



Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 10 June 2024
Volume 161, No 1

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 June 2024

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: The usual rules apply for Members' statements.

European Athletics Championships: Irish Gold Medals

Ms Ennis: I want to reflect on what was a history-making weekend for Irish athletics. People saw the jubilant scenes on Saturday as our four-by-four mixed relay team won European gold. I pay tribute to Chris O'Donnell, Rhasidat Adeleke, Thomas Barr and Sharlene Mawdsley for making history in the four-by-four relay.

I want to pay particular tribute to County Down woman Ciara Mageean on her history-making performance last night in winning individual gold for Ireland. Ciara now joins the lofty heights once occupied only by Sonia O'Sullivan in winning an individual European gold for Ireland. After bronze in 2016, silver in 2022 and now gold in 2024, Ciara joins Sonia O'Sullivan as one of only two Irish athletes to win three European medals.

We can all offer our congratulations to Ciara and the entire Irish athletics team. We are super excited to see how the team performs at this summer's Olympics in Paris. It was an extraordinary achievement by Ciara and is a testament to her dedication and hard work. Ciara has done herself, her family, Portaferry, County Down and the entire island of Ireland proud. We send our best wishes and congratulations to Ciara, her family and the rest of Team Ireland.

Paddy the Pigeon: Destruction of Memorial

Ms Brownlee: I rise to condemn the vandalism that led to the destruction of a memorial plaque to Paddy the Pigeon in Carnlough over the weekend.

During World War II, the RAF used many pigeons, which were trained to carry secret coded messages between the Allies, providing vital communication links. Paddy was a locally trained bird, owned and bred by Captain Andrew Hughes and jointly trained by John McMullan of Carnlough. He played a crucial role for the Allied forces during the Normandy landings on D-Day.

On 12 June 1944, Paddy was released in Normandy, carrying coded information about the Allied forces' advance. Despite the challenges posed by bad weather and the German falcons that were trained to intercept messenger pigeons, Paddy made it back to his base in Hampshire, England, in the record time of four hours and 50 minutes. That was the fastest recorded time for any pigeon making that journey during the Normandy landings. For his service, Paddy was awarded the Dicken Medal on 1 September 1944. That medal is the highest honour that an animal can receive in the UK. It is the equivalent of the Victoria Cross for humans.

After the war, Paddy returned to his home in Carnlough, where he lived until his death in 1954 and where a memorial plaque in his honour was erected by the Larne and District Historical Society in 2009. The plaque had remained in place without issue for the past 15 years. At the weekend, however, it was ripped from the wall and destroyed at a time at which the country paused to remember the bravery and sacrifice of all those who landed at Normandy on 6 June 1944, fighting for the freedom that we all enjoy today. That mindless act of thuggery has served only to anger the local community.

The significance of the attack's timing is certainly not lost on me. I say this to those who waited until the cover of darkness to carry out such a callous act: just know that you do not represent the good people of Carnlough or East Antrim. We will remember them.

Bike Week 2024

Mr McMurray: Today marks the start of Bike Week 2024. I certainly have an interest in cycling, though not a pecuniary one. Quite simply, cycling is good for you. It helps those who cycle to meet the recommended physical activity guidelines, and it benefits their mental health and well-being. It reduces the chances of other medical issues developing by up to 45%. Cycling helps to save the planet by reducing our emissions and our impact on the environment. It saves money and increases positive health outcomes. Being outside and exercising in the fresh air is good for your well-being.

More people want to cycle, but there are barriers to their participation. The biggest barrier is the fear of cycling on our roads. In the past 10 years, 22 cyclists have been killed on our roads. I call on those in the Chamber and those listening online to give cyclists a bit of room. The minimum distance that drivers should give to cyclists when passing is 1-5 metres. If you think about it, you will agree that that is not much space. Indeed, if another vehicle passed your vehicle at that distance, you would probably find it to be pretty close, even though you would be surrounded by a metal frame to keep you safe. Cyclists do not have that same protection of a metal shell when travelling.

Very active clubs throughout the Province organise club and social rides as well as competitions, both on- and off-road. All abilities are catered for. I acknowledge the work that those clubs do in promoting cycling. I echo the calls of agencies such as Cycling UK, Outscape and Sustrans in their efforts to make cycling, active travel and its benefits more accessible by investing in safe and healthy sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and putting it on a par with our neighbours in the Republic and Scotland; creating more neighbourhoods and communities that are connected via active travelways — I note that the solutions for our bigger cities are the same solutions as the ones wanted by those in our more rural towns and villages — ensuring that our children can cycle to the places that they want to go to, while enabling and encouraging them to do so; and increasing access to bikes in various ways so that cycling can become a genuine alternative to using cars. Through that, we can help to tackle climate change and air pollution.

I encourage everyone to, in the nicest possible way, get on your bike at some stage this week and get some stoke through a spoke.

Infant Mental Health Awareness Week

Mr Butler: Today, we recognise Infant Mental Health Awareness Week. We are reminded of the crucial importance of providing a strong foundation for mental well-being from the earliest stages of life. I thank Stronger from the Start Alliance, a coalition of around 60 voluntary sector organisations, which highlights the importance of infant mental health. The mental health of expectant mothers, newborns and young children is not just a priority but a necessity. Ensuring that they receive the best start in life is fundamental, but our commitment must extend far beyond those early years.

As we know, mental health is a lifelong journey. It requires continuous support at all stages of development, particularly during the critical transition points in life, such as entry to school, adolescence, the start of a career and ageing. Those moments of change can be challenging and stressful, making it essential that support systems are in place to help individuals navigate the transitions smoothly. Too many of our young people, girls and boys, struggle with their mental health, and, tragically, some lose hope along the way. That should be a stark reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support.

It is our role as legislators and leaders to ensure that future generations are provided with hope and opportunity in abundance. In our pursuit of transforming mental health, we must also confront and address the root causes of mental health disparity. Tackling inequalities, poverty and discrimination must be ingrained in our collective efforts. Those issues are not just peripheral concerns but are central to the well-being of all our communities and should be embedded in our DNA. As we move forward, let us commit to a vision where mental health support is comprehensive, inclusive and accessible at every stage of life. By doing so, we can ensure that everyone has the opportunity to thrive from infancy right through to old age. Together, we can create a society where mental health is prioritised and every individual is given the chance to lead a fulfilling and mentally healthy life. I encourage all Members to support Infant Mental Health Awareness Week.

Altnagelvin Hospital Emergency Department

Mr Delargy: I rise to talk about the emergency department at Altnagelvin Hospital. I welcome the opening of the minor injuries unit at

Altnagelvin, which has helped to alleviate some of the pressures. In only a few weeks, the unit has seen over 2,000 patients, which has made a critical difference, but, until there is a new emergency department at Altnagelvin, the hospital will never be able to cope with the huge number of admissions. I was there recently not as an MLA but as a close relative of someone in the emergency department. I saw at first hand the pressure that the nurses, doctors, porters, cleaners, admin staff and, indeed, the whole team are under in that department. There is simply not enough space, so myriad people with complex medical conditions are there, waiting for treatment in a confined space that is totally inappropriate for their emergency medical needs.

No one chooses or plans to be in an emergency department. If we look at the issue simply by examining the critical mass of people in Derry, we will never solve the problem. We need to look at the issue across the entire trust; indeed, across the entire north-west. We have seen the breakthroughs that we can make in people's care and access when we have things like the North West Cancer Centre, which treats people on the basis of their localised need. In order to get a proper localised service that is fit for purpose and allows quick and easy access for all our patients, we need to look at all-Ireland solutions and treat our regions properly. I implore the Health Minister to look at the business case that will come from the trust. I implore all local representatives to get behind that and ensure that we have access to an accident and emergency service at Altnagelvin that is fit for purpose.

Dental Services: Deregistration

Mr Frew: Last month, I asked the Health Minister how many people had been deregistered by their dentist in the past six years. I asked that question because I was seeing a worrying trend in my constituency office. The figures are absolutely astounding. The number of people who were deregistered in 2018 was 572. In 2019, it was 784. You would think that that was natural. In 2020, the first year of COVID, the number was down to 243. You would expect that that was to do with the pandemic, but look at what happened with lockdown philosophy: in 2021, the figure for deregistration by dentists was 2,021, which is four times the number of deregistrations in 2018. It did not stop there. In 2022, the figure rose to 9,432, and, in 2023, a whopping 12,858 people were deregistered by their dentist.

Think how many people have been deregistered and how many people sit in pain, having trouble accessing the services that they require for proper dental treatment. Those figures are important. This is a ticking time bomb of pain, and I need the House to recognise that.

12.15 pm

European Athletics Championships: Ciara Mageean

Mr McNulty: *"I didn't grow up playing camogie to get boxed in"*

is not a statement that you would associate with the Olympic Stadium in Rome or the European Athletics Championships, but, oh my God, well done, Ciara Mageean: comhghairdeas, comhghairdeas, comhghairdeas [*Translation: congratulations, congratulations, congratulations.*] You demonstrated your pride and joy in your effort and your understanding of the importance of the grind and the strength and importance of teamwork. Whoa, what a race; whoa, what a victory speech. You demonstrated the power of dreaming big, working hard and committing to the process. Well done, Ciara. You have done yourself, your family and Portaferry proud; you have done your club proud; and you have done your country proud. Well done, Ciara. Because of what you have done, hundreds of thousands of little kids will grow up dreaming of being another Ciara Mageean. Unbelievable. Comhghairdeas [*Translation: Congratulations*].

Diabetes Week

Mr Dickson: I speak as chair of the all-party group (APG) on diabetes. While I am not diabetic, my wife has been a type 2 diabetic for many years. Today marks the start of Diabetes Week, the awareness week for people living with diabetes that is marked every year by Diabetes UK and people living with diabetes across the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, just under 115,000 people live with various types of diabetes. A further 73,000 people live with prediabetes in Northern Ireland. Diabetes is a serious and relentless condition that can cause other health problems if it is not picked up and monitored or treated in the early stages. Regular diabetic checks are vital.

For this year's Diabetes Week, let us shine a light on the health checks that everyone with diabetes needs. As part of their annual review,

every diabetic should have a blood test to check their HbA1C for average blood sugar and cholesterol levels; a urine sample to check how well their kidneys are working; their weight and blood pressure measured; and help to stop smoking if that is applicable. Every two years, everyone with diabetes should have an eye and foot check. Frustratingly, with no national diabetic audit in Northern Ireland, it is difficult to assess how many people with diabetes in Northern Ireland receive all the health checks. That needs to change.

Today, at the beginning of Diabetes Week, I call on our Health Minister to add Northern Ireland to the national diabetic audit, so that we can avail ourselves of all the up-to-date statistics. As chair of the APG on diabetes, I call on everyone living with diabetes to take the opportunity to receive their health check when it is offered. If you do not think that you are getting the health checks that you need, please speak to your healthcare team or visit the Diabetes UK website for further information.

D-Day Commemorations

Mrs Erskine: On D-Day, scores of men went from these shores to Normandy to fight the tyranny of Nazi occupation. The debt that we owe to those men is immeasurable. Those from these shores who fought against Nazi occupation did not care about the religion of their fellow soldiers. Across Northern Ireland, it was poignant that all sections of the community came together to pay our respects to those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the civil and religious freedoms that we have today. The Royal Ulster Rifles played a critical role on D-Day, with soldiers from across the island of Ireland volunteering to play their part in the war effort. In my constituency, the Royal Air Force, which had bases at St Angelo airport, Enniskillen and at Castle Archdale also played a significant role. Their sacrifice must never be forgotten. The freedoms that they helped to win must always be honoured and protected.

As elected representatives, we, in particular, enjoy the benefits of those hard-won freedoms. Democracy and freedom to put forward our different viewpoints were secured by all those who landed on the beaches of Normandy. We all, from whatever background, enjoy those freedoms. People from across Northern Ireland were pleased to see the deputy First Minister join veterans and leaders from across the world in Portsmouth and Normandy. It was humbling to see veterans of over 100 years of age or in their late nineties travelling to remember their friends and comrades on the Normandy

beaches. Despite their frailty, they stayed to the end of events.

It is disappointing that the First Minister was not present. I do not know what other engagements, she felt, were a higher priority, but perhaps she will spell out the reason for the decision that she took. The veterans who made the trip deserve an explanation, but so do the wider public. The deputy First Minister represented not just all those who stepped up to fight from Northern Ireland; I am glad that she also referenced those from across the island of Ireland who joined the Allied fight against the Nazi regime. The mistakes of our political representatives were not confined to the First Minister. Our Prime Minister was in Normandy, but he prioritised an election interview and left early. His decision to leave is inexplicable, but he has at least taken the step of apologising: the least that could be expected.

The veterans of D-Day landed on those beaches to fight for freedom for everybody; they did not discriminate. They were heroes for all. The First Minister, unfortunately, fell short of her promise to be First Minister for all.

European Athletic Championships: Ciara Mageean

Mr Mathison: Like other Members, I pay tribute to the achievements of Ciara Mageean, who is a Portaferry local, which is in the constituency of Strangford that I am proud to represent. Building on her previous bronze and silver medal successes at the championships, Ciara won gold yesterday evening in spectacular fashion. Anyone lucky enough to see the race will know that it started slowly, but it culminated in a phenomenal break from Ciara in the closing moments that saw her win in breathtaking style. The victory was undoubtedly the culmination of years of hard work and dedication when Ciara single-mindedly pursued her goal to win gold, overcoming injury and disappointment when she narrowly missed out on a medal in the world championships last year. It was undoubtedly one of the most exciting finishes to an athletics race that you could wish to see.

Ciara, as mentioned, has done Portaferry proud. I listened to her mum on the radio this morning, and she has clearly made her family proud. They are overjoyed by her success, and the whole town of Portaferry is delighted with the result. Ciara has firmly put Portaferry on the sporting map, and she will inspire the next generation of athletes from the area. We all look forward with anticipation to the Olympic Games to see what Ciara can achieve there.

I will add that we have more Strangford representation at the Olympics, with Rhys McClenaghan competing in the pommel horse gymnastic event. I wish both athletes well, but, again, I congratulate Ciara for her phenomenal achievement in Rome.

D-Day Commemorations: Enniskillen

Mr Elliott: My statement is a follow-on to Mrs Erskine's comments about the D-Day celebrations, but I want to look at a more positive aspect. Obviously, a great sacrifice and commitment was made by those who fought 80 years ago.

In Fermanagh, over the weekend, we had some great events put on by local people. On Thursday, Gary Wilson read the national D-Day proclamation at the Watergate in Enniskillen, accompanied by the pipes and drums of the Royal Dragoon Guards. At 11.00 am, Enniskillen Model Primary School and Jones Memorial Primary School took part in activities and hosted commemorations. At 6.30 pm on Thursday, the bells of St. Macartin's Cathedral rang, followed by a community service that was attended by a large congregation.

On Saturday morning, there was a drumhead service in Trory parish church. However, the finale was obviously from 11 am to 5 pm, when we had activities and events at St Angelo airport, which was a great location, and thousands attended. People came from across the community to participate, listen to the musical entertainment and see the stands and activities.

I put on record my thanks and congratulations, particularly to Selwyn Johnston and his team, who put on the event without any direct funding or much support from statutory agencies. He did it himself, along with a small group of volunteers. Thank you to Selwyn, and well done to him and his team.

Social Housing

Mr Durkan: The need for social housing here is profound. For years, it has been warned that failure to get a grip of the crisis would lead to spiralling homelessness and poverty that would prove difficult, if not impossible, to curtail. The cuts imposed on the capital budget for the Department for Communities will allow for just 400 new social housing builds this year. That is one fifth of the 2,000-home target that was outlined to me by Minister Lyons not four months ago. At that rate of construction, it would take 118 years to clear the existing social

housing waiting list. Figures that I received recently from the Minister show a fall in capital budget funding between 2021-22 and 2024-25 of £111 million. That is a whopping 45.4% reduction. We have reverted to the 2018-19 levels of funding without accounting for the impact of inflation. In that time, housing waiting lists have risen to a record high of 47,000 households.

The failure to invest in social housing will have devastating consequences, particularly in areas of high deprivation. That trajectory will worsen without immediate intervention from the Executive. Despite promises, housing has not yet been included as a stand-alone outcome in a Programme for Government, and it remains to be seen whether it will be. There have been harrowing cuts to homelessness prevention programmes and a backtrack on the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment to enhance investment in new-build housing. There has also been a deafening silence on the much-heralded housing supply strategy, which was announced by a previous Minister with great fanfare and promised 100,000 new homes within 15 years. Despite the urgent need for action, there has been a lack of follow-through, leaving countless families in housing limbo. Instead, DFC could be in the ludicrous position of building fewer social homes this year than it sold last year.

The consequences of the DFC budget will be utterly devastating for people across the North, including the families with young children who are being moved from hotel rooms to bed and breakfasts; the woman living with disabilities that make it impossible for her to climb the stairs in her home or to sleep or wash; or the young man who has overstayed his welcome on the sofas of various relatives. The Executive's track record on social housing is an insult to every individual who is desperately awaiting a place to call home.

Men's Health Week

Mr Middleton: Today marks the beginning of Men's Health Week. Men's Health Week gives us the opportunity to raise awareness and promote better health among men. One of the key issues that needs to be highlighted during this important week is mental health. Mental health issues do not discriminate, yet men in particular face unique challenges. Society has long perpetuated a stereotype of men, often equating vulnerability with weakness. That dangerous misconception can prevent men from seeking the help that they need, leading to

silent suffering and tragically, in many cases, to suicide.

Suicide remains the leading cause of death among men under the age of 50 and young people aged 15 to 29. Sadly, the suicide rate for men in Northern Ireland remains alarmingly high. According to statistics from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), in 2022, there were 203 recorded suicides. A significant majority — three in four — of those deaths were men, which highlights the critical nature of male mental health.

During this Men's Health Week, we must advocate for more open conversations about mental health. Normalising the discussion can dismantle the stigma and encourage those in need to seek help without fear or shame. If you or someone you know is struggling, it is vital to reach out. You can do so without fear or shame: seeking help is not a sign of weakness, but, indeed, a brave and necessary step towards recovery and well-being.

12.30 pm

There are many organisations out there. This week and right throughout the year, they will be highlighting the many issues affecting men. Organisations include the Men's Action Network in my constituency and the Men's Advisory Project, but there are many others that do fantastic work in those areas. They need sustainable funding in order to be able to continue carrying out that work. I therefore call on the Minister of Health to prioritise mental health as a key area to be addressed.

Unfortunately, other serious issues predominantly affect men, such as prostate cancer and cardiovascular disease, which is a key issue. Cancer awareness is another issue to be addressed. In this Men's Health Week, I urge people to reach out and support such organisations, which are carrying out vital work.

EU Law in Northern Ireland

Mr Allister: In recent days in most of Europe, we saw the election of a foreign Parliament. The relevance of that foreign Parliament to us in Northern Ireland is that it has control over 300 areas of law that affect Northern Ireland. Those are areas of law that should be decided by this House or by Westminster but are instead legislated for by that foreign Parliament, the European Parliament. Those areas of law, from the sublime to the ridiculous, touch all our lives.

Last week, we had an illustration of the ridiculousness of the pernicious tentacles of foreign law in our country, when it was decreed by those whom we do not elect that in Northern Ireland, from two years' hence, it will become illegal, according to that foreign law, to produce smoky bacon crisps. Think of it: a foreign Parliament is deciding what flavourings can be applied by Northern Ireland manufacturers to something as common as potato crisps. How ridiculous is that?

It illustrates, however, the consequence of the surrender of sovereignty over Northern Ireland by the protocol to a foreign power. Of course, it goes much wider. Our trade and economic laws and how we manufacture, package and sell all our goods are governed by laws that we do not make and do not change, thanks to the pernicious protocol.

None of that has been altered or reversed by the dud Donaldson deal that, some told us, would remove EU law. Patently, it has not done so, and now we continue down the path of the ridiculous. It is a constitutional outrage that we are governed by laws that we do not make and cannot change, even down to that most mundane of levels.

Mr Speaker: That brings Members' statements to a conclusion.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes Body

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that they must be concise in asking questions.

Dr Archibald (The Minister of Finance): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I will make the following statement on the twenty-second meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in special EU programmes sectoral format, which was held in the offices of the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (DPENDPDR) in Dublin on Wednesday 15 May 2024.

As Minister of Finance, I represented the Executive and was accompanied by junior Minister Cameron from the Executive Office. The Irish Government were represented by Minister Paschal Donohoe TD from the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Cameron, and I make the statement on behalf of us both.

The NSMC received a report on the implementation of the 2014-2020 Peace IV and INTERREG Va programmes. Ministers noted that EU expenditure targets to date for both programmes have been met and that both are currently forecast to achieve full expenditure, in line with total programme allocations.

The NSMC noted that the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) is working on the task of facilitating closure of the programmes.

For Peace IV, 95 projects were approved in the priority areas of shared education, children and young people, shared spaces and services, and building positive relations. Eighty-eight projects have concluded, one has been withdrawn and six are due to complete in 2024. Under INTERREG Va, 32 programmes were approved in the priority areas of research and innovation, environment, sustainable transport and health. Twenty-eight projects have concluded activity, one has been withdrawn and three are due to complete in 2024. Ministers welcomed the actions delivered specifically under the environment and sustainable transport themes

of INTERREG Va to address the challenges of climate change and loss of biodiversity.

The NSMC noted the SEUPB chief executive's progress report for the 2021-27 PEACE PLUS programme. Calls for funding applications opened in June 2023. Calls in 16 investment areas have opened to date, and 19 projects, to the value of €278 million, have so far been approved for funding, representing almost a quarter — 24.3% — of the total programme value. Ministers received a presentation on the PEACE PLUS young social innovators project. The NSMC noted that the programme has a strong focus on actions to address climate change and loss of biodiversity, including an investment of €303 million in the "Supporting a sustainable and better-connected future" theme. Ministers welcomed the contribution of the Peace IV, INTERREG Va and PEACE PLUS programmes in protecting and preserving peace and providing opportunities for building prosperity.

Ministers noted and approved the SEUPB corporate plan for 2023-25 and the business plans and budget provision for 2022, 2023 and 2024, which were drafted in line with guidance issued by the Finance Departments. Ministers noted the SEUPB annual reports and accounts for 2019, 2020 and 2021 and its draft accounts for 2022 and 2023. The SEUPB annual reports and accounts for 2019 and 2020 have been certified by the Comptrollers and Auditors General in both jurisdictions and have been laid before the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The 2021 annual report and accounts have been certified by the Comptrollers and Auditors General in both jurisdictions, have been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and will be laid before the NI Assembly in due course. The 2022 and 2023 draft accounts are currently awaiting certification by the Comptrollers and Auditors General in both jurisdictions. Following their certification, they will be laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Ministers noted that the SEUPB's governance structures continue to operate effectively. The Council noted that an independent organisational review of the SEUPB has been completed and has made recommendations on SEUPB staffing levels and grading. Ministers agreed that the approved headcount for SEUPB will be revised to 86, with the potential to increase to 88, and agreed that five posts identified in the review will be regraded.

The NSMC agreed to hold its next special EU programmes meeting in autumn 2024.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Minister. The current period of PEACE PLUS ends in 2027. Was there any discussion about whether that funding programme will be renewed? We will have a new EU Commission this year. There were EU elections at the weekend. Not to rub it in, but I am sure that the Minister noticed that there were elections at the weekend. What plans are in place to negotiate a new period of PEACE PLUS funding?

Dr Archibald: As the Member will be aware, the current 2021-27 PEACE PLUS programme came into existence as part of the withdrawal agreement in 2019. The proposal for PEACE PLUS was made in the context of our unique and specific circumstances on this island and with a view to supporting North/South cooperation under the Good Friday Agreement. Obviously, any successor programme to PEACE PLUS would require a decision at a political level. An assessment of the benefits of the current and previous programmes and the need for further programme work will be undertaken. Discussions will be required with the British and Irish Governments and the EU, and a direction at political level will allow those discussions to commence.

Miss Brogan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. *[Translation: I thank the Minister.]* Can the Minister describe the current position on the PEACE PLUS programme, please?

Dr Archibald: SEUPB officially opened PEACE PLUS for funding calls in June last year. Programme implementation is progressing well, with the majority of the 22 investment areas having opened their calls for applications. The remaining investment areas are scheduled to open for applications later this year.

A number of programme steering committee meetings have taken place, and they make the final decisions on applications, resulting in funding being awarded. So far, over a quarter — £274 million — of the programme budget has been committed to 23 successful projects. That includes approximately £30.5 million that has been committed since the meeting took place on 15 May. Funds have been committed to youth projects, mental health projects, shared education, local community peace action plans, victims and survivors, the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise and geothermal energy.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you, Minister, for today's statement. I note you mentioned the increased headcount approved for the SEUPB. Given this year's challenging budget and the significant pressures and cuts across your Department in

IT, HR and Land and Property Services, what impact will those Department of Finance budget cuts have on the SEUPB?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for the question. Obviously, it is important that SEUPB has the appropriate resource and structures to effectively implement the PEACE PLUS project, which is worth over €1 billion, as well as to close Peace IV and INTERREG Va. Given the magnitude, in particular, of the administrative requirements to develop and deliver PEACE PLUS and the expanse of policy areas covered, it was an appropriate time to reconsider the organisational requirements of SEUPB, and a recommendation was made for additional posts.

I have some costings in front of me on what will fall to the Department of Finance. The additional resource will be funded from the technical assistance budget of the PEACE PLUS programme. That is the budget allocated as per EU regulations for programme management, monitoring and evaluation, and it includes staff costs. PEACE PLUS is 80%-funded through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which is fully reimbursed by the European Commission, and the remaining 20% is provided by the accountable Departments' match funding, which comes from the core budget. DOF in the North and the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform in the South are the accountable Departments. The cost to DOF will be almost 15% of the total additional cost of the posts, which is £300,000. Therefore, the cost that falls to the Department of Finance is £44,640, which, in the grand scheme of the Department's budget, is not a huge amount, but it is something that we will continue to monitor in the time ahead.

Mr Tennyson: Thank you, Minister, for your answers and the statement. On the independent organisational review, are there any significant recommendations other than those relating to headcount and regrading of which the Assembly should be aware?

Dr Archibald: I am happy to write to the Member on the review. The significant recommendations were on the headcount, which I mentioned in respect of SEUPB being able to properly deliver the programme, given its scale, while tidying up the closure of Peace IV and INTERREG Va. It is important at this juncture to ensure that SEUPB is appropriately resourced to deliver what it needs to deliver. I am happy to write to the Member with further details.

Mrs Mason: Will PEACE PLUS see a simplified assessment process and a reduction in the administrative burden on applicants and projects?

Dr Archibald: A priority during PEACE PLUS development was to streamline the application and assessment process, focusing on a reduction in the time taken to assess applications and a reduction in the administrative burden on applicants and on the beneficiaries of funding. Department of Finance economists carried out a review of the application template and the assessment process for Peace IV and INTERREG Va and made recommendations on how those could be improved for PEACE PLUS. SEUPB has considered and implemented the recommendations, where possible.

12.45 pm

SEUPB provides pre-development support to applicants, which is new for the PEACE PLUS programme. It means that SEUPB engages with applicants to help them facilitate the development of their application before the call for applications opens. That assists applicants in producing high-quality applications and projects. PEACE PLUS provides a small grants programme to help smaller community groups that previously felt that they did not have the capacity to apply for the funding and the opportunity, therefore, to get involved. Grants of up to €100,000 are available under investment areas 1.2 and 6.2, and applications to those areas will be delivered in a more streamlined and simplified manner. There has been engagement with the European Commission in developing that process.

Mr Frew: The SEUPB's annual report and accounts for 2021 have been certified by the Comptroller and Auditor General in both jurisdictions. They have been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and will be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly in due course. Minister, what is the hold-up, and why are we still awaiting certification for 2022?

Dr Archibald: I am happy to write to the Member and furnish him with the details of that. I assume that it is a process issue.

Mr McGrath: Given that Peace moneys can often be delivered to the community and voluntary sector in the absence of funds from the Executive, is the Minister aware of any additional emphasis being placed on mental health? Groups across my constituency are struggling for funds and absolutely need

additional moneys to do their work. They are groups such as Pop Up Art in Downpatrick; MyMy in Newcastle; the Well in the Kingdom; and even neurodivergent groups, such as the ADHD hub in Newcastle.

Dr Archibald: I commend the Member for getting the plugs in for his constituency. One of the key themes of PEACE PLUS is youth mental health and well-being. There is a significant role for community organisations in PEACE PLUS, and there was significant engagement to ensure that the needs of communities were addressed and recognised in the development of the programme. There was specific engagement with smaller community groups, which is really important because some of them felt that, previously, there was a barrier to their getting involved. That is why there has been a specific focus on ensuring a more simplified approach to the application process.

There are the specific elements in relation to mental health, but, within those other themes as well, there are opportunities for community organisations and groups, such as those that the Member mentioned, to apply for those smaller grants, which is a new opportunity. Those grants of up to €100,000 will be part of what will be called "the cross-community change maker funds" and "cross-border change maker funds." There might be opportunities there, and I encourage the Member to engage with SEUPB around what additional opportunities there might be in relation to mental health.

Mr Allister: Is it another sign of the profligacy of North/South bodies that, in the case of SEUPB, no accounts after 2021 have even been certified, yet the Minister comes to the House today and announces an increase in staff to up to 86 or even 88? She has not told us how many extra staff that is. How many extra staff are being appointed for the body, whose accounts are not in order?

Dr Archibald: I am sure that the Member will appreciate that the accounts have not been laid in the Assembly in the last couple of years because the Assembly was not sitting and there was no ability to approve the accounts via the North/South Ministerial Council.

On the specific question about the staffing complement, the current staff complement for SEUPB is 57, and the last time that it was reviewed was in 2012.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance. I ask Members to take their

ease for a moment, while we change the top Table.

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

Executive Committee Business

Occupational Pension Schemes (Administration, Investment, Charges and Governance) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

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

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Administration, Investment, Charges and Governance) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Lyons: The rule is the first of four sets of regulations relating to pensions that we are considering today. The regulations require the Assembly's approval, and, due to its absence, they have been revoked and replaced on several occasions. Otherwise, they would have expired at the end of the six-month period from the date that they came into operation. As the provisions are somewhat technical, I should, at the outset, explain and perhaps warn that some pensions jargon is inevitable.

The rule is the current replacement for the original regulations that came into operation on 6 April 2023. It amends a number of sets of existing regulations, including the Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997. The rule places administration and governance requirements on trustees of occupational defined contribution pension schemes, in particular to require trustees of certain schemes to disclose their investment returns and demonstrate that they are providing value for their members. It also increases flexibility for defined contribution schemes to make greater use of performance fees payable to fund managers when they deliver healthy returns on their default investment arrangements. Those are funds into which members are automatically placed by the scheme.

It makes other changes to the ways in which specific types of pension schemes must comply with the requirements to produce a statement of investment principles. For example, it includes

provision to require trustees of relevant schemes to include an explanation of their policy on investing in illiquid assets. The regulations also require trustees of relevant schemes to report annually on the percentage of assets allocated to different investment asset classes in their default arrangements and to disclose certain specified performance fees incurred in the scheme year. Those measures aim to encourage the consolidation of defined contribution pension schemes so that members are able to benefit from economies of scale and access to a diverse range of asset classes that larger schemes bring. They have been introduced alongside guidance to help trustees of schemes that are in scope to meet the requirements.

The regulations also require trustees of qualifying collective money purchase schemes to include an explanation of their policies on investing in illiquid assets in their statement of investment principles. That is to reflect the fact that such schemes do not have default investment funds. They also make consequential amendments to, for example, the information that must be published on a publicly available website. The regulations amend the definition of charges to exclude performance fees when assessing whether a scheme complies with the charge cap. That is the limit on the charges that can be applied to default investment funds. In complying with the requirements to assess the value for members that their scheme provides and to report net investment returns and on costs and charges, trustees and managers are required to have regard to guidance issued by the Department.

In summary, the measures in the regulations offer opportunities to improve outcomes for members of defined contribution schemes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Minister, thank you for opening the debate.

Ms Ferguson (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I rise as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Communities to support the introduction of the Occupational Pension Schemes (Administration, Investment, Charges and Governance) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024.

The Committee considered the regulations at its meeting on 11 April, and members were made aware of the fact that the update is needed to enhance the framework governing occupational pension schemes across the North. The amendments focus on four key areas — administration, investment, charges and

governance — and will amend existing regulations to require trustees or managers of most defined contribution occupational pension schemes to publish their policies on investment in illiquid assets and information about the types of assets in which their schemes have investments. Members also recognise that the regulations further amend a number of sets of existing regulations relating to the administration and governance of occupational pension schemes.

Improved administrative processes will ensure the most efficient management of pension schemes. That includes updated record-keeping requirements and enhanced data protection measures to safeguard the personal information of scheme members.

The regulations introduce new guidelines for the investment strategies of pension schemes. Those guidelines emphasise the importance of sustainable and responsible investment practices, aligning with global best practice and considering the long-term impact on the environment and society.

In order to protect scheme members from excessive charges, the regulations set clear limits on the fees that can be charged by pension scheme providers. That ensures that members receive the maximum benefit from their contributions and that their pensions are not eroded by high administrative costs.

Lastly, the regulations will support the introduction of stronger governance measures to ensure that pension schemes are managed in a transparent and accountable manner. That includes stricter requirements for the qualifications and conduct of trustees and managers of pension schemes, as well as regular reporting and oversight mechanisms.

The Committee is content to support the regulations as it understands that the intent is to improve benefits to members. The amendments will provide greater scrutiny and peace of mind to pension scheme members from knowing that their retirement savings are being managed prudently and ethically. By fostering transparency and accountability, we build greater trust in the pension system.

The Committee understands that the amendments have been developed in consultation with industry experts, stakeholders and representatives of pension scheme members. There is broad support for the changes, reflecting a consensus on the need to modernise and strengthen our pension regulations. Therefore, I am content to

recommend that the Assembly approves the regulations.

Mr Kingston: This afternoon, the Minister for Communities will bring before the Assembly a number of motions relating to statutory rules and regulations regarding pension matters and social security benefits. Each of those matters of legislation has its own importance. Whilst the technicality might not be the most exciting for a debate, they have their importance, particularly in establishing parity between arrangements in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, given that pensions are organised generally at that level.

As the Deputy Chair said, the Committee for Communities considered these matters, and my colleague on the Committee, Maurice Bradley, and I welcome the fact that the Minister is now bringing them before the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): I call the Minister for Communities to wind up the debate on the motion.

Mr Lyons: I am grateful to Mr Kingston, the Deputy Chair and the rest of the Committee for their support. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Administration, Investment, Charges and Governance) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

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

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

1.00 pm

Mr Lyons: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. This rule is the current replacement of the original regulations, which came into operation on 1 August 2022. The rule provides for an authorisation and supervision regime for collective money purchase (CMP) schemes, which are commonly known as collective defined contribution (CDC) pension schemes. Currently, there are two primary types of pension schemes: defined benefits schemes, where the employer underwrites the pension benefits that are paid to employees; and defined contribution schemes, whereby individual members bear all the investment and longevity risks, and there are no employer guarantees regarding what the member may receive at retirement.

Collective money purchase schemes provide an alternative in which the contributions of members and employers are pooled and invested with a view to delivering benefits at the level to which the scheme aspires. They offer potential benefits and economies of scale and the opportunity for greater investment in higher returning assets than are usually associated with defined contribution occupational pension schemes. Their collective nature means that investment and longevity risks are shared across the membership. As these schemes provide an income to pensioner members, there is no need for members to make complex financial decisions at the point of retirement.

Income in retirement from collective money purchase schemes is subject to periodic adjustment, which is designed to achieve a balance between a scheme's assets and the amount required for the provision of benefits. Collective money purchase schemes are believed to be more sustainable for employers and employees alike, and they have the potential to offer better outcomes for pension scheme members.

To build confidence in these new schemes, it is considered essential that only well-run schemes be allowed to operate. The regulations set out detailed requirements for the process for applying to the Pensions Regulator for authorisation, as well as details regarding the authorisation criteria that need to be met in order for collective money purchase schemes to operate. Those include criteria to ensure that only fit and proper persons are involved in key capacities relating to those schemes; that the design of the scheme is sound and complies with the legislative requirements; and that the scheme has sufficient financial resources to meet the costs of setting up and running the scheme and to take the necessary steps if things go wrong.

If the Pensions Regulator is not satisfied that all the authorisation criteria are met, it cannot authorise the scheme. The regulations also set out requirements relating to the Pensions Regulator's supervisory role. The regulator can withdraw authorisation if it is no longer satisfied that the authorisation criteria are met. The regulations set out further detail on information to be provided to the regulator while the scheme is running, which will help the regulator to consider whether it is satisfied that the authorisation criteria for schemes continue to be met.

The regulations also provide more detail about the actions that trustees must take if a scheme experiences a triggering event. Those are certain events, which are set out in primary legislation, that can pose a threat to the future of the scheme and the interests of members. The regulations also provide for consequential amendments to other sets of regulations: for example, to make provision for an alternative automatic enrolment quality test for collective money purchase schemes. These regulations, along with the occupational pension schemes regulations of 2022, implement the authorisation and supervisory regime for collective money purchase schemes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Minister, thank you for opening the debate.

Ms Ferguson (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities, I support the Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations (NI) 2024. The Committee considered this statutory rule at its meeting on 29 February 2024. At that meeting, Committee members were briefed by departmental officials who provided information on the purpose and scope of the regulations. Committee members heard that these regulations revoke and replace the previous 2023 regulations, ensuring the continuity of the authorisation and supervisory regime for collective money purchase schemes.

Collective money purchase schemes, which are also known as collective defined contributions schemes, pool contributions and investment risks, thereby providing more predictable benefits, compared with traditional defined contribution schemes. The key features of the regulations are that the CMP schemes are designed to offer a more stable and reliable income for pensioners by balancing risks more effectively across scheme members, and they include specific provisions for the establishment, administration and governance of collective money purchase schemes.

The regulations outline the criteria for the establishment of CMP schemes, ensuring that they are established by credible and capable entities. Those include rigorous initial assessments to confirm that the proposed schemes have robust financial and operational frameworks. Clear guidelines are provided to ensure efficient administration, emphasising the importance of accurate record-keeping and transparent communication with members. The regulations also require regular reporting to ensure ongoing compliance and effective oversight.

The Committee was content that the regulations promote sustainable investment practices, ensuring that the schemes are aligned with broader economic and environmental goals. The regulations also include strong governance and member protection, including requirements for the qualifications and conduct of trustees and scheme managers. Enhanced protection measures are in place to safeguard members' interests, including mechanisms for dispute resolution and member engagement. The Committee recognises that the regulations support greater diversity and choice in the pensions market for employers and employees.

In conclusion, Committee members were agreed that the Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations (NI) 2024 represented a forward-thinking approach to pension provision. These regulations offer enhanced security, stability and predictability for pension scheme members. Following the briefing and a question and answer session, the Committee recommended that the regulations be approved by the Assembly. On behalf of the Committee, I am content to recommend that the Assembly approves the Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations (NI) 2024.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for that on behalf of the Committee. I call on the Minister for Communities to conclude and wind on the debate.

Mr Lyons: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the Deputy Chair and the Committee for their support and for the evident enthusiasm from the rest of the Chamber. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Occupational Pension Schemes (Governance and Registration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

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

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Governance and Registration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Mr Lyons: This rule is the replacement for the original regulations, which came into operation on 1 October 2022. The rule integrates into pensions law provisions of the Investment Consultancy and Fiduciary Management Market Investigation Order 2019, which was made by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). It also enables the Pensions Regulator to oversee compliance by trustees of relevant pension schemes to allow for effective monitoring and enforcement.

In broad terms, investment consultancy is the provision of advice to trustees on investment strategy and related matters. Fiduciary management involves the delegation by trustees of some investment decisions to advisers. The CMA made a number of recommendations, including a recommendation for legislation to enable the Pensions Regulator to oversee the duties on trustees to allow for effective enforcement.

The rule brings into law various duties placed on trustees in defined benefit and defined contribution occupational pension schemes. The regulations primarily amend the Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 to impose duties on trustees of relevant trust schemes in connection with the provision of fiduciary management schemes by fiduciary management providers. Trustees of occupational pension schemes are required to set objectives for persons who provide them with investment consultancy services, review those objectives at intervals of no more than three years and review annually the

performance of providers against the objectives. Setting objectives enables trustees to monitor the performance of their advisers and get better value for money in the long term.

Trustees are also required to carry out a qualifying tender process when continuing to use existing fiduciary management providers, or when appointing new ones, if the scheme meets the asset management threshold. The threshold is met when fiduciary managers, who are covered by the regulations, manage 20% or more of the in-scope assets. The regulations also set out what the qualifying tender process is and when it must be carried out.

Those duties encourage trustees to become more engaged with the way in which services are bought, monitored and evaluated or to consider more efficient consolidation options. In turn, that leads to better outcomes for scheme members and employer sponsors of schemes. Specific enforcement powers are given to the Pensions Regulator in connection with those duties. For example, a process is set out whereby the regulator may issue a compliance notice or third-party compliance notice if:

"it is of the opinion that the person is not complying, or has not complied, with"

the relevant provision. The regulations also amend regulation 3 of the Register of Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 so as to require certain information about investment consultancy providers and fiduciary management providers to be included in the scheme's return, among other things. Trustees are required to provide the relevant detail about each of their fiduciary management providers and about whether the trustees carried out a qualifying tender process. If they did not carry out such a process for that provider, the trustees have to state why it was not carried out. Trustees are also required to confirm relevant details of each of their investment consultancy providers and of whether the trustees have set and reviewed the objectives and reviewed the performance of the provider. If they have not done that, they are required to confirm why.

The overall aim of the remedies is to encourage trustees to engage better and to monitor the value for money of the services that they use. Better oversight of the measures should also have a positive impact on defined-contribution members' pots and defined benefit funding shortfalls.

Ms Ferguson (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I support the introduction of the Occupational Pension Schemes (Governance and Registration) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024. The Committee considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 11 April and understands that the regulations' primary objective is to integrate provisions from the Investment Consultancy and Fiduciary Management Market Investigation Order 2019, which was made by the Competition and Markets Authority, into our pensions law. That integration will allow the Pensions Regulator to oversee compliance by trustees, thereby ensuring the effective monitoring and enforcement of governance standards. That is to be welcomed.

The Committee understands that there are a number of key aspects to the regulations. The first is governance enhancements. Trustees of relevant pension schemes are required to conduct qualifying tender processes when appointing fiduciary management services or continuing to use fiduciary management services, especially when asset management thresholds are met, in order to ensure that trustees engage in competitive practices, thereby securing better value and service quality for scheme members. Secondly, trustees have a duty to set and review objectives of their investment consultancy providers, with reviews taking place at intervals of no more than three years. Annual performance reviews of investment consultancy providers are also required, promoting continuous oversight and accountability.

Another key aspect is enforcement and compliance. The Pensions Regulator is granted specific enforcement powers, including the power to issue compliance and penalty notices. Trustees are required to provide detailed information about their fiduciary management and investment consultancy providers in their scheme returns, fostering greater transparency.

I will move on to administrative improvements. The regulations introduce streamlined registration processes, ensuring efficient administration and accurate record-keeping. Enhanced reporting requirements should ensure that members receive regular, comprehensive updates on the performance and governance of their pension schemes.

On the matter of consultation and equality impact, the regulations will align our pensions regulations with those already established in GB, thus ensuring parity and consistency. By fostering competition and transparency in fiduciary management and investment

consultancy services, the regulations protect the interests of pension scheme members and ensure that they receive the best possible outcomes.

1.15 pm

In conclusion, the Committee acknowledges that the Occupational Pension Schemes (Governance and Registration) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024 represent a positive step forward in the governance and oversight of our pension schemes, recognising the critical role that they will play in safeguarding the future of occupational pensions here. Therefore, I am content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you. I now call on the Minister for Communities to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the debate on the motion.

Mr Lyons: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, and to the Committee, for their support. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Governance and Registration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Occupational Pension Schemes (Master Trusts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

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

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Master Trusts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you, Minister. The Business Committee has agreed again that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Mr Lyons: This rule is the current replacement of the original regulations, which came into operation on 6 April 2022. The rule provides for the authorisation and supervision regime for master trust pension schemes under the Pension Schemes Act (Northern Ireland) 2021,

which corresponds to provision for Great Britain in the Pension Schemes Act 2017.

A master scheme is one that must be used by more than one employer, provides money purchase pensions, and is not a public-sector scheme or used by only connected employers — for example, by one profession or group of companies. Many employers have chosen to enrol their workers into a master trust scheme rather than setting up their own pension scheme. That led to a considerable expansion of the master trust market.

Master trust scheme structures create specific risks that were not addressed by the legislation, which was designed for other types of pension scheme. The regulations aim to address the potential impact of the risks for master trust scheme members by providing an authorisation and supervision regime administered by the Pensions Regulator, which operates UK-wide. The authorisation regime requires all master trust schemes to be authorised by the Pensions Regulator. The Pensions Regulator's ongoing supervision regime will ensure that master trust schemes continue to meet the authorisation criteria. It also gives the regulator greater powers to engage with and, if appropriate, intervene if a master trust scheme is in danger of failing to meet the authorisation criteria. The Pensions Regulator will assess each master trust scheme against authorisation criteria aimed at addressing the risks specific to master trusts. Those include that the persons involved in running the scheme are fit and proper, and that the scheme is financially sustainable. Once authorised, master trust schemes are required to continue to meet the authorisation criteria.

These regulations also set out requirements relating to the Pensions Regulator's supervisory role. The regulator can withdraw authorisation if it is no longer satisfied that the authorisation criteria are met. The regulations set out further detail on information to be provided to the regulator while the scheme is running, which will help the regulator to consider whether it is satisfied that the authorisation criteria for schemes continue to be met. Where a person fails to comply with a request for information, the Pensions Regulator can impose fixed and escalating penalties that are broadly consistent with other penalties that can be imposed by the regulator. The regulations provide more detail about the actions that trustees must take if a scheme experiences a triggering event. The Pensions Regulator will work with the scheme to ensure that appropriate action is taken at each stage, including notifying employers and members about what has happened and what their options are if the scheme is going to wind

up. Restrictions on charges in the Act mean that additional costs cannot be passed on to members.

In summary, these regulations introduce a robust authorisation and supervision regime for master trust pension schemes.

Ms Ferguson (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): On behalf of the Committee, I support the introduction of the regulations. The Committee considered the rule on 11 April 2024. Committee members understand that the regulations set out the authorisation and supervision regimes for master trust pension schemes, which have grown considerably in the past few years.

The regulations are designed to revoke and re-enact the Occupational Pension Schemes (Master Trusts) (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2023, ensuring continuity and robustness in the governance of master trust pension schemes. Committee members were made aware that the master trust market had grown significantly, driven by the automatic enrolment duty introduced by the Pensions Act 2008. Master trust schemes provide a collective pension solution for multiple employers. They particularly benefit smaller employers that cannot set up their own pension schemes. The expansion, however, has introduced specific risks that previous legislation did not address.

I turn to the key features of the regulations. Committee members noted that the regulations propose improvements in a number of areas. First, the Committee welcomed that the regulations established an authorisation and supervision regime for master trust schemes, overseen by the Pensions Regulator. All master trusts must apply for authorisation and demonstrate that they meet rigorous criteria related to governance, financial sustainability and operational processes. Secondly, only individuals deemed to be "fit and proper" can be involved in running the schemes in order to ensure high standards of integrity and competence. Thirdly, master trust schemes must show financial sustainability. There are specific provisions for schemes with and without scheme funders. That ensures that schemes can cover their costs and protect members' assets. The regulations provide that adequate systems and processes must be in place to ensure effective scheme management, including robust administrative procedures and risk management frameworks. Those should include a continuity strategy that details actions in the event of significant disruptions or a triggering event, such as financial difficulties or operational failures.

In relation to supervision and enforcement, the Pensions Regulator will have enhanced powers to monitor and intervene in master trust schemes. That includes the ability to impose penalties for non-compliance and to direct trustees to take specific actions if members' rights are at risk. The regulations also provide for fraud compensation fund adjustments — that is, adjustments to the fraud compensation fund criteria — which will now mean that only the insolvency of the scheme funder is required for a master trust to apply. That simplifies the process and provides greater protection for members.

In conclusion, the regulations are amongst a number of important steps that we have heard about today. These ones aim to safeguard the interests of master trust pension scheme members across the North. They provide a robust framework for authorisation, supervision and intervention to ensure that those pension schemes remain secure, well-managed and resilient. The Committee was content for me to recommend the Occupational Pension Schemes (Master Trusts) Regulations (NI) 2024 for approval by the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): Thank you for that further response from the Committee. I call the Minister to conclude the debate on the motion by making a winding-up speech.

Mr Lyons: I am grateful to the Deputy Chair and the Committee for their support. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Master Trusts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair): The Minister and the Deputy Chair of the Committee are getting through the business very efficiently, and lots of business at that. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while we change the top Table.

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

Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

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

That the Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

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

Mr Lyons: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The statutory rule that we are considering is the most recent in a series of confirmatory procedure statutory rules that effect an increase in the benefit cap levels in Northern Ireland by 10.1% from April 2023 in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. The regulations amend the rates in the Welfare Reform and Work (Northern Ireland) Order 2016, the Universal Credit Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the Housing Benefit Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006.

The increase in the annual benefit cap limit was to ensure that all households would see an increase in their benefit following the benefit upgrading from April 2023 in line with the CPI. The cap increased from £20,000 to £22,020 a year for couples and lone parents, and from £13,400 to £14,753 for single people. The rates apply across the United Kingdom with the exception of households living in greater London, which are subject to higher limits. The increase enables households to receive benefits up to the value of gross earnings of around £26,500.

While there are exemptions from the cap for universal credit households, I emphasise that, under the current welfare supplementary payment schemes, the impact of the benefit cap is fully mitigated for families with children in Northern Ireland. That ensures financial protection for families who have a reduction in benefit due to the benefit cap. The mitigation payments are due to expire on 31 March 2025. My Department has recently commenced a statutory review to consider the future of the mitigation payments post March 2025.

The benefit cap is not reviewed annually in the way that most social security benefits are; rather, there is a statutory duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to review the benefit cap levels at least once every five years. The benefit cap was introduced in GB in April 2013, and the levels were reviewed in 2014. A further review was not undertaken until November 2022. The outcome of that review resulted in increases to the benefit cap levels from 1 April 2023. When the Secretary of State makes regulations that amend the annual benefit cap, the Department for Communities

may make corresponding amending regulations. The Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 came into operation on 1 April of that year to establish the revised benefit cap limits in line with the equivalent provision made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in Great Britain. Those confirmatory regulations were revoked and re-enacted by the Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 to maintain the revised limits. Those regulations were revoked and re-enacted by the Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024, which came into operation on 21 March 2024. The proposed rule maintains the annual benefit cap levels that were increased by 10.1% from April 2023 to £22,020 for couples and lone parents and to £14,753 for single people. The increase reflects and is based on the September 2022 CPI.

I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Ferguson (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I rise as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities to support the introduction of the regulations. I will follow with a contribution in my capacity as a Sinn Féin MLA.

The Committee considered the rule at its meeting on 11 April. Members recognised that the regulations will increase the levels by 10.1% in line with the consumer price index for the year ending September 2022, which will result in working-age benefit households now being entitled to £22,020 as opposed to £20,000 for couples and lone parents. For single people, the increase will be from £13,400 to £14,753. The Committee heard that the purpose of the regulations is to revoke and re-enact the Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2023 and that they came into operation on 21 March 2024. They need to be approved by 22 September 2024.

The measure ensures continuity and adjusts the benefit cap levels to reflect current economic conditions.

1.30 pm

By way of background, I will say that the Committee was reminded that the benefit cap was introduced in May 2016 to limit the total working-age benefits that a household could receive. Initially set at £26,000 for families and £18,200 for single adults, those levels were reduced in November 2016 to £20,000 for

families and £13,400 for single adults. The review by the British Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in November 2022 determined that the levels should be increased by 10.1%, in line with the CPI for the year ending September 2022. In terms of the key adjustments from the new cap levels, the regulations raise the benefit cap from £20,000 to £22,020 for couples and lone parents and from £13,400 to £14,753 for single adults, ensuring that benefit levels keep pace with inflation.

The Committee was advised that the Department for Communities had conducted a screening exercise under section 75 of the NI Act 1998 and concluded that an equality impact assessment (EQIA) was not necessary as the changes:

"would not have significant implications for equality of opportunity".

On the regulatory and financial implications, the Committee was advised that the regulations impose no additional burdens on business, charities, voluntary bodies or on the public sector.

In relation to compliance and monitoring, the regulations comply with section 24 of the NI Act 1998. They provide parity with the equivalent regulations in GB, specifically the Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, ensuring that there is consistency here. The Committee understands that benefit cap levels are subject to review at least once every five years, with the next review required in November 2027.

The Committee was content that the regulations are required. I am therefore content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

I will make a few short remarks in my capacity as an MLA. I make it clear that the benefit cap is mitigated in the North. The welfare supplementary payment was introduced in 2016, following the recommendations of the Evason report. It protected people against that Tory policy by building in a review every four years. The payment was continued in 2020 by the previous Minister, my party colleague Deirdre Hargey, who also closed the widely acknowledged loophole in the initial legislation. That simplified the qualifying criteria and ensured that more families with children received that financial support.

I take the opportunity to acknowledge all those who campaigned rigorously on the loopholes as

well as on the need to continue the mitigations beyond 2020. I mention in particular the Cliff Edge Coalition. It briefed the Committee last week, highlighting once again the importance of our mitigations and the need to enhance them while putting forward its own recommendations.

I call on the Minister for Communities to give a commitment, as a matter of urgency, to extend the benefit cap mitigation post March 2025 in order to give our families the certainty of that payment as soon as possible and to prevent yet another cliff edge.

Ms Mulholland: I thank the Minister for sitting through the very rigorous scrutiny of the pensions regulations.

A budget cap has been in place for some time. Welfare supplementary payments play such a crucial role in providing additional financial support for the individuals and families who are most in need and most vulnerable. The hope is that they can maintain a basic standard of living despite economic pressures, but, in recent years, we have seen that that objective is not being fulfilled. There are families who still struggle with the cost of living, the cost of food and the cost of heating their home. We see more and more families having to access food banks. The importance of the welfare supplementary payments cannot be overstated; it is a life-or-death situation for some families. My party and others on the Communities Committee are genuinely frightened by the cliff edge that we will face in March 2025. I reiterate the Deputy Chairperson's call on the Minister to outline the plans to mitigate the cliff edge that we face.

I have a couple of questions about the regulations. Have any projections been done of the economic impact of the 10·1% increase in the benefit cap on the financial stability of households currently at the cap limit? Has the Department done any studies or had any engagements that support those projections? Given that the increase is tied to the consumer price index for the year ending September 2022, what mechanisms are in place to ensure that future adjustments to the benefit cap continue to accurately reflect changes in living costs? That is not what we see right now. How frequently will it be reviewed? We have talked about a five-year review, but is there any way of doing an interim review of the changes, given how volatile the market is at the moment? Are any safeguards included in the regulations to prevent potential unintended consequences, such as people not qualifying for another benefit if there is a knock-on effect from the increased allowance?

Mr Lyons: I welcome the support for the regulations from across the House, including from the Deputy Chairperson and the rest of the Committee. I will remark on some of the comments that were made.

As I said, a review will be carried out on the future of mitigation payments. I want the review to be completed as soon as possible so that I can consider it. Certainly, there is consensus among those who have spoken today about the need for mitigations to continue. The mitigations exist in many different forms, but I will have to wait for the report to come back and consider each on its merits. We have a tight budgetary environment, and I want to make sure that we put the resources where they can most help those in need. It may well be that keeping that money where it is and keeping the existing mitigations in place is the best way to do it. There may be other things we can do as well that are more targeted towards those in need. Members will be aware of some of the mitigations that have been suggested in addition to what we have. It may be that we need to look at those as a whole.

I will come back to Sian Mulholland if I miss any of her comments in my response. It is believed that increasing the cap in line with the CPI strikes the right balance as regards the challenging economic climate that we find ourselves in and the associated pressures and is in line with the increase in most of the social security benefits that we saw in 2023. I may have missed something, but I am more than happy to come back to the Member.

I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Child Support (Management of Payments and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023

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

That the Child Support (Management of Payments and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved.

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

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): The regulations, which came into operation on 26 February this year, enable my Department to make amendments to child maintenance legislation and overall improvements to the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). The regulations allow for the write-off of arrears of less than £7. That is intended to help reduce the overall arrears balance and extinguish liability for the arrears of child support maintenance where it appears to my Department that it would be unfair or otherwise inappropriate to enforce liability for the arrears. That will ensure that efforts and resources can be focused on taking action to collect unpaid arrears in the cases that will make the biggest difference to children.

In the regulations, we take the pragmatic approach of bringing forward powers to write off minimal amounts of less than £7 on a small number of inactive cases. The reason for the figure of £7 is that the minimum child maintenance payment is £7 a week. Those cases would otherwise have been closed were it not for the small outstanding balances. As of February 2024, there were approximately 193 relevant cases held by CMS operations. It is estimated that the maximum total amount of arrears across those cases is £1,306. The regulations permit the Department to write off arrears where the arrears have accrued under an application for child maintenance; the arrears relate to a case where the maintenance calculation has ceased in specific circumstances; the arrears are less than £7; and the paying parent has failed to make any payments in the past three months.

We introduce the measures for two pragmatic reasons. First, the reality is that keeping open that small number of cases with low levels of arrears requires considerable human and financial resources, and taking the required actions to recover such small amounts of arrears often costs more than the actual value of the arrears. If the cases were to be left open, the cost of maintaining the cases could increase for years, with no greater chance of money being paid to receiving parents. The regulations will ensure that the Child Maintenance Service caseworkers' time and effort are used efficiently. Secondly, given that the CMS will close only cases in which the service has stopped calculating child maintenance payments, it is likely that payments will no longer be needed. That could be because the child has become an adult; the

parents have reconciled; or the paying parent has, sadly, passed away. Therefore, it makes sense to close those cases, not least for the certainty and clarity that it provides for families. The full details of the criteria that permit the writing off of arrears are set out in the regulations, but they include where maintenance calculations have ceased and where no payments have been made in the previous three months.

The changes build on several improvements that we have already made and are among the first in a further wave of measures that we plan to bring forward to ensure that the service is more accessible, simpler, speedier and, ultimately, gets more money to more children more quickly.

Ms Ferguson (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): As Deputy Chairperson, I support the Child Support (Management of Payments and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2023. The Committee considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 22 February 2024. At that meeting, members were briefed by officials from the Department who provided an overview of the regulations. As the Minister outlined, the amendments allow the Child Maintenance Service to write off arrears of less than £7 under certain conditions. That adjustment is practical and necessary. It applies when a maintenance calculation has ceased and no payments have been made by the non-resident parent in the three months preceding the Department's decision to write off the arrears. It is an efficient way to handle cases in which the cost of pursuing the debt far exceeds its value.

The legislative context is rooted in the Child Support (NI) Order 1991, which requires that parents continue to fulfil their financial responsibilities towards their children even if they no longer live together. The amendment aligns with the overarching goal of child maintenance legislation, which is to maximise effective maintenance arrangements for children who are living apart from one or both parents.

As the Minister outlined, the key amendments to the 2009 regulations are twofold: first, the arrears' extinguishment; and, secondly, the notification requirements. On consultation and feedback, the Committee understands that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) conducted a public consultation between June and August 2021 that invited opinions on the proposals for extinguishing the low-level debt. The feedback indicated general agreement, albeit with some reservations and differing

opinions on the maximum level of arrears to be written off. Ultimately, the threshold was set at £6.99, just below the £7 flat rate of child maintenance, ensuring that the maintenance process remains efficient without undue loss to the receiving parent.

The Committee was also made aware that the financial and operational implications of the amendments will result in operational cost savings for the Child Maintenance Service, as the expense of collecting the low-value debts significantly outweighs their actual worth.

That measure ensures that resources are used more effectively, thereby enhancing the efficiency of the child maintenance system.

1.45 pm

Committee members were content that the Child Support (Management of Payment and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 reflected a pragmatic approach to child maintenance. Allowing the Child Maintenance Service to extinguish low-level debts will ensure that resources are allocated efficiently. That will benefit the overall system, support the primary goal of child maintenance legislation and allow the Child Maintenance Service to better allocate its efforts towards supporting children and families who rely on maintenance payments. The Committee acknowledges that the regulations have been considered to ensure that they do not have any adverse impact on equality of opportunity or good relations for any of the section 75 equality groups. The policy was considered to be largely technical in nature, with a primary goal of enhancing the efficiency of the Child Maintenance Service.

Following discussion, the Committee recommended that the regulations be approved by the Assembly. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Communities, I am content to recommend that the Assembly approves the Child Support (Management of Payment and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2023.

Mr McCrossan: As the Deputy Chair rightly outlined, the regulations were considered by the Committee at an earlier stage. It is important to point out that, whilst those particular regulations are important and, in the same breath, somewhat minor, there is a wider challenge for our Assembly and citizens. The welfare system is supposed to be a safety net to protect people, but the reality, given where we currently sit in Northern Ireland, with the rising costs of food, fuel and every aspect of living generally, is that it is falling short. It does not do enough to

support people, and the SDLP has been saying that for a long number of years. As Members pointed out in the previous debate on the benefit cap regulations, we voted against the benefit cap legislation at Westminster. The party across the Chamber supported that legislation, Sinn Féin did not show up and the Alliance Party supported it. When it comes to the welfare system in Northern Ireland, a lot of people are being forced into poverty as a result of the legislation that is in place and the failure of the Executive to acknowledge it.

I welcome these regulations but make the broader point that we should not praise the benefit system in any way, because it is leaving our people in a very difficult situation, adding to their challenges and bringing about poverty. It is far from a safety net, particularly when you compare it to the South of this island, which is doing a lot more for vulnerable people and working families than this place could ever dream of.

Mr Lyons: I will respond to the comments of Mr McCrossan first. He is a debate late on the issues that he is trying to raise. The regulations that we are debating relate to the Child Maintenance Service and the changes that we are trying to make there. We understand that the work of the Child Maintenance Service is vital and these regulations, albeit minor, will make a difference and help to deliver a more cost-effective system and contribute to the goal of the overall improvement of the Child Maintenance Service.

If the Member would like to have a wider debate on the welfare system in Northern Ireland, I am sure that the Business Office and the party Whips will consider it. There are things that are in our control and others that are outside it. That is why we are doing what we can to mitigate some of the changes that took place. However, in making sure that we have adequate support and address some of the anti-poverty issues that we want to deal with, that work will be wide-ranging. I look forward to having the Member's support so that we can tackle the root causes of poverty.

In many ways, we wish that the Child Maintenance Service did not have to exist. It exists because of failures that take place elsewhere: that is the world that we live in. I hope that the changes that we make today can at least make it more effective. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support (Management of Payments and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 be approved.

Child Support Fees (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

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

That the Child Support Fees (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

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

Mr Lyons: The regulations, which came into operation on 18 January 2024, amend the Child Support Fees Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 by revoking regulation 3(6) and 3(7). Those provisions relate to arrangements for the collection of child maintenance. The regulations are required to satisfy the legal doctrine of revoking obsolete provisions from the statute book as promptly as possible. Regulation 3(6) and regulation 3(7) of the Child Support Fees Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 were rendered obsolete following the enactment of the Child Support Collection (Domestic Abuse) Act 2023 on 29 June 2023. The primary purpose of the UK-wide Act was to provide additional legislative protection for victims of domestic abuse who use the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). The Act does that by allowing for the collection of child maintenance payments by my Department on behalf of the person with care where my Department is satisfied that there is evidence of behaviour of a parent that amounts to domestic abuse against the other parent or children in the household. In revoking regulation 3(6) and regulation 3(7), my Department is removing the risk of any confusion arising in the wider public and legal community. Primary legislation naturally takes precedence over subordinate legislation, and, as the statute book does not require both provisions to operate concurrently, it is therefore prudent to revoke the subordinate provisions.

Although the regulations are merely technical in nature, they are, more importantly, closely associated with the domestic abuse protections that are provided in the Child Support Collection (Domestic Abuse) Act 2023. The shared aim of my Department and the CMS is always to strive to provide a better service for protecting victims of domestic abuse. The regulations form part of

a wider legislative package that flows from the 2023 Act that will see a focus on that important policy area. I commend the regulations to the House.

Ms Ferguson (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee for Communities supports the approval of the Child Support Fees (Revocation) Regulations (NI) 2024. The Committee considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 29 February 2024. At that meeting, Committee members were briefed by departmental officials. Following review and discussions, the Committee recommended that the regulations be approved by the Assembly. The Committee was made aware that the original regulations — the Child Support Fees (Revocation) Regulations (NI) 2023 — were first introduced in July 2023 and that revocation and re-enactment were therefore required owing to the ongoing absence of the Assembly.

The Committee understands that the regulations are technical in purpose in order to revoke and re-enact the provisions of the 2023 regulations, which amend the Child Support Fees Regulations (NI) 2014. That is essential to allow for the continuation of the collect-and-pay process to be used in a child maintenance arrangement. The primary purpose of the regulations is to revoke certain provisions of the 2014 regulations. The change is required in order to allow the continuation of the collect-and-pay process in child maintenance cases in which either parent objects to using direct pay owing to a previous criminal conviction related to domestic abuse by the other parent or a current civil court order related to domestic abuse, such as a non-molestation order. By permitting the collect-and-pay process in those circumstances, the regulations aim to protect victims of domestic abuse, thereby ensuring that they can receive child maintenance without compromising their safety. The measure will help anonymise the personal details of receiving parents while ensuring that they still receive the necessary financial support for their children.

The Committee noted that the policy primarily benefits victims of domestic abuse, who are predominantly women. The legislative change therefore significantly supports and protects a vulnerable group in our community. The Committee recognises that, although paying parents and receiving parents will still be subject to collection fees under the Child Maintenance Service, the priority is to safeguard the well-being of domestic abuse victims. Future legislation should address the collection fee issues more comprehensively.

On the subject of financial and operational implications, the Committee understands that implementing the regulations will enable the Child Maintenance Service to function without interruption, which will avoid any risks to recipients, as well as any inefficiencies that may arise from outdated legislative provisions. That continuity is vital for the well-being of the children and families who depend on such services.

The Committee understands that the regulations are a necessary legislative measure to ensure the continued effectiveness of the Child Maintenance Service. Therefore, I am content to recommend that the Assembly approve the Child Support Fees (Revocation) Regulations (NI) 2024.

Ms Mulholland: Thank you, Minister, for bringing these regulations to the Floor. I support anything that can be done to streamline the service, protect victims of domestic violence and make sure that money gets to the right place for persons with care.

I know that my colleague Ciara Ferguson mentioned the fees, and that is what, with your indulgence, Minister, I want to bring up. Someone in my constituency who is in that situation brought this up with me: why should a victim of domestic violence have to pay a 4% fee to use the collect-and-pay service in order to safeguard their welfare and identity for the protection of their safety? I encourage the Minister to look into that specific collection fee for those who are experiencing or are a victim of domestic violence, because they should not have to pay a 4% fee to protect themselves.

Mr Lyons: I will respond to Sian Mulholland's comments first. Although it is not directly affected by the regulations in front us, I am more than happy for officials to look into that issue, and I will come back to her with a response. I certainly agree with the tone and tenor of what she is saying, and I thank her for bringing it to my attention.

I am grateful for the support that we have for the regulations, which are minor but necessary. Again, I am grateful for the Chamber's support. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support Fees (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken): Ladies and gentlemen, as Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the Assembly take its ease until then.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: It is time for questions to the Executive Office. We will start with listed questions. Questions 2, 3, 6 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Central Good Relations Fund: Scope

1. **Ms Nicholl** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what plans they have to widen the scope of the central good relations fund. (AQO 540/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly (The deputy First Minister): Since 2016, we have allocated over £25 million through the central good relations fund to support more than 780 projects across all geographical areas, to the benefit of more than 260,000 people. The central good relations fund is an annual, merit-based programme designed to deliver and support projects in areas where there is a good relations need. The projects are a key aspect of building peace and reconciliation, while bringing people together through common interests such as sports and arts and improving mental health. In addition, the projects often provide opportunities for participants to build new skills, gain qualifications and employment opportunities and develop new friendships. We remain committed to the central good relations fund delivery, with a clear focus on prioritising and maximising the number of projects delivered.

Ms Nicholl: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Does she agree that Northern Ireland is now a more diverse society and therefore the good relations fund could widen to include newcomer communities, while acknowledging that lots of brilliant work is being done by the voluntary and community sector, which cannot avail itself of that funding because it is so oversubscribed?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The central good relations fund was developed to be a flexible scheme, sitting in the centre. It was never designed to replace other funding, and other funding schemes are dedicated or ring-fenced for particular purposes. The central good relations fund is probably the most flexible scheme that we have. It is founded very much in section

75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which, of course, extends not only to political and religious viewpoints but to different racial groups. When it was designed, it took into account newcomer groups and other aspects of that. There is flexibility, but it is oversubscribed, and I suspect that it will continue to be oversubscribed because of the demand for it.

Mr McHugh: Will the deputy First Minister provide an update on the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) review? Does she think there is merit in engaging with the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) recommendations?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Yes, indeed. It provides a perfect opportunity to look not just at the recommendations coming out of the FICT report but at the thinking and considerations in that substantive report. The review is well under way. The stakeholder engagement process has concluded. There has also been an extensive paper research exercise in conjunction with the universities here — Ulster University and Queen's University — to look at the developments in key policy areas. That will all be woven into the consideration of the revised strategy. It would be absolutely appropriate, given the alignment between FICT and T:BUC, for that to be fully taken into account as part of that review process.

Ms Forsythe: Will the deputy First Minister outline how the impacts of the good relations projects are measured?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It is incredibly important that we measure projects and interventions to ensure that the funding support goes into the right types of interventions in the right places. That is why we have a baseline for all of the individual projects. We monitor the improvement of relationships and attitudes within the cohort that takes part in the projects. We do that at individual project level but also across the programme by measuring all kinds of indicators, which are picked to give us a sense of how effective these things are. Yes, we monitor it continuously, and it is critical that those evaluations are woven into our consideration of the way forward when making amendments or changes to future funding schemes.

Mr O'Toole: Does the deputy First Minister agree that, 26 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, evidence of young teenagers pulling down party electoral posters to put on bonfires are not good examples of progress on good relations? Will she condemn those actions

and, further, agree that modelling a proper commitment to good relations should start with political leaders calling that out and calling out the proliferation of paramilitary flags?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Building on the good debate that we had in the Assembly, I believe that all parties are strongly united against paramilitarism and the demonstration of that through flags or in other ways. Likewise, it is a critical part of democracy that every candidate can stand and promote what they want voters to examine so as to give voters the opportunity to be as informed as they can be and to do so without intimidation. I believe that everyone across the House would be united in that approach.

Mr Speaker: I call Philip McGuigan.

Mr McGuigan: Ceist a 3. *[Translation: Question 3.]*

Mr Speaker: It is question 4, I think, Mr McGuigan.

Mr McGuigan: Sorry. Ceist a 4. *[Translation: Question 4.]*

Mother-and-baby Homes: Victims and Survivors

4. **Mr McGuigan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline when the consultation will commence with victims and survivors of mother-and-baby homes on the establishment of an inquiry and a financial redress scheme. (AQO 543/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: That will teach me a lesson to remove the material for the withdrawn questions. I did not have an answer to question 3, but I have an answer to question 4.

We are very aware of the needs of victims and survivors and remain committed to introducing legislation to the Assembly for a statutory public inquiry and redress scheme as soon as possible. There are a number of complex and sensitive issues for us to consider carefully. It is important that victims and survivors are at the centre of this, which is why a public consultation on the key policy proposals is essential. We want to meet the Victims and Survivors Consultation Forum and to seek the views of Executive colleagues before coming to a decision on some of the points. It is anticipated that the consultation will be launched in a matter of weeks. We are actively considering the proposals and will include online and face-

to-face events to make sure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to contribute during the 12-week period. This remains one of the most difficult parts of our past, but we are committed to the three core aims of truth, acknowledgement and accountability.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer to question 4 and for her commitment to introduce legislation for a statutory public inquiry and redress scheme as soon as possible. Will she commit to engaging with key groups in advance of the publication of the public consultation?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely, and, as I understand it, we are in the process of establishing those meetings, if they are not already in the diary. I always believe that it is critical to speak directly to those most impacted, not only in this area but across all the policy areas in the Department. That is what the First Minister and I will strive to do, so, yes, we will meet those groups. We believe that that is very important, and we want to continue to ensure that the process is victim-centred and works for those most impacted by the issue.

Ms Bradshaw: Deputy First Minister, you will recall from the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry that Sir Anthony Hart, in advance of publication, indicated that he was going to recommend a redress scheme. The victims and survivors had to wait about four years from that indication until the redress scheme was set up. To what degree can you commit that the redress scheme will sit alongside the public inquiry as opposed to being subsequent to it?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: This is an unusual aspect of this in the sense that the initial redress scheme — the standardised payment — will sit alongside the public inquiry. You are absolutely right, and that was done on the basis of experience and that there is an actual and real need for that support now among those most impacted. However, we are also aware that a public inquiry takes time, not least for the legislation and the foundations of that but also for building the organisation up and listening to and considering the evidence. Yes, we are fully committed to the standardised payment being released at the same time. As you know, there is a phase 2, which is a more tailored payment that will come further down the line, but it is important to meet the needs of those most impacted as soon as we can.

North/South Ministerial Council: Update

5. **Mr Kearney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work progressed under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). (AQO 544/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council resumed on 8 April with a plenary meeting in Armagh. Since then, Ministers have met to discuss a range of issues in sectoral format, including trade and business development, special EU programmes, education, agriculture, language and, just this morning, environment and aquaculture. Meetings in the remaining sectors will take place over the coming weeks and months. The focus has been on ensuring that appropriate governance is in place for the North/South bodies, including appointing CEOs and board members and agreeing business plans. The North/South Ministerial Council is also considering how the various North/South Ministerial Council sectors can contribute to addressing climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an leas-Chéad-Aire as ucht a freagra.

[Translation: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer.]

Not only is Lough Neagh the largest fresh water body on the island of Ireland, but, as you know, it provides 40% of this region's drinking water. It is also integral to the environment, biodiversity, the economy of the lough shore community and the adjoining waterways. Can you set out for us the steps that you are prepared to take and are committed to taking to build on the discussions on Lough Neagh at the last NSMC meeting?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The issues that pertain to Lough Neagh are, of course, predominantly for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Minister of Agriculture. We had those discussions in the North/South format, particularly on sharing expertise and research. We know that those are longer-term issues, so that research and collaboration will be important in looking at the medium- to longer-term interventions. Urgent action is required now. That is why I welcomed the £1.6 million that is being set aside in the Budget for urgent actions this year. Most of the Executive supported that. We all know that parts of our constituencies touch on Lough Neagh, but it is a Northern Ireland-wide issue. It

was disappointing that not all Ministers supported that £1.6 million's being allocated, but it was the right thing to do. We must all work collectively to ensure that there are immediate interventions while we continue with that research to ensure that there is the right longer-term intervention as well.

Mr Kingston: The deputy First Minister will agree that east-west relations through the East-West Council and the British-Irish Council (BIC) are just as vital as North/South relations through the North/South Ministerial Council. With the general election taking place on 4 July, will the next meeting of the British-Irish Council proceed as planned?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Yes, absolutely. The first meeting of the BIC since devolution was restored will take place at the end of next week in the Isle of Man. We will participate in that. It is critical that we continue to build on those relationships. There has been significant change in the leadership of the participants. We look forward to building those strong relationships, because the big issues like climate change, growing our economy and the way that we operate in the international space will all be helped by closer cooperation, including across this United Kingdom.

Mr Honeyford: Can the deputy First Minister update the House on work that has taken place on the new international relations strategy in May and June of this year?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Extensive work has been done on the review of the good relations strategy. Officials are finalising that strategy on the basis of the extensive consultation that they have done. We look forward to seeing those proposals coming forward.

Irish Language Commissioner: Appointment

7. **Mr Delargy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the timeline for the appointment of an Irish language commissioner. (AQO 546/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: TEO is responsible for taking forward the necessary arrangements to implement the provisions of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, including the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, the Irish language commissioner and the commissioner for the Ulster-Scots and the Ulster-British

tradition. We have given initial consideration to the appointments process and hope to make an announcement in due course regarding the necessary recruitment competitions. We will keep Members updated.

Mr Delargy: I thank the deputy First Minister for her response. It is welcome that an announcement will be made in due course on those recruitment competitions. Will the deputy First Minister detail the reason why the three bodies have not yet been established? Can she commit to setting out a more definitive timeline for the recruitment to those three bodies?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: They are public appointments. They are also statutory bodies. They are brand new. Therefore, considerable work has been done on their establishment through the legislation. Because they are public appointments regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, we have to go through a number of necessary legal steps.

There will be three different recruitment competitions, all of which will operate at the same time, with the aim of recruiting eight individuals: that is, of course, because the office of identity and cultural identity will have more than one. It is a substantial undertaking. We have considered and agreed the initial submission. We are now waiting for more details around the legalities, the contracts, the proposals, the job specs and all those different requirements that we need to look at. It is a lengthy process, but we are determined that it will proceed and proceed in a way that gets the right people for those posts.

2.15 pm

Ms Mulholland: I thank the deputy First Minister for outlining the timeline. Will she elaborate on the budget that has been set aside for this process for the 2024-25 financial year?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Public appointments processes generally take between six to 12 months, especially if they are new recruitment processes. The financial implications for that in this year's budget will come from the cost of the recruitment competition. We will not know the actual cost of the proposed offices until we look at the initial business plans for those. The business and corporate plans will come up for agreement. We have flagged it up with the Department of Finance that we currently have no budget lines to support this, but, in all likelihood, we will be in the next financial year before any expenditure will be required for the establishment of the three offices.

Mr Allister: No business cases have been presented, but the Department must have some idea of the likely cost of those bodies. What is that estimate?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: All those costs are, ultimately, scalable and dependent on how many staff there will be and on the agreement of the business and corporate plan. No body can ever do everything that it wanted to do, so it is about looking at whatever budget is available, and people being able to fit and to prioritise within that. Of course, the starting point for that will be to look at the statutory duties of each of the commissioners but also at the individual proposals that they make. It is absolutely essential that this is done on a fair and equitable basis. We look forward to seeing the plans being put forward and assessing those in accordance with the budgets that we are able to achieve for those offices, in order to ensure that they can make a meaningful and positive difference.

Mr Speaker: Declan McAleer is not in his place. I call Matthew O'Toole.

Programme for Government: Update

10. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on when a Programme for Government will be published. (AQO 549/22-27)

12. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plan to consult on a Programme for Government. (AQO 551/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 10 and 12 together.

We are working to finalise a draft Programme for Government and hope to begin consultation soon. Publication and consultation dates are under consideration due to the pre-election period. We want to hear views on the draft document from as many people as possible during the consultation period. We will deliver a consultation process that allows individuals, stakeholders and delivery partners to help shape our vision, and we will make use of in-person and online events to help that process.

Mr O'Toole: Are we to understand from the deputy First Minister that a Programme for Government is actually drafted but cannot be published yet? Secondly, in response to a question that I submitted, we established that at

least 100 meetings between Executive parties and the Civil Service took place between the Assembly election in 2022 and the restoration of these institutions in February 2024. Given that it is now more than four months since we came back, and we still have not seen the Programme for Government, what on earth were you talking about?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be well aware of the difference between political discussions and being informed of ongoing issues and the duties that we, as Ministers, have to discharge in relation to the Programme for Government. Those are two entirely different processes. The Programme for Government process commenced when we took on these roles. Of course, there is learning to take from that process. We want to make sure that this is a Programme for Government that fits within our, sadly, limited budget flexibility, but one that makes a significant difference on the key issues. We have already highlighted what some of the priorities are: childcare, tackling the big challenges in our health system and supporting families with children who have special educational needs. Those are big issues that will be prioritised, but it is right and proper that we take the time to ensure that they are properly integrated, through the roles that we hold.

Mr Mathison: Will the deputy First Minister confirm how the Programme for Government will align with the Executive's legislative programme and budget?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware of how challenging the current Budget is, and the number-one priority initially must be to try to maintain our public services to the best standard that we possibly can within the budgetary envelope. That will inevitably limit the discretion and flexibility that we may have for new policies, but we are very clear that this is not about trying to do everything and put everything into a Programme for Government. We want to prioritise, and, as I said, we have highlighted a number of those issues already, such as the lack of affordable childcare, which puts pressure on families throughout Northern Ireland. We all know about the challenges in the health service. Let us make no mistake: there is not a significant amount of money that gives flexibility for a huge range of new issues. This must be about supporting our existing public services, trying to ensure the transformation of and absolutely necessary improvement in those and continuing to build for the opportunity when further investment is available to us as an Executive for new and prioritised areas.

Communities in Transition

11. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact of the Communities in Transition (CIT) programme in west Belfast. (AQO 550/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Communities in Transition has operated across eight designated areas since 2019. Our officials are carrying out a comprehensive review of phases 1 and 2 of the programme to inform planning and delivery of any future phase beyond March 2025, should funding become available. As part of that, consideration will be given to refreshing the initial research that identified the current eight CIT areas.

On the impact of CIT in west Belfast since 2019, there has been the investment of approximately £3.7 million of projects delivered in the area, including health and well-being, community safety, employability, ex-prisoner support and restorative practice. From research, it is clear that those local initiatives continue to be at the forefront of tackling a range of problems in west Belfast.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an leas-Chéad-Aire as ucht a freagra. *[Translation: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer.]* Will she outline the plans for Communities in Transition phase 3?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The programme continues to be rolled out in this phase. Throughout this phase, we will evaluate those projects to ensure that we are pulling forward the best practice. The programme has had a significant positive impact across the communities where those projects have been rolled out. It is important to try to mainstream as much of that as possible and to try to ensure the continuation of some of that support. We have seen a significant number of participants in those areas, which has been very positive. I think that we are seeing increases in community resilience. We are seeing a very significant reduction in paramilitary-style attacks. That is all very positive, and we need to build on it moving forward.

Mr Brett: The deputy First Minister recently attended an event that I hosted here at Parliament Buildings celebrating the role of young people across North Belfast and Newtownabbey who took part in the CIT programme. Will the deputy First Minister join me in congratulating Northern Ireland Alternatives for the excellent work that it

continues to do in delivering for the communities most in need in my constituency?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for his question. Absolutely. Northern Ireland Alternatives does fantastic work in the local community and has done so for some considerable time. In this role, I have had the opportunity to go along and see some of its important work and its celebration events. Undoubtedly, over many years, NI Alternatives has impacted on thousands and thousands of lives across the community, particularly in North Belfast but also beyond. It is a delivery partner for the Executive Office that we are very proud to have and on which we have relied for many years to deliver these programmes in such an effective way across communities, really changing lives for the better.

Mr McMurray: What learning will be applied from the work of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition to moving forward with transition?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The commission's report is a substantive one. It contains significant analysis that was based on an extensive consultation process with stakeholders from throughout the community. While the recommendations were not all fully agreed by the commission, as a piece of work, the report is hugely valuable. That should inform the work of Together: Building a United Community and some of the actions that come out of it, but you are absolutely right that it is also a useful piece of work for informing Communities in Transition, because we know that some of the difficult issues that communities still face are those that have an implication from the legacy of the past and have connections to some of the paramilitarism of the past. I absolutely believe that it will be an important piece of work for evaluating and reviewing the way forward.

Mr Durkan: Before expanding, extending or renewing the programme, are you convinced that an appropriate appraisal has been, or will be, made of its impact on transitioning communities away from paramilitarism for good?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Yes, absolutely. For some considerable time, the Department has ensured that we evaluate projects, and for good reason: if we do not measure the impact of these programmes and projects, we do not know what impact they are having. Initially, we set baselines around attitudes and other indicators at individual project level and programme level. That is important. If a project is not working, it

should not be funded to continue. If a project in a particular area or context does work, we need to know that so that we can roll it out elsewhere. Fundamentally, we are about finding the things that work and changing the outcomes and objectives of those types of projects for the better.

General Election: Executive Capacity

13. **Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have introduced measures to ensure that the Executive will be working to its maximum capacity during the Westminster election campaign. (AQO 552/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Executive Committee will continue to meet during the pre-election period. The business of Departments will also continue as normal, subject only to any changes that are considered to be necessary to adhere to the pre-election guidance. Decisions on specific activities or items of business are a matter for each Minister.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her answer. It was good to see that you were at the Armagh Show on Saturday, deputy First Minister, albeit I did not see you as I was too busy running around after a wee fella in the fairground. What is the deputy First Minister's assessment of the requirement for Ministers to step down whilst campaigning to secure election to other legislatures?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Guidance has been published and is available online for everybody to take a look at. Of course, the devolved legislatures are not particularly impacted on by the period of purdah, but there are implications for Ministers in relation to announcements and their approach. It is a matter for each Minister, in accordance with that guidance. It is clear, however, that we need to be careful about some of the issues and how we approach them.

Public Service Transformation

14. **Mr Tennyson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their role in driving public service transformation across the Executive. (AQO 553/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: We have made the transformation of public services a key priority for the Executive. Many sectors need investment and reform in order to ensure equitable access to the high-quality services that our citizens expect and make the public

finances sustainable. The Executive have agreed an approach proposed by the Finance Minister for making quick progress on the use of £235 million of ring-fenced funding that is available for transformation. The Finance Minister has established an interim public-sector transformation board that will make recommendations in relation to projects that could be supported by that funding.

Mr Tennyson: Does the deputy First Minister agree that tackling the cost of division in our society and our services should be a priority for all Ministers as part of a programme for public service transformation, not least to ensure more efficient and effective outcomes, and also as a means of integration and reconciliation in our community?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It is important that all those issues are considered. Of course, in the roll-out of any public services, we have a shared objective and seek the same outcome, which is to ensure that those public services work for those who need them when they need them. We listen all the time to those who are trying to use services across education, health and our public services, so we know that those public services are under pressure. The avoidance of duplication is important, as is finding the right interventions of transformation to ensure that we can do more with the budget that we have, continue to build on the positive work that is being done in our public sector and improve our public services, including those within the health sector.

TEO: Permanent Secretary

15. **Ms Egan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give an update on the appointment of a permanent secretary to the Executive Office. (AQO 554/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The head of the Civil Service launched an external recruitment exercise to fill vacancies in two permanent secretary roles in December 2023. The competition produced two successful candidates. One of the successful candidates, Mr Ian Snowden, was appointed to the Department for the Economy post on 28 March 2024.

The Executive Office post remains vacant, however. The next step is that the TEO permanent secretary role will be filled on an interim basis through an internal temporary promotion opportunity.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: We now move to topical questions.

Euro 2028: Casement Park

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that, this Friday, the first match of the European Football Championship 2024 will take place in the Allianz Arena, whether it would not be wonderful if we could be sure that the 2028 championship will happen at Casement Park in Belfast; whether they support that happening; and, more importantly, to outline what specific conversations they have had with the UK Government to ensure that the funding required is delivered to make that tournament happen in Belfast. (AQT 361/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware of how difficult the current fiscal situation and the Budget are for Northern Ireland. It is therefore a matter for the UK Government in ongoing discussions, and I know that a number of Ministers and others have been making representations to that end.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I know how difficult the fiscal position is. That is why I asked you what representations your office — the head of devolved government here, led by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — has made to the UK Government. Earlier, Mr Kingston asked you about the importance of the East-West Council and the British-Irish Council. Have you used those forums or any other route to press for funding to ensure that the Euros come to Belfast and that Casement Park is built in time?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member will be aware that we have been pressing the UK Government on a range of issues pertaining to the Budget. The Northern Ireland Budget is incredibly difficult. We know its impact, not least on our health system and on waiting lists, and the associated pressures that it causes. We also know the pressures on our education system. This is not a single-issue issue but an issue to do with core public services that people need, such as health, education, roads and investment. Organisations are crying out for funding, and I have certainly not been behind the door in making strong representations to the UK Government. We are prepared to step up and do transformation, but we also need a Budget from the UK Government that will enable us to do that in order to deliver core

public services that will impact positively on everyone throughout Northern Ireland.

Programme for Government: Executive Priorities

T2. **Mr Allen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm the Executive's priorities and whether a Programme for Government will robustly measure those priorities. (AQT 362/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. The Member will be aware that we have pushed forward with an outcomes-focused Programme for Government. Its purpose is to see the bigger picture when it comes to our objectives of having public services that deliver for people, of ensuring that what we do grows our economy and of providing a brighter, better future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

How do we do that? We must do it through the actions that we take as an Executive and in Departments. As I said earlier, we also need to ensure that what we do works, and we will know that it works only if we measure interventions. There will absolutely be a framework of indicators. Those indicators will be baselined and measured throughout the lifetime of the Programme for Government to inform us moving forward. That plays an important part and will be fully integrated into our Programme for Government.

Mr Allen: Thank you, deputy First Minister, for that answer. I was at an event this morning in Clifton House on hidden homelessness. There is deep concern among housing providers and those involved in housing over the funding that is to be made available to the social housing development programme and the ability of the Executive to take a truly cross-departmental approach to tackling the housing crisis that is gripping Northern Ireland. Will the deputy First Minister outline how the Executive will truly get to grips with that crisis?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Member's question highlights once again how difficult our Budget is. The Budget for this year was divided up, with approximately 50% for the Department of Health, 30% for the Department of Education and 10% for the Department of Justice. That left just 10% to be divided among the other Departments, including the Department for Communities, which takes the lead on housing.

Housing is an issue of significant concern. To some extent, we are behind some other jurisdictions on tackling the housing crisis. The

Member will know from speaking to those at the event this morning — we all know from speaking to people throughout Northern Ireland and in our constituencies — that the housing crisis is already putting pressure on families. We need more social and affordable housing. We must make sure that young families and people in Northern Ireland can get on to the housing ladder and get a home. We need to take action on the issue now. It is, unfortunately, a product of the difficult Budget position, but I am acutely aware of the pressures. We will continue to seek that additional resource to ensure that we can build what we need to build.

Good Economic News

T3. **Ms Sheerin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the recent Ulster Bank survey that showed the sharpest rise in orders for the first time in two years, to join her in welcoming that good news, which indicates that our local economy and, in particular, our private sector are growing. (AQT 363/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Yes. It is certainly a positive indication, but we know how difficult it is. We can welcome that good news, and the First Minister and I, since taking up our roles, have said many times that we want to prioritise the prosperity agenda. We need our economy to grow, and we need to do whatever we can, as joint leaders of the Executive but also working with our Ministers, to ensure that we have the right interventions and context to allow our economy to grow. It would be wrong for me not to recognise that the inflationary rises and other cost rises are difficult for small to medium-sized businesses, which are battling through a challenging situation. Again, I want to send the message that we are here to support those businesses, listen to them and try to ensure that we grow our economy.

Ms Sheerin: In that context, do you agree that it is really important for Invest NI and the Executive to maximise and focus on the benefits and opportunities that come from dual market access?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: It would be wrong to say "focus", because we know that our economy is made up of many different elements. Of course, some aspects will be impacted by dual market access, particularly the export and manufacturing of goods. We are largely a small to medium-sized business economy. Many of those businesses are indigenous and trade only within Northern Ireland. We must show support for those businesses. They are the backbone of

our economy, and we want to support them. Likewise, foreign direct investment is so important and essential. The biggest growth in that area has been in the services industry, which is not impacted by dual market access. It is important that we move forward in parallel with a range of those key aspects of our economy. It is only by doing so that we will grow the economy and ensure that we achieve the prosperity agenda.

Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition

T4. **Mr Mathison** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the actions that are being taken to progress the recommendations of the 2021 report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. (AQT 364/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As I indicated in my answer to a previous question, we had a good debate in the Assembly on that issue. A huge amount of important and useful work has been done by the commission. There is an opportune time for the evaluation and review, for example, of Together: Building a United Community to ensure that that learning and some of the recommendations are fully taken into account in that process.

Mr Mathison: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Given the debate that she referenced, in which the motion that called for a consultation on the issue of flying flags was passed, what specific work has been undertaken to progress that consultation?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As I indicated earlier, we are focused on the review of T:BUC at the moment. There have been hugely positive indications of the impact of T:BUC. Of course, it is largely focused on good relations between people throughout Northern Ireland. Of course, the work of the FICT commission is relevant to that. Where there are challenges, it is often, as I indicated, because of some of the elements of our disputed and contested history. It is a good opportunity for us to fully take that into account and see whether we can find a way forward.

South Belfast: Recent Hate Crime

T5. **Ms Nicholl** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, having noted that, last week, a mother and her daughter made the news because of a racial hate crime in her constituency, with the daughter being left so terrified that she now does not leave the house

unless going to school, to join her in condemning all racist hate crimes and making it clear that there is no place for that behaviour in society. (AQT 365/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I am sure that everyone in the House will agree that there is no space whatever for hate crimes based on any characteristic, including race. We must all stand united against such things. People must be able to live their lives free from harassment and hate, no matter where they are in Northern Ireland.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, deputy First Minister. What reassurances can you and your office give to people who are living in fear that the racial equality strategy will be robust, co-designed, co-delivered and brought to the House soon?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: The Executive Office led the way on co-production and co-design in a number of our processes, not least the first Together: Building a United Community consultation. We adopted a very detailed stakeholder co-production approach for that. It was, I think, the first time that any Department had done such a thing. Of course, it has evolved and improved since then, and I am glad to see it being mainstreamed.

The Member is absolutely right that the racial equality strategy must be effective. To be effective, it must be co-designed and must work; otherwise, what is the point of doing it? We want it to be effective. We want it to work and to support everybody whom it needs to support.

Mr Speaker: Mr McAleer is not in his place. I call Áine Murphy.

European Athletics Championships: Ciara Mageean

T8. **Ms Á Murphy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to join her in congratulating Ciara Mageean on her fantastic achievement in winning her gold medal, which many in the Chamber will have seen last night. (AQT 368/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. It was fantastic, and it was good to see the really positive reception to it. So many of our young athletes from Northern Ireland are shining on the international stage. That drives us to say that we must do even more to support them, not least with their training but on their journey right

through. They are fantastic ambassadors for sport, for young people and, indeed, for Northern Ireland.

Ms Á Murphy: Go raibh maith agat [*Translation: Thank you*]. I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Does she agree that it should be an inspiration for young people, especially girls and young women, to participate in sport?

Mrs Little-Pengelly: Absolutely. I am passionate about that. We know that many young girls fall out of playing sport at a relatively young age, whereas boys and men often continue to play team sports, in particular, throughout their teenage years but also into their twenties and beyond. We need to support more of that, to ensure that our young girls continue to participate in sport not just at the elite level but at every level. Of course, it is fantastic to see our young athletes competing at the elite level as well. As I said, we know that additional support is required for those who are exceptional in order to allow them to shine, and we need to look at that.

Vaccine Injured and Bereaved

T9. **Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to send a signal today that they acknowledge the vaccine injured and bereaved community, who have been waiting since February for a diary date for their office to meet them, and acknowledge the pain and suffering that those people go through daily. (AQT 369/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: There is no doubt that there are people who were impacted and injured. Those people still endure a huge amount of pain and a significant impact on their lives. I am pleased to say that the First Minister and I have jointly agreed to meet the vaccine-injured. I say this genuinely: we are striving to do that as soon as we can. We are working to ensure that a meeting can be put into the diary as soon as possible. We know that there is a keenness to meet. As I said earlier, nothing beats speaking to people directly about their experiences. That is why we have been keen to do so. That is what we do for much of our week, so, absolutely, we will do that.

Mr Frew: I thank the deputy First Minister for that acknowledgement. It means a lot, and it will mean a lot to the people who have been injured and bereaved. VIBS-NI, the support group that helps people who have been vaccine-injured, is planning a protest on the steps of Stormont on Tuesday 2 July. That may be a good date,

Minister, for you and the "First Minister for all" to meet those people.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As I said, we will continue to strive to get a diary date. If we can have a date in the diary earlier rather than later, I will be happy to do that. I know that there is a keenness to have that meeting as soon as possible, but, if we cannot do it before that date, we will try to do so on that day.

Programme for Government

T10. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give an update on Programme for Government preparations and commit that it will be debated in the Chamber and published for public consultation before summer recess. (AQT 370/22-27)

Mrs Little-Pengelly: As indicated, the election being called has an impact on the guidance on when we can publish and commence our consultation.

It is something that, last week, I took the opportunity to mention to the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales. They are in a similar position with their programmes for government in that they have reasonably well-developed programmes but will have to pause publication of them until after the election period. That gives us an opportunity however, as work will go on in the coming weeks, to continue to look at the issues.

2.45 pm

It is important to say that whatever is published as the Programme for Government will not be the final version. It will be published for consultation. We are acutely aware of wanting to hear from people about their views on the issues. We want to get that out for consultation as soon as possible. Absolutely, that process should be commenced with a debate in the Assembly if at all possible — I believe that it will be — but the key thing will be to get out on the ground throughout every part and place of Northern Ireland to ensure that the maximum number of people respond to the consultation and that we are informed on the way forward.

Mr Speaker: That brings to a conclusion questions to the deputy First Minister. Congratulations, deputy First Minister. You are the first Minister to have got through all your questions, the topical and the main set of questions.

Health

Mr Speaker: We now move to questions to the Minister of Health. It is your first day; the standard has been set.

Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope to rise to the challenge.

Children's Social Care Services: Independent Review

1. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the report of the independent review of children's social care services in Northern Ireland. (AQO 555/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her question. The report of the independent review of children's social care services was published in June of last year. It was followed by a public consultation on the review recommendations. That ran for 12 weeks from September to December 2023. My officials are developing advice based on analysis of the responses to the public consultation. Subject to the final outcome of the consultation and other factors, including the availability of budget, of course, and the views of other Ministers, where relevant because of cross-cutting issues, the intention is to implement as many recommendations as possible as quickly as possible. A number of the recommendations will be taken forward, as appropriate, through the children's social care services reform programme.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Health Minister. Last week, I spoke to a senior social worker in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. She said that she feels under a lot of pressure and almost as though she is part of a second-class workforce. What short-term measures are you taking to better support and bolster the social work community?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her follow-up question. I accept that working in children's social care services requires fully staffed, well-motivated and well-managed teams of social workers and, indeed, other staff. Work to identify measures to address the issues in the social care workforce is ongoing under the workforce review implementation board and the children's social care services strategic reform programme. Under the reform programme, a social care workforce work stream has been established. An exercise to scope the existing

social care workforce and work on a social care workforce strategy have also commenced.

A number of actions aimed at stabilising the social work workforce have already been taken. They include fast-tracking the employment of newly qualified social workers and the cessation of recruitment of social workers through recruitment agencies. Work on the development of a 10-year plan for pathways into social work is well advanced. That plan aims to maximise attraction into the social work profession, outline the most efficient recruitment processes and describe effective retention strategies to maintain social workers in essential health and social care services. Funding has been secured to commission an additional 40 social work training places, which are expected to commence in September of this year.

Ms Kimmins: The Minister will be aware that, last week, Professor Ray Jones briefed the Health Committee on his review. He expressed concern and frustration about the pace of the implementation of the review's recommendations. Will the Minister assure us that he will take the decisions needed to move this on as quickly as possible before more children end up in care when that could have been avoided?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Committee Chair for her comments and her question. I was aware that Professor Jones was at the Committee last Thursday. He was good enough, on his way back to the airport, to drive by Castle Buildings, and I was able to have a brief introductory conversation with him. I woke up this morning to find a very encouraging email from the professor. I very much look forward to engaging with him in the immediate future.

The issues are really important, and some of the recommendations are cross-cutting and, to my mind, potentially repercussive. I want to give due consideration not just to what is proposed and the impact on children's services but to how it might impact on other areas. For example, his recommendation for an arm's-length body (ALB) is potentially repercussive. I am not saying that that is a bad thing; I am just saying that we need to be aware of what those repercussions may be, and that will mean having a discussion with Executive colleagues.

Mr McGrath: The best involvement that children can have with social services is no involvement because it is not required. When we asked Professor Jones that question last week, he cited things such as the two-child

benefit cap and the lack of a poverty strategy as contributors to the conditions that mean that children will require involvement with social services. What work is the Minister doing with Executive colleagues to try to prevent poverty and enable children to stay away from social services?

Mr Nesbitt: The Member will be aware that I am fewer than two weeks in post. There is yet to be an Executive meeting during my time as the Health Minister, although I hope that that will cease to be the case on Thursday.

I have identified some of the areas that I consider to be the most difficult or challenging in Health and Social Care (HSC). I want to concentrate on those areas over the next three years, and they include waiting lists, cancer, mental health and health inequalities. We need to see the Executive take cross-cutting actions on health inequalities, and that will address where the Member is directing me.

COVID Certification Scheme: Cost

3. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Health to outline the total cost of the COVID certification scheme in Northern Ireland. (AQO 557/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question. The Health and Social Care COVID certification scheme was introduced at the start of July 2021. It was to enable Northern Ireland's citizens who wished to undertake international travel to satisfy the requirements of the destination countries. Without the service, citizens would have been unable to avoid restrictions such as a 10-day quarantine on arrival that other countries imposed. The service closed to new applications on 19 December 2023, when the last remaining countries withdrew their requirements for vaccination certification. Between —.

Mr Speaker: Mr Frew. Sorry, Minister.

Mr Nesbitt: Between July 2021 and December 2023, the COVID certification scheme in Northern Ireland cost a total of £21.5 million. The funding covered the creation and use of a Civil Service identity authentication service; the creation and maintenance of an internationally trusted mobile app and paper certificates; and the provision of a helpline to assist those experiencing difficulties with the automated process and to assist in obtaining secure paper certificates, as well as further guidance.

Had the service not been available, patients would have inundated GPs and vaccination

centres with requests for documentation to allow them to undertake international travel. In November 2021, the Executive also agreed restrictions on access to a range of venues. Northern Ireland's citizens were able to use the COVID certification app to meet the criteria for access. The creation and maintenance of the service helped to allow continued access to a range of businesses during the pandemic.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the fact that the vaccine certification scheme was used to discriminate against people and coerce them to take a medicine that could cause serious side effects, making them very sick, and that some people lost family due to vaccine injury, will the Health Minister acknowledge that some people's lives have been destroyed? Will he commit to meeting the vaccine-injured and bereaved community, something that his predecessor refused to do?

Mr Nesbitt: I acknowledge the Member's long-standing interest in those issues. I have no difficulty in saying that I will meet members of that group. It is very important for me to understand their viewpoint, but it is also important for the Member to understand that that was, effectively, an unprecedented time for the devolved Administration and that decisions were made at pace. I regret utterly and absolutely any damage that a vaccination programme caused to any citizen in this country. That is the last thing that any Member would want. However, I encourage the Member to understand that a balance had to be struck. He asked about the cost of the certification scheme. You have to balance the cost of that against the almost certain chaos that not introducing such a scheme would have caused.

Mr McMurray: Will the Minister provide an update on progress towards the introduction of the public health Bill?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question. I have been discussing the public health Bill in my early days. We are currently governed by an Act dating from 1967. It seems to me that that Act is all well and good if the issue is noted on the face of the Bill, but that, if it is not, there is a problem. I am in the early stages of taking briefings, with colleagues, about introducing a new Bill that will, effectively, cover all hazards, so that we can be much more fleet of foot. That will, obviously, require cross-departmental agreement at Executive level. I am keen that any regulations that may be contained in such a Bill will be subject to affirmative action — in other words, the

Assembly would very much have its place in making the final decisions.

Soft Drinks Industry Levy

4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health whether he will engage with the Minister of Finance to ring-fence funding, generated by the soft drinks industry levy, to address health-related conditions, including obesity and type 2 diabetes. (AQO 558/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member. The soft drinks industry levy is a UK-wide tariff that applies to drinks that contain added sugar. It seeks to contribute to strategies to reduce obesity by reducing or removing added sugar from soft drinks and encouraging producers and importers to reformulate their products to reduce the sugar content and/or portion sizes of added-sugar drinks. Given the nature of the market, and the fact that the levy applies to producers and importers, the relevant businesses report once for all receipts raised across the UK. Therefore, HMRC does not report receipts below the UK-wide level, or regionally. However, in 2022-23, the levy raised £355 million across the UK. Using population measure, and assuming that the production of soft drinks is representative across the UK, we could estimate that £10.6 million was raised in Northern Ireland in the 2022-23 financial year. The levy is not formally linked by the UK Government to any specific spending, so it is not known how much the Executive receive as a result of the levy. My Department previously explored the potential to use funds equivalent to those likely to have been raised through the levy in Northern Ireland for tackling obesity and other public health-related issues, but, given that there was no budget line, that did not prove to be possible. It is still my preference that the revenue raised through the levy be targeted at obesity-related purposes. My Department recently consulted on a new co-produced obesity strategy framework, Healthy Futures. The public consultation commenced on 24 November 2023 and closed on 1 March of this year. A consultation summary report is being developed. The Department will give further consideration to the potential to use such resources as the soft drinks industry levy, and the mechanisms to do so, as work on the new strategic framework progresses.

Mr Durkan: I congratulate the Minister and wish him well on his elevation from frying pan to fire. I do not doubt his desire to do things differently, if it means improving outcomes for people, primarily, but also the public purse. In that vein, does the Minister concur that

increased targeted spend on prevention and early intervention will dramatically reduce suffering from, and spend on, conditions associated with obesity?

Mr Nesbitt: I absolutely agree with the Member. Take, for example, treatments for obesity and the cost of treatments for obesity. I had my Department give further consideration to the potential to use such resources as this levy, and the mechanisms to do so, through the development of priorities and actions arising from the strategic framework. Officials are in contact with the Department of Finance. A consultation summary report will be published soon.

I agree with the Member: this is a critical issue. Public health is so important. We spend a lot on it, but we think about the savings. I believe very much in data as a way forward, but I am also conscious that all data ultimately equates to human beings, and it is the human cost of things such as obesity that we have to tackle.

3.00 pm

Ms Brownlee: I welcome the Minister to his new position. Minister, will you provide an update on funding for the commissioning of hybrid closed-loop technology for people with type 1 diabetes, especially in light of the positive announcement by the Scottish Government?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her question. I am not entirely sure how it relates to the original question. I can say, however, that the strategic planning and performance group has received formal notification of endorsement from the Department of Health. That followed the review of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) final guidance on hybrid closed-loop systems for managing blood glucose levels in type 1 diabetes, which was published in December 2023. Work is being undertaken to understand the implications of that decision for overall provision, consideration of priority groups, system costs, workforce and the communication requirements to enable and support. That will inform final decision-making and commissioning arrangements for Northern Ireland.

The Member may be interested to note that NHS England has developed a phased implementation strategy in response to the guidance. Owing to the scale and scope of the recommendation, implementation will be over a five-year period, and it will include a process of

prioritisation for eligibility, in line with NICE guidelines.

Significant additional investment will be required to support the implementation of the hybrid closed-loop system for people living with type 1 diabetes who would be eligible. The Northern Ireland Diabetics Network will communicate with all stakeholders following decision-making in relation to the hybrid closed-loop system and its implementation in Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister provide an insight into what is behind the significant growth in the number of people who live with type 2 diabetes?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question. A variety of factors impacts on the growth of type 2 diabetes. We all need to be focused on it because its implications for not only the health of individuals and communities but the resourcing and funding of the health service cannot be overestimated. Factors include age and ethnicity. Above all, however, there are manageable issues, and the biggest of all, of course, is diet. One of the issues that I have been discussing with colleagues and officials in the Department of Health — the discussion is at an early stage and relates to my desire to bring forward an initiative on health inequalities — is diet and the role that dieticians can play if we are to get ourselves out of the building, as we call GP surgeries and hospitals, and take services into the community.

Abortion Data

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health to outline why data is not published in relation to abortions in Northern Ireland, similar to the statistics published for England and Wales. (AQO 559/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question. The Department will publish comprehensive data relating to abortions in Northern Ireland on 20 June this year. It will cover the three-year period from the introduction of the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations on 31 March 2020 to 31 March 2023.

My understanding is that the Department's annual publications had under-reported the number of abortions in Northern Ireland since the law was changed in 2020. That is recognised, and, although the accurate totals have been disclosed regularly through Assembly questions for written answer, I assure

the Member that they will be corrected in the forthcoming publication for each of the three reporting years.

The issue arose because the methodology in place prior to the law change was set up to capture only those procedures involving hospital admissions. However, since the introduction of the 2020 abortion regulations, the majority of abortions in Northern Ireland are early medical abortions and take place in an outpatient setting.

Following an instruction from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to the Department on 2 December 2022 to formally commission abortion services, a process has been under way to verify up-to-date statistics from the date of the law change in Northern Ireland. Those are the statistics that will be published later this month.

Mr Allister: It is concerning to hear about under-reporting, considering 8,000 have been reported in the figures already. Will the Minister assure me that we will now see the sort of data that we see from England and Wales, which indicates the age of the mother and the medical cause? England and Wales publish whether it is related to Down's syndrome, spina bifida or something else. Will all of those things now appear? It is important that people know how many babies with spina bifida or Down's syndrome are being killed in the womb.

Mr Nesbitt: I assure the Member that, as is the case with all abortion publications in England, Wales and Scotland, the forthcoming publication for abortions in Northern Ireland will provide a breakdown of abortions by age; by health and social care trust; by the statutory grounds for abortion, which will be based on the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020; by gestation; and by method of abortion.

Ms Egan: Minister, do you have plans to bring abortion services in Northern Ireland into line with those in England, Scotland and Wales by fulfilling regulation 8 of the Abortion (No. 2) Regulations 2020 regarding telemedicine?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her question. Unfortunately, as I said, being just under two weeks into the role, there are some areas that I have not yet had the opportunity to have a detailed briefing on from senior officials in the Department of Health or, indeed, from arm's-length bodies, some of the royal colleges or the British Medical Association. I am not in a position to make a definitive statement to the Member on that issue, but she has put it on my

radar. I will consult, reflect and decide in due course.

Health Service Transformation Plans

6. **Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister of Health when will he bring forward plans for transformation of the health service. (AQO 560/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her question. The reform of our Health and Social Care service is one of my key concerns. I made it clear in my opening statement last Monday that it was an area that I would be focusing on along with health inequalities, cancer, mental health and waiting lists. There is an existing overarching plan for reforming our health service: the 'Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together' report. That was launched in 2016 as the Department's 10-year plan in response to the recommendations of the Bengoa report, 'Systems, Not Structures: Changing Health and Social Care'. Of course, we need to continue to review and refine that 10-year Delivering Together plan.

Progress has been made across a broad range of critical areas, including social care, mental health, acute care, elective care and primary care. For example, in primary care, we have rolled out the multidisciplinary team model, which is not only providing a better service for patients but helping to stabilise GP practices. In elective care, we have established day procedure centres at the Lagan Valley and Omagh hospitals and overnight stay centres at the Mater Hospital, Daisy Hill Hospital and the South West Acute Hospital. That is beginning to deliver some welcome results: the latest inpatient and day case stats show a reduction for the seventh successive quarter, which is the longest sustained reduction since at least 2008. I offer that as a fact, not to show complacency.

There are important examples of reform in action. Reform continues to be progressed through co-production and collaborative working with a wide range of stakeholders. My Department has published a number of Delivering Together update reports, highlighting the progress that has been made on various reform projects. The Delivering Together 2024 progress report, which summaries all the current Health and Social Care reform strategies and plans, will shortly be available for publication.

Mrs Dodds: It is unfortunate that, at a time when we know that the health service needs significant reform in order to provide better

outcomes for patients, we have had a history of what has happened since 2016 from the Minister. There are many points from your answer, Minister, that I could pick up on, but I will pick up on one: multidisciplinary teams were set up —

Mr Speaker: Question, please.

Mrs Dodds: — initially as a consequence of money from the DUP confidence-and-supply agreement. So far, only 30% —

Mr Speaker: May we have a question, please, Mrs Dodds?

Mrs Dodds: — of GP practices have them, and only 8% have full multidisciplinary services. When will you rectify that, and do you acknowledge that doing so is fundamental to transformation?

Mr Nesbitt: The irony is not lost on me that the Member criticises me for giving a history of events in 2016 but then gives the House a history of her party's confidence-and-supply arrangements.

I repeat that the multidisciplinary teams are, on an evidence base, working well and delivering what I want. Everything that I focus on is for better outcomes, which the MDTs are delivering. The roll-out was a multi-year plan. Unfortunately, under the current Budget, that plan will not be speeded up but will slow down.

I look forward to meeting Executive colleagues to try to impress on them some of the issues that are related to the current Department of Health budget and seeing what we can do. I want to do what I can with the money that we have. It is a lot of money, but the pressures remain. One of the pressures is the inability to deliver the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams in as timely a manner as I would wish.

Mrs Dillon: The previous Minister gave assurances that every inch of the hospitals and buildings that we have is needed. Minister, can you give us assurances that you will bring staff and the community with you when you look at where services will be delivered? We need all the hospitals, but we also need to know where the services will be.

Mr Nesbitt: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member. As my predecessor said, we need every square metre, or was it square inch? I am not sure whether he was being European, but we need every "amount" that we have in those buildings. What I want to do, however, is put a

focus on the people who populate them. As I said last Monday, the two primary reasons that we have a health service are to keep the healthy healthy and to cure the sick. No matter how much resource we have to keep people healthy, we will find that people become sick and will still need to go to places where they will find specialists who are dedicated to curing whatever ailment they present with.

Yes, we will look at our entire estate of hospitals. I hope, sooner rather than later, to speak to the House about how we better view each hospital as part of a network rather than as an institution operating in isolation. Not every hospital will provide every service. Again, as I said last Monday, if I were to need a procedure and the choice was between going to the nearest facility, where the procedure is done, say, once a week, and travelling a bit further to somewhere where it is done seven times a day, five days a week, I know which one I would choose. It is a question of reorganising and reforming; it is not a question of saying, "I am closing a hospital". I have no intention, over the next three years, of going anywhere near the idea of closing a hospital or reducing that square metreage or square yardage.

Mr Donnelly: The Minister mentioned his commitment to the Bengoa report. We all know that, were it not for the repeated shutdowns of this place, we would be eight years into a 10-year programme of reform of the health service. Will the Minister outline his priorities for transformation over the remainder of the mandate?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Committee for his question. What we perhaps need, given that we are so far away from the publication of the Bengoa report, is to get back to day zero and reboot. We should almost return to factory settings, to use that cliché. I have been discussing with senior officials in the Department how we might reboot. It seems to me that Bengoa has perhaps been misinterpreted in part of the public consciousness and is now viewed as some sort of road map or blueprint for how we get from where we are to the best 21st-century health and social care service that we can devise. Of course, it was not that; it was a set of principles. We could, perhaps, call it a "framework". It is up to us and to stakeholders to populate that framework and make it work in the best possible way.

I am thinking about it, and I hope to be able to return to the House, if not before recess, certainly early in the autumn, with an idea of

how we go about rebooting Bengoa and actually delivering it in a practical sense and delivering the principles in a real-time sense.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Time has lapsed for listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

Dementia: Statistics

T1. Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to publish data on the number of people in each trust area who are living with the various types of dementia. (AQT 371/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question. Dementia is an issue that is so broad and impacts so deeply on so many people. I am sure that the Member popped in to the Parkinson's UK event earlier today in the Long Gallery. I know that his colleague sitting behind him, Mr McGlone, was there. If I may divert for a second, I put on record, as I did upstairs, my thanks to the thousands and thousands of carers, particularly unpaid carers, who provide such fantastic work to us.

In breaking down numbers across the various geographic health trusts, I am not sure whether that has been done, to be frank with the Member. I will certainly make it my business to find out. As I have said previously, data is absolutely key to maximising the resources and the capacity of the health and social care system to deliver for patients.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister. There are new modifying therapies awaiting approval, and some of them are very beneficial to those with an early stage of Alzheimer's, but not other forms. Therefore, having that data and understanding that data is critical to early intervention, which will help people to live with the condition for longer. Does the Minister agree that getting that early diagnosis is crucial to helping people?

Mr Nesbitt: I certainly do. I think that, first of all, awareness and education and then early detection and prevention — these things all go together. Social prescribing is something that is relatively new in health and social care, and that is very important. I do puzzles and crosswords to try to keep myself mentally fit. My dear late mother, when she was in her eighties, liked to do things like Wordle. In fact, when the Glider came on stream in east Belfast, she used to get the Glider into town to go for a cup

of coffee. She felt that it kept her active and mentally stimulated. There are a lot of things besides pills and tablets that we have to look at to address these issues — I was going to say "tackle these issues", but it is not going to go away. It is a question of handling it to the best effect. Yes: awareness, education and early detection are absolutely critical.

Bowel Cancer: Screening Age

T2. **Ms Nicholl** asked the Minister of Health, after wishing him well in his new role, whether he has any plans to reduce the bowel cancer screening age to 50, in line with the UK National Screening Committee's recommendations, on the back of the 'Routes to Diagnosis' report, which showed that 28% of bowel cancers, of which half are diagnosed as stage 4, are detected in emergency settings and showed a significant drop in emergency presentation among the screening population. (AQT 372/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member. Perhaps we should be swapping places for this one, because you have a level of detail that I am afraid that I cannot match on my first day of topical questions. However, cancer is one of the four areas that I identified, as well as mental health, waiting lists and health inequalities, as something that I really want to focus on in the remaining three years of the mandate.

In being the Minister and having a leadership role, it is very important to surround yourself with people who know the things that you do not. Clearly, for example, you have expertise and an interest in this particular area, which I will take back to the relevant staff in the Department of Health, the arm's-length bodies and other stakeholders, as required. I will look at it and promise that, once again, I will study it, reflect on it, make a decision and get back to you in due course.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. If you are to engage with officials, I urge you to engage with people who are campaigning about bowel cancer. They are the ones with the expertise, not me, and they will be happy to brief you further.

Mr Nesbitt: I take the point.

Mental Health: Community and Voluntary Sector Referrals

T3. **Ms Forsythe** asked the Minister of Health to consider a follow-up commitment to access

and audit information relating to the mental health crisis in Northern Ireland, in light of the answer she received last week to a question for written answer, which asked whether, in the face of that crisis, he could detail the number of patients who were referred directly to voluntary and community sector organisations, albeit she was told that, when asked, the health and social care trusts stated that the information was not available. (AQT 373/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member. I am disappointed that she is not satisfied with the response that she got. As a broad point, when you include the voluntary and community sector and charities, the health and social care system is a vast and very complex set of institutions and bodies, and there are an awful lot of moving parts. I am aware that, sometimes, when a Member asks a question for written answer of me, I have to say that the information is held by the health and social care trusts rather than by the Department. Sometimes, the health and social care trusts are able to provide the information, and, sometimes, they come back and say that they do not hold the information.

As I have already said on a couple of occasions in this session, data will be very important to me in how we improve and max out the capacity of the entire system. Where there are gaps, I need to know about them and need to react to them, so I thank the Member for putting that on my radar. I will take it away and ask questions about why you remain unsatisfied and why we cannot satisfy your desire.

Ms Forsythe: I am pleased to chair the recently formed all-party group on voluntary and community sector. There is a real feeling in the sector that it is not valued by the Departments and its outcomes are not recognised. I invite the Minister to engage with the all-party group and perhaps attend an upcoming meeting to satisfy people that he recognises their value in this term.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member. I must add this caution: there are so many all-party groups that I am not sure that it will be logistically possible for Ministers to start engaging across that whole sector. I sat on a number of all-party groups, so I very much recognise their importance. It is also important that the right officials from Departments attend all-party groups when it is relevant. For example, back in the day, I was very fond of sitting on the all-party group on social enterprise, and the then permanent secretary of the Department of Finance, Sue Gray, was a regular attendee at those meetings.

There is a way of better coordinating engagement between all-party groups and Departments at a very senior level.

I also say this to the Member. Thinking back to my experience as a victims' commissioner in the Commission for Victims and Survivors, we had maybe 100 groups that were set up to help some of the most vulnerable — people who had been hurt in the conflict, both physically and mentally. The people who were running those groups did not set them up to be chief executives, accountants or human resource managers, yet they seemed to spend a lot of the time doing those things. They spent a very significant amount of their time chasing funds on an annual basis to keep their bodies running. I am very interested in how better we support the voluntary and community sector and effectively free it up to do what it set itself up to do, which is to help vulnerable people.

Duty of Candour: Individual or Organisational

T4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to introduce an individual duty of candour, which was one the key recommendations from Justice O'Hara's inquiry into the hyponatraemia scandal. (AQT 374/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question. I have been discussing that with officials during my first two weeks in office. The Member will be aware that, in 2022, there was a public consultation on a duty of candour. My officials are developing proposals for a regional "being open" framework. That includes plans for further consultations in the months ahead. That is a key contributing piece of work to help to further support an open, just and learning culture in Health and Social Care. I am aware that the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) is reviewing the implementation of the duty of candour in England. We will, of course, consider the learning that emerges from that exercise.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a threagra. [*Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.*] The Minister will be aware that, over the past number of years, there have been a number of scandals in the health service. As well as the hyponatraemia scandal, we have had the Muckamore Abbey Hospital debacle, the blood contamination scandal and, of course, in the Belfast Trust, the neurology scandal. One of the common themes that runs through all those scandals is the lack of accountability and the circling of the wagons

to protect organisational reputations. Will the Minister introduce an individual duty of candour, or will he cop out and go with an organisational duty of candour?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question, but I do not agree with his description of copping out. What I am interested in is how best we encourage individuals who work in Health and Social Care to be absolutely honest about what happens when things go wrong. Is that by placing a statutory duty of candour on an individual? I am not sure that it is. It is the outcome that I am focused on; I am not yet clear about the mechanism by which to get there.

I remind the Member that DHSC in England is reviewing the duty of candour because it is clearly not delivering exactly as it was. Not too long ago, I studied a comparative report on candour in aviation and in health. The conclusion seemed to be that aviation was way ahead of the health service because of the black box and the fact that, when a catastrophic event occurs and passengers die, every effort is made to analyse what went wrong through the black box etc, with no particular concern for the effect on the individual. Of course, the point is that if there is a catastrophic impact in aviation, the pilot and crew tend to die, whereas, in the health service, it is the patients who suffer rather than those who work in it. Your concern has to be this: which system do you put in place to most motivate an individual to come forward and be honest about the mistakes that they have made? You could put a punitive system in place that actually discourages openness and candour.

Budget 2024-25: Pay Awards

T5. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister to provide an assessment of the impact that the Budget 2024-25 will have on his ability to deliver pay awards in the 2024-25 period. (AQT 375/22-27)

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his question. The short answer is this: it is simply not good. The budget that I have gives me, frankly, zero ability to deliver a pay award for this year. Members will know that we are largely informed by the recommendations of various independent pay review bodies. While those panels are yet to publish their recommendations, they are likely to come in just a few weeks' time. A pay award here of 3% would cost approximately £150 million. While there was an additional resource allocation in the most recent budgetary outcome, not a

single penny of that, I am afraid to report, was for pay.

If I may broaden that out: I consider pay to be part of the definition of a good job. I am pleased that my ministerial colleague the Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, has charged Dr Lisa Wilson from the Nevin Economic Research Institute to look at the definition of a good job. The Economy Committee is looking at that.

I would like every job in Health and Social Care to be a good job. Pay is very important, as are terms and conditions. However, I see a good job as a job that people get out of bed for because they look forward to their shift and because it is a valued role that they think is important, and, importantly, because we all value the work that Health and Social Care does. Unfortunately, I can only repeat that there would be a potential shortfall of £150 million were we to talk about a 3% increase in pay this year.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That brings topical questions to the Minister of Health to a conclusion.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

The Executive Office

D-Day Events: Non-attendance of the First Minister

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

Mr Allister asked the First and deputy First Minister why the First Minister did not attend events to commemorate D-Day.

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): Our Department receives many invitations and endeavours to attend as many events as possible. The Executive Office is represented by me, as the First Minister, and by the deputy First Minister and our junior Ministers. Last week, our Department was represented at events including the D-Day commemorations, business awards and the Your Time To Shine female leaders celebration event.

Mr Allister: Mrs O'Neill proclaimed herself to:

"be a First Minister for all." — [Official Report (Hansard), 3 February 2024, p15, col 2],

yet at the nation and Europe's most significant anniversary since she came to office, she was deliberately absent, choosing to prioritise her party interests and dogma. Is the truth of the First Minister's absence because she and her party are compromised by their association with Nazism in World War II, Sinn Féin having eulogised the IRA leader Seán Russell, who infamously collaborated with Hitler on his plans to invade Great Britain? Will the First Minister apologise to veterans and to democrats for her calculated insult on Thursday?

Mrs O'Neill: My original answer stands. Our Department receives many invitations, and I am more than confident — I have every confidence, in fact — that the deputy First Minister represented our office appropriately at the event last week. I attend many events and will continue to do so where possible. We were more than adequately represented by the deputy First Minister last week.

Mrs Dodds: I am glad that the deputy First Minister was there to represent Northern Ireland. However, the First Minister was absent, and it gives the lie that she is "a First Minister for all". Was she absent because, as someone who regularly eulogises IRA terrorists, she was ashamed to stand with real soldiers who fought for liberty and democracy? Was she absent because she was ashamed of the Southern Government's neutrality in the face of Nazi atrocities? Either way, she should be ashamed of letting down the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Member is not for one second trying to denigrate the role of the deputy First Minister, who was there to represent the whole of the Executive Office.

Mr Allister: Where were you?

Mrs O'Neill: The deputy First Minister and I and our office agreed that she would attend. We were adequately represented by the deputy First Minister, and I trust that the Member will agree with that statement.

Ms Bradshaw: D-Day was an important turning point not just for the United Kingdom but for the world in defeating fascism. Indeed, many Irish people were involved in that turning point in many different ways. Does the First Minister agree that it was welcome that the Executive Office was represented by the deputy First Minister but that, as a self-proclaimed "First Minister for all", she should, on reflection, have taken that opportunity to represent us all on a global stage?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that I am very confident that I can stand over my record as a First Minister for all. I think that I demonstrate that every day in word and deed.

Mr Allister: Not on Thursday.

Mrs O'Neill: I concur with her comment that it was appropriate that we were represented. It was appropriate that the Executive were represented by the deputy First Minister in agreement with me. That is something that we discussed, as we do with every other invitation that we receive.

Dr Aiken: First Minister, you will be aware of the fact that the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy are, at present, busy defending the sea lanes all the way around our island. In particular, the Royal Air Force has been doing search-and-rescue work and has been hunting for submarines. I thank the Member who raised

the tangential matter of submarines and people who were delivering fascism coming to the island of Ireland. First Minister, bearing in mind the importance of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force to the continuing security of this island, would it not have been better for you to have attended the D-Day events and represent everybody in Northern Ireland as the First Minister for all? Would you care to thank the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy for the excellent job that they are doing in defending this island, bearing in mind that they are not being paid for it by the Irish Government?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said on the record, I am very happy that our Executive Office was represented by the deputy First Minister. It was agreed that she would attend on our behalf. We consider all invitations that we receive. On this occasion, the deputy First Minister attended, and I am glad that she did.

Mr O'Toole: First Minister, one of the outcomes at the end of the Second World War was the creation of the EU, ultimately, and its single market. I was shocked last week to hear your party leader, Mary Lou McDonald, say on the Claire Byrne programme on RTÉ that she was not uncomfortable with an increase in checks on people moving across the border in Ireland. She also said that the main issue that Sinn Féin had with the border was around remilitarisation. That will come as a shock to those of us who have worked hard over the past number of years to prevent a hardening of the border in relation to goods and people. I was also shocked to read a Sinn Féin election leaflet delivered in County Louth, of all places, First Minister —

Mr Speaker: Come to a question, please, Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: — that said that Sinn Féin is opposed to open borders and that Ireland must have control over its borders. That was delivered in County Louth, First Minister.

Mr Speaker: Could we have a question, please?

Mr O'Toole: Do you regret that your party, in its failed election campaign, attempted to weaponise the open border on this island? Do you regret that, and will you ensure that it never happens again?

Mrs O'Neill: From the contributions of Members, one suspects that there is an election in the offing. I think that we should keep focused on the fact that —

Mr O'Toole: There was one last week.

Mrs O'Neill: Let me answer the question, considering that you have posed it.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: Did you want to say something, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I was just calling the House to order for you to continue, First Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you. I appreciate that.

As I have said, our Department receives many invitations. On this occasion, the deputy First Minister represented the Executive Office. I am more than content that she did so. I have every confidence, as a matter of fact, that she represented our office very appropriately.

Mr Brooks: The deputy First Minister more than represented Northern Ireland in the appropriate way. It is appalling, I think, that the First Minister did not also do so. Will she take this opportunity to stand against Nazism by calling for the removal of Seán Russell's statue in Fairview Park in Dublin?

Mrs O'Neill: My goodness. You are all electioneering here. Be serious about the issue. Either you are really serious about the issue or you are not. Of course we stand against Nazism — who does not? *[Interruption.]* Can I make this one point? Perhaps the Members on the Benches opposite will care to listen to it: the deputy First Minister and I agreed the approach to how we would attend the commemoration last week. It was an agreed Executive Office approach. I am quite sure that the Member, like his colleague, would not denigrate the attendance of his party colleague. The deputy First Minister represented the Executive Office, and I have every confidence in her ability to do so.

Mr Chambers: First Minister, the events of last Thursday were very significant internationally and historically. They were an opportunity for you to demonstrate the cooperation that has been developing between you and the deputy First Minister. Will you agree, First Minister, that, on reflection, your absence was a serious lapse of judgement?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, I have every confidence in the deputy First Minister's representation of the Executive Office at the occasion.

Ms Ennis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister has come to the House and answered the question for urgent oral answer in good faith. Can the Speaker review the subsequent questions that were asked? Were they in keeping with the nature of the question for urgent oral answer?

Mr Speaker: The questions were robust, and the First Minister robustly defended herself.

Adjourned at 3.39 pm.