal road behaviours?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Illegal road behaviours and detection of them fall to the PSNI. We work closely with our partners in the PSNI on the promotion of road safety. I am engaging with my colleagues in the Department on bringing forward further legislation on drink-driving, drug-driving, being distracted while driving a vehicle and other matters to improve road safety. It will then be a matter for the PSNI to enforce that.

The most important aspect of road safety is road user behaviour, whether you are a driver, cyclist, motorcyclist or pedestrian. How you use the road is the most important thing as to whether you arrive home safely or the person that you are sharing the road with arrives home safely. Yes, there are engineering solutions, education solutions and enforcement solutions, but, if every one of us corrects or challenges our own behaviour, we will see a significant decline in serious injuries and casualties on our roads. The figures this year are just awful: there have been 33 deaths so far this year. I appeal to road users: treat yourself with respect, and treat other drivers and road users with respect.

**Mr Dunne:** I welcome the progress on the Department's road safety strategy and the interim targets of 50% by 2030 and zero by 2050. Does the Minister share my concerns about figures released just last week by the Department of Justice that drink- and drug-driving convictions are up by almost 20% in the last four years? A lot more needs to be done to tackle that serious problem. Maybe he can elaborate on what, he feels, could be done.

**Mr O'Dowd:** It is shocking to hear those figures. Some of that may be down to more detection by the PSNI, but there is no excuse or reason for anybody to get behind the wheel of a vehicle or any other form of transport if they have taken alcohol or drugs that would affect their ability to manage that vehicle. I am looking at introducing stricter drink-driving regulations. I am also seeking to see how I can support the PSNI in its roadside detections of drugs. There are many areas of our driving and road safety where education is required, particularly for younger drivers, but everyone knows that it is absolutely unacceptable to get behind the wheel of a vehicle having taken alcohol or

drugs that affect your behaviour. It is just totally unacceptable.

## **Seaview Primary School: Traffic Management**

7. **Mr Kingston** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will consider introducing a one-way system in the neighbouring streets around Seaview Primary School, North Belfast, to ease congestion, in consultation with the school and local community. (AQO 686/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Traffic congestion occurs at Seaview Primary School due to a concentration of vehicles arriving and departing within a short period. Such congestion, which is normal at most schools during drop-off and pickup times, is usually of relatively short duration. I can advise that officials from Roads eastern division have been in discussions with the school and the PSNI regarding various issues over a number of years. During that time, a number of "School Keep Clear" road markings have been introduced in some of the streets around the school. It is acknowledged that the streets around the school are busy. However, no excessive traffic progression issues have been noted. Any congestion that occurs tends to clear quickly.

While there are no plans to introduce additional measures at the school, I can advise that inconsiderate parking or parking in such a way as to cause an obstruction is an offence that the PSNI can deal with.

**Mr Kingston:** Thank you, Minister, for listing the ways in which this has been considered in the past; I am disappointed, though, that there is no undertaking to at least look again at it. The matter is raised regularly with me by residents close to Seaview Primary School and by the school principal and parents. I have raised it with departmental officials, and they gave me an undertaking that it would be looked at. It sounds from your answer as though it will not be looked at. It is an area of tightly packed, narrow streets and terraced housing from an era when many people did not have cars. Whilst I accept that congestion is always an issue around schools —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Could the Member ask a question?

**Mr Kingston:** — there is a particular need in that area. I will follow it up with officials, and I would appreciate it if the Minister could at least



lean on them and ask, "Look, can this be looked at again?". That is the only supplementary comment that I want to make.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I come from a generation, maybe like you, that walked to school. I am from a rural background, and I let my children know that it was three miles that I had to walk to school and back. Some days, I say that it was five miles; other days, I say that it was seven.

My point is that we need to encourage more parents and children to walk to school. I accept that, in some circumstances — the road layout or other matters — that is not safe. It is not a blanket solution, but, particularly in urban areas, we have to encourage more children to walk or cycle to school. I know that there is an onus on my Department to ensure that the proper facilities and engineering solutions are in place for active travel, and I will bring those forward as we work our way through the active travel policy.

The reality, Mr Kingston, is that the issues around Seaview Primary School are not unique; they can be found in any urban setting. The long-term, short-term or medium-term solution — whatever way you want to put it — is to encourage more people to walk or cycle to school.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am glad that the Minister is committed to reducing congestion around schools. In my constituency, there is a range of them — Rosetta Primary School; St Bernard's Primary School; Fane Street Primary School; St Bride's Primary School — where this is a real challenge. It is not about just congestion, as you say; it is also about air quality and healthy living.

There is a scheme that operates outside lots of schools across the water called the School Streets Initiative. Is he aware of that, and will he work to roll that out in the North where it is applicable and useful?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of the scheme. It has been raised in the Chamber before, and my officials are looking to see whether we can adopt pilot schemes here to see how successful that could be. We have to take imaginative measures to ensure that children and young people are encouraged to walk and cycle to school, for all the reasons that you outlined. It is important that my Department plays its role and that others play their role in that.

**Mr Mathison:** I also welcome the Minister's commitment to promoting active travel to school. Is he able to confirm how much he will allocate to the active schools travel programme in this financial year?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not have the figures in front of me, but I will certainly share them with the Member.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** For a quick supplementary, I call Pat Sheehan.

**Mr Sheehan:** Will the Minister tell us what measures he is considering to encourage active travel and thereby reduce car travel and congestion around schools?

**Mr O'Dowd:** My officials and I are working on an active travel policy. Under climate legislation, we have to spend 10% of our capital budget on active travel, so there is a legal and moral obligation on us to do that. It is OK for a Minister to stand up in the Chamber and say, "Well, more people should walk and cycle", but we have to provide the proper network of footpaths, which have to be wide enough for cyclists and walkers. We have to provide proper street lighting and crossings etc for young people, who will then feel safe walking back and forth to school. I acknowledge my obligations on this, and I assure the Member that I will plot out an investment strategy that reflects them.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. I advise Members that question 10 has been withdrawn.

**2.30 pm**

## **Derry to Coleraine Rail Upgrade**

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether, pursuant to an answer to an earlier question, he stated, and the Member is fairly sure that he did, that construction work on phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine scheme will commence in 2026. (AQT 451/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I think that I misspoke at the end. We are procuring the engineering team and the technical team to be in place for 2026. Construction will start in 2027. The Member may have heard me mention this before, but the previously ring-fenced investment funding is now being used to purchase and install the 55,000 sleepers that are required for the

project, so there is an active plan in place to deliver the upgrade.

**Mr Durkan:** I am glad that I gave the Minister the opportunity to clear that up after he misspoke when answering an earlier question.

The north-west transport hub celebrated the milestone of reaching one million passengers last year. That is brilliant and shows the real appetite for public transport use. That figure has been achieved despite the fact that there is only one train every two hours on a Sunday. Can the Minister intervene to seek timetable changes from Translink in order to facilitate more trains for Derry?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes, I can, and I will. Again, it comes down to decisions that I have to make. At this stage, Translink is dealing with a very difficult budget. This year, I took the opportunity to ring-fence the capital investment that is required, but I will be engaging with Translink on how we move forward with providing the train service that is also needed. Doing that requires a significant, but not impossible, piece of investment over the period in which I hope to be in office. It also requires a lead-in time, because new train drivers and other staff need to be recruited. Some additional train and carriage infrastructure may also be required, but, yes, I am going to work my way towards undertaking that project.

## Transport Costs: Health Trusts

T2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide his assessment of the transport costs that health trusts face. (AQT 452/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** All Executive colleagues' Departments are obviously under significant pressure, but I note the recent reports of the transport costs that the Department of Health is facing. I have offered help previously, and I am in the process of writing to the Health Minister again. Community transport is uniquely placed to assist the Department of Health and other Departments with meeting rising transport costs. It will not suit every set of circumstances, as there will always be circumstances in which patients require other forms of transport, but community transport is ideally placed to assist with a significant proportion of the challenges that the Department of Health, the Department for Communities, DAERA and other Departments face to reduce isolation, thus ensuring that people can attend their health appointments etc.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that Departments should work together to provide community transport?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes, I do agree. In coming into office, I attempted to arrange meetings with several Ministers. I accept, however, that everybody's diary during the period in which we came into office was busy as a result of dealing with the significant challenges that we all had. A small matter of an election got in the way, but, once we get that out of the road, there is an opportunity for me and other Ministers to sit down and see how we can support one another to provide proper transport for rural and isolated communities.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Alex Easton is not in his place.

## A5 Upgrade

T4. **Miss Brogan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that he will be aware that the Member and Sinn Féin colleagues in West Tyrone have long been campaigning for this and are eager to see it happen, for an update on the upgrade of the A5, on which far too many lives have been lost, resulting in far too many families and communities having been left devastated. (AQT 454/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I can confirm that, at this morning's Executive meeting, I briefed Executive colleagues that, in the coming days, I will be issuing them with my initial response to the Planning Appeals Commission's report. I will also be making a recommendation that we proceed with the A5 upgrade. I am conscious that it is a cross-cutting issue, so I will issue the papers to my Executive colleagues, await their feedback and then submit a further paper in mid-August for their approval to move ahead with the A5 project.

**Miss Brogan:** I thank the Minister for that answer. That news will be really welcome to people right across West Tyrone and everyone who uses the A5. As I say, we have been waiting patiently for progress on it. I thank the Minister for the work that he has done and the commitment that he has made to deliver the A5 upgrade. What is the Minister's assessment of the impact that the upgrade can have on road safety?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I have carefully considered the 30 recommendations in the Planning Appeals Commission's report. I am also acutely aware of the road safety aspects. I believe that, if my

recommendation to approve it is endorsed by the Executive, we will not only be providing a state-of-the-art road and correcting regional imbalance but saving lives.

## Renewable Energy Target

T5. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how he intends to play his part to reach the renewable energy target of 80% by 2030. (AQT 455/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** As Minister, I am committed to making a positive contribution, and I recognise that our planning system has an important supporting role to play. I want to ensure that the planning system operates efficiently and effectively within an appropriate legislative policy framework. Last year's changes to planning legislation expanded permitted development rights for the installation of microgeneration equipment, such as heat pumps. Later this year, I expect to publish revised regional planning policy for renewable and low-carbon energy to inform plan-making and decision-making within the wider context of energy and climate change.

**Mr Kelly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for that answer.*] Does the Minister agree that improvements to the planning system can assist that?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes. Where we have an evidence base to show that we need to change and keep up to date with the ever-changing economy out there and how we support each other, I will make, and my Department has previously made, policy changes to do that, but, as the Member will understand, I want to move forward on an evidence-based format in order to ensure that, when we make changes, they are to the betterment of the system.

## A2 Buncrana Road

T6. **Mr Delargy** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A2 Buncrana Road. (AQT 456/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member will be aware that the A2 Buncrana Road works were suspended as a result of a decision that was made during the time when the Executive and Assembly were down. The Buncrana Road is now part of the discussions around a transport strategy and will move forward as part of that overall policy.

**Mr Delargy:** It is very welcome to hear that, Minister. It is very welcome for the people of Derry and, actually, for the people of Donegal, who use that road daily. What engagement has the Department had with schools and local businesses around that?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Part of the development of the north-west transport plan will involve discussions with relevant stakeholders. Businesses, schools and the local community are key to that. There will be ongoing discussions with those stakeholders.

## Roads: Construction and Landowner Compensation

T7. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having heard him refer to the A5 and A2 schemes, to outline the average time that it takes to complete such a scheme from start to finish, and the time that it can take to pay out compensation to the landowners who are affected by them. (AQT 457/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The A5 scheme has, I think, been on the cards for 17 years. It is far too long from announcement to delivery. That delay can be for various reasons. It can involve procurement, design, challenges to procurement or design, legal challenges, public inquiries, and, quite rightly, having to deal with landowners who seek compensation for our taking their land. There are so many different moving parts in a major scheme that it can cause delay. The Executive and Departments need to sit down together and engage on how we can speed those things up, because the inflationary pressure alone on costs is frightening, never mind anything else. We have to look at all the policies and frameworks that we have to deal with to ensure that they are effective, efficient and necessary. The key objective is that we deliver for the public good.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you will be aware that I wrote to you recently with regard to the A6 scheme. One farmer has now waited almost eight years for his compensation payout, much of that due to the Department's bureaucracy and officials coming out to do survey after survey. At what stage will you intervene in some of those cases to prevent all those surveys being carried out and unnecessary pressures being applied to farmers who have been waiting on compensation for so long?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I tend not to intervene in individual cases. It would be wrong for me to do so,

unless there were exceptional circumstances. There are well-tested and proven policies, procedures and legal tests in place to ensure that the Minister can keep his nose out of such situations, to be honest. If there are exceptional circumstances and I am comfortable that I am not overreaching my powers, I will look at a case, but it would be the exception.

## Railway Line: Antrim to Lisburn

T8. **Mr Baker** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the timescale of the feasibility study into reopening the Antrim to Lisburn railway line. (AQT 458/22-27)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I can confirm that Translink received funding directly through the Union connectivity fund to undertake a feasibility study regarding the reopening of the railway line between Lisburn and Antrim. The feasibility study is ongoing and will include demand forecasting for additional rail passengers and route and operating models; a benefit-and-cost plan; and a delivery strategy, including on the potential connection to Belfast International Airport, as Mr Blair mentioned earlier. The study is due to be completed later this year.

**Mr Baker:** Go raibh maith agat [*Translation: Thank you*] for your answer, Minister. Does the Minister agree that enhancing rail connectivity across the island is the future?

**Mr O'Dowd:** First, I should clarify that the study is due to be completed early next year.

Yes, without a doubt, we have to correct the mistakes that were made 60 years ago. As I said earlier, I intend to leave in place plans that will go a long way in ensuring that the Department for Infrastructure is focused on the future delivery of improved rail connection for urban and rural communities.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Since Mr Carroll is not in his place, the Assembly will take its ease until 2.45 pm. The next item of business will be questions to the Minister of Health.

2.45 pm

## Health

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Questions 2 and 7 have been withdrawn.

## Self-directed Support: Payments and Budgets

1. **Mr Baker** asked the Minister of Health whether he is aware of differences in payment rates and managed budgets for clients of self-directed support across health and social care trusts. (AQO 694/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health):** Mr Deputy Speaker, before I answer the question, I want, with your indulgence, to acknowledge that I came across a social media post from Mr Baker last night that marked the second anniversary of the sad passing of his baby nephew Enda, who succumbed to a genetic disease called Edwards' syndrome. I believe that that was not the first time for the family. I just want to acknowledge that and reach out. As I often say, health is personal.

In answer to Mr Baker's question, my Department has always supported and continues to support the promotion of self-directed support, as it allows an individual to have as much choice and control as they wish over their personal budget, which has been identified and allocated to them by their local trust to meet their assessed needs. On 1 April 2024, my Department announced an uplift of the regional hourly rate for direct payments by 9.8% to £16.88 per hour from the previous £15.37. It is a set regional rate per hour, and therefore that is the rate that all trusts give to an individual in receipt of a direct payment.

I am aware that there can be a disparity in the rates paid to personal assistants. However, the rate of pay is ultimately a private arrangement between the service user and the personal assistant whom they employ, and, on that basis, the rate of payment to the personal assistant is negotiable. The service user, as the employer, is responsible for meeting all the administrative costs associated with being a recipient of a direct payment, such as National Insurance contributions, pension contributions, sick pay, annual leave, redundancy and so on, all from within the direct payment amount that has been allocated to them. Over and above that, my Department endorses the need for personal assistants to receive a rate of pay that is, as a minimum, reflective of the national living wage, which is £11.44 per hour.

**Mr Baker:** Go raibh maith agat, Minister. Thank you for the kind words.

How does the Minister plan to ensure that organisations such as Kids Together are able to continue and provide an invaluable service

where managed budgets are paid at the same rate as self-directed support?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his supplementary. One of the points is that a direct payment is not intended to replace existing support offered by family members; rather, it is to supplement care. There is a range of people who provide that care, and it is important that all of them get a fair crack, as it were, at providing support. I will work with officials and ask them to look closely at ensuring that there is a fair and equitable spread of those who provide that care.

When I think about this, I always remember my time as a victims' commissioner and the move that was made from the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund to the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). The point about that is that the move was to truly personalise the service. The memorial fund used to offer back-to-school or short break programmes, so, if you wanted money for school uniforms for your children or grandchildren, that was all well and good and, if you wanted a short break, all the better. However, if you did not want something that came under a scheme, the memorial fund simply could not help you. The move to the Victims and Survivors Service was designed to treat every client individually: "What is it that will improve your life? What are the barriers to your being content and prosperous? How can we come in and try to remove those barriers?". It is the same with these payments. Who delivers the service should be those who, the recipient who is commissioning the service feels, are best placed to help them in their life.

**Mr Donnelly:** Will the Minister meet the Centre for Independent Living to discuss its priorities around self-directed support?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Yes, I am more than happy to meet anybody who has ideas about how we can best deliver those services. Absolutely.

**Mr Elliott:** I understand and recall that a support package in the region of £70 million was announced earlier this year. Will the Minister provide us with information or an update on how much of that was for self-directed payments?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Yes. Minister Swann announced £70 million in March. I can tell Mr Elliott that £7.3 million was invested in self-directed support. The estimate for that was based on current expenditure levels for self-directed support in Health and Social Care (HSC). I

hope that he will agree that that was a significant contribution to improving the service.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Question 2 has been withdrawn. I call Stephen Dunne.

## Emergency Service Response Times

3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Health to outline what engagement he has had with the Minister for Infrastructure in relation to improving emergency service response times to road traffic collisions. (AQO 696/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank Mr Dunne for the question. In October 2022, a draft Northern Ireland road safety strategy reaching up to 2030 was published. While Departments supported it at the time, unfortunately, it could not be finalised due to the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive. Following the return of Ministers, the strategy has been updated, and it was brought to the Executive on 23 May. I support the strategy. I welcome the ambition to deliver an interim target of 50% fewer deaths and serious injuries in the decade between 2020 and 2030.

The post-crash response pillar aims to establish an effective and appropriate response to collisions to ensure that road victims receive appropriate medical care and rehabilitation to minimise the severity of the long-term impact of their injuries. The strategy identifies several key factors required for success in delivering the outlined 2030 targets and strategic outcomes. I am pleased that it has secured Executive commitment. However, that needs to be followed up with appropriate funding, appropriate resources and collaborative partnership working, in which, I can tell the Member, I will certainly play my part.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his answer and his commitment. I put on record my gratitude to our emergency services, which deal with such awful circumstances. Will the Minister commit to working alongside the Infrastructure Minister and the Justice Minister to ensure that every effort is made to meet the target of zero deaths and serious injuries by 2050, including looking, where possible, to improve emergency service response times to road traffic collisions?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I will make the commitment to work with my Executive partners. I will also say to the Member that I am more than happy to work on a cross-border basis, because, on Thursday, not only was I at the health sectoral meeting but I attended the infrastructure sectoral meeting with Minister John O'Dowd and his counterpart from the Government of Ireland, Eamon Ryan.

The statistics south of the border for fatal road traffic collisions and serious injuries from collisions are also going very much the wrong way, so cooperation is part of the mix too.

My Department has taken steps to improve waiting times at emergency departments. Reducing handover delays at emergency departments has been a key priority, and a regional process has been issued to all trusts for the release of ambulances for outside emergency departments when the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has an outstanding category 1 or category 2 call. That will very much improve response times. That is certainly the ambition.

**Mr Butler:** Will the Minister agree that an opportunity has been lost with the failure to deliver the Desertcreat tri-service training college, which would have assisted emergency response times, given that road traffic accidents involve a multi-agency response? Will the Minister explain what supports are provided for first responders after they attend such traumatic incidents?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member, and I look forward to visiting Desertcreat to see what the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) does there. Its employees regularly encounter incidents that may be defined as "critical", and such incidents can cause psychological distress to those involved. The Fire and Rescue Service is committed to ensuring that employees receive the support required through critical incident stress management. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service takes a comprehensive and integrated multicomponent approach, through that critical incident stress management process, to crisis and disaster intervention. The aims are stabilisation, symptom reduction, return to adaptive functioning and facilitating access to continued care. As part of that process, employees are also offered the opportunity to attend counselling with Inspire.

The Ambulance Service community resuscitation education officers have received training in critical incident stress management, and they will engage with community first-responder volunteers, if they require support following a challenging call. If further support is required, a community resuscitation education officer can refer a community first-responder volunteer to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service peer support team. That team can also refer community first-responder members for free and confidential support through Inspire Workplaces.

## Doctors' Rotas

**4. Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health whether health and social care trusts are progressing with plans to publish all doctors' rotas, in line with recommended guidance. (AQO 697/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank Paula Bradshaw for her question. As you will be aware, junior doctors in Northern Ireland are employed under the single lead employer. They work in a number of host HSC organisations that are responsible for developing, issuing and monitoring the working patterns and rotas of junior doctors. Under the current guidance, it is recommended that trainees receive their rotas a minimum of six weeks prior to taking up post. The Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) is responsible for providing the postings to host organisations, following the completion of their recruitment campaigns. NIMDTA has confirmed that all allocations for August of this year have been released to employing organisations, giving adequate notice to enable the health and social care trusts to prepare and issue their rotas.

I have been advised by the host organisations — the trusts — that they are making every effort to provide their junior doctors with rotas six weeks prior to the trainees taking up their posts. They have, however, advised that that is not always possible due to vacancies appearing in the postings at late notice. In cases where the host organisation is unable to provide a rota within the recommended time frame, they state that they will advise the trainees and, where possible, provide an indicative rota.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, Minister, for your response. I am sure that you have engaged with junior doctors on many occasions since taking up post and that they have a long list of issues that they want to see resolved, not least their pay. Will you outline how you have engaged with them since coming into post?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member. Indeed, I engaged with them before coming into post, when I was the Assembly Private Secretary to Minister Swann. More recently, I have written to all three branches of the BMA and invited them to meet me to discuss the issues that the health service faces and how we can move forward together. I have also advised the branches that I wish to meet all three branches together.

The junior doctors committee has written to me separately, and I hope to meet its

representatives shortly. I have reiterated my offer of arbitration and confirmed my desire to see a revised contract and terms and conditions for junior doctors as a way of securing any additionality to the pay bill. The junior doctors committee has stated that its current mandate is for pay and that it would consider contract negotiations once a reasonable pay offer and a commitment to full pay restoration has been made.

One of the non-pay issues on which we can make good progress is meeting the good practice requirements for delivering those rotas within the six-week time frame. There are other non-pay issues that I am keen to discuss as a way of improving the working lives of junior doctors. In brief, we seem to find ourselves in a situation that, for me, is a model illustration of why we need arbitration processes. Again, I encourage the BMA junior doctors committee to engage in those terms.

**Ms Kimmins:** The fact that we are still talking about non-pay issues as the predominant factor concerns me, because the BMA has said clearly that it needs to see a pay offer. If this does not work, Minister, what are the next steps in the process because we need to find a resolution urgently.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Chair of the Committee for her comments. The next steps are difficult, because, as I said to Ms Bradshaw, we are in a classic situation where arbitration is the only way to go forward. Were I, as Minister, to go forward with the BMA junior doctors committee on its terms, purely discussing pay, there is no guarantee that we would reach a mutually agreeable resolution, particularly given the budgetary constraints that I am operating under.

The other point to make is this: how repercussive would it be to reach a pay agreement with the junior doctors, given the sort of quantum that they wish to achieve in those negotiations? I can say only that I am not looking at a plan B. What I am doing is encouraging them to sit down with the Department and engage in meaningful, constructive and equitable arbitration.

### 3.00 pm

**Miss McAllister:** Minister, I do not understand how you can arbitrate something on which you are already saying no, before you enter that arbitration. You outlined the Department of Health's perspective, which is that there will be no discussions about pay unless you get

discussions about contract. It is incumbent on you, as the Minister, to sit down, in a meaningful way, with only pay on the table, without saying no. What is there to negotiate if you are already saying no?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for her question. There are the terms and conditions of employment, the rotas and all the wraparound that is involved in being a junior doctor. I do not for one moment think that junior doctors want to be junior doctors just because of the salary band that that offers; it is a vocation. They probably have good ideas about how to improve the National Health Service, how to improve productivity and how to achieve better outcomes. There is an awful lot to discuss, and it is perfectly reasonable to say that the Department is willing to discuss pay within the envelope of terms and conditions and that we will do so in independent arbitration.

## Clinical Radiologists/Clinical Oncologists: Shortfall

5. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the Royal College of Radiologists' 2023 clinical radiology and clinical oncology workforce census reports, for his assessment of the projected shortfalls of 44% for clinical radiologists and 12% for clinical oncologists, by 2028. (AQO 698/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank Mr Harvey for his question. I am aware of the workforce challenges across health and social care. I welcome the Royal College of Radiologists' report. I have agreed to meet college representatives to discuss the findings in detail.

The college is an important stakeholder in delivering effective cancer and imaging services for our population. My Department is committed to developing cancer and imaging services for all the people of Northern Ireland. Following the cancer strategy, by this year we will have invested £10.88 million to stabilise HSC trusts' oncology and haematology services. That will increase the number of funded oncology and haematology posts, including clinical oncologist posts. Specific cancer pathways are being developed that will inform future strategic workforce planning to address workforce requirements for clinical oncologists and other professions.

The active expansion of multidisciplinary teams is a key part of our overarching programme to reform health and social care. With regard to imaging services, my Department and the HSC are taking forward a proposal for a multi-

professional imaging academy for Northern Ireland. That will significantly increase capacity in the health and social care system for training greater numbers of radiologists and radiographers, including interventional radiologist consultants, each year. It will provide a continuous supply of locally trained consultant radiologists and advanced radiographer practitioners, which will address the increasing demand for imaging investigations and reduce our reliance on costly outsourcing.

I remain profoundly dissatisfied with the level of funding being made available to my Department, which has hampered and limited the Department's ability to make further progress that can transform the delivery of health and social care in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Harvey:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, I was going to ask what plans you have to increase the number of specialty training places to ensure that we have a pipeline of new consultants, but you touched on that, so perhaps you could elaborate on your answer a wee bit.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. We do indeed have significant gaps across key professions in health and social care. Recruitment, training and retention of staff are critical. We also need to ensure that we recruit staff with the correct skills to deliver a modern cancer service.

My Department is committed to creating safe, adequately staffed work environments, which will help to ensure that we attract and retain staff across the health and social care system. Through effective workforce planning, we will ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to the education and employment of health and social care staff. The Royal College of Radiologists' three-point plan to support oncology and clinical radiology focuses on recruitment, training and retention. My Department's health and social care workforce strategy 2026, 'Delivering for Our People', and its current, second action plan contain a comprehensive and ambitious work programme that includes the development of initiatives to enhance our attraction, recruitment and retention across all staff groups and specialities. I look forward to engaging with college representatives on that at our forthcoming meeting, which will inform our work in the area.

**Mr Chambers:** Will the Minister provide an update on what is being done to speed up

access to diagnostic services for patients who are suspected to have cancer?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his question. The Department is working closely with health and social care trusts to address the long waits that we see in many of our cancer pathways. That includes short-term measures such as buddying arrangements, whereby patients are transferred to other trusts for a diagnosis. Medium- and longer-term measures are also required to ensure that we have sufficient capacity to meet the growing demand that a growing and ageing population will generate. That will require investment in workforce and capital equipment. It will also require us to transform how we deliver key services to ensure that they have the capacity and expertise to deliver.

**Ms Egan:** Question 10, please.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Sorry, Connie, it was indicated to the Table that you were going to ask a supplementary.

**Ms Egan:** No. Apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** In that case, I call Diane Dodds.

**Mrs Dodds:** Minister, you will agree that early detection for cancers is extremely important. Recently, I met Cathy Brokenshire, the widow of the late James Brokenshire. We do not have early screening for lung cancer in Northern Ireland, despite lung cancer being one of our most prolific killers of people with cancer. Will you look at the idea of having screening for lung cancer and come back to the House with proposals on that vital aspect of healthcare?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for her question. Yes, I will commit to taking that away and discussing it with colleagues in the Department. I agree with the Member that it is a gap that not only exists but needs to be closed for the sake of our people.

## Health Outcomes: Regional Inequalities

6. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health to outline how he plans to address regional inequalities in health outcomes. (AQO 699/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** The health inequalities annual report that was published by my Department on 27 March 2024 highlighted the scale of



inequalities that continue to exist. For example, the report showed that, in 2020-22, males in the most deprived areas lived on average 7.2 fewer years than males in the least deprived areas. The gap for females was 4.8 years. That is happening a quarter of the way into the 21st century.

Inequalities in health outcomes arise primarily because of inequalities in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. For example, research has shown that only 20% of health outcomes are driven by the clinical care that we receive, with the rest being related to the socio-economic and physical environment in which people live and a range of health and lifestyle behaviours or choices.

Making Life Better is the overarching strategic framework for public health through which the Executive committed to creating the conditions for individuals, families and communities to take greater control over their lives and be enabled and supported to lead healthier lives. The framework is underpinned by a range of public health strategies that focus on specific issues such as substance use, suicide prevention, tobacco use and obesity prevention. It is further complemented by the integrated care system for Northern Ireland, which is underpinned by a population health and outcomes-based approach.

Reducing inequalities in health is a huge challenge. It needs continued, sustained collaboration across Departments and agencies, including local government and the community and voluntary sector, and with communities to address the factors that impact on health and well-being locally and regionally. The Member will be aware from my recent statement in the Chamber that health inequalities will be one of my main areas as Health Minister, and I hope to update the Chamber soon on an initiative.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I thank the Minister for his answer. There is also a gap of between 11 years and 15 years in healthy life expectancy between the most deprived and least deprived areas. The rate of drug abuse in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area is 145% higher than the average for trust areas. We therefore really need interventions that are directed at the most deprived areas.

Do you agree that activity in your Department goes hand in hand with economic performance? How can we have confidence in regional inequalities being tackled if the two relevant Departments are not working together to achieve regional balance?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for her question. There are two elements to consider, the first of which is the question of tackling areas of deprivation, while the second is the issue that the Member raised about regional inequalities. I am certainly up for tackling both. As I said, I hope to work with departmental officials in the coming weeks to advance the initiative that I want to introduce to tackle health inequalities. Indeed, I have a meeting with senior officials scheduled for later this afternoon about taking the next step in developing the proposals. We will take one or two areas of deprivation, no matter where they are. We will take services that already exist and put them into a programme. We will then flood the areas with information and services, in the hope that our doing so will have an impact. If we do that, I believe that other areas that suffer from severe health inequalities will see what is being done elsewhere and say, "I would like a slice of that cake". We will certainly ensure that we deliver a proportionate degree of regional balance in the roll-out of that initiative.

**Mrs Dillon:** It is very positive to hear that you seriously want to tackle inequalities, Minister. Given your response, do you agree that funding should follow need? We do not need to reinvent the wheel, as there are already some fantastic projects that are funded through the Community Foundation via the Department. Do you agree that the Community Foundation needs to continue to fund organisations that work on the ground in communities and that understand the place where they are working and the people with whom they are dealing?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I very much agree with the Member's sentiment. That funding needs to continue. Although we can talk broadly about commonalities in health inequalities, each area of deprivation has its specific issues and needs. People in communities are better placed than anybody else to say what the solutions are that they believe will work for them in their community.

I have had very initial discussions with Executive colleagues about the issue. Solid research indicates that clinical and health interventions are probably only 20% of the solution and that perhaps 40% of it is down to socio-economic factors. I was very pleased with the reaction of my colleague Conor Murphy, the Economy Minister, who seems to be up for tackling the issue. As a member of the Economy Committee before taking on this role, I was very focused on the fact that our rate of economic inactivity — people who are not in

work or not seeking work — is 26%. That is one in four people. If Members look at the reasons that people are economically inactive, they will see that physical and mental health is probably the single biggest reason. Accessible, affordable childcare is also a major issue.

An all-Executive initiative is therefore needed to tackle the issue, but it cannot be done in a top-down way. Rather, we need to get into communities and say, "Do you agree that these are your issues?" and, "How do we co-design and co-produce the answers so that they make a positive impact?". The figures on how long people live for and on how long they live a healthy life are stubbornly not moving. The dial is not moving. We therefore have to change the dial. To do that, there has to be a cross-departmental, all-Government initiative.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** We have time for one further, short question.

3.15 pm

### **Cancer Strategy 2022-2032: Implementation**

8. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health to provide a timeline on the implementation of the Northern Ireland Cancer Strategy 2022-2032. (AQO 701/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** As the Member will know, the cancer strategy is a 10-year plan to reform cancer services here. Since it was published in 2022, we have already seen significant progress against a number of actions. Key examples of that include the development of rapid diagnostic centres and services to provide genomic testing for cancer patients. Both of those services will help to improve pathways and patient outcomes.

We have completed reviews of haematological cancer pathways and adolescent and young adult cancer services, and we are progressing work to implement their recommendations. We have invested in oncology and haematology stabilisation plans and clinical nurse specialists in order to ensure that those services are better staffed. Work is under way to review breast cancer services and to implement an optimal care pathway for pancreatic cancer patients. The focus of that work is on reducing the length of time that those patients are waiting for diagnosis and treatment, thereby improving patient outcomes.

I will leave it there, Mr Deputy Speaker, in order to afford Mr Dickson the opportunity to come back.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** A short supplementary, Mr Dickson.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Minister, you will recognise that skin cancer is one of the most common forms of cancer in Northern Ireland. You recently answered questions from me with regard to sunbeds. Do you agree with me that sunbeds are, as MPs in the House of Commons have described them, killing machines, and what action will you take to ban them?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** A short response, please, Minister.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I hear what the Member is saying. I can only say that I have never been tempted to go anywhere near such a machine. I will take the matter back to the Department and I will reply in proper and appropriate detail to Mr Dickson.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Thank you, Minister. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Questions 3 and 6 have been withdrawn.

### **Autism Reviewer**

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, having noted that the role of autism reviewer is a critical requirement of the Autism (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, to state why that role has not yet been realised and recruited for and whether he agrees that it is critical to monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the new autism strategy. (AQT 461/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his question. I am fully aware of the responsibility to appoint an independent autism reviewer, and I acknowledge the significant role that the post will bring for autistic people and their families. I have deferred a decision on the reviewer until I can consider health funding pressures in the round, which I have to do, particularly taking account of the outcome of June monitoring, which has now been announced. Nevertheless, I will take the decision on the reviewer in the coming weeks. I recognise the importance of ensuring that all people with autism, or those who are waiting for an assessment for autism, their families and their carers, can all receive

the right access to services. I can assure all Members that my Department will continue to work in partnership across Departments, the health and social care sector, public bodies and the community and voluntary sector to make that happen.

Whilst the monitoring and reporting role will be fulfilled by the independent autism reviewer, in adherence to legislative requirements, the Department of Health will commit to that role until that appointment is made. The autism strategy 2023-28 was published, along with an initial two-year delivery plan for 2023-25, on 13 December 2023, and work is under way across Departments and public bodies. Progress will be assessed through the annual monitoring report, which will be completed shortly. Once I have agreed and approved that report, a copy will be published on the Department of Health's website.

**Mr Durkan:** It is welcome that the decision will be made, so I implore the Minister to make the right one. Cognisant of his long-held interest in mental health and the absolutely appalling and disproportionate mental health outcomes for autistic people, does he agree that we need to urgently provide specialist mental health support in that community?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Again, I thank the Member. I acknowledge that the need for improved understanding of autism for all people has been raised consistently throughout stakeholder engagement and public consultations down the years. My Department intends to provide autism training across all the health and social care sector, rather than just empowering specialist groups of individuals. All trusts offer training and support to all staff in the effective support of those patients with communication challenges and barriers, including those with autism. When they are accessing services, support staff need to be more aware.

Trusts take a service-wide approach to addressing the needs of those with autism. That includes providing training for all staff, run by individual trusts or commissioned from external organisations, and self-directed learning for those with a particular identified training need. The Autism (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 inserts subsection 4A, which states:

*"The autism strategy must set out how training (including accredited training) is to be provided to the staff of Northern Ireland departments and other public bodies on how to best address the needs of—*

*(a) persons with autism, and*

*(b) the families and carers of persons with autism."*

The Department recognises that the training provided needs to be readily accessible, practical in its approach and influenced by autistic people in order to ensure that the challenges that they experience are accurately represented.

With the funding that is allocated through the autism strategy 2023-28, all trusts are taking forward a regional project to develop GP training videos, and all trusts offer training and support to all their staff in the effective support of those patients with communications challenges and barriers, including autism, in accessing services, while also supporting staff to be more aware.

## Excess Deaths

T2. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health to what he attributes the horrific figures of over 1,000 excess deaths, which are deaths above the five-year average, in Northern Ireland over the past year, including 755 deaths in 2024 alone. (AQT 462/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his question and acknowledge his long-standing interest in the area. The expression "excess deaths" is horribly clinical, but I suggest that it is a necessary definition. First, I assure Mr Frew that I do not want any partner, relative or friend of somebody who has passed away to wonder whether the implication of that person being an "excess death" is that the death should perhaps never have happened.

I am very much focused on the issue of excess deaths. Of course, the issue is not unique to Northern Ireland and has been observed internationally. The underlying explanation is likely to be multifactorial and may include an increasing number of people with long-term conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. It could also be down to lifestyle changes in a population, access to services or the longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have discussed the issue with the Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Ian Young. My Department has also commissioned the Public Health Agency to carry out work to investigate the potential causes. That work is ongoing.

**Mr Frew:** I welcome the Minister's movement to have an investigation into the issue of excess deaths, which is something that the previous Minister refused to conduct.

Does the Minister believe that lockdowns not only caused massive damage to the development of our infants, damage to the education of our children, the rise in anxiety and depression among our most vulnerable, an increase in domestic and sexual violence and an increase in child abuse but caused deaths?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question and very much acknowledge the principle of what he said. The impact of the COVID pandemic and of lockdowns are matters for the long, ongoing and necessary UK-wide inquiry. I do not want to say anything that could be considered prejudicial to the work of that inquiry. I acknowledge what the Member is saying and understand the logic of what he has concluded, but I will stop short of making definitive comment for fear of prejudicing the inquiry.

### South West Acute Hospital

T4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, being sure that he recognises the significance of the modern facilities at the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH) in Enniskillen, whether he will look at expanding those facilities, particularly the theatres, so that the SWAH can be a regional hub and make a much more useful contribution to reducing waiting lists throughout Northern Ireland. (AQT 464/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his question. He may recall that, in another role, as the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, I had the pleasure of visiting the South West Acute Hospital not long after it opened. It is a very impressive, very modern and very efficient-looking facility. When it comes to efficiency, I am very much focused on increasing the uptake and capacity of theatres to do more, not just in the South West Acute Hospital but in all theatres across our acute hospitals. That has to be a matter for debate, because I cannot just wave a magic wand and increase the capacity and usage of the theatres. If I could, I would, and failing me having that ability, it is a question of negotiation and strategy, as I see it.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for that. I note that he has visited the South West Acute Hospital in the past, but now may be a good time for him to update his knowledge. I invite him back to the South West Acute Hospital in the near future, if he will accept that invitation.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I am more than happy to accept an invitation to revisit the South West Acute Hospital and perhaps build a day's worth of programmes, events and meetings around it. Last Thursday, I had the great pleasure of going to Crossmaglen to visit a family-run GP practice, and that was really inspiring and energising. I will expect no less when Mr Elliott takes me back to the South West Acute Hospital.

### Budget Cuts

T5. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether, given that successive Tory and Stormont Administrations have wrecked our health service with budget cuts over the years, and given the Minister's previous statements about health cuts and that there will likely be a new Prime Minister on Friday morning, he will commit to ruling out implementing any budget cuts in the months and years ahead. (AQT 465/22-27)

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his question. To be clear, when I have talked about implementing cuts, it is in the context that, according to the five health trusts, there appear to be four categories of cuts: those that have low impact, medium impact, high impact and catastrophic impact. I have said that I am not willing to implement cuts that have a catastrophic impact, because that will do real damage to our patients. That represents real, serious, significant and, to my mind, unavoidable harm, and that is not for me.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, all cuts, especially in the health service, are catastrophic. Minister, there is growing demand for a wealth tax on corporations across these islands. When the new Prime Minister comes here, will you commit to raising that matter with him as a way to fund our health service? Millionaire and billionaire wealth is completely out of control, and such a tax would be one quick way to fund our health service.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank Mr Carroll for his supplementary question. He is taking me to an area that may be just slightly above my pay grade, but I will say this to Mr Carroll: it seems to me that people of reasonably high wealth who have decent incomes and disposable cash tend to take out private health insurance, so I am not quite sure where he is going with that, unless he is suggesting that we impose additional taxation on them to help fund the

health service. If that is the case, that is way beyond my pay grade.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** That concludes Health questions. The Assembly will take its ease while we change the top Table to get ready for the next item of business.

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

**3.30 pm**

## Question for Urgent Oral Answer

### Economy

#### Spirit AeroSystems

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr David Brooks has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary, followed by a Member who has tabled a question on the same subject.

**Mr Brooks** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on his engagement with Spirit AeroSystems and Airbus following reports that Airbus will take over part of the Belfast operations.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** Following this morning's announcements, I am committed to supporting Spirit AeroSystems in seeking the best outcome for our economy and the workforce based here. I have spoken with senior management at the company and with Boeing to ensure that we will explore all avenues for sustaining the operations and employment here. I will continue to engage with the company and the unions on the acquisition by working with key stakeholders to ensure that the future status of the highly skilled workforce is protected.

**Mr Brooks:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest in that my brother is employed by Spirit AeroSystems.

The Minister will recognise that today's announcement will add a sense of nervousness to Spirit's highly skilled workforce. Will he outline what engagement the Executive plan to have with the UK Government, Invest NI and others in order to secure the preferred outcome of Airbus taking ownership of the Belfast operations in their entirety? In doing so, will he outline what the backup plan is to keep those good jobs secure should that preferred solution not emerge?

**Mr C Murphy:** I recognise the nervousness that will be felt about that. The best outcome would be for Airbus to take the entirety of the operation here. It has focused on the wing production unit, which, of course, is good news for the significant number of workers involved in

that part of the operation, but a larger number of workers are outside that. They will continue to be Spirit employees. We have something like six to 12 months from the announcement of the merger and the acquisition by Airbus to work that through.

Last night, the deputy First Minister, the First Minister and I had a late-night engagement with Boeing, and we had a very early morning engagement with Spirit. I hope to reach out this week to the Department in London, and, with an incoming Government on the other side of this week, we clearly intend to reach out there as well, and we will continue to engage.

There is a recognition by Boeing, Spirit and Airbus that there is a highly skilled workforce here, that they have been performing remarkably well, that there is room for growth in the aerospace industry and that Boeing previously did an awful lot here. As a matter of fact, most of its work outside the United States was done here. We are ambitious not only to secure that but to continue to grow the aerospace industry here.

We in the Executive are united in our viewpoint on this, and we ensured that Boeing and Spirit heard it. We will also ensure that the Government and Airbus hear about our commitment to protect those jobs and to make sure that there continues to be growth in the sector here.

There is a period of time now when everything is on the table for discussion. There is significant certainty for those who work in the wing production side of things and less so for others, but we want to get to a space where we can protect that employment and continue to grow the industry here. As I said, there is international recognition of the quality of the workforce here and the quality of output that there has been for many years.

**Mr McReynolds:** I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber today. The Minister will, no doubt, be aware of the concern and uncertainty that many employees woke up to today after seeing social media. Will he confirm when he will meet the unions to update and reassure them that he and his Department are taking the matter seriously?

**Mr C Murphy:** I have met the unions already, and I will be happy to meet them again whenever they wish. They will know, as we do, that this is the announcement of the beginning of a process that will roll on for months. We need to make sure that all the key players in that process understand the importance of the

workforce to here, to our economy and to the community that lives here. That has already landed, certainly with Boeing and Spirit. We are in that space anyway.

Boeing has pledged to be partners with us, and we want to make sure that a new Government, when they are in place, are fully committed. A level of support was given to Airbus and others to ensure that the workforce was kept here. We want to follow up on those commitments and make sure that they are held to.

Of course, I will meet the unions again. If that is their wish, I am happy to do so. I have already met with them. They were aware that the process was beginning and, like us, wanted to protect the jobs and the skills on that site. We will continue to work with them in the time ahead to get the best possible outcome.

**Mr McGuigan:** I note the commitment of the Minister and, indeed, that of the other Executive Ministers on this. The Minister has alluded to the question that I was going to ask, which is whether he and the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be in contact with an incoming British Government after the election results to ensure that Spirit is high up the agenda and there is a meeting to discuss this as soon as possible.

**Mr C Murphy:** Invest NI is already doing a lot of the legwork with the companies involved and has been for some time. It is in contact today with the Department in London. As I said, I hope to get an opportunity to speak to that Department this week.

We have a strong commitment to go when a Government are in place beyond next week to make sure that they understand fully what we wish to do. Invest NI will lead on the ground on the issue and is very much engaged with it, and we will ensure that we have that conversation. The British Government were substantial funders of the project here, but the Executive were the significant funder, and we want to ensure that all of that investment in skills, R&D and innovation — the intellectual property that has been built up in the skills base — is kept here and utilised fully in the growth of that industry.

**Dr Aiken:** The Northern Ireland Government invested around £520 million in what was then Bombardier. What guarantees do we have from Airbus that the manufacturing, the intellectual property and the R&D facilities will remain in Belfast, and will that be written into any agreement with Airbus?

**Mr C Murphy:** A lot of that remains under Spirit, which will stay there until such times as the process is concluded. Of course, we want to ensure that, where support was given to secure employment, that support is held to, and we will get the opportunity to talk to Airbus.

What Spirit wants to see and what we want to see is, if it is not Airbus or Boeing, a responsible owner taking over the remainder of the operation here so that it can continue to be developed in the way that it has been developed and those skills and all of that know-how and talent can be put to full use in the context, as Boeing has informed us, of a growing industry that is getting back to where it was pre-COVID and continues to grow.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Minister, you have already referred to most of what I wanted to ask you. In relation to Invest NI taking the lead, will it push the unique position and the competitive advantage that we have in Northern Ireland with dual-market access in this area of expertise?

**Mr C Murphy:** It will push all the buttons that we can push. Our main attraction is that we have a highly skilled workforce with a significant number of years' experience in this area. That workforce has won multiple awards for its innovation and the work that it does in the general aerospace sector. It is also well versed on the significant supply chain in the sector. That is probably the primary attraction at the moment. Certainly, if there are other advantages with dual access or anything else and they are attractive to making sure that we get the right ownership for the remainder of the business, whether it is Airbus or others, we will deploy all the arguments that are available to us.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** There no other people — sorry, I call Matthew O'Toole.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker; I am sure that it was not personal.

Minister, I want to push you on dual-market access. Airbus is basically a pan-European company, with operations all over the continent. There really is a specific opportunity for the talented workers that you talked about to be part of a wider supply chain. It is important that you, your Department and Invest NI push the fact that we have dual-market access because it might be that we can grow the workforce here given the ability that we have to move stuff across the continent and into the UK market.

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, that is the ambition: not just to secure the workforce here but to grow it. The indications are that growth in the industry is possible, and we want to be in the space where that can happen. We need, if you like, a strategic owner of the business — somebody who is engaged across Europe, the States or the rest of the world — who has the same ambition as we have, which is to employ an already skilled workforce and to add to it.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** That definitely is the conclusion of this item of business. Members, take your ease for a few minutes.

## Executive Committee Business

### Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2024-25; and Supply Resolution for Excess Votes for 2016-17, 2018-19, 2020-21, 2021-22

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £25,255,627,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, for the year ending 31 March 2025 and that resources, not exceeding £28,772,794,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 2 of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2024-25 laid before the Assembly on 19 June 2024. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]*

*The following motion stood in the Order Paper:*

*That this Assembly approves that sums be granted out of the Consolidated Fund not exceeding £397,000 for the year ending 31 March 2017 and not exceeding £45,000 for the year ending 31 March 2019 for use by the Public Prosecution Service; that resources not exceeding £11,409,000 for the year ending 31 March 2021 and not exceeding £10,721,000 for the year ending 31 March 2022 be authorised for use by the Department of Education — teachers' superannuation; and that resources not exceeding £7,380,000 for the year ending 31 March 2023 be authorised for use by the Department of Education; as detailed in the Statement of Excesses 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 document laid before the Assembly on 19 June 2024. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]*

**Mr Frew:** I welcome the progress that has been made on a Budget. It has been a long time coming. We understand why it has taken so long, and we understand the procedures that have been followed to get here, not least the 65% Vote on Account earlier in the year that allowed that wee bit more flexibility. I am glad that we will have a Budget Bill before the Assembly tomorrow, before we go into recess. We would have been in a bad place if we, as an Assembly, had not had sight of that Budget (No. 2) Bill until September. I welcome the progress, and I thank the Finance Minister for that progress.

We hear time after time, not only from the Finance Minister and her Department, that this is a challenging Budget and that we are in a challenging environment. I guess that we can all agree with that, and we can all agree that we have not been funded under an ideal model in recent years. We have had success, which I welcome and acknowledge, with regard to a needs-based funding framework, whereby we are funded under relative need of 124%, and that is essential going forward. However, with that figure, we will still hit a cliff edge soon, so I push the Minister to do all that she can in her endeavours to pursue the Exchequer and the new Government, whoever it may be, to ensure that we are funded by need.

One of the biggest issues that will face us, as well as how we will build on and improve our infrastructure, is, simply, how we will pay people what they are worth and what is fair. If we do not pay people fairly and appropriately, we will see our infrastructure and our services crumble. We know that pay awards are a massive issue, but there are no recurring moneys coming from Treasury for pay awards. Therefore, we have to fund that recurrently for ever and a day. That is a massive challenge.

Given all of those challenges — having to pay people appropriately, not having enough money in the first place and a crumbling infrastructure — what do we need? It is obvious that we need more money, but we also need better scrutiny and, with that better scrutiny, transformation and reform of our Departments and of how our services are delivered. I have yet to see any real progress in those areas, either so far in this short term or previously. It alarms me that we do not see that.

Worse than that, when it comes to scrutiny, I see a reversal.

**3.45 pm**



In the last mandate, we had the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021. I am so interested in that Act because I amended it to introduce a section that adds to scrutiny. It places a duty on all Departments that they:

*"must provide the relevant Assembly committee with a written or oral briefing on the department's submission to each monitoring round no longer than 7 days following submission to the Department of Finance."*

From what I can see and hear, many Departments have failed to do that in monitoring rounds. The Finance Committee has also discovered that most scrutiny Committees have not had adequate time or presence from officials to discuss their budgetary bids and positions. With the more challenging Budget, fiscal framework and environment in which we operate, it seems that scrutiny has gone down and not up. That does not bode well for the future. That is when mistakes happen. I worry that mistakes could happen in every Department that is not scrutinised properly or does not afford its scrutiny Committee the appropriate information in a timely fashion to enable it to support and advise the Department.

Of course, with the challenging Budget environment that we are in, we hear the cry endlessly for further fiscal powers. If we have less scrutiny, how will we cope with more fiscal powers? Does it not mean that more things will go wrong, if we have more fiscal powers? I worry about the way forward with regard to further fiscal powers. What will we do with those levers? What will we do with those additional levers of power, if we are in a challenging environment? Those levers will go only up, never down. Whom will that hurt? It will hurt middle-income earners, the people who are just managing to stay above water. That worries me too.

I also worry about the fact that a member of the Executive will not support the Budget. Two pillars of governance are the Programme for Government and a Budget to go with it. If a Minister will not support the Budget, while that is his prerogative, he should consider his position in the Executive, so that they can move on with one voice.

**Ms Bradshaw (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office):** I speak on behalf of the Committee. The Main Estimates indicate that the Department has been allocated a budget of around £186 million of resource DEL. Of that, £105 million is

earmarked, so there is a very small amount of baseline funds to play with. In addition, the Department will receive £18 million for capital projects, such as Ebrington, Urban Villages and the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. The Committee looks forward to visiting Ebrington later this year to discuss the site in further detail and to look at how investment is being used to good effect. The Committee has been particularly interested in regional balance in that regard, so our intended visit to the north-west will be an opportunity to look at how money is being invested in that area.

The Department has indicated that it was anticipating having to make the same savings as in its 2023-24 budget: 10% across the board. Those savings have to be made out of the £81 million of baseline funds that are available, which, as in the last financial year, is likely to be a considerable challenge. Those required savings are in addition to new areas of expenditure for the Department, such as the establishment of an Irish language commissioner, a commissioner for Ulster-Scots and the Ulster-British tradition and the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. In addition, the establishment of a central delivery unit for government, the provision of free period products and the progression of the ending violence against women and girls strategy will all have to be paid for. The forecast funding for victims' payments, historical institutional abuse costs and the truth recovery programme has increased by over £30 million since the previous Budget. Truth recovery costs could also increase by a further £3.1 million once legislation is passed to establish an inquiry and redress arrangements. The Committee is eager to look into the detail of that when the Bill to establish an inquiry proceeds to Committee Stage.

The Department has indicated that managing those pressures means that it will have to go into 2024-25 with an overcommitment, which it currently plans to manage to zero during the year. The current Estimate, however, in the absence of June monitoring — sorry, this speech was written before the announcement — represents an overspend in excess of £4 million. The Department made its June monitoring bids, and we are grateful that the Finance Minister was able to make her announcement this afternoon.

It is important that we get the money right. We need to ensure that the groups on the ground that deliver across the service areas for the Executive Office have resources and stability. We look forward to undertaking further scrutiny

of the Department's finances in the coming months.

**Dr Aiken:** Members who have been here for a bit longer and have been scrutinising our finances for some time as part of the Finance Committee will look at the motions before us with interest. One of the most interesting things is that we are talking about the Northern Ireland Main Estimates and the Excess Votes from 2016-17 on. If there is anything to indicate how badly we have got things wrong since then, it should be that. We are being asked to approve Excess Votes from 2016-17 to 2022-23. There is no doubt that we will, because this is money spent and money gone. There will not be a Division on that. We need to understand, however, how we have got to the point at which we are now trying to ask Westminster to be allowed more opportunities for the devolution of fiscal powers, when this is the first time since 2016 that we are in a position to approve the Main Estimates. That is something that we all should be concerned about.

The point that I now make is not a political one but a point of scrutiny, and other Members have alluded to it. The lack of information and the lack of a flow of reliable data will make it remarkably difficult for us as Members to provide appropriate scrutiny of any of the processes going forward. I am glad to see that the Minister is pushing ahead with the idea of putting the Fiscal Council on a proper statutory footing, but that has to be expedited, because we cannot afford to be in the situation again in which we wait seven to eight years to pass the Estimates.

I will go on to talk about some other issues, but there is another thing that concerns me. I would never want to give a boost to my learned friend the Chair of the Finance Committee, who is also the leader of the Opposition, but there is something off about having the June monitoring round at this stage, when a delay of three to four days would not have made much difference.

A further concern is that I have asked the First Minister and the deputy First Minister a direct question about a Programme for Government, which is essential for what we need to do and what we are trying to do. I asked why we could not bring a Programme for Government forward. The reason that I was given was that we are in purdah and that arrangements were being made that it should not happen. We are being asked to consider a Budget that is not based on need. If it were based on need, the health budget would not be in the position in which it is and we would not be as short of

funding as we are. We are grateful for the additional £122 million, but we are still in a catastrophic situation. That point has been underlined by our health trusts and health professionals.

We should look objectively at the need. We spent a lot of time at Hillsborough Castle, as we sat around the various tables, trying to make sure that the British Government realised that there was a definition of need and that improvements were required to the level of need that we have. We have talked about that, and we have seen the level of need increase to 124%; indeed, it may and probably will have to be higher than that. That is a needs-based approach. If we took the needs-based approach, how did we get into a situation where the Health Department has been cut? We have heard Alliance and everybody else say, "Oh no, it hasn't really been cut". Yes, it has. It has been cut by 2.3%, which is £187 million. We cannot deliver what we need to do with the funds that we have. We are in a catastrophic situation.

The Minister might make some remarks at the end about how we get to a proper needs-based approach for budgeting. I do not know how we will do that without a Programme for Government. The one thing I remember is that all the main parties who sat round the table at Hillsborough Castle said that they were committed to making health the number-one priority; indeed, many of those parties said in their manifestos that Health needs an extra £1 billion. Now we are scrabbling for extra moneys. As the Minister said earlier today, the Health requirement far outstrips the moneys that are available. That talks to the need for proper prioritisation and the need to make sure that that happens.

We are without a Programme for Government, and the June monitoring round is now happening in July, but there is another thing that raises my concern: the Minister is taking this at risk. I would also like the Minister to address why she has a degree of certainty that the Treasury, which will probably be under a new Government, will honour the various commitments.

**Mr O'Toole:** I thank the Member for giving way. He will be aware of the pre-election guidance that was issued by the Executive Office, which said:

*"Where a proposed announcement would involve consultation with UK Government Departments, the general presumption is*

*that it should be deferred until the new UK Government is in place."*

Given that today's monitoring round was clear that the allocations were made at risk and that there was some lack of certainty over whether the UK Government would agree to the specific allocations, does that not indicate that it is a prima facie breach of the pre-election guidance?

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

**Dr Aiken:** That question should be raised with the permanent secretary or the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. There may, indeed, be a case for that. My concern is more fundamental than that, and it is that we are predicating the June monitoring round on moneys that have not been guaranteed. As I said, I would like the Minister to give the House some degree of surety that those funds will actually be there.

We expect that there probably will be a new Government in place come Friday, and there are already indications that we are moving to an early Budget, maybe even in September. If that is the case, what are the plans going forward to make sure that we are able to continue with this process? We will need another monitoring round, and I am beginning to suspect that we will need another Budget Bill. We need to have some kind of assurance that we are top of this, but we cannot get that — I go back to my first point, which others have mentioned — unless we have proper data, proper governance and proper use and flow of information. If we cannot do our job effectively and scrutinise effectively, we cannot help you, Minister, and we definitely cannot help the Departments.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I am pleased to speak on the issue today. We are all conscious that this is an important week in which to consider our public finances, as a new Government will soon take shape in Westminster. I start by saying that we absolutely understand that the money simply does not exist to do everything that we want to see done or to meet the many competing pressures on Departments. None of us is under any illusion at all about the scale of the funding crisis that faces us.

However, that is all the more reason for us to be prudent and strategic about our use of public money. More than ever, the public expect and deserve their politicians to manage public affairs in a way that maximises value for money. Let us be honest: we can afford to do

nothing less when our public services are on their knees.

**4.00 pm**

We have all knocked on the doors asking for votes in the past six weeks. We all note that we scarcely pass a door without hearing a harrowing story about an excruciating wait for treatment in our health service and the chronic agony experienced by people as they wait for a life-transforming appointment. The same frustration can be felt when it comes to the housing crisis in Northern Ireland. A couple of weeks ago, I raised the case of a young woman in my constituency who had a caesarean section and gave birth to a beautiful girl but returned home to temporary accommodation in a hotel room with a toddler in tow. That is no way for our people to be forced to live. My staff team do the best they can in supporting the constituency, but, like the public, they feel let down and left behind by politics.

We can also feel frustrated and angry about the levels of poverty in our community. In 2024, it is unacceptable that 18% of children here live in relative poverty before housing costs. That level of poverty has real and deep consequences for well-being and life expectancy, with poor children being four times more likely to develop a mental health problem by the age of 11. The gap in healthy life expectancy is between 11 and 15 years when comparing the most and least deprived areas. That is totally unacceptable, and the gaps are getting bigger.

At last week's Public Accounts Committee meeting, MLAs received a briefing on child poverty and the lack of progress that has been made. The officials were crystal clear that the absence of a Government here has exacerbated poverty. I hope that the parties that collapsed this place — whatever their reasons — reflect on that meeting and on the myriad times since our return that we have been told about the impact of the lack of a Government here: soaring waiting lists, spiralling childcare costs, and more and more children and adults trapped in poverty. Those are the consequences of politicians who would rather pull things down than build them up and would rather walk away than reach a consensus. We cannot allow that to happen again.

In the context of all that, I hope that all parties agree that this mandate should be different from the last one. The Executive simply have to do better when it comes to the strategic planning of our public services. The public understand that not everything can be funded, and they are well used to hard times after the

last decade. However, we need a better deal and a more strategic approach that prioritises early intervention and understands that prevention is better than cure. It will require difficult decisions. It will also require the parties to live up to their commitments, to put the plans on the table and to outline how those plans will be prioritised. Such accountability and transparency will give confidence to the public that this Government are serious and understand the gravity of the challenges facing individuals and families in our communities.

As we speak, we have not seen a Programme for Government. The public are asking, "Where is the plan for our public services? Are the Government up to the task of sorting them out? Are they even serious about doing that?". It is time to step up to the plate. I hope that the Executive can do that. We will work with other parties to secure a strong fiscal framework and improved financial settlement from Westminster. We will continue to call for a comprehensive spending review and greater accountability on effective spending to improve public services, including through an enhanced role for the Fiscal Council. That will include advocating a Programme for Government target to meaningfully increase tax varying and borrowing powers for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In the meantime, the Opposition will closely scrutinise the Executive's approach to public finances to ensure that it meets the needs of our people and aligns with our priorities, with the long-term funding needed to ensure a better future for all our communities. That is the only way in which we can secure the transformation of our public services and the change needed across our region.

**Mr McGlone:** I listened intently to Dr Aiken's emphasis on health in his contribution. I am sure that all our offices receive correspondence about waiting lists, childcare and paediatric health issues. Some of the cases could take a tear from a stone. I raised this point earlier in response to the Minister of Health's statement: there is a need for the re-establishment of the cross-border healthcare directive to help reduce waiting lists. We all know and recognise the need for cross-border cooperation on health. We often talk about it in the Chamber. It makes sense. If we can in some way alleviate the problem of our major waiting lists, why not do it? Why not collaborate with the Irish Government and Minister Donnelly to see what can conceivably be done? The health service is on its knees. Day and daily, we hear of cases, and it honestly seems to be getting worse. The required investment would at least help to break

the back of some of the waiting lists, which are getting longer and longer.

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

**Mr McGlone:** Yes.

**Dr Aiken:** I do not wish to put words in the Minister's mouth, but I assure you that, had the Minister the funding to continue those initiatives, he would look favourably on doing so. Working effectively together is not just an "all-island" health strategy; it is an "all-islands" health strategy.

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

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* We owe it to our people to do all that we humanly can, especially on health. Nevertheless, I will move on to the scripted speech that I intended to give, but Dr Aiken inspired me to raise that issue first.

The environment and ecological crisis that we face in the North demands long-term strategic thinking and action, but the Executive have repeatedly failed to deliver what is required. The Budget demonstrates that. Nowhere is the absence of long-term strategic thinking more apparent than in the Executive's failure to deliver for Lough Neagh.

It is almost exactly a year since the devastating algae blooms shut down activity on the lough. The stench and sight of the blooms were apparent, as were their effects. We are now back in the summer months, and the blooms are, in fact, recurring on the lough. In some pictures taken by the PSNI last week, the blooms were very visible. They are re-emerging. The Assembly is about to go into summer recess, and the Executive parties have not delivered a rescue plan for the lough. In fairness to the AERA Minister, it is not necessarily because of a lack of ambition on his part.

We know what is needed to address the excessive levels of nutrients in the lough that fuel the algae blooms. All parties and MLAs received the briefings from DAERA about its priorities. The key actions that were recommended at the start of the year included: enforcing existing regulations; reducing the level of phosphorous in animal feed; developing a policy to reduce or eliminate the use of chemical phosphorous fertiliser on grasslands;

bringing forward an updated nitrates action programme; and making additional investment in our waste water network. The estimated additional costs for the necessary upgrading of 18 waste water treatment works that have an impact on Lough Neagh was £131 million. If Executive parties are serious about improving the poor water quality in our rivers and lakes, further investment will be needed in the water and waste water network across the North.

The additional moneys for social housing were mentioned, and that is very welcome indeed. Many of our towns are in paralysis because of the lack of investment in the waste water disposal system. Sewage disposal works are at or beyond capacity. That has an effect on the delivery of social and private housing and on retail and commercial developments. Consequentially, there is an impact on the cost of housing. Hopefully, any negotiations between the Executive and, what we hope will be, an incoming Labour Government will render at least some investment in the improvements that are so needed for all our vital agencies.

Another area in which the Executive have not delivered is climate change and, in particular, the just transition to net zero. When the Assembly passed the Climate Change Act in 2022, we set ambitious targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions for all sectors of our economy to achieve. Given the delay in agreeing to the targets in the Climate Change Act, we had a short time to start to take action. Due to the DUP's boycott of the Executive, the deadline for setting the first carbon budget has been missed. The deadline for the first carbon action plan has also been missed.

It was recognised that achieving the ambitious targets that are in the Climate Change Act would require advice and assistance in order for it to be available for all sectors, particularly agriculture, yet, despite the urgent need to act, the required just transition commission is not in place. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have not established the office of climate commissioner, and no one has been appointed to the post. There is no just transition fund for agriculture to assist farmers to make the necessary changes in farming practice. It is an absolute requirement to facilitate that transition by way of training and grant aid and to move to new farming and agricultural methods. Those are essential elements of the Climate Change Act that are required if we are to achieve the net zero target by 2050. The longer that it takes to start the process of a just transition, the more difficult that transition will be. It is also vital that we define exactly what that just transition is, yet not only are those

elements of the Climate Change Act missing but there is still a lack of clarity about that definition.

I raised those issues with the AERA Minister during his appearances at the Committee, so he is well aware of our party's concerns. As I have repeatedly said, the SDLP is willing to work constructively with the Minister on Lough Neagh, on a just transition to net zero and on establishing an independent environmental protection agency, but Executive parties really need to work together much more constructively on those and other issues. Otherwise, it will be an abject failure.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leat as cuireadh a thabhairt domh labhairt. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank you for giving me the invitation to speak.]*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Go raibh maith agat as sin. *[Translation: Thank you for that.]* I call the Minister of Finance, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion. You have up to 55 minutes.

**Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance):** The debate has covered many aspects of public expenditure and, perhaps, a few topics that are not quite related to that. I will, however, endeavour to address as many of the points that were raised during the debate as I can. First, I again thank the Finance Committee for its agreement that this important legislation be taken through by accelerated passage. That agreement secures the timely passage of the legislation, thereby avoiding risk or legal uncertainty about the funding of public services.

I listened with interest to the debate. I will turn to some of the issues that Members raised. Matthew O'Toole indicated the need for a multi-year Budget that is aligned with a Programme for Government. For once, I do not disagree with the Member. I have stated my commitment to multi-year Budgets many times. As the Member is well aware, I am tied to the period of the Treasury spending review. I have expressed my desire and the need for a multi-year spending review to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and to the shadow Secretary of State. The prioritisation of funding should be driven by an agreed Programme for Government, but, as with many things, it is important to get that right rather than to just do it quickly. To be clear, neither a multi-year Budget nor a Programme for Government will remove the financial pressures that all our Departments face, nor does the absence of a PFG mean that funding is not being prioritised.

Every time that I bring recommendations to the Executive, they are prioritised for the allocation of the finite resources that are available.

The leader of the Opposition again made clear his view on agreeing the June monitoring round, which is, I reiterate, a view that I do not accept or agree with. Having considered the pre-election guidance, my clear view and that of my Department is, as the Member well knows, having had briefings from my most senior officials in the previous two Finance Committee meetings, that June monitoring is normal, routine Executive business — it happens every year — and that this Westminster election should not prevent business being done in the Assembly and the Executive. Given the financial pressures facing Departments, it was essential that they be provided with clarity on any additional funding as soon as possible. Knowing that funding was available for allocation, I could not stand by while Departments took decisions with potentially adverse impacts on services that could have been avoided if additional allocations had been agreed.

It was important to give Departments certainty to plan. It was also important to give certainty to the people who rely on the services that are delivered by those Departments and to the workers who deliver those services, whether in our schools, our hospitals or our universities. I considered the guidance, and I was satisfied that we could continue to act.

#### 4.15 pm

Ms Forsythe noted that the Department of Finance did not commission Estimates memoranda from Departments. The purpose of the memorandum was to provide users of the Estimates with greater understanding of the information in them. However, given the review of financial processes and the increased detail and clarity now included in the Estimates, including on contingent liabilities, items relying on the sole authority of the Budget Act and so on, it was felt that the production of a separate Estimates memorandum would no longer be needed and, indeed, would represent duplication. However, if the Committee would find a memorandum helpful for its scrutiny of Departments' spending proposals, officials would be happy to commission such a document.

Mr Elliott raised issues relating to the budget for the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. He indicated that it was lower this year than it was last year. Mr Elliott

compared the net resources required, which include both annually managed expenditure (AME), which is outside the Executive's control, and ring-fenced non-cash items such as depreciation. It is not appropriate to compare those two figures. Within the 2023-24 figure, for example, is an AME provision of some £118 million, the majority of which relates to a requirement for remediation works at an illegal waste site by the Environment Agency. DAERA's non-ring-fenced resource DEL opening budget is, in fact, 6.1% higher than the non-ring-fenced opening budget for 2023-24, when earmarked items are removed. That is a more meaningful comparator of a Department's ability to fund day-to-day services.

Eóin spoke about the sole authority of the Budget Act. I expect that that will begin to be addressed in coming months. Obviously, the absence of an Executive and an Assembly prevented the Assembly from legislating for some of those functions in the normal way.

Mr Frew and, I think, Diane Forsythe, referenced the pending cliff edge at the end of the 2025-26 financial year. Thankfully, in the interim fiscal framework that we agreed with the Treasury just before the general election was called, there was a commitment that we could plan on the assurance that we would be funded at or above the 124% level of need. We will want to firm that up with the Treasury in our negotiations on a final fiscal framework. Mr Frew also mentioned the need for transformation of our public services, with which, I think, we all concur. He will be aware that we have established the public sector transformation board, which has received and is considering bids. We are in a position to allocate up to £47 million per year over the next five years. Hopefully, that will instil some innovative thinking and produce transformation projects that will make progress on the issue. Obviously, Mr Frew and I disagree on the devolution of fiscal powers, but I am sure that we can get into that debate in more detail at another point.

Paula Bradshaw referred to the Executive Office's challenges. We are probably all well versed in the challenges across the Departments. We have tried to alleviate some of those relating to Communities in Transition and the central good relations fund in the June monitoring round.

Dr Aiken raised a number of points. He highlighted concerns around how June monitoring could proceed without certainty over the funding. It was important that we made those allocations, including the £122 million to

the Department of Health, in June monitoring. Dr Aiken compared the figures for the end of the year with those for the start of the year for the past two financial years and indicated that, in his analysis, there was a shortfall of £187 million. However, in June monitoring alone, the Department of Health received an uplift of over £165 million. That shows that you cannot compare the end of a year with the start of a year. We will return to that at different points.

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

**Dr Archibald:** Quickly.

**Dr Aiken:** Thanks very much indeed, Minister. The question that I was trying to get at was how you can have that degree of certainty from the Treasury. Do we have any correspondence or written guidance from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that states, "These are assumptions that you can work to"?

**Dr Archibald:** We had an indication from Treasury that £185 million of Barnett consequentials would come across from Westminster's Main Estimates. We also had additional funding of £41 million in Barnett consequentials that came very late in the previous financial year, and additional money that came across because of the 24% level of need that was applied to the spring statement. That brought us to the total that we were able to allocate. I do not believe that there will be a rolling back from Treasury on Westminster's Main Estimates. I do not see how Departments' pressures will have disappeared during the six weeks since Treasury indicated that to us. Whitehall Departments face similar pressures, particularly in respect of increased pension contributions. The Finance Committee was briefed by my officials in the past two weeks; it indicated that it was content for us to proceed on the basis that we have. It is reasonable to anticipate not only that the Westminster Main Estimates will move forward but that additional funding may be provided to Westminster Departments, and that we will receive additional Barnett moneys in-year. That is a reasonable assumption in respect of the additional funding.

The Member set out his concerns about June monitoring shortly after he pressed for additional funding for the Department of Health. You cannot have it both ways in respect of making the case for additional funding and then criticising us when we move ahead to deliver that funding.

**Dr Aiken:** I can.

**Dr Archibald:** Well, you can try.

Patsy made some comments about Lough Neagh. It is important that we see the publication of the plan for Lough Neagh as soon as possible. I am pleased that we were able to allocate some money to Lough Neagh: in capital, which was allocated in the Budget but confirmed in June monitoring; and in the £1.5 million of resource that we have allocated and ring-fenced specifically for the environmental improvement plan to deliver actions relating to Lough Neagh.

Sinéad McLaughlin made some comments about the need for us to have a Programme for Government that improves outcomes. Of course, I concur with Sinéad's comments in that regard. Nicola Brogan referenced the need to progress the negotiations on the fiscal framework. We will seek to do that very quickly, once the new Government are in place after the election on Thursday.

I will draw my remarks to a close. I thank Members for their patience. Assembly approval of the motion today on the Main Estimates for 2024-25 is a crucial stage in securing the public expenditure that enables Departments to continue to deliver services during the 2024-25 financial year. Failure to pass this Supply resolution would put at risk the continuation of public services for the remainder of the financial year. I, therefore, commend the Main Estimates 2024-25 to the Assembly, and I ask Members to support the motion.

In addition, Assembly approval of the Statement of Excesses is required to regularise Excess that has been incurred. I, therefore, commend the Statement of Excesses for 2016-17, 2018-19, 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, and I ask that Members also support that motion.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Go raibh maith agat as sin, a Aire. [*Translation: Thank you for that, Minister.*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £25,255,627,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman,*

and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, for the year ending 31 March 2025 and that resources, not exceeding £28,772,794,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2025 as summarised for each Department or other public body in column 2 of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2024-25 laid before the Assembly on 19 June 2024.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** We now move to the Supply resolution for Excess Votes, which has already been debated.

*Motion proposed:*

*That this Assembly approves that sums be granted out of the Consolidated Fund not exceeding £397,000 for the year ending 31 March 2017 and not exceeding £45,000 for the year ending 31 March 2019 for use by the Public Prosecution Service; that resources not exceeding £11,409,000 for the year ending 31 March 2021 and not exceeding £10,721,000 for the year ending 31 March 2022 be authorised for use by the Department of Education — teachers' superannuation; and that resources not exceeding £7,380,000 for the year ending 31 March 2023 be authorised for use by the Department of Education; as detailed in the Statement of Excesses 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 document laid before the Assembly on 19 June 2024.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly approves that sums be granted out of the Consolidated Fund not exceeding £397,000 for the year ending 31 March 2017 and not exceeding £45,000 for the year ending 31 March 2019 for use by the Public Prosecution Service; that resources not exceeding £11,409,000 for the year ending 31 March 2021 and not exceeding £10,721,000 for the year ending 31 March 2022 be authorised for use by the Department of Education — teachers' superannuation; and that resources not exceeding £7,380,000 for the year ending 31 March 2023 be authorised for use by the Department of Education; as detailed in the Statement of Excesses 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 document laid before the Assembly*

on 19 June 2024. — [Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance).]

## **Budget (No. 2) Bill: First Stage**

**Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance):** I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 06/22-27], which is a Bill to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the year ending 31 March 2025 (including income); to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of that year; to authorise the use of those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of those sums; to authorise the use for the public service of excess resources for the years ending 31 March 2021, 2022 and 2023; to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain excess sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2017 and 2019; and to authorise the use of those sums for specified purposes.

*Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I inform Members that the Speaker has received a letter from the Committee for Finance advising that the Committee is satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2), and that the Bill can, therefore, proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

*Adjourned at 4.27 pm.*