



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Contents

## Members' Statements

Loughinisland Massacre ..... 1

UEFA Under-19 Championship Northern Ireland 2024..... 1

Luke Fields ..... 2

Schools Estate: Derry ..... 2

Loughinisland Massacre ..... 2

Pigeon Racing ..... 3

River Roe Fish Kill ..... 3

No Gas Caverns Campaign..... 3

Homelessness ..... 4

Loughinisland Massacre ..... 4

## Opposition Business

Dual Market Access..... 5

Cross-border Healthcare ..... 19

## Oral Answers to Questions

Communities..... 26

## Opposition Business

Cross-border Healthcare (*Continued*) ..... 35

All-Ireland Tourism ..... 40

## Executive Committee Business

Defective Premises Bill: Further Consideration Stage ..... 54

# Assembly Members

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

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 18 June 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Members' Statements

**Mr Speaker:** The first item in the Order Paper is Members' statements. The usual rules apply.

### Loughinisland Massacre

**Mrs Mason:** Thirty years ago today, the village of Loughinisland was shaken to its very core. As locals watched Ireland playing Italy in the World Cup, members of the UVF entered the Heights Bar in the small south Down village and opened fire. The men sprayed the room with more than 60 bullets. Six men were killed outright, and five other people were wounded. As families eagerly awaited the results of the World Cup match, their lives were shattered by an act of unimaginable violence. Today, three decades on, we honour the memories of Adrian Rogan, Malcolm Jenkinson, Barney Green, Eamon Byrne, Daniel McCreanor and Patrick O'Hare. We remember them today as fathers, sons, brothers, uncles and friends whose lives were cruelly cut short. We extend our deepest sympathies and eternal solidarity to their families, who have borne the unimaginable burden of their loss with grace and dignity. Their strength continues to inspire us all.

The morning after the attack, the getaway car was found abandoned in a field near Crossgar. Almost two months later, the assault rifle used in the attack was found hidden at a bridge near Saintfield, along with a holdall containing boiler suits, balaclavas, gloves, handguns and ammunition. Despite various investigations, no one has ever been convicted for the Loughinisland massacre.

The pain of that night has been compounded by years of unanswered questions and significant allegations of collusion. While the 2016 report by the Police Ombudsman provided some answers, the pursuit of full accountability remains. Heartbroken families have been fighting for years, determined to get truth and justice for their loved ones. The pain of that night still reverberates through Loughinisland, yet it also serves as a testament to our

community's resilience and unwavering pursuit of a better future. We stand, three decades later, not only to remember those whom we lost but to honour their memory by reaffirming our commitment to peace, accountability and reconciliation.

### UEFA Under-19 Championship Northern Ireland 2024

**Mr Kingston:** We have been able to enjoy watching on television the UEFA European Championship matches in Germany these evenings, and the standard of football has been good so far. However, it will not finish for us here in Northern Ireland with the Euros final on Sunday 14 July. The next day, Monday 15 July, is the start of the men's UEFA Under-19 Championship in Northern Ireland, which will run for two weeks until Sunday 28 July. Eight countries will take part: Spain, Italy, France, Denmark, Norway, Ukraine, Turkey and Northern Ireland, as the hosts. The venues for the group matches will be the Seaview stadium in Belfast and Inver Park in Larne, with the semi-finals and final scheduled to be staged at the national football stadium at Windsor Park on Sunday 28 July.

It will be a great chance to see emerging stars of the future. Most of the top European players of today, such as Mbappé and Ronaldo, played in that tournament in their day. Tickets are very reasonably priced at just £2 for children and £5 for adults. I encourage folks to check out the section on the Irish Football Association (IFA) website. Taking part in the tournament is a big step up for Northern Ireland. We wish our under-19 manager and Northern Ireland legend, Gareth McAuley, and his young squad every success in the tournament that we are hosting.

Training sessions for the teams are being held at a range of local community venues. I know that the board of Paisley Park Sportsplex, off the West Circular Road in Belfast, is delighted to be hosting some of those training sessions on the restored 3G pitch. The tournament will result in a legacy of investment in some of

those venues and strengthens the need for a national training centre, which is to include a grass pitch. There will also be fan zones and community activities during the tournament.

Whatever the outcome is for Northern Ireland sharing in the British/Irish hosting of the 2028 Euros, the hosting of the under-19 tournament this summer is a great credit to the Irish Football Association. In particular, it is part of the legacy of the work of the late Craig Stanfield, who did so much to attract major UEFA tournaments to Northern Ireland. It builds on our hosting of the women's UEFA Under-19 tournament in 2017 and the UEFA Super Cup in 2021. It is fitting that the Junior Cup is now named after Craig Stanfield, in recognition of his work.

I wish to express particular thanks to Malcolm Roberts at the IFA for his information and assistance and for his work in promoting the tournament.

## Luke Fields

**Ms Nicholl:** Luke Fields is an Aquinas student. He is also a playwright. In the past few months, Luke and a number of students across the UK entered a playwrighting competition, and, out of the 500 entries, Luke was successful. He is a former Youth Lyric pupil and has achieved enormous success. He will go to the National Theatre, where his play will be directed by an in-house director and performed by actors on stage. This is an amazing achievement for Luke — it is also testament to the young, creative talent in south Belfast — and I am incredibly proud of him.

Last night, I was at the launch of the Seamus Heaney Centre — I think that you were there too, Mr Speaker — and I was struck by how that new building, which is a tribute to one of Ireland's greatest poets, will not only be a place of learning but inspire the next generation of creatives. On Wednesday, it will have Fighting Words NI, a young creative writing programme. Children from Botanic Primary School will go to the Seamus Heaney Centre and learn about creative writing. It will inspire the next generation. As I was thinking about Luke, Seamus Heaney, Kelly McCaughrain and all the amazing writers in our city, it made me think of how important it is that we have strategic, long-term arts funding. Given that we have been able to produce such talent, imagine what more could be achieved if that funding were in place.

Congratulations to Luke. I wish him all the best for the performance of his play.

## Schools Estate: Derry

**Mr Delargy:** I will speak about the condition of many schools in Derry. I am aware that we have raised the condition of those schools with the Department of Education and the Education Authority (EA) over the past months. It is a constant issue of maintenance, because our schools simply cannot get, and are not getting, the capital funding that they require to make sure that they are fit for purpose and safe for pupils.

The Minister recently made two statements on the issue, one of which was more positive for Derry schools than the other. Essentially, two schools in Derry — Lumen Christi College and St Brigid's College in Carnhill — are on that waiting list, but both will languish, as they have been languishing, on that list. We know that change needs to happen for staff and for families, but also, most importantly, for pupils. We are in that situation where change is needed, but it is not happening.

I recently visited many schools in Derry that are in these conditions: children are being taught in Portakabins that are cold, have black mould and are in an extremely poor condition. It is not acceptable, in 2024, for any child to be taught in conditions that look like those in the photo that I am holding up. Children are being taught in schools that have black mould on the ceiling. That is an extreme health risk for those children and is not acceptable at all. There are also schools with Portakabins that look like the ones in this photo and are simply not being maintained by the Education Authority. I brought these photos in, because, if children in our communities, in our constituencies, see that every day when they go to school, it is very important that the people in here, who make the decisions, see photos of it. There are also conditions such as those that you can see in this photo. It is simply not acceptable that children go into school every day to conditions like those in the photos.

The issue may not be a priority for the Education Minister, but it is certainly a priority for me and for Sinn Féin, and we will continue to stand up for those children, their families and our community to ensure that children can go to schools that are fit for purpose and safe and where they can be taught in conditions that are appropriate for education.

## Loughinisland Massacre

**Mr McGrath:** As an MLA for Loughinisland, I add my voice to those of my colleagues in

remembering those who were so grossly murdered that night 30 years ago and their families, who live with that tragedy every day. For the benefit of Members who have never been to Loughinisland, it is a small place: a rural village with a school, a chapel, a pub and a few houses, where the local shop is a few minutes' walk away. It is nestled off the main Belfast to Newcastle road. Thousands will have passed it, but most will not have given a thought to what happened there 30 years ago. On that night, the pub was packed with people watching a football match. With the Euros currently on, that could be happening in many places this week. Those people went out to watch a football match and to have a few pints, but the carnage that occurred brought an end to that.

I was in Donegal that night with friends from Loughinisland. That was before social media and before mobile phones were really in use. I remember the car journey home as the news was coming through. Then the names came through. Each one was known to my friends, and the sense of pain was palpable. The fact that there has never been any justice is frightening. That is the case not because those who did those horrendous murders are unknown but because our system is unwilling. We must change that. Families must get justice. The pain that Loughinisland still feels must be allowed to heal, but, for so many, that cannot and will not happen.

In remembering Eamon Byrne, Barney Green, Malcolm Jenkinson, Dan McCreanor, Patsy O'Hare and Adrian Rogan — who was the father of a former MLA — the pain that is felt for them goes on, but the support of the community for their families is as strong as ever.

10.45 am

## Pigeon Racing

**Mr Swann:** There has been a lot of talk of sport in this place over the past few days, with everybody concentrating on UEFA. One sport that is going on across Northern Ireland at the minute is cross-community and goes across all age groups without fear, favour or distinction: pigeon racing. It is not often spoken about in the Chamber, nor are the benefits that it brings to the individuals who are involved, from the mental health aspect to the social aspect and the sense of camaraderie that is brought about by pigeon clubs and pigeon racers who, as I said, are of all ages and from all communities. Back in 2016, as some Members will remember, it was good to see this place

recognising pigeon racing as a sport under the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. That has not been done in other jurisdictions, but it brought a benefit to those clubs. I want to put on record that, since this place passed the amendment that recognised pigeon racing as a sport under the 2016 Act, over the past five years, pigeon racing clubs across Northern Ireland have been able to obtain £113,000 of rates rebates through the sports and recreation rate relief, allowing many of those clubs to continue racing and operating. They get no support from any other Department or from most councils. I express my thanks and, I think, those of the Chamber, to the volunteers across Northern Ireland who keep the pigeon clubs going on a daily and weekly basis.

## River Roe Fish Kill

**Mr Robinson:** I want to comment briefly on the fish kill that happened in the River Roe in County Londonderry. The incident was confirmed by the Loughs Agency, which said that 700 juvenile salmon and trout died in the incident at Burnfoot, between Limavady and Dungiven, on Friday evening. That is a spawning area for salmon and a nursery area for juvenile fish, both salmon and sea trout, and the incident could have a long-term impact on the river. Anglers in the area have all said that they are devastated by what happened over the weekend. It appears to have been a huge incident. I call on the agencies to urgently identify the source, investigate the matter fully and if, as we suspect, it is foul play, ensure that those who are responsible face penalties. It is another in a long list of fish kills in the Province and across the UK, and I call on anyone who has information about the source of this latest kill to please report it urgently.

## No Gas Caverns Campaign

**Mr Donnelly:** I rise to congratulate the No Gas Caverns campaign in Islandmagee on its legal victory yesterday at the Court of Appeal. The campaign has been working for many years to oppose having seven skyscraper-sized caverns constructed under Larne lough to store natural gas. It would have created a dead zone in the sea off the coast of Islandmagee and locked Northern Ireland into fossil fuel dependency for decades at a time when we have legally binding targets to reduce emissions to net zero by 2050.

The No Gas Caverns campaign is made up of local residents who are absolutely committed to protecting that beautiful area for future generations. They fundraised for many years,

arranging events such as coffee mornings, local gigs and freezing swims at Brown's Bay, and they have huge support in the local community. It was a long struggle for the campaigners, but they fought tirelessly, overcoming the odds and getting back up after knock-backs. They are a very persistent bunch. The decision could have far-reaching consequences for future fossil fuel projects across Northern Ireland. It is a real David and Goliath story, and it shows that, when a dedicated group of people organise together to oppose a damaging proposal in their area, they can win.

The Assembly declared a climate emergency in 2020 and passed the Climate Change Act in 2022, which set legal targets for reducing emissions. We should shift our focus from polluting fossil fuel schemes such as that proposed project and concentrate on seizing the huge economic benefits and security of supply that will come from developing sources of clean renewable energy here in Northern Ireland. In the words of the campaign spokesperson, Lisa Dobbie:

*"It's a win for the community, wildlife and the environment".*

## Homelessness

**Ms Ferguson:** The human cost of homelessness cannot be overstated. As an Assembly and an Executive, we need to get to grips with the level of housing need that exists across our society and constituencies. I speak again today, first and foremost, to thank the Simon Community for sharing its recent research, which suggests that we could have in the region of 80,000 people experiencing homelessness. The significant suggested number — people who are invisible and unaccounted for in official statistics — points to the reality of hidden homelessness, which might include staying with a relative, living in a car or sofa-surfing in the homes of friends or colleagues.

Living in temporary or non-standard forms of accommodation is unsettling for so many reasons, not least the impact that it has on people's mental health, resilience and well-being. It disrupts any stability or certainty in people's lives and impacts on their access to opportunities, whether in employment or education; and it can have devastating outcomes if the root causes of homelessness are not adequately addressed. We know the effect that it can have on physical health conditions and the mobility of some individuals. No person who is living with disabilities, for

example, should find themselves feeling constrained and helpless because they do not have a stable home in which to access essential equipment, support and necessary adaptations.

With a spend of £34.5 million in 2023-24 on temporary accommodation, and rising, it is not acceptable for the Department for Communities to suggest a social housing programme that will deliver 400 — 400 — new homes in 2024-25. With 47,312 households on the waiting list at the end of March 2024, it will, effectively, address the needs of 0.85% of those households. We must, collectively, as an Executive and an Assembly, have the vision to deliver more social and affordable housing than ever before. We must then support success in that area by applying political will and vital resources.

We must secure multi-annual Budgets and strategically plan across all Departments for the longer term for housing delivery and homelessness prevention efforts, particularly with respect to Budget discussions. I call on the Minister for Communities to begin that process by publishing the housing supply strategy and urgently reconsidering the proposed departmental allocations that are allowing for a fall of 73.4% in our social home starts in the incoming year.

## Loughinisland Massacre

**Mr O'Toole:** Thirty years ago today, gunmen walked into a small rural pub in County Down and opened fire on a room full of innocent civilians who were watching a football match. Ireland were playing Italy in the World Cup and were, unusually, winning. I was watching the match at home as a child when my father was called away: I did not know why.

In living rooms, pubs and clubs across Ireland, it was a moment of joy and togetherness. In the Heights Bar, also known as O'Toole's, innocent people were watching the game when two UVF gunmen entered the pub and sprayed it with bullets from an assault rifle. They killed six innocent men: Adrian Rogan, Malcolm Jenkinson, Dan McCreanor, Patsy O'Hare, Eamon Byrne and Barney Green. At 87, Barney Green was the oldest known victim of the Troubles. He was shot in the back while watching a football match. The killers shouted "Fenian bastards", then made their escape, leaving a scene of unimaginable horror and suffering — suffering that has continued over the past 30 years for the victims' families and the survivors of that obscene act.

Though all the dead men were Catholic, the community was and is a shared one. Almost exactly five years after the atrocity, I started working behind that bar. There were still security cameras and a buzzer to enter, but the pub was frequented by people from all traditions, appalled at the evil atrocity that had been visited on Loughinisland.

That obscenity was compounded by the failure of the criminal justice system to provide any justice or accountability. That is a failure that persists to this day. It is a failure that we now know was about more than simple incompetence. Repeated reports have pointed to collusion. The only meaningful justice and accountability offered to the Loughinisland families came, first, in the 2016 ombudsman's report and then in the pioneering investigative journalism of Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney. The offence was compounded when those brave investigative journalists were arrested — arrested — for the work that they did for the Loughinisland families.

Loughinisland is an ancient place. If you go to Loughinisland, you will find ancient churches on a small island in the lough. It is a place of calm and dignity. That calm and dignity is reflected in the dignity and resilience of the Loughinisland families and that community over the past 30 years. That dignity and calm sits in stark contrast to the failures of the criminal justice system; to those who still celebrate and trivialise the evil acts that took place; and the organisations, including those who were on the Newtownards Road on Saturday night, that trivialise acts such as shooting an 87-year-old man in the back. The courage, dignity and resilience of the Loughinisland families stands true, and my thoughts are with them today.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes Members' statements.

## Opposition Business

### Dual Market Access

**Mr O'Toole:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly affirms the huge opportunity afforded to our local economy as a result of the dual market access available to businesses here, allowing the seamless movement of goods into both the EU and UK markets; recognises that this opportunity has the potential to deliver tangible benefits in terms of job creation, inward investment, improved wages and productivity and improved regional balance; acknowledges the importance of continued efforts to ease the flow of goods moving from east to west and also the need to mitigate damage to North/South services and trade not covered by the protocol/Windsor framework; notes that deriving full benefits from our advantageous trading position will require focused intergovernmental and inter-agency work; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Irish Government to establish a joint Invest NI/IDA Ireland working group, drawing on expertise from InterTradeIreland, interested business groups and, where relevant, the UK Department for Business and Trade and the EU Directorate-General, to develop a clearly defined strategy to maximise the huge economic advantages afforded to Northern Ireland, with the aim of providing reports to the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), which will in turn furnish recommendations under article 14 of the protocol to the Specialised Committee on the protocol/Windsor framework; and further calls on the Minister to provide an update to the Assembly on the establishment of this working group and its actions not later than the end of 2024.*

**Mr Speaker:** It is more like an essay than a motion. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr O'Toole:** First, I apologise to the Clerk for making her read out such an expansive motion. The motion is long and detailed for a specific reason: we want to nail down specifics in it. In each Opposition day so far, the SDLP Opposition have sought to use their time to effectively hold Ministers to account and to platform the most urgent policy matters. The



two go hand in hand: accountability and a vision for the future; that is what being a constructive Opposition is about.

In this final Opposition day before the summer recess — I am sure that some Executive colleagues will be delighted to hear me say that — the SDLP Opposition will propose three motions aimed at maximising the benefits of all-Ireland cooperation in investment and job creation, improving healthcare and building our vital tourism industry. In each of those areas, the relevant Minister has signalled a positive tone in relation to greater cross-border collaboration, but we want and need to see practical action and specific plans with timelines.

Our first, admittedly very detailed, motion calls for specific actions — meat on the bones — and a rhetorical commitment to dual market access. The SDLP has been the loudest and longest champion of the unique dual market access afforded to this region under the protocol, now termed the Windsor framework. Indeed, I was the first person to use that phrase in the Assembly Chamber — yes, I am sad enough that I went and checked that in Hansard. Back then, in 2020 and 2021, the very existence of our preferential trading arrangements at the crossroads of the world's two largest markets was hugely controversial. Yes, it remains controversial today, as does Brexit itself, which was an extraordinary act of economic self-harm. The UK's official economic forecast to the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that Brexit, specifically hard Brexit, will cost the UK around 4% of its productivity and 15% lower trade. Those might seem like dry, abstract percentages, but they will add up to tens and, ultimately, hundreds of billions of pounds of lost economic activity, which means tens of billions of pounds or more of missed tax revenue. When we add that to the existing effects of grinding austerity, it helps to explain the withered state of public services here and elsewhere.

### 11.00 am

I do not want to spend the debate lingering on the old Brexit battle, not that there really is anything to debate. Even Nigel Farage, a close personal friend — or fair-weather friend — to some in the Chamber, has admitted that Brexit is a failure. We cannot escape all the negative consequences of that failure. As I said, we are living with its consequences, with lower spending by the UK Government and the deterioration of public services. We are dealing with key labour shortages, with the movement of people being outside the protocol. We are

dealing with disruptions in trading services, cross-border and into Europe.

The data is clear: we are seeing tangible economic benefits from our ability, which is unique on this planet, to move goods seamlessly into both the British and European single markets. InterTradeIreland collates data published by the Central Statistics Office in Dublin and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in Belfast. The data is stark. Before Brexit and our new trading arrangements in 2015, annual cross-border trade in goods stood at just under €3 billion, having been around that level for more than a decade. By 2023, cross-border trade had tripled in value to more than €10 billion. I quote a report from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) last September:

*"The unique status of Northern Ireland with its access to both the EU and UK markets has driven this recent substantial increase in cross-border trade and has the potential to continue to feed into broader economic linkages across the island."*

Let me be clear: that is a good thing, whatever your constitutional perspective.

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

**Mr O'Toole:** I will give way briefly.

**Mr Allister:** The Member is the leader of the Opposition for a party called the Social Democratic and Labour Party. Is that which he is embracing — the concept of 300 areas of law that should rest in this House being surrendered to a foreign Parliament over which we have no control — not the very antithesis of democracy? I never really thought of the Member as a colonialist, but it turns out that that is exactly what he is: a willing slave to colonial rule by the EU.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am delighted that I gave way to the Member, because he has given me the opportunity to say that I am a proud pro-European and that I would love to remove any scintilla of a lack of democracy from our arrangements by rejoining the European Union via an inclusive and reconciled new Ireland. What a great idea.

To be clear, increased cross-border trade is a good thing. It may be the only good thing to have come from Brexit, even if was the last thing that some of Brexit's strongest proponents wanted. We have some canopy from the Brexit storm. Northern Ireland, traditionally one of the

weakest-performing economic regions, has consistently outperformed other UK regions since we formally exited the EU. Ignoring the role played by our uniquely advantageous trading position would be daft and disingenuous. Much of that growth happened when there was no Executive at all to drive policy or strategy or when severe political instability and doubts over Ministers' commitment to pursuing the benefits of dual market access hindered investment.

I can remember a time in the Chamber when Ministers for the Economy denied that there even were benefits, even as Invest NI sought to tentatively market those benefits overseas. I am glad that the Economy Minister that we now have does not share that position. Imagine what could be achieved with a focused plan and strategy in collaboration with the Irish Government and, indeed, with the support of the UK Government and the European Commission.

Briefly, to anyone who thinks that we are ignoring the east-west axis: our motion is deliberately drafted so as to underline the importance of the east-west axis. By definition, supporting the dual market access benefits of the protocol is an acknowledgement of the fact that the east-west economic access is vital for Northern Ireland. Of course, our motion says that we want collaboration with the UK Department for Business and Trade to help to realise the benefits. I genuinely commend the Economy Minister for showing a commitment to growing the all-island economy as part of his economic vision and to getting additional funding for InterTradelreland, which was deliberately left to wilt as a bit of a Cinderella among economic development agencies by some of his predecessors.

We will, however, need much more than simply some extra funding and aspirations for InterTradelreland. It needs a detailed work programme with agreed targets and, yes, bureaucratic structures for delivery and accountability. We in the SDLP believe that that should logically start with an agreed working group comprising IDA Ireland, which is known as one of the world's most successful investment agencies, and Invest NI reporting jointly to Ministers, North and South. For too long, on both sides of the border, those agencies were encouraged to view each other, narrowly and unhelpfully, as competitors rather than partners.

The protocol offers a specific benefit to goods moving from Northern Ireland, but its benefits can be felt all over the island of Ireland. To give

an example, if a US or Continental pharmaceutical company were wishing to avail itself of the protocol benefits of a location in the North, that would need not deter investment in the South. Indeed, it might enhance the investment potential — such potential that I am choking on my words with excitement — of existing Southern sites, given the potential for cross-border value chains.

The recent review of Invest NI and the appointment of an IDA Ireland veteran as its chief executive officer offer the chance to open a new chapter. As I said, our motion also acknowledges the importance of the east-west axis in making such opportunities work, whether by resolving outstanding issues with moving goods east to west or by ensuring that, unlike under the Tories, a new British Government are willing to task their Department for Business and Trade with properly helping signpost and sell our dual market access.

In early 2021, the SDLP wrote to that UK Department's predecessor, alongside the Irish Government and the EU Directorate-General for Trade. At the time, we did not have a local Minister who wanted to take that opportunity. If the rhetoric is to be believed, we do now, but we need to see a plan, on paper and with clear actions and timelines, ideally in a Programme for Government with a budget to match.

The protocol's economic opportunities are no panacea, but they are, finally, a unique opportunity to turn the dual nature of this complicated place into meaningful economic potential for our people. Let us not waste that chance. I commend the Opposition motion to the Assembly.

**Mr Delargy:** Today, we discuss the significant opportunities for and the challenges facing the North of Ireland in the post-Brexit era. As representatives who are committed to the prosperity and well-being of all our people, it is essential that we recognise and seize the potential that lies ahead.

Since Brexit, the North has found itself in a unique position. Our continued access to UK and EU markets offers unparalleled trade benefits. We have seen recent statistics that showcase the fact that, between the North and the Republic, there has been a marked increase in trade, with exports rising by over 40% in the past year alone. Dual access has therefore allowed our businesses to thrive in a way that is unmatched by other regions, ensuring that the North is an attractive hub for trade and investment. Our priority must be to put the economy and jobs first.

Given our strategic position, and with the right policies, the North has the potential to become a dynamic, forward-thinking economy that is driven by innovation and trade. We can create an environment that attracts global business, fosters local entrepreneurship and ensures high-quality, good jobs for our people. We must advocate policies that support that vision and work tirelessly to create a thriving economic landscape. The economy of the North must be allowed to move forward on a stable and secure footing in order to take advantage of dual market access.

The economic and global potential arising from our dual market access has been significantly showcased around the world. Just last week, at the Committee for the Executive Office, we heard from offices across the world about the opportunities that that has created and the interest in the North that has arisen and been augmented. Dual market access has to be recognised and promoted, as it affords the North the potential to bring good jobs and prosperity to businesses, farmers and families across the North.

One of the most exciting prospects is enhanced cooperation across Ireland. There are numerous examples of businesses operating seamlessly between North and South, exemplifying the spirit of cooperation and mutual benefit. Companies such as Vertiv in Derry are shining examples of that success. Vertiv has leveraged its unique position to streamline operations, enhance supply-chain efficiency and access a broader market base, all while creating jobs and fostering economic growth in the north-west.

Do not just take it from me. Listen to John McGrane, head of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, and to Stephen Kelly of Manufacturing NI, who stated:

*“The benefits of dual market access cannot be overstated. It allows businesses to compete on a global stage, bringing prosperity and job creation. We must continue to support and promote this unique position to maximize its potential.”*

In conclusion, the North has a unique opportunity to redefine its economic future. By embracing all-Ireland cooperation while simultaneously augmenting east-west relations, prioritising economic growth and leveraging our unique dual market access, we can create a prosperous and inclusive economy for all. We know that those relations are more important than ever, as are our offices in Brussels — they presented to us, as I said, this week — and the

North/South bodies that we are able to access this information through, and we should seize the opportunities that we now have. Let us work together, North/South and east-west, to build a brighter future for the North and be recognised as a beacon of innovation, trade and opportunity.

**Mrs Erskine:** The DUP has been clear that the arrangements to which Northern Ireland is currently subject impact on and undermine the integrity of the UK's internal market. However, the DUP was able to make gains. Building on the progress to date, the DUP will continue to fight to fully restore Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, including removing the application of EU law in our country and the internal Irish Sea border that it creates.

The continued barriers to trade with GB demonstrate that dual market access to both the UK and EU markets, in the broadest sense depicted by those who tabled the motion, does not exist in the sense outlined. We must not pretend otherwise. Purchases made by Northern Irish businesses from GB were worth more than twice as much as those from the whole EU, including the Irish Republic, in 2022. Moreover, GB remains the largest and most valuable market for Northern Ireland's economy, including external sales. Those trends must be reflected through trade, customs and regulatory arrangements that provide unfettered access for firms and consumers. The SDLP, Sinn Féin and Alliance fail to realise that the internal barriers to trade between GB and NI have a direct and tangible impact on our competitiveness when firms market their goods outside Northern Ireland, including in the EU. The higher transport and logistical costs from GB for raw materials will lead to higher production costs and, in turn, higher product prices, which collectively makes breaking into new markets more challenging.

Today's motion also talks about the potential benefits of so-called dual market access for attracting inward investment to Northern Ireland. It fails to consider that, if a global manufacturer is considering investing in Northern Ireland's highly skilled workforce, barriers to sourcing key materials from one of the world's largest economies — GB — will have a chilling effect on whether a business chooses to invest. A competitive advantage at the point of sale is of little benefit if there is a competitive disadvantage elsewhere in the supply chain. We accept the reference to easing the flow of trade between GB and NI in the motion, but it is at best superficial. There is no reference to a role for Intertrade UK, which will be key to promoting trade between our four

nations. Creating working groups that focus solely on North/South trade, rather than investment opportunities that encompass the whole UK, limits what can be achieved for our businesses and communities.

The motion envisages a role for the North/South Ministerial Council that frankly does not exist. Article 14(b) of the protocol states that the Specialised Committee will:

*"examine proposals concerning the implementation and application of this Protocol from the North-South Ministerial Council and North-South Implementation bodies set up under the 1998 Agreement".*

It is unclear how the development of a new economic strategy for Northern Ireland, as recommended by the motion, falls into the remit of "implementation". Furthermore, why should the Republic's foreign direct investment association have any role in the development of Northern Ireland's trade and investment strategies? Promoting Northern Ireland's role in a truly global economy should be a matter for the Executive, Invest NI and the Department for Business and Trade. We are firmly of the view that it does not require large swathes of EU law to apply in Northern Ireland to secure advantageous and mutually beneficial trading arrangements. Mutual recognition would see the 5% of businesses in Northern Ireland that trade with the EU monitored by UK authorities to ensure that they have complied with EU standards and regulations and paid any tariffs due. The EU would take the same responsibility for Irish businesses exporting into Northern Ireland.

That approach was recklessly dismissed by the EU and Dublin.

**11.15 am**

We will continue to make the case that the Trade and Cooperation Agreement review next year presents an opportunity to demonstrate that Northern Ireland should not be bound by EU law, which is not needed when mutual enforcement and recognition would and could work between the UK and EU. That will ensure that any approach to affording businesses and consumers access to both the UK and EU markets respects the territorial integrity of the UK, the value of existing trade flows and the constitutional —

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

**Mrs Erskine:** — position of Northern Ireland. Therefore, we will vote against the motion.

**Mr Tennyson:** The UK's decision to leave the European Union in 2016 was an enormous act of economic self-harm. Its destabilising impacts have been most acutely felt here in Northern Ireland, with borders and barriers being placed back at the centre of our politics. It has left in its wake a litany of unkept promises and unfulfilled commitments. That is no surprise to those of us on these Benches, but what never fails to surprise me is the ability of DUP members to contort themselves and U-turn on the issue and their seemingly endless willingness to trust a Conservative Party that has thrown them under the bus at every cut and turn over the past eight years. Nor is it lost on the public that the DUP held the balance of power at Westminster during a critical juncture in the Brexit negotiations and then misrepresented Northern Ireland, which overwhelmingly voted to remain in the EU, voted down every possible alternative to the protocol, overplayed its hand, squandered its influence and walked us to the position in which we now find ourselves. Nor is the irony lost on anyone that those who most avidly pursued the hardest possible Brexit now shed crocodile tears at the inevitable consequences of their actions.

Since 2016, we have been engaged in an exercise of damage limitation. Alliance has consistently said that there was no such thing as a good or sensible Brexit, and, despite our opposition to both Brexit and the protocol, which we voted against at Europe and at Westminster, we have continued to focus on pragmatic solutions to make leaving the EU as painless and low-impact as possible for business and the people whom we represent. However, we can deliver on those solutions only if people are willing to acknowledge that Brexit is the original sin that has caused increased friction and costs, rather than entertaining the fantasy that we can leave the EU and retain all its benefits.

Whatever the deal, the fact remains that Northern Ireland requires special arrangements, and that is why Alliance's tests have remained: protecting the Good Friday Agreement, upholding our dual market access and ensuring that any agreement is legal and sustainable. There is no doubt that our dual market access creates huge economic opportunities for agriculture, manufacturing and pharmaceutical companies. Indeed, to see that, you have only to look to my constituency of Upper Bann, where Almac, a highly regulated pharmaceutical manufacturer, is reaping the huge benefits of access to both markets.

However, in order to fully maximise that benefit, we owe those businesses political certainty and stability and a commitment to upholding that dual market access and to working across these islands, including with the Irish Government, to market and promote the opportunities on the international stage.

I welcome the practical proposals that are set out in the motion. My colleague David Honeyford will speak in more detail about our proposals for how we can better leverage that dual market access.

Dual market access, however, must not be the ceiling on our ambition. It is true that dual market access applies only to goods and not to services and that some friction exists in a number of areas. We need a focus from the next UK Government on resolving outstanding issues, such as those relating to dental amalgam and veterinary medicines, through comprehensive and bespoke agreements. Alliance would go further still. Our ambition is not only to return to the single market and the customs union but to be back in the European Union where we belong, cooperating and collaborating with our European neighbours on the big economic and environmental challenges

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

**Mr Tennyson:** — restoring opportunities for our young people and reversing the huge economic damage that has been caused.

I will give way to the Member, and I can predict what he is going to ask me.

**Mr O'Toole:** I have a genuine curiosity. I thank the Member for giving way. Sadly, from my point of view — in a previous life, I tried hard to keep the UK in the EU — it appears vanishingly unlikely that the UK will rejoin the EU. Are there any other routes that he can think of and that he would like to endorse here today for how Northern Ireland can rejoin the EU? I cannot think of any.

**Mr Tennyson:** There are two routes back into the European Union.

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

**Mr Tennyson:** I do not share the Member's analysis that the UK returning to the EU is unlikely. If you look at opinion polling and the UK public's opinion on the impact of Brexit, given the fact that the decision to leave the EU came about as a result of a referendum that

was tainted by lies and dark money and given that people are feeling the impact of Brexit on their pocket, you will see that a huge number of people in the UK are reconsidering the decision that was taken. I will continue to argue and try to persuade counterparts in Westminster that we should return to the EU. I would not be surprised if that were to happen sooner than the Member thinks.

**Dr Aiken:** The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion. The issue is dual market access, but we have to consider it in the wider context. We are at a juxtaposition at the moment: we are potentially looking at a new United Kingdom Government who, if Labour, are already seeking a new approach to Europe. Many of us who have spent a lot of time in Brussels and a lot of time talking to our European friends in Brussels, Dublin and other capital cities across Europe will know that there is very much a wish to have the United Kingdom much more closely associated with Europe. The reason for that is clear: we have a war in Europe right now, and the indications are that it will get significantly worse. It is vital that the United Kingdom is part of the response to all the challenges that face everybody across Europe at the moment, whether that is through providing security or because of our strengths in research and development, industrial capacity and manufacturing, of which Northern Ireland is very much a key part.

There are many advantages to Northern Ireland's dual market access. I note the need to work more closely across this island, these islands and Europe to make that happen. I thank the Member for raising the issue of Intertrade UK and the importance of east-west links. That is also vital. If Northern Ireland is going to properly fulfil its role, it will need the linkages with the rest of our nation to be just as strong as those with the European Union. They will need to be made to work.

I am a member of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee. We in the Chamber need to make sure that any rules and regulations that come from the European Union are fit for purpose. We, as a Committee, have to take our responsibilities seriously and scrutinise those rules and regulations. If some of them will undermine significantly that dual market access by distorting the market, it is our duty to do something about it. Regrettably, as I have said in a Member's statement, the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee is not being particularly democratic; it is definitely not doing a lot of scrutiny; and I assure you that it is not acting well as a Committee. That needs to change. If we are to

support Northern Ireland businesses to get the most out of that dual market access, we have to remove whatever tinted glasses we have, look at the issues critically and put the interests of Northern Ireland first. There are many issues that need to be dealt with effectively.

As we, hopefully, move into a new period post 5 July, the United Kingdom will move closer towards the European Union, particularly in the areas of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) regulations, life sciences, pharmaceuticals, research and development, and some services. Northern Ireland needs to remain agile and effective enough to make proper use of that dual market access.

I am glad that the Minister is here. One of the questions that we have to ask is whether Invest NI is fit for purpose. I think that anybody who talks to industry and businesses across Northern Ireland will know that there is a universal theme: Invest NI is not fit for purpose. We need to invest properly in Invest NI so that it is capable of undertaking its role most effectively. If that means improving relationships and getting much better at working with the Department for Business and Trade and other groups, as well as the likes of IDA Ireland, it is important that we do that. However, we should also be cautious, because, having worked many times with the IDA, I assure you that its interests are not for Northern Ireland; they are for the Irish Republic. We need to have in Invest NI an organisation that is match fit enough to deal with that across the board.

**Mr Honeyford:** I recently wrote an Alliance Party opinion piece that was published in the 'The Irish News' that laid out Alliance's position on working to rebalance the economy across this island and within these islands. It referenced collaboration between Invest NI and the IDA, so I thank the SDLP for bringing forward a lot of what I have previously said.

Sinéad McLaughlin and I, as with the DUP and Sinn Féin members of the Economy Committee, are often very much on the same page, and I look forward to continuing those close working relationships as we look to grow and better our economy. It is so positive when we speak collectively on the issues, but it is absolutely disappointing — there must be an election on the go or something — that we have the DUP's position today. However, the public see through that and will expect us to get back to normal after recess and to having a working collaboration between everybody in order to better this place.

I said in the Platform piece that I wrote that, "It's the economy, stupid", which was the famous catchphrase from the 1992 presidential election. The question was this:

*"Change? or More of the same?"*

As our economic performance remains stubbornly well behind that of the rest of the UK and absolutely miles behind that of the South, change is the only option that we have in Northern Ireland. More of the same is just no longer sustainable.

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

**Mr Honeyford:** Yes, sure.

**Mr O'Toole:** I will be brief. Thanks for giving way. The Member is right to say that we are one of the worst performers in these islands, and we have been for generations now. However, is it not also the case that, since the protocol came into effect, we have outperformed most other UK regions, which indicates that our preferential trading arrangements are doing some economic good for this region?

**Mr Honeyford:** Absolutely.

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

**Mr Honeyford:** I welcome the intervention. A lot of what has been said from the DUP Benches was completely not reality. Business has been leading change, and trade across to GB has increased. Off the top of my head, I cannot remember the figure, but it is in tens of per cents; it is not a little amount. The trade deficit is decreasing, and our growth is rising, and that is to be welcomed.

Change is our only option. Our economy has been in deficit since the 1930s and remains heavily reliant on the public sector, and that is unsustainable. Our population is suffering under the resultant squeeze, and that has been brought into sharp focus with the Treasury's below-need funding of Northern Ireland. We can no longer afford to view our economy as a side issue. Our economy is central to creating the future that we all want to see. It affects job opportunities, salary levels and the amount of money that the public have in their pockets at the end of a week. It is our mortgage payments, rent, energy costs and the cost of fuel for our cars and to heat our homes. Our economic success is also central to improving and reforming our public-sector services, and at times we do not help ourselves by not getting

on with transformation in some of the larger Departments.

As I have said several times in the Chamber, Alliance welcomes dual market access for goods, but, ultimately, that is second best to what we had as a full member of the EU, and Alliance regrets that we do not have the full benefits of EU membership, which include freedom of services, capital and movement of people. As a pro-European party, we want to be back in the EU.

I have also said several times that we must get moving with dual market access. We must maximise that opportunity and use it to turn our economy around. There is no point in having an opportunity while sitting back and looking at it or, even worse, continuing to walk up a cul-de-sac and argue about the past. We just need to get on with it and stop wasting time. As with many strategies that come through the House, it can be seen mistakenly that the strategy or agreement is the end goal rather than the starting point. We need to get off the starting line and aim for a future that we want to see. It is time to increase our efforts and our focus and to strive for better.

Alliance aspires to enhance North/South economic cooperation, bringing shared economic opportunity across the island of Ireland, alongside continuing to support our trade with GB, which remains our largest trading partner. Our business community is already leading that economic change.

Alliance has put forward proposals to focus and grow our foreign direct investment, but Invest NI should be working in partnership with IDA Ireland. The focus should be on attracting investment north of the border, not on trying to compete with IDA Ireland; on marketing ourselves to the world, much as we already do in tourism; on selling the benefits of investing in the North; and on prioritising working together to deliver jobs, increase our standard of living, increase investment here and, ultimately, raise our GDP.

### 11.30 am

The motion does not mention infrastructure, but infrastructure is essential to driving our economic growth. Alliance believes that we need to better connect North and South for the mutual benefit of every one of us. We need a focus on collaboration and connectivity, including fast railways, the A1 and A5 road upgrades and upgraded road and rail connections to our international airport to

deliver higher passenger numbers and attract new European, American and international connections. That would all help to reposition and focus our economic growth towards the North.

If we are to fully exploit dual market access, it is essential that we focus on delivery and focus on it now. That requires more than words; it needs actions.

**Mr Allister:** I will vote against the motion, fundamentally because it embraces the most anti-democratic concept available in a democracy: a people of part of the United Kingdom should be disenfranchised from controlling and legislating for the laws that govern much of their economy. I have already made this point, but I make it again: to be a member of the EU single market, which sadly we are, you have to subjugate your own sovereignty to that of the EU. In the case of Northern Ireland, that means that to enjoy the misnomered benefits of the single market, we have to subject ourselves to 300 areas of law that we do not make and cannot change: EU laws — foreign laws. The motion embraces that anti-democratic concept of disenfranchising the people of this part of the United Kingdom by making them colonial slaves to a foreign jurisdiction.

**Mr Tennyson:** I thank the Member for giving way. He talks about the democratic deficit, as he sees it, but surely he recognises that a majority of people in Northern Ireland voted for parties that want those special arrangements and that there is therefore democratic support for the current arrangement.

**Mr Allister:** My mission to educate the Member will never cease. I remind him again that the United Kingdom voted to leave. It was a single vote for a single nation. Sadly, we in Northern Ireland did not get Brexit; we got left behind. That is the source of the problem.

The Europhiles of the House are very keen to talk about their democratic credentials when it suits them, but, on this subject, we get stony silence. They do not want to defend the right of their electorate to pass the laws that govern them. That is the Achilles heel of the entire concept of the EU single market.

As for the panacea of dual access, where is it? Mr Kennedy, the US envoy, told us about the wonderful avalanche of companies that were just waiting to come. Where are they? The truth is that it is our services industry that has expanded, not our manufacturing industry. The

irony is that services are not covered by the protocol; they remain within a United Kingdom context. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Being in the EU single market is not benefiting the economy of Northern Ireland; instead, it is fettering our relationship with our biggest partner, hence the fundamental assault on our economic prosperity that access to the dual market brings.

It all comes back to the fundamental question: is it right — can it be proper — that a people be governed by laws that they do not make and cannot change? My answer is that that can never be right.

It did not have to be like this. There was an obvious answer, which actually emanated from some of those who worked for the EU. Sir Jonathan Faull, Professor Weiler and Professor Sarmiento all suggested that the answer to the Irish border problem was mutual recognition, and so it was. However, the Irish Government, in their political pursuit of unifying the island of Ireland through the protocol, rejected what is the basis of international trade elsewhere: if you want to make goods that are destined for a foreign market, you make them to the standards of that foreign market and vice versa, and you mutually enforce each other's laws. That is the fundamental element of international trade. We do not need a protocol. We do not need that which is encumbering our economy. What we needed was what exists elsewhere: mutual enforcement of each other's laws on goods. Instead, we have put up a partitioning border in the Irish Sea, and we are now spending £192 million building border posts to enforce that which is wholly unnecessary when it comes to securing trade between and within two independent sovereign entities, such as the EU is and such as the United Kingdom should be.

The motion is laced with its political ambition of dismantling the Union, and the protocol is the greatest aid to that imaginable. That is why it is couched in the terms that it is.

I welcome the fact that the DUP has found reverse gear from 'Safeguarding the Union', when it was embracing the idea of dual market access. The DUP now tells us that it wants rid of EU law. Good, because you cannot have dual market access and you cannot be in the EU single market if you are subject to EU law. The volte-face of Gavin Robinson is welcome. It is a pity that he was one of those who told us the lies that the Irish Sea border was gone and therefore lost the trust, as his party did, of those who are of a unionist persuasion.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** I thank the Members who tabled the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak to it. I assure the proposer of the motion that the detail that he has outlined will be responded to with detail and that it is not merely rhetoric that I am deploying on this issue. A number of Members contributed to the debate, and I thank them for their contributions.

The certainty in trading arrangements delivered by the Windsor framework provides us with a unique set of trading arrangements and offers unique opportunities for the North, both in inward investment and trade growth. It positions our region as a unique gateway for the sale of goods to two of the world's largest markets: Britain and the EU. The dual market access means that we are the only location where business can export goods to both British and EU markets free from customs declarations, rules of origin certificates and non-tariff barriers. Businesses based here can use EU inputs in their products without having to import them, enhancing the benefits for companies serving the British market. That is a unique proposition for businesses here, as well as those seeking a pivotal location from which to service British and EU markets, recalibrate supply chains or design, develop and sell products across key industries. Those industries include life and health sciences, aerospace, electronics and machinery, chemicals, consumer goods and agri-food goods. The benefits afforded by dual market access further enhance our already strong position as a prime location to establish or grow a business based primarily on the skills of our people.

The trade and investment opportunities available through our dual market access position of supporting more businesses to export and attracting inward investment will be a key catalyst in achieving our economic plan of a highly productive, zero-carbon, regionally balanced economy with good jobs. Indeed, exporting is a key driver of productivity growth, and, whilst the North performs favourably through a number of our businesses that sell outside the local market, there is significant potential to increase the value of our external sales. Our unique position of having access to both the EU single market and the British market provides us with the conditions to grow our external sales at scale. We can use that access and the appeal that it provides to foreign firms to invest and do business here to our advantage in pursuit of attracting high-quality, highly productive inward investment, which would benefit all parts of the North.



My Department and its partner agencies are working closely together to understand how best to maximise the opportunities that dual market access provides and how best to support businesses to take advantage of them. My Department has undertaken analysis and published information that uses regulatory indices that were developed by the UK Trade Policy Observatory to help businesses to better understand the post-EU exit regulatory environment within individual sectors. That work will assist businesses to better understand the types of products and sectors where dual market access opportunities could be exploited. We have also worked with Queen's University to publish information that helps businesses to understand the complexity of the regulatory landscape in the North.

To build on that work, my Department and Invest NI organised the first co-design workshop with a range of local business representatives. Output of the co-design session with businesses is a forward plan activity in addition to current Invest NI activities, including the establishment of a dedicated team in Invest NI to maximise dual market access opportunities, which will work in collaboration with colleagues in the Department for the Economy, InterTradelreland and relevant partners in Britain; a programme of engagement with businesses across the North to support them to maximise opportunities and navigate current trading arrangements; and a schedule of quarterly engagement with business representative organisations to continue the process of co-design. My Department has brought together key providers on export support and advice through the export forum. That will help to ensure that providers are joined up and working seamlessly together, delivering effective advice and services to our businesses and supporting them to expand into external markets.

Our unique dual market access adds to the proposition that makes the North an attractive place in which to invest. Work is well under way by Invest NI to ramp up the awareness and promotion of our dual market access proposition in key markets. Invest NI has expanded its on-the-ground resources across key EU markets to identify and maximise opportunities for businesses across the North and to promote the continued ease of sourcing goods from the region for buyers and our unique market access arrangements for investors. Invest NI has been promoting the advantage of dual market access in its discussions with buyers and investors, and it will supplement that with a campaign utilising social media, online and in-person events and

awareness raising at trade events. It has developed and is implementing a programme of trade visits and services to promote opportunities for local firms.

Further work is to be done with EU member states to highlight the fact that, unlike in Britain, Brexit has not introduced any barriers to importing from the North. However, disrupting long-established arrangements does not come without difficulties. I am aware that some businesses are experiencing issues with, for example, supply chains or delivery of their goods. Indeed, I am aware of a business in my constituency that is experiencing issues with sending orders to the EU and receivers experiencing customer charges. My officials and I will continue to raise those issues on behalf of businesses with British Government and EU officials, with whom we will continue to seek practical and pragmatic resolutions.

Article 14 — specifically, article 14(b) — of the protocol provides for the North/South Ministerial Council to raise issues to the Specialised Committee on the implementation of the protocol where there are perceived problems with all-Ireland trade. That could represent a useful mechanism by which to raise issues directly with decision makers on both the British and EU sides. If appropriate, and in consultation with the North/South Ministerial Council, I would be willing to explore the use of that existing mechanism. To support sustainable growth of the economy, we will need to continue to work in collaboration with both the British and Irish Governments on areas of shared opportunities and challenges. Indeed, as Britain and Ireland represent the two largest markets that businesses here sell to, it is clearly in our economic interest to collaborate in order to maximise the opportunities that are associated with dual market access, growing trade on a North/South and east-west basis.

Collaboration will also be key to unlocking the tremendous potential that the all-island economy possesses. The Windsor framework arrangements and our access to the EU single market for goods have protected the thriving all-Ireland economy. It is important to build on that for the benefit of all our people. The value of the all-Ireland economy and cross-border trade to growing exports will be important to achieving economic development. Sales to the South of Ireland grew by £1 billion, or 18%, in 2022. The total value of those sales is now £6.4 billion. I want us to make the most of our dual market access opportunities to support more businesses to export. For many, cross-border trade is the first step in developing that capacity.

Indeed, research shows that businesses that trade cross-border are more successful, resilient and profitable. Businesses that operate cross-border continue to benefit from the degree of mobility in the labour market provided by the common travel area, and that has been unaffected by the Windsor framework.

**11.45 am**

The work of InterTradeIreland has been instrumental in growing the all-Ireland economy. When it first opened its doors in 1999, cross-border trade was valued at €2 billion. The potential of the all-Ireland market has not yet been fully realised, but it is today valued at €12 billion, which is an all-time high.

InterTradeIreland, in its role as the only all-Ireland trade development agency, has done a lot of foundation work on bringing agencies together through collaboration. Those agencies include InterTradeIreland, Invest NI, Enterprise Ireland, the Department for the Economy and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Over the past two years, that work has been positively influenced by the funding commitment from the Shared Island Fund for the enterprise scheme, which is valued at €30 million. That investment, over the next three to four years, will allow the economic development agencies on the island to work together to enhance collaboration, develop shared programmes and support businesses, North and South. It represents the first time that all three economic development agencies across the island will work together to deliver such an initiative. That will be a boost to the whole island and particularly the border region by addressing ingrained disadvantage and by increasing economic inclusion and innovation growth.

The Government in Dublin recognise, as do I, the importance of growing and sustaining the strong economic ties across the island that will be key to our economic growth and shared future. By cooperating on shared challenges and opportunities, we will be able to better realise the potential of the all-Ireland economy. Cooperation is already occurring in areas such as tourism, with the award of €7.6 million by the Irish Government through the Shared Island Fund for a programme of work on a tourism project that is to run from 2023 to 2025. The project will develop a new all-Ireland tourism brand collaboration and marketing initiative to be administered by tourism agencies on a cross-border basis. We must also pursue other areas, such as those that relate to the net zero agenda, on an all-island basis.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister will recall that one of the boasts of the 'Safeguarding the Union' Command Paper — the DUP's deal — was that legislative action would be taken on the duty to cooperate North/South. Has the Minister seen any sign of that?

**Mr C Murphy:** We continue to develop the outworkings of all of that. I can assure the Member that organic growth, North to South and South to North, has already been significant, and we will continue to provide whatever support we can in that regard. If that requires legislative action, that is something that we will look at. My sense is that some of the rhetoric in the Command Paper was more about reassuring people than providing any significant impetus. The foolishness of trying to put up barriers to something that has organically been very successful over the past 10 years and that has benefited local businesses from all areas and communities across the North is nonsensical.

Pursuing a circular economy will require all-island collaboration and increased resource efficiency to foster innovations through clusters and networks, reduce waste, stimulate secondary materials and strengthen supply chains.

I will move on to trade. Following discussions between my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the first joint international trade mission will take place later this year. The mission will be delivered in partnership by Invest NI, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland to grow jointly the economy on the island. Those organisations will support a joint delegation of fintech, edtech and related technology companies from across the island, with a view to increasing export sales. Building on that cooperation, Invest NI will also look to identify potential opportunities for further and more systemic collaboration with Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and other organisations. I will also continue to work with the British Government, through the east-west structures that were set up recently and the new Intertrade UK body, although, to date, we have had no clarification from the British Government on Intertrade UK's structure, role or responsibilities.

Dual market access provides the North with a unique selling point, and we must leverage that

position in order to grow our exports and trade and to attract investment.

I turn now to some of the points that were raised in the debate. I hope that I have addressed the detail of what the proposer is seeking through the motion. I can assure him that we continue to work on those issues. The DUP complained about the internal trade barriers and argued against our denial that those barriers existed. In the whole Brexit debate, most of us who were on the other side of thinking that Brexit was a bad idea argued precisely the point that introducing trade barriers would disrupt trade right across, and that is essentially what has happened as a consequence of Brexit. The protocol mitigates the worst impacts of Brexit.

The other issue, mutual recognition, was also promoted by Jim Allister in his contribution. Mutual recognition of standards has been consistently rejected by the UK and the EU. It is unlikely that it will become an answer to the Brexit issue in the near future, so the Windsor framework remains the only viable option to ensure free flow of trade North/South and east-west.

Steve Aiken questioned the fitness of Invest NI. It has been through a very significant review, and the outworkings of that continue and will have the support of the Department in getting to that space. There have been very significant changes in Invest NI, and there will continue to be significant changes. I am sure that he is reassured, though, given his references to IDA Ireland, that the new chief executive has experience of working in IDA Ireland and will bring that experience to his job in Invest NI.

I am coming to the end of my contribution. I thank the proposers and those who contributed to the discussion. As a consequence of being given some relief in relation to the whole Brexit debacle, we need to continue to get on with making the best advantage of that. We have already begun that work. The response of businesses to that has been evident over the last period of time. We will continue to do that work in our own businesses, but also with the possibility of attracting investment from other countries.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am pleased to be able to wind up on today's debate, which was fulsome and constructive; many interesting points were raised. Before I come to my substantive remarks, it is important to say that, in taking advantage of dual market access, there is no detriment to anyone's constitutional perspective. That is important. Believing in dual

market access and supporting the potential for dual market access does not encumber or get in the way of anyone's constitutional aspiration, despite what Mr Allister and others say.

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

**Mr O'Toole:** I will come on to some other remarks, but I will give way briefly to Mr Allister.

**Mr Allister:** How can it but interfere with one's constitutional integrity if you move from a situation of being governed by laws made in your own country — you elect representatives to make those laws — to a situation where you subject yourself to foreign laws over which you have no control? How could that not be a huge constitutional and democratic deficit?

**Mr O'Toole:** If you believe in the perfect fetish of sovereignty at all costs, and that is the thing that you focus on exclusively, and you think that is how you define identity and citizenship, I accept that. I have also accepted and acknowledged that, for many unionists, the protocol has presented difficulties. It would be nice if the Member would acknowledge that, for many of us, Brexit presented profound challenges to how we see ourselves as Europeans, and, for many of us who believe deeply in an open border on this island, it was profoundly offensive. He constantly pushes the idea of constitutional perfection. We do not have constitutional perfection here, because we are a complicated place. I believe in a new Ireland without a border on it; he does not. I respect his position. I would appreciate it if he would respect that many of us are offended by the very fact of Brexit itself, but I want to move on and make some remarks in relation to the broader debate.

Our motion was long. We made the Clerk read out an entirely long motion because we wanted it to be detailed, to be specific and to have multiple aspects and clauses to it. What does that mean? It means that the motion offers real opportunity not just for maximising dual market access but for creating a substantive plan for dual market access and how we leverage it and benefit from it. I want to reflect on a couple of the comments that were made.

I welcome the fact that Mr Delargy acknowledged that this was a unique opportunity for the North. I will touch on some of what Deborah Erskine said. She is coming back into the Chamber now: perfect timing. Deborah Erskine said that the UK internal market is important and that our motion did not reflect that. *Au contraire*: it states that the movement

of goods from east to west is critically important. It also states that the UK Government will have a role in dual market access and maximising its benefits. That is therefore an unfair reflection of what our motion states.

Mrs Erskine also said that article 14 has nothing to do with benefits from the protocol. I do not think that that is true either. I do not think that there is any fair reading of what article 14 of the protocol states. It does not suggest that it could not have the role that we outline. By the way, some of the points that are made repeatedly about the lack of democratic input are and were designed to be answered specifically by article 14 of the protocol, which offers a role for the North/South Ministerial Council, a body that is democratically accountable to Members of the Chamber. I am afraid, therefore, that that point just does not stand.

She talked about mutual recognition. As has been said by the Minister, mutual recognition has been, with the greatest possible respect, virtually laughed out of court by any serious economist or trade specialist, particularly in relation to the island of Ireland, which has very specific needs and requirements. It is important to say that Mrs Erskine represents Fermanagh and South Tyrone, a border constituency. There are cattle that graze in County Monaghan and County Fermanagh. That is not an unusual thing. She will be aware that there are cross-border farms, and, of course, things such as our dairy industry are entirely cross-border. Whether or not you believe in constitutional change, you cannot pretend that the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland are on opposite sides of the world; they are not.

Eóin Tennyson pointed to Almac, which is a striking example of a regulated company, as he said. It is the case that those that operate in highly regulated environments, including pharmaceuticals, are exactly the kinds of companies that are well placed to benefit from the protocol, because they have substantive regulatory operations and may want the political and regulatory certainty that comes from our protocol arrangements. He is also right when he says that political certainty and some stability here are critical to us being able to leverage investment.

I welcome very strongly the input of Steve Aiken, who acknowledged that there is a degree of balance in our motion. It is important to acknowledge that, as Steve Aiken said, for a significant period, IDA Ireland had been strikingly focused on the needs of the Republic. I do not dispute that at all. In fact, I think that I

said it in my opening remarks. It is the case that IDA Ireland and Invest NI have operated as competitors and rivals. Clearly, that does not have to be the case. There is the potential for partnership, and our motion is all about delivering on that sense of partnership.

There were a number of inputs from other Members. David Honeyford talked about the benefits, and he outlined the Alliance Party's position. I reassure him that the SDLP has been talking about this for some time too, but I am glad that we are on the same page. It is important that parties can collaborate on such matters.

Since it came up on a couple of occasions with my dear colleagues to my right, I want to touch briefly on the point about us rejoining the EU. As someone who worked in Whitehall for years and worked there in the middle of the Brexit years — that is, in large part, why I am here now — I think that, for the foreseeable future, it is strikingly, if not vanishingly, unlikely that the UK will rejoin the EU. I genuinely wish that it were otherwise for a whole range of reasons, including personal ones. I do not think that it is very likely, in part because significant trade-offs would have to be made. An enormous amount of political courage and political bandwidth would be required for it to happen.

The truth is — if people were honest with themselves, they would know this — that the only meaningful way back into the EU — to be clear, this is not what today's debate is about — is constitutional change on this island and a new Ireland. That is my position. I recognise that others may differ from it, but I think that it is the only realistic one. To be clear, that is not what this motion is about. The motion is not about the constitution; it is about our current constitutional position and maximising the benefits that we have and can see from dual market access. As I said in my remarks, we are a complicated place. We are a dual place, in many ways. Dual market access reflects that dualism and the fact that we face both ways. We face both ways politically and culturally in terms of allegiance. Why not derive an economic benefit from it?

I welcome the fact that the Minister has appraised and is supportive of the broad principles of the motion. We have sought to be constructive in opposition the whole way through our time here.

I acknowledge the fact that the Minister is engaged on the all-island economy and has committed significant time to cross-border work. He will recognise that we will want to hold him

to his word on some of that stuff and to keep corresponding with him about the implementation of the specifics of the motion, which calls specifically for an action plan to be provided to the Assembly later in the year. We would like to see the Minister provide that in some form and will ask him for that. Let me be clear, however, that I welcome his intent and that we look forward to that intent being implemented through action.

## 12.00 noon

I also point out that the use of article 14 and the making of representations to the NSMC is not to prioritise the NSMC over any other body. Any other body that exists under the Windsor framework or even that exists more informally is welcome. I would like to see those of us in the Chamber having observer status in the EU Parliament and being able to make representations there. I see some raised eyebrows across the Chamber: I recognise that that is not universally popular, but I am up for any opportunity that allows us to input or improve our input into how the protocol works and, ultimately, to maximise the economic benefits. Those economic benefits are real; we enjoy them already. Think how great they could be if there were political stability here and proper buy-in. That would not compromise or undermine anyone's constitutional position; quite the opposite, in my view.

I commend today's first Opposition day motion to the Assembly. I thank everybody for their constructive contributions, and I very much hope that the motion will pass.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 50; Noes 20.*

## AYES

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Egan, Mr Elliott, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Miss Hargey, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Miss McAllister, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr*

*O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Tennyson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Durkan and Mr McGrath*

## NOES

*Mr Allister, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Robinson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brooks and Mr Harvey*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly affirms the huge opportunity afforded to our local economy as a result of the dual market access available to businesses here, allowing the seamless movement of goods into both the EU and UK markets; recognises that this opportunity has the potential to deliver tangible benefits in terms of job creation, inward investment, improved wages and productivity and improved regional balance; acknowledges the importance of continued efforts to ease the flow of goods moving from east to west and also the need to mitigate damage to North/South services and trade not covered by the protocol/Windsor framework; notes that deriving full benefits from our advantageous trading position will require focused intergovernmental and inter-agency work; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Irish Government to establish a joint Invest NI/IDA Ireland working group, drawing on expertise from InterTradeIreland, interested business groups and, where relevant, the UK Department for Business and Trade and the EU Directorate-General, to develop a clearly defined strategy to maximise the huge economic advantages afforded to Northern Ireland, with the aim of providing reports to the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), which will in turn furnish recommendations under article 14 of the protocol to the Specialised Committee on the protocol/Windsor framework; and further calls on the Minister to provide an update to the Assembly on the establishment of this working group and its actions not later than the end of 2024.*

## 12.15 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Members, please take your ease while we change the top Table.

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

## Cross-border Healthcare

**Mr McGrath:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly acknowledges the daunting challenges facing our health service; laments that Northern Ireland has fallen behind the Republic of Ireland and the rest of these isles on several healthcare outcomes; understands that a solution to our healthcare challenges will not come solely through increased funding, but also through reform of our services; recognises that a key element of this will be further collaboration with the healthcare service in the Republic of Ireland; acknowledges that certain bespoke specialist services, in particular perinatal and paediatric post-mortem services, which are currently not available in Northern Ireland, could be delivered more efficiently and compassionately on an all-island basis; calls on the Minister of Health to work with the Irish Minister for Health to identify how the two jurisdictions can work together to reduce waiting lists, harmonise healthcare pay rates, and deliver bespoke specialist services on an all-Ireland basis.*

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

**Mr McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on cross-border healthcare. The SDLP tabled the motion with the public firmly in our minds. We are very much an ageing population, and I certainly feel that myself as the years go by. That being the case, our reliance on our health system will only increase over time, whether that be for one-off visits or for people who require more sustained and repeated care. At the heart of today's debate are two words that sum up what our approach to healthcare on an all-island basis should be: "efficient" and "compassionate". At the outset, I want Members to know that, in approaching the debate, whilst we are discussing people's ability to avail themselves of healthcare in the South, that in no way diminishes anyone's sense of national identity. Receiving healthcare in Dublin will not make those here who are British any less so.

There is nothing new about cross-border healthcare. The provision of such healthcare has been a key element of the European Union for many years. As a result of our exit from the EU, many here who had been able to avail themselves of care in the South through cross-border healthcare were worried about what the future of that provision might be. As one that does not support Brexit, our party was committed to ensuring that we minimised the adverse impact that Brexit threatened. Therefore, we were concerned about the loss of the cross-border healthcare directive in 2020. To set it in context, between 2019 and its closure, there were well in excess of 3,000 reimbursement claims for the cross-border healthcare directive at a cost of just over £15 million. The former Minister of Health, Robin Swann, then introduced —

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I am always astounded that people put so much emphasis on cross-border healthcare. Will the Member agree that there is an inherent inequity in that people who want to avail themselves of that service have to provide the money up front before they can claim it back and that, even then, they may not be able to claim all of it back? That is an inequality in the whole set-up. I would like to hear the Member's views on that.

**Mr McGrath:** I do not disagree with what the Member said, but, of course, the greatest inequity is that people are not getting their healthcare and are being forced to use their savings to pay for it up front. I want to see a system whereby people do not have to claim money back and, instead, treatment can be approved so that they can get it without having to make any payment. That would remove that inequity from the system. The bottom line, however, is that, if that system were not in place, none of them would get any treatment or relief from the symptoms of illnesses that some have been living with for a long time.

I will mention again the number of people whose pain has been alleviated. There was also the Republic of Ireland reimbursement scheme, which was introduced by Minister Swann. Between its introduction and closure, there were over 3,500 reimbursement claims at a cost of just over £21 million. If people did not have that system to invest in, they might end up going privately. If they do so, they will get nothing back. At least this way means that those who have the money can pay for the service, get treatment and claim it back. That takes pressure off the system, which will help others to avail themselves of services. It is an imperfect system, because it addresses a

problem that should be resolved in a different way.

Think of the 6,500 people whose lives have been supported and improved through our capacity and willingness to work with our colleagues in the South, whether they needed a new hip, cataract removal, scans or cardiac surgery. The schemes covered a range of interventions. All those conditions, however, could be addressed through our willingness to work together through a scheme that costs a fraction of our healthcare budget. It is an efficient use of our healthcare funding. You cannot put a price on the impact of those operations. If people did not have them, the impact on their quality of life would be enormous.

It should also be noted that the second scheme that I referenced was delivered by a unionist Health Minister. It is an important point to make, as it recognises our ability to reach beyond ourselves and deliver positive outcomes for all members of the public, regardless of our own views or constitutional aspirations. That must surely be the sort of vision that we need to look for in our Government working together. Imagine if we had been without Ministers at the time of making those decisions. I am not so sure that the schemes would have been introduced. There would have just been more uncertainty. That underscores the importance of having this institution up and running so that Ministers can take the decisions that are required to provide services for the community. If we could see delivery of such a short-term scheme, which would deliver positive outcomes for the public, each of us could then consider our capacity for further joint health working with colleagues in the South. Members of the Health Committee and those beyond it know the full range of problems in our health sector. Many segments of the health service are clogged up by long waiting lists, meaning that people are not getting the outcomes that they need.

The services could provide care to women and families in some of the most emotionally charged and heartbreaking situations. I refer specifically to the perinatal and paediatric post-mortem services that we do not provide here. The absence of a paediatric post-mortem service and the fact that we still cannot access the service in the South result in many women and families having to access the service in England. While it must be said that the service puts care and compassion at its heart, I cannot help but think that it is worth exploring whether we would be able to provide the service on this island.

We must give credence to the need for cross-border working, given the increasing reach of Sláintecare in the South. That reform of services delivers positive health outcomes in the South, but it is also quickly becoming an attraction for healthcare staff from the North. I will set it in context: a primary care doctor in the North could earn around £75,000; in the South, they could earn an average of €130,000, which equates to over £100,000. Think of what could be achieved in some areas if we were to commence cross-border working to help deliver some elements of primary care as well. Meanwhile, again for context, in the past five years, we have spent well in excess of £11 million on GP locum cover alone.

As we commence the debate, I look forward to hearing Members' contributions and hope that they demonstrate a willingness to do some imaginative thinking in order to deliver positive health outcomes for all members of the public. I hope that Members across the House will support our motion, remembering that efficiency and, most importantly, compassion are at its core.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Member for proposing this important motion. It is no secret that Sinn Féin's vision for the future of healthcare is one that encompasses an all-island health service because it makes sense. Yesterday, all parties supported our motion on all-island cancer research. In discussing that, nobody disputed that that makes sense. It is the way in which we need to go.

The proposer of the motion mentioned the importance of cross-border, all-island healthcare in reducing the colossal waiting lists in our health system, with people's conditions continually worsening as they languish on waiting lists for not weeks or months but years. We have to think outside the box, which means collaborating with our colleagues across this island and sharing our resource, knowledge and expertise. In more and more conversations with individuals, organisations and professionals, it is being said, "We want to get the best care for people. We want to ensure that they get the best outcomes". I know that the Minister has said that achieving better outcomes for patients is one of his priorities. That is where we need to go, and the motion will help formalise that and emphasise how we work together.

As I mentioned in yesterday's debate, the Oireachtas Health Committee will come to Belfast next week, about which I am really excited. It is the first time that we have done that, and that in itself shows that there is

appetite for the Assembly Health Committee and the Oireachtas Health Committee to work together. I hope that it is the start of something really progressive and productive. We will meet representatives from the Queen's University Centre for Cancer Research and others to look at the opportunities that exist across the island. We have a small island and a small population overall. Looking at the population in the North, I think that it is equivalent to that of a big city such as Glasgow. The potential of the resource and talent that we have across our island is huge. There is so much that we can do.

I am being parochial, but it is not surprising that I should mention my hospital, Daisy Hill, which is the only hospital between Drogheda and Portadown and serves a huge area of Newry, south Armagh, south Down and, indeed, north Leinster. It is ideally placed, as a central location, to provide healthcare on an all-island basis, and, indeed, it already does so. In many cases, for people from the South or other parts of the North, it is the closest hospital when something happens to them. Likewise, there is huge potential for our Ambulance Service, which is increasingly pressurised. I recently spoke to a family who had an emergency situation with a child and were ever so grateful to get any ambulance. We can do a huge amount of work on an all-island basis to ensure that we get resources to people at the right time so that they get the right care.

The Member who spoke previously talked about the loss of our workforce. Our health service workforce, as we have said repeatedly in the Chamber since the Assembly was restored, is the underpinning issue to be fixed to ensure that we have the right capacity to deliver services for all our citizens. We are, however, losing our workforce to the South, where there are more attractive jobs and better conditions. The Member referenced Sláintecare. Why do we not pool that resource? Why can we not work together to ensure that we provide really high-class services? That is doable, and it is not all about money. It is something that we can do if there is the will between the two Health Departments.

I agree with everything that has been said. We have so much potential because we are a small island, with the maximum distance that anybody would have to travel taking just a couple of hours.

If we work together, we can achieve so much more, and it is certainly something that I support. My party has produced a document on its vision for all-island healthcare, and I hope

we can see some of that with the support of the House for this important motion.

### 12.30 pm

**Mr Robinson:** Yesterday, the House considered a motion on cancer. Today, there is another sensitive issue in the Order Paper: post-mortem services for babies and children. At the outset, I sympathise with any parents who have had to walk through this highly traumatic circumstance. Few will know what it feels like, and I cannot imagine how difficult it is. I hope that all Members will be very sensitive to that fact today.

At the core of the motion is the fact that, since the end of 2018, the health service in Northern Ireland has been left without a single paediatric pathologist. All Members will agree that that is unacceptable, and I look forward to the Minister's explanation of not only what measures have been taken by the Department to recruit a consultant in this field but when that staff member will be in place.

Today, we wish to make it absolutely clear that we fully support those services, but simply exporting the issue to Liverpool or Dublin is not acceptable. However, the motion as drafted seems to just accept the fact that perinatal and paediatric post-mortem services, which are currently unavailable in the Province, could be delivered more efficiently and compassionately on an all-Ireland basis. The outworking of that premise is an acceptance that parents should travel with their baby for a post-mortem in Liverpool or Dublin. In our eyes, the status quo of a trip to Alder Hey Children's Hospital or the alternative of a considerable drive to Dublin is unacceptable.

Let us show some empathy to those in that situation. With the Liverpool or Dublin option, the parents travel with their child, but leave their crucial support network of wider friends and family at their most vulnerable time and when that support is most needed. We want to be clear that the service should be available in the health service in the Province, and we unfortunately cannot support a motion that forces parents on a journey of hundreds of miles with their loved one during a time of extreme personal trauma. The service needs to be provided by the Department of Health, and it is unforgivable that we do not have a local solution after nearly six years. We support the contention in the motion that more money is not the key to resolving the well-documented issues that face the health service today. That said, health has been prioritised by the Executive



and has seen its baseline funding increase by £2 billion since 2020.

With regard to the later parts of the motion, we refer Members to the Bengoa report, which the current First Minister launched when she was the Health Minister in 2016. The 'Systems, not Structures' report by Professor Bengoa was designed to deliver the transformation the health service needs and to achieve the best clinical outcomes for people here.

In closing, I recognise and commend the work of the charity Sands. It is an organisation that supports anyone affected by pregnancy or perinatal loss and provides bereavement care and support for parents in those very difficult circumstances. We cannot support a motion that appears to accept the failure of the Department of Health to provide this incredibly important local paediatric pathology service for parents going through that traumatic experience. Exporting it is not the answer; solving it is.

**Mr Donnelly:** I thank the SDLP Members for tabling this motion as one of the Opposition day debates. It is good that two important health motions have come before the Assembly this week that recognise the many challenges our health service faces. We will support the motion.

It is unacceptable that we have the longest waiting lists on these islands and some of the longest in Europe. In particular, our waiting lists are significantly longer than those in the Republic of Ireland. Based on official figures from last year, twice as many people in Northern Ireland were on a waiting list for an appointment, despite having approximately a third of the population. The disparity was much larger for people waiting over 12 months: approximately four times as many people in Northern Ireland. Anything that can be done to reduce those waiting lists must be done.

One aspect of the motion that is particularly encouraging is the recognition that the transformation of our health service will not be achieved solely through increased funding but that fundamental reform is also needed. That will require difficult decisions and, more importantly, political leadership from all Members of the Assembly and the Department of Health. As mentioned, we have had the Bengoa report, 'Systems, not Structures', effectively sitting on a shelf for the past eight years due to years of prolonged political instability. Outside this specific debate, we need fundamental reform of the Assembly and its structures so that it cannot collapse again

through the actions of one party, otherwise we can never commit to the required long-term planning and multi-year budgets needed for transformation.

We discussed all-Ireland cooperation yesterday in relation to cancer research, but I want to discuss such cooperation more broadly. It makes sense, from a geographical perspective, for example, that, at the North West Cancer Centre at Altnagelvin, which is partially funded by the Irish Government, approximately one third of its yearly patients are from the Republic of Ireland, mainly Donegal, which is just a few miles from Derry; otherwise, such patients would have to travel to Galway or Dublin. On the other hand, there has been an increase in the number of children from Northern Ireland receiving heart surgery in Dublin, since heart surgery services in the Royal Victoria Hospital ended in 2015. That vital network continues through cooperation with Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Dublin, which is very accessible for people in Northern Ireland. It is only a few hours in a car, bus or train.

It is important to recognise that one of the main challenges to cross-border health cooperation is the challenge posed by Brexit. Some of that relates to funding. In the short term, much of our current funding continues through PEACE PLUS, but, in the coming years, it will become increasingly uncertain as to whether equivalent UK funding is available. The loss of EU regulations and directives providing benefits in respect of cross-border healthcare is also of significance, not only on this island but across the EU. The temporary reinstatement of the cross-border healthcare directive in 2021, for one year, was a welcome step by former Minister Swann to help reduce the waiting lists. However, we need a more proactive and permanent approach to reduce waiting lists, and cross-border healthcare cooperation should be considered as a part of that approach.

As mentioned, pay rates, compared with the rest of the UK and with the rest of Ireland, remain an important issue here in Northern Ireland. We have discussed in previous debates how pay is much lower here compared with other jurisdictions. For example, in last month's debate on the motion on junior doctors' pay, it was acknowledged that junior doctors work very long hours and face the longest waiting lists in Europe for the lowest pay in the UK. It is well known that the Republic of Ireland both higher pay and fairer working conditions compared with here. As such, many healthcare workers are working in the South as opposed to working in their local health service. That is obviously not an issue in England, Scotland and Wales,

and it is important that the Minister considers the specific circumstances here in Northern Ireland when addressing pay issues in any discussion of future pay settlements.

There are many opportunities for potential cross-border cooperation, particularly in relation to healthcare, but, in order to realise those, we need to confront the challenges and barriers posed by Brexit, and we will need political stability here to deliver the long-term reforms and to establish the long-term relationships needed, North/South, to improve our health service for the benefit of patients across the island of Ireland.

**Dr Aiken:** There is no doubt that our health service is facing some unprecedented challenges. Our overall waiting times position remains wholly unacceptable, and our health workers are operating under huge pressure. Similarly, major demands remain on services such as primary care, social care, dental and pharmacy.

It might seem easy to say that our health service is sliding in only one direction and that turning it around is beyond us, but neither I nor my party share that view. Even though the likes of the elective care framework has never been fully funded by the Executive, not least because of the repeated stop/start nature of this place, there has still been some notable transformation and progress made. For instance, thanks to decisions made in 2021, treatment waiting times, at least, have been falling steadily. Of course, we absolutely accept that we were starting from an appalling position and that overall waiting times are still far too long, but it is worth noting that, for those waiting for treatments, in the space of 12 months, the number has reduced by 15,000, by over 12% overall. Some very positive progress has been made for those waiting for inpatient day-case treatment in areas such as general surgery, which has seen the waiting list fall by over 20%. Similarly, progress has been made in cutting waiting times in ENT, gynaecology and urology. That shows that, where there is a clear focus and political will, any kind of progress can be made.

My party will always stand ready to utilise any and all opportunities to help patients and staff. That includes working on an all-Ireland basis when beneficial. We know that there are areas of such cooperation that currently work well and that, similarly, there are other areas that could work better. We need to recognise that it is not a panacea. There are major pressures in the Republic's health service also. It is grappling with the very same challenges that we are: poor

waiting times, changing demography and the rising costs of care and treatment.

We acknowledge that a gap in pay is developing on the island of Ireland, which will raise particular challenges locally. It is not just the health service that is being impacted; it is education, a slate of other public services and private commerce. In reality, never mind not keeping up with pay in the Republic of Ireland because of the failure of the previous Executive to agree a Budget, and then the absence of Ministers even in post, our health workers have too often had to watch their pay falling well behind that of their counterparts, even in the rest of the UK. Thankfully, however, due to the work of the previous Minister of Health in January 2020, and again in February of this year, parity has largely been restored. It is essential that the Executive give a commitment to fund and maintain that. Without a stable workforce, the improvements that we want to make simply will not be possible.

Progress needs to be accelerated even further. I welcome the publication of the updated elective care framework only a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, however, the recent Budget, which was agreed by Sinn Féin, DUP and Alliance Ministers, in which the Health budget was cut by 2.3%, will greatly impact on the ability to drive through further improvements. MLAs need to be aware that, as it stands, the Executive have not provided a single penny of targeted funding to spend on tackling waiting lists. It is, therefore, totally incoherent for the Executive to try to claim, as the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party still do, that tackling waiting lists is a priority for them. Quite frankly, it is not. At the same time, the Budget did not even meet the Department of Health's basic plea just to keep up with red-flag cancer and other time-critical treatments.

Although we welcome any further improvements that can be made through working on an all-island basis, as well as on the vital east-west basis, the reality is that the greatest potential for reform and improvement still sits with what is available on our own doorstep. To do that, we require a collective willingness.

**Miss McAllister:** I thank the Member for tabling the motion, which the Alliance Party is happy to support. Since the Assembly was restored in February, we have had many discussions about the state of our health service. One thing has been clear in every one of those motions: the status quo is simply not working. That is why Alliance has been consistent and unwavering in its calls for the transformation and reform of the

health service for many years. There must be a willingness to look at how services can be delivered in the most efficient way possible, with better outcomes, ultimately, for our constituents.

I understand that the Minister is new in the role and that it may take a number of weeks or months for his plans to be brought to the Assembly, but I hope that, in good time, some of those priorities will be progressed through the Assembly and the Health Committee. In particular, I note the reconfiguration blueprint. The Committee was told that that would come forward, possibly, in June. I wonder whether the Minister, in his response, will confirm whether we will see that within the next two weeks.

One thing is clear from the people who give evidence to the Health Committee, whether they are allied health professionals, doctors, nurses or anyone else in the health sector: their patients tell them that they are willing to travel for treatment. We, too, hear that from our constituents. They want the best healthcare possible, and if that means that they must travel for it, they are more than willing to do so.

#### 12.45 pm

We have seen the success of that in the elective care and surgical hubs. People have been more than happy to move outside their city or rural area in order to get seen quicker. A further example of how transformation can work through all-island cooperation are the children's heart services. A number of Members mentioned that. I think about that service quite a lot. A child in my family has a heart condition and relies on it. A topic that comes to mind for all parents is that their child's health is a priority, and you would be willing to travel to wherever is needed so long as it is provided by the state — well, maybe not so long but as long as it is provided by the state. That is the crux of it.

Just yesterday, as Members who spoke previously mentioned, we spoke about cooperating on an all-island basis on cancer research. The Good Friday Agreement was clear in recognising that cancer impacts everyone equally across these islands. Since then, there has been ongoing cooperation on cancer research. I hope that, in the coming months, the Minister will develop not only the policy links on that on an all-island basis but the delivery of services, because that is crucial here.

Whilst we speak of the delivery of those services, I want to touch on the cross-border directive. We need to reflect on the realities of

that, because when it comes to the independent sector across these islands, we are cementing a two-tier health system. It is a two-tier health system for those who, ultimately, can put money towards their healthcare. That is not acceptable and is not something that we should rely on. I understand using it in the short term to tackle waiting lists. The Committee has heard many times from stakeholders that those who are on some waiting list for longer than three months in the Republic of Ireland are seen in the independent sector, where Sláintecare provides the healthcare. However, they actually come up here to Northern Ireland and are seen in the independent sector, where their state provides the care, so something does not quite add up there. We cannot have a cross-border directive whereby we allow people to travel only to the Republic of Ireland. If it can be done here in Northern Ireland, we should allow that too. I hope that the Minister will speak on that. Officials said that the issue would be brought back to the Committee within a number of months, so I look forward to hearing about it.

There is cross-party agreement in the Chamber that the healthcare sector cannot continue with the current status quo, that waiting lists are rising unacceptably and that patients are experiencing complications and additional harm while waiting. Also, staff are choosing to work elsewhere. We all agree that it is not acceptable in the current circumstances to see an exodus of staff every single year from the health service up here in Northern Ireland to that in the Republic of Ireland. It is crucial now that the Minister shows leadership on the issues —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up.

**Miss McAllister:** — and that all parties are willing to work together on the matter.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Nuala. Minister, you are next to respond. You have around only 12 minutes. If you can do it now, well and good. If not, we can take you immediately after Question Time. It is up to yourself. There is no pressure.

**Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health):** I will wait, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** That is your prerogative. That is fair enough. As Members know, the Business Committee is due to meet at 1.00 pm. Given that we do not have enough time for the Minister to respond, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend now. The next item of business will be Question

Time, and immediately after that, the Minister will respond.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.49 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Communities**

#### **Social Housing: Rural Areas**

1. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Communities what measures are being considered to meet social housing targets in rural areas. (AQO 612/22-27)

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):** I am committed to ensuring the vitality and viability of our rural areas and to addressing rural housing need. One of my key priorities as Minister is the delivery of social housing.

The delivery of social housing in rural areas presents significant challenges and often requires different solutions from those that apply in urban areas. In an effort to address those issues, the Housing Executive, through its rural action plan, has shown its commitment to helping to address need and sustain local communities. In rural locations, the Housing Executive carries out housing needs tests to determine whether there is a hidden housing demand not evident from the waiting list, and it listens to requests from local elected representatives and community representatives. To assist housing associations in areas where it is difficult to secure sites, the Housing Executive also carries out site identification studies. That involves examining all underdeveloped lands within a settlement and seeks to identify potential sites for the future development of social housing.

Additionally, my Department has set up a steering group that includes representatives from my Department, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the Housing Executive and Land and Property Services. The overall aim of the steering group will be to explore the barriers to rural housing development and develop a plan to address them. Those barriers include land, grant, need, infrastructure and planning.

**Mr Blair:** I thank the Minister for that reply. Will he outline how he is ensuring or, perhaps, working with others to ensure that social houses planned for rural areas will be energy-efficient?

**Mr Lyons:** That is important to me, because I also have responsibility for anti-poverty and fuel poverty issues, which go hand in hand. It is important that we make sure that all our homes are energy-efficient, whether they are in urban or rural areas. Not only does that help us to meet our climate change targets, but, more importantly, it helps people to stay warm and keep more of their money.

**Mr McHugh:** Have the Minister or the Department's steering group received an update from the Housing Executive in respect of the findings of the recent study that ran until 31 March by researchers at the University of Liverpool and University College London regarding the consistent missing of rural housing targets? If not, when does he expect to receive that information?

**Mr Lyons:** I am due to get the research paper to which the Member refers by the end of June; I have not received it yet. He is right to highlight that there have been significant difficulties in reaching the targets that have been set. Those targets have not been met for quite a few years: the information that I have is that, in the past five years, they have not been met at all. That is an issue of concern that we need to address.

**Mrs Erskine:** It will be no surprise to the Minister that I am interested in housing need in rural areas. He referred to issues around hidden demand and to his ministerial engagement with stakeholders. What steps is the Minister taking to identify hidden demand, specifically in rural areas?

**Mr Lyons:** It comes as no surprise that the Member raises again, as she frequently does, the issue of the need for more housing in rural areas, particularly in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. She is right to highlight the issues around hidden demand, which are more prevalent in rural areas. To identify and address those issues, the Housing Executive carries out housing needs tests in selected rural areas every year. Each test is tailored to suit the designated area. That can involve community meetings, engagement with the local primary school and a public information event. The Housing Executive will also promote the test on social media and engage with community representatives and local politicians to ensure that the information reaches people who are in need of a home. Through those tests, the Housing Executive will work with rural communities to promote its range of housing services and encourage those in need of a home to come forward and register on our waiting list. If the Member knows a particular

area that, she believes, needs to be highlighted, I encourage her to contact the Housing Executive about that.

**Mr McGlone:** Minister, what engagement is there between your Department and the Department for Infrastructure on the lack of capacity at NI Water, which is causing paralysis of development in many areas, including social housing?

**Mr Lyons:** The Member is right to raise infrastructure issues, and I have no doubt that those will come up again during Question Time, because one of the biggest drags that we face is not being able to progress with the building that we want to see. All of that will be part of the draft housing supply strategy, and I have committed to working with Executive colleagues to make sure that we get commitment and buy-in from other Ministers, including the Minister for Infrastructure, to make sure that those issues are addressed. Waste water and planning are also issues. If those issues are not resolved satisfactorily, it will make our housebuilding targets even more difficult to achieve not just in rural areas but across Northern Ireland.

## Housing Supply Strategy

2. **Ms Ferguson** asked the Minister for Communities when the housing supply strategy will be published. (AQO 613/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** As I said at a Communities Committee meeting in April and at the all-party group on homelessness in May, I am reviewing the housing supply strategy. I will take that forward as quickly as possible, and I am working on it now. I have also been working closely with my officials to update the strategy to ensure that it remains accurate and aligns with current policy. Doing that has emphasised that addressing the issues that are impacting housing supply is outside the gift of any one Department. We need to make sure that we have a collaborative approach across the Executive to deliver the houses that are so badly required.

This needs to be a whole-Executive strategy, so I have written to my ministerial colleagues in the Departments of Finance, Health, Infrastructure and Economy. Those Departments have key strategic remits, and I need them to buy into the strategy. I plan to meet those Ministers — I have my first meeting organised with the Minister of Finance — to seek their support for the approach set out in the strategy and their commitment to deliver the necessary actions to

make the transformational change that is required. Once that work is finished, I will bring a finalised strategy to the Executive for their consideration and approval as quickly as I can. I want this to be a priority for the Executive, and I want the funds in place to back that up.

**Ms Ferguson:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. We recognise — I think that everyone in the Assembly does — that the £15 million that has been allocated to new-build social homes will allow only up to 400 new-build social starts in 2024-25. I know that you met a number of housing associations last week, and I welcome that. That is a reduction of well over 1,000 homes, and it is not where we need to be. I welcome the update that you have given on your liaison with all Departments. Where would you say we are in relation to housing being a priority in the Programme for Government?

**Mr Lyons:** First of all, I will say that it has been a disappointing last number of weeks with budget allocations. I accept that no Minister in any Department is happy with the budget that they have received. I am particularly disappointed with the budget that we have because, frankly, starting 400 social homes this year is not good enough and is not where we need to be. I want to make sure that that changes, and I will do everything that I can to make sure that we increase that number. I will work with Executive colleagues to highlight that and to make sure that we get back to where we need to be.

I was pleased to meet the housing associations last week. They expressed their frustration, but we had a good conversation about the way forward as well. I assure the Member that I will do everything in my power to ensure that we continue to invest in social homes and make the most of the funds that we have.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you, Minister, for the information on the housing supply strategy. Can you tell the House what plans you have to allow the Housing Executive to, once again, enter the home-building market and to re-profile its finances to ensure that it can do that successfully?

**Mr Speaker:** Minister, before you reply, I remind Members to speak through the Chair. You are not the only one, Mr Dickson; it is happening on numerous occasions. I remind Members to address the Speaker and ask the Minister a question through the Speaker.

**Mr Lyons:** When I first came into office, this was one of the first things that I raised with officials, because we are not in a good enough place right now when it comes to housing. I fear that we will be dealing with constrained budgets for the foreseeable future, and the status quo just is not acceptable. We need to do things differently. We are exploring options. Last week, there was a useful Innovation Lab meeting, and I look forward to getting a read-out from that.

There are not many real game changers in this place, but one that we can have for Northern Ireland is the transformation of the Housing Executive's borrowing powers. That would be good for two reasons. The first is that it would be able to build more social homes. The second is that it would be able to renovate or refurbish social homes as well. At this point, we are in real danger of allowing some of our existing stock to simply become uninhabitable. I absolutely want to see that change.

I have been pressing Executive colleagues. Obviously, it will require engagement with the Treasury, and it is not appropriate for any Department other than the Department of Finance to do that, but, from discussions with Executive colleagues, I believe that there is cross-party support to see that change, because, ultimately, it will allow us to build more homes and to make a real change and difference to people's lives. That is what we should be here to do.

**Mr Durkan:** Has the Minister made clear to the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues in no uncertain terms the impact that the Budget would have on his Department's ability to deliver social housing, in particular?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes, I did so in my engagement with the Finance Minister prior to the Budget's being set. In conversations with Ministers, I made clear the impact that that would have. I am not sure whether I gave an exact number for the impact that it would have on housebuilding, but it was always clear that a constrained capital budget would impact on housebuilding, given that the majority of my capital budget is and always has been spent on building houses.

I understand that there are pressures in every Department. I would like to have had more money. We have to work together. We have to do the best that we can with what we have. It underlines the need for us to ensure that we get that fair funding agreement with the Treasury. In the meantime, I will do the best that I can with what I have. I will also look at novel options

that may be available to us to enable us to increase the supply of housing.

### **Football Pitches: Investment**

3. **Mr Brooks** asked the Minister for Communities to outline what plans he has to invest in pitches for grassroots and community football, to meet the growing demand. (AQO 614/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** The Northern Ireland football fund — formerly called the "subregional stadia programme" — will provide investment for football at all levels. I want to roll out the first funding awards as quickly as possible. However, it is important that the funding is disbursed in a fair and transparent manner. Therefore, my officials are finalising plans for my approval, and I plan to make further announcements later this year.

**Mr Brooks:** Clubs in my constituency are thankful for the work that the Minister is doing and his commitment in that area. With the growth of football, particularly the women's game and inclusive football, demand in East Belfast is certainly outstripping supply. Many clubs will be keen to speak to and engage with the Minister. Will he join me soon to visit Dundela Football Club and Shorts Football Club, in particular?

**2.15 pm**

**Mr Lyons:** Yes, I am more than happy to meet the Member in his constituency. He has already had me down to visit a club or two, and I am happy to go again. He highlights an important issue — the lack of provision in East Belfast — but, unfortunately, the issue is not unique to East Belfast. It is very much the case in East Antrim as well. In fact, I know of many examples of young people who are being turned away from playing, simply because clubs do not have the pitch capacity that is required. It is important for me that performance clubs get the support that they need, but it is also important that we make a difference to grassroots provision. I say that because football has an impact on people's mental and physical health and well-being. Sport, and participation in sport, can go a long way to ensuring that we have happier and healthier citizens in Northern Ireland. There is clearly a need in East Belfast, as there will be in many other constituencies, and we stand ready to help. I look forward to accepting the Member's invitation.

**Ms Kimmins:** The recent funding announcement is very welcome in my constituency of Newry and Armagh. The Minister mentioned East Antrim and East Belfast, but we have dire facilities. That is an issue that is raised regularly. We have some of the top teams in the North, such as Cleary Celtic Football Club, which won its third title in a row at the weekend, and some younger teams, such as Lisdrum Youth Football Club and Windmill Stars Football Club, coming through, which demonstrates an —

**Mr Speaker:** Does the Member have a question?

**Ms Kimmins:** — exponential growth in grassroots football for young people. Will the Minister give a commitment to work closely with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to upgrade facilities and provide facilities that the teams across my area not only desperately need but, more importantly, deserve?

**Mr Lyons:** First, I put it on record that I am sure that every constituency across Northern Ireland has fantastic football clubs that do fantastic work, and I am sure that they are all in need of resource. The Member mentions her constituency and makes an important point about the council. In many cases, councils have been essential partners in some of the development that we have seen take place so far. Under the Northern Ireland football fund, that will also be the case. It is important that councils work closely with the Department to deliver funding. It is worth making the point that, when it comes to applications to the fund, it is not about a pass or a fail. Rather, we want to work together with clubs to ensure that they get to the position that they need to get to so that they can avail themselves of the funding when it becomes available. I am absolutely committed to working in partnership with clubs and other important stakeholders, such as councils, to make sure that funding is delivered.

**Ms Egan:** Will the Minister elaborate on the criteria that he will use to allocate further funding?

**Mr Lyons:** The criteria are still being finalised. I hope that the Member listened to the speech that I made at Windsor Park, although, unfortunately, it may have been overshadowed somewhat by an announcement that the Prime Minister made on the same day. We will be setting out a number of criteria against which clubs will be scored. Clubs will need to make a number of commitments. First, a monetary commitment will need to be made. We need to

make sure that clubs are financially viable, because there is no point in building something that they are not able to maintain. They will also need to demonstrate how the facility is going to improve their community and how they will get more young people and women involved, and they will need to make sure that there is disability provision. Those are all factors that will be taken into consideration. Again, I emphasise the point that we want to work with clubs. We are not trying to catch anybody out. We are not trying to make sure that clubs cannot avail themselves of the fund. We will help them through the process so that they can indicate how their application will make a difference, how it will fulfil a need and how it will improve the community overall.

**Mr Speaker:** I hope that you were not as wet as the Prime Minister.

**Mr Elliott:** As the chairman of a local club, I welcome the Minister's announcement about investment in local football. At what stage are the business case projects for the funding that was announced on 2 October 2023? Funding seems to be being allocated to senior clubs.

**Mr Lyons:** That work is ongoing. We hope to provide additional funding to help those that want to progress their case. If there are specific clubs or issues that the Member has in mind, I will be more than happy to provide that information.

**Mr McNulty:** It is crunch time, it is do or die, it is high noon on proceeding with the Casement Park project so that it will be ready for Euro 2028. The redevelopment of Casement Park is a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and it must be seized. It is a huge opportunity for the North, a beacon of hope and reconciliation. What are you, your Department and your Executive colleagues doing to ensure that Casement Park will be delivered in time to host the Euro 2028 games?

**Mr Lyons:** First of all, it is important to note that Casement Park is separate from the Northern Ireland football fund. Those are two separate issues. They are not linked to each other. The Member may not be happy with what I am about to say, but it has not changed since the last time we discussed it in the Chamber. The Casement Park redevelopment, in its current form, does not have the funding package together. We do not have that commitment from the UK Government. That is what is holding up any progression on that issue. I expect to get further information on that when the new Government are in post.

## Ulster-Scots Links: USA

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Communities whether he has any plans to enhance Northern Ireland's Ulster-Scots links with the United States of America. (AQO 615/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** The contribution and influence that the early Ulster-Scots migrants made to the traditions, values and history of the United States of America is immeasurable. From the American Revolution, including the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the war of independence, through to the establishment and development of a new nation, Ulster-Scots settlers played a hugely important role. Indeed, no fewer than 20 of the 45 men who have served as President of the United States can trace their roots to Ulster, including, of course, Andrew Jackson, whose parents left Carrickfergus, in my constituency, in 1765.

The success of the Ulster-Scots Agency's recent exhibition at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), which celebrated the role of the Ulster Scots in shaping the events leading to the US Declaration of Independence, highlights the opportunities. We need to do better at exploiting those opportunities and the incredible potential that exists. I am therefore delighted to announce today that I have established a United States/Northern Ireland cultural working group, led by my Department. The group involves key agencies here and in the United States, including the Northern Ireland Bureau, the Ulster-Scots Agency, PRONI, Tourism Northern Ireland and Tourism Ireland. The group is working to identify new opportunities and to develop a programme of cultural engagement in the United States and in Northern Ireland. It will promote the role of the Ulster-Scots early settlers in influencing American society and commemorate the 250th anniversary of American independence in 2026. I am excited about the opportunities to develop a greater understanding of Ulster-Scots links with the United States and to build new partnerships to achieve cultural, social and economic objectives.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for his response and welcome his announcement. Will he consider working with local councils, which have well-established links, particularly through sister cities? The relationships are already in place in the United States, and I will give an example of Belfast and Nashville. I also encourage the Minister and his officials to meet and discuss his proposals with the Ulster-Scots Community Network, which is the



representative body for the Ulster-Scots community in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Lyons:** Yes, absolutely. I agree with everything that the Member has said. First, I think that councils play a really important role in helping to foster those social and cultural links. The sister cities projects are a great example of how you can establish those, and I think of Belfast and Nashville in particular.

I also take on board what she said about the Ulster-Scots Community Network. It is key that it is involved. There is huge potential here to exploit all the links, and I do not think that we have maximised that potential. I would love to see everybody involved in making sure that we make the most of it, especially as we head towards the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

**Ms Mulholland:** I agree that we have not tapped the full potential of the Ulster-Scots cultural and linguistic community here. Does the Minister agree that, before we look externally, we need to fully recognise the potential here and look at some initiatives to promote Irish and Ulster-Scots culture and language together and promote inclusivity of all languages in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Lyons:** First, I do not think that this is just a language issue; it goes into heritage, history and culture as well. Secondly, I do not think that it is about excluding anybody or pitting one against the other. We have very distinct links with the United States that have not been exploited very much. We see the influence of Irish America. It is there, and that is to be welcomed. However, I do not think that the Ulster-Scots influence in the United States has been there. There is a lot more work that we can do. That is something that I want to see happen, and it is something that I hope will happen. It is about developing and building those relationships, all for the benefit of people here. That is why we have included the tourism organisations. We would love to see more people from the US come here. We want to make sure that PRONI is ready to help them, because we understand how important ancestry and family history are to many tourists. The group is about making sure that we do everything we can to exploit the links that are there and the fantastic history and heritage that exist between Northern Ireland and the United States.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, I welcome any progress on building the Ulster-Scots brand in America. I have been to Andrew Jackson's house outside

Nashville. The Scots-Irish/Ulster-Scots contribution is huge. It is cross-community and cross-border, as is the Irish language, because, of course, it predates the partition of Ireland and lots of the divisions that have emerged since. Obviously, we are waiting on an Irish language strategy, and that is determined by statute. Will you, please, inform us where that is at the minute, acknowledging, as I have, the importance of the work on Ulster Scots?

**Mr Lyons:** Again, I make the point that, when it comes to the links that we are trying to exploit and develop here, it is not just about language. I am certainly not trying to pit one against the other. I want to make sure that Northern Ireland benefits from this. That is what I intend to do, especially when it comes to the culture, the heritage and the language, as well as the values that contributed so much to the development of the United States.

The language strategies are with officials, and they are being progressed. I will have an update for the House in due course.

## **Accommodation: Non-standard and Temporary**

5. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities what steps he will take to address the increased use of non-standard temporary accommodation. (AQO 616/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** We have an immediate issue with the use of non-standard temporary accommodation. It is not good for families — they need the security of their own homes — and it is very expensive. There are far too many households in temporary accommodation — almost 5,000 — and, on any night, there are between 400 and 500 in hotels and B&Bs. The average stay in temporary accommodation is now over 34 weeks. These are children who are not near their schools and people who are away from families and support networks and who are unable to get to work.

The Housing Executive assures me that the use of non-standard accommodation is only out of necessity and is due to unprecedented demand. The Housing Executive has made it clear that it is committed to reducing the use of non-standard accommodation. It has, for example, initiated a housing solutions task and finish group to look for alternative and more financially sustainable options. I have asked the Housing Executive to focus on that work and to provide me with monthly updates on the use of temporary accommodation. I assure the Member and, indeed, the rest of the House that

I will do all that I can to get the issue under control.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you for your answer, Minister. Non-standard temporary accommodation has risen by over 500% in my constituency. I am dealing with a particularly distressing case in which one of my constituents — a young woman who has just had a caesarean section — has been returned to a hotel bedroom along with her baby and toddler. That is no way for a child to start their life.

Will the Minister look into that matter and see whether we can get her out of that temporary accommodation, now? It is affecting her mental health and well-being, and that of her two children.

**Mr Speaker:** Minister, you have about 10 seconds.

**2.30 pm**

**Mr Lyons:** Temporary accommodation is not suitable for any family, especially in the circumstances that the Member described. If she would like to meet me afterwards or to contact my office, I will make sure that we look into that and see what we might be able to do.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes that batch of questions to the Minister. We will move to topical questions. The first question has been withdrawn.

## **Grassroots Sports: Funding**

T2. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities what support has been given to grassroots sports over the past three financial years. (AQT 412/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Over the past three financial years, up to March 2024, Sport NI has issued Exchequer funding of almost £39.4 million and National Lottery funding of just over £17 million. That funding consisted of 3,394 grant awards to over 1,963 bodies, which included grassroots sports governing bodies. In 2023-24, Sport NI invested £7.1 million of National Lottery funding into 37 sports governing bodies, and that figure will increase to almost £8 million. In 2023-24, Sport NI awarded just over £1.37 million of capital funding for the purpose of improving sports facilities, including those that will benefit grassroots clubs.

By way of comparison, I can advise that, of the funding paid out that year, the Irish Football Association received £500,000, Ulster GAA received £440,000, Ulster Rugby received £450,000, golf received £264,000 and tennis received £52,000. The £1.37 million of capital investment programmes that were administered included the Building Better Sports Facilities programme, the Your School Your Club initiative, stadia safety and the renewable energy fund, and nine different sports have benefited.

**Mr Harvey:** Will the Minister join me in wishing reigning world and European champion gymnast, Rhys McClenaghan, from Newtownards, well for the Olympic Games to be held in Paris this summer?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes, absolutely. I wish him all the best — not just him, but all those from Northern Ireland who are competing in the games. Rhys is a fantastic athlete and an incredible competitor. He has had huge success in Europe and at the Commonwealth Games and is an inspiration to many people across Northern Ireland. Of course, I absolutely want to wish him well.

I recently took the opportunity to visit the Sports Institute at the Jordanstown campus of Ulster University. It was great to meet those who are going to the Olympics or hoping to go to the Olympics. I hope that I speak on behalf of the House when I wish them all the very best in the coming months, not just at the Olympic Games, but at the Paralympic Games in August and September. It is worth reminding ourselves of something that was certainly made clear to me when I was at the Sports Institute. We think of the individual athletes, but there is an incredible team behind every one of those athletes, and they deserve our thanks and appreciation for the work that they do.

I get some difficult questions in the House. Am I willing to wish Rhys well? Yes, I absolutely am.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Beattie and Ms Ennis are not in their place, so I call Mr Brian Kingston.

## **Supporting People Programme**

T5. **Mr Kingston** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the impact that his budget for 2024-25 will have on the Supporting People programme. (AQT 415/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** The Supporting People programme is a vital service that provides invaluable housing support to vulnerable people, enabling

them to have better quality of life, live more independently in the community and maintain their tenancies. My Department works closely with the Housing Executive on resource allocation to analyse budget requirements and assess the impact of each year's DFC budget on the Supporting People programme. More than 70% of the Supporting People budget is used by providers to pay the salaries of Supporting People staff across 850 services. In March 2024, I announced £3 million of additional funding for the Supporting People programme for the 2023-24 financial year. That funding, which the Northern Ireland Housing Executive distributed to accredited providers, was to help sustain those vital housing support services and support providers during the difficulties of the current economic situation. Notwithstanding the significant budgetary constraints this year, I have decided to provide a £4.8 million increase in funding for the Supporting People programme that goes above the 2023-24 final equality impact assessment budget position in order to help ensure its continued viability.

**Mr Kingston:** I welcome the increase in funding for the Supporting People programme and recognise that the Minister is operating in a very constrained budgetary environment. Will he make sure, as far as possible, that funding goes to those projects that make the greatest impact on people's lives, are strategic and have long-term benefits for the people of Northern Ireland?

**Mr Lyons:** Yes. The Member is absolutely right to raise the issue because we are in an era of constrained budgets, so it is important that we spend every pound as wisely as we can and in a way that most benefits people in Northern Ireland. Those are really difficult decisions. None of the budget process was easy. We have many good programmes that deliver for people across Northern Ireland, and it was a very difficult budgetary process, but I decided to increase the funding that is available for Supporting People because it makes a real impact and changes lives. Moreover, if that money were not made available, I would simply be pushing problems on to other Departments — I would impact even more on the Department of Health and, in many cases, the Department of Justice — so the approach that I am taking to spending public funds is to make sure that they go to where they make the greatest difference. I know that others will not be happy with some of the outcomes and that we will face an awful lot of difficulty, but, as the Member set out, we need to make sure that we spend money where it can make the most difference.

## **Athletics Northern Ireland: Facilities**

T6. **Mr McMurray** asked the Minister for Communities whether, given that Athletics Northern Ireland is required to hold its Ulster and NI indoor championships in Leinster due to the lack of a facility in Northern Ireland, he and his Department have any plans to investigate whether such a facility could be developed in Northern Ireland. (AQT 416/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Although that matter has not come across my desk to date, I will be more than happy to get additional information or meet the Member to discuss it further. Whether people from Northern Ireland have to go to another jurisdiction or even to a town that is further away from them in order to compete or train, I do not think that that is acceptable. I want to make sure that we have the facilities for our sports here in Northern Ireland, and I am committed to doing what we can within the budget envelope that we have to make sure that we deliver in that way.

**Mr McMurray:** I thank the Minister for his response, and I will take him up on his offer to engage further.

**Mr Lyons:** I would be more than happy to do that. Perhaps the Member will get in contact with my private office so that we can get the arrangements made.

## **Poverty: Cost to Public Services**

T7. **Ms Egan** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the cost to his Department of public services in addressing poverty, following a presentation to the Committee for Communities last week by the British Association of Social Workers. (AQT 417/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Poverty has costs to the individual and to society as a whole. Research shows clear evidence that poverty affects a child's start in life. It increases the risk of poor health and well-being and of below-average educational outcomes, and it can impact on development in a child's early years. It is equally clear that intervening early to address the issues that people suffering socio-economic disadvantage face will have long-term positive impacts on those individuals, potentially freeing resources for use elsewhere. I am therefore determined to deliver an Executive anti-poverty strategy that helps children and young people to get the best possible start in life, have the opportunity to live in safe, stable homes, have a good education

and get a good job. Those issues can be tackled only by collective action by our Executive. I want to make sure that, as an Executive, we have alignment of approach, and a focus on prevention and early intervention will be essential.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you, Minister. Do you agree that, in order to better address the issue, we should have an Executive-wide audit of the cost of poverty to our public services, especially given the situation that we are in with our public finances?

**Mr Lyons:** That is certainly an important part of the work that we do in the Department for Communities. Monitoring the impact of our work is very important, and we want to make sure that we have robust data when it comes to measuring the impact of the Executive's anti-poverty strategy in the short, medium and longer term. To support the development of the anti-poverty strategy, departmental officials have conducted a number of research projects as part of DFC's economic and social research programme. The research has shown that many factors are identified across the literature that increase the risk of falling into poverty. Many have been found to stem from early years, with multiple childhood factors heavily affecting the risk of poverty in the future. That data is important, and we have it to an extent in the Department, but it is an interesting idea to make sure that we have that across the Executive, because it is important that we are able to define exactly what the problem is, understand how we fix it and measure that against the targets that we set. Having the data will be important to doing that.

## Larne Swimmers: Olympic Selection

T8. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Communities to join him in welcoming the fact that Danielle Hill and the Wiffen boys, who are swimmers from the great Larne swimming team, have been selected for the Olympics. (AQT 418/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** Again, that is not a difficult question to answer, especially when there is a constituency link. The Member will not be surprised to hear that I do not disagree with him. Of course, I absolutely want to congratulate them, and I look forward to seeing further success. In fact, I will be meeting them very soon.

**Dr Aiken:** Minister, one of the issues that we have with promoting excellence in swimming across Northern Ireland is the lack of facilities.

We have had real difficulties in getting a 50-metre pool, which, for some particular reason, has been stuck in the permanently down position. Will you ask your officials to look at how we can ensure that, at least in Northern Ireland, we can have the facilities to support our Olympians?

**Mr Lyons:** I am grateful to the Member for his question, which highlights a number of issues. First, the need for us to make sure that we are investing in sport in Northern Ireland. We have already highlighted the importance of grassroots sport, and that needs to continue. We also have a responsibility to make sure that the appropriate facilities are there so that we can help our elite athletes. I am disappointed to hear that that continues to be an issue. It is not fair: not having the proper training facilities harms the potential of some of our athletes.

The Member has identified the need in swimming, but I have been informed of problems elsewhere, where the physical facilities have not been available or there has not been the coaching capacity to make the most of the potential of some of our athletes. He will be aware of the constrained budget position that we are operating in. However, there are always novel ways in which we can examine those issues. If the Member would like to discuss the matter further, I will be happy to do that, perhaps along with some of the other Members who have raised issues about facilities today.

If I have forgotten anybody who is competing at the Olympics, we wish them all the very best and look forward to many medals being brought home in the coming weeks.

## Social Sector Size Criteria Payments: Workaround

T9. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities, after stating that, when the Assembly was down, he was contacted by a number of constituents who were affected by social sector size criteria, which are crucial mitigations that we provide, with payment in one case being made in error and recovered from the landlord, leaving the person concerned with no recourse to get that payment set aside, when the workaround will be brought forward, given that his officials are aware of the issue. (AQT 419/22-27)

**Mr Lyons:** I am grateful to the Member for raising that issue. It is not something that I have been made aware of. Unfortunately, from time to time, people find themselves, either through

fraud or error, in a position where they have to repay. That is something that we are trying to limit, and a number of questions have been asked in relation to carer's allowance in particular. I am more than happy to look into the specific issue that the Member raised and see what can be done or what workaround can be put in place. If somebody has been affected in that way, with someone else being reimbursed on their behalf and the payment not being passed on, that is completely unacceptable. I am more than happy to engage with the Member and see what we can put in place to make sure that the issue can be resolved.

**2.45 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** The time for Members' questions has elapsed. Members should take their ease for a moment.

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

## Opposition Business

### Cross-border Healthcare

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly acknowledges the daunting challenges facing our health service; laments that Northern Ireland has fallen behind the Republic of Ireland and the rest of these isles on several healthcare outcomes; understands that a solution to our healthcare challenges will not come solely through increased funding, but also through reform of our services; recognises that a key element of this will be further collaboration with the healthcare service in the Republic of Ireland; acknowledges that certain bespoke specialist services, in particular perinatal and paediatric post-mortem services, which are currently not available in Northern Ireland, could be delivered more efficiently and compassionately on an all-island basis; calls on the Minister of Health to work with the Irish Minister for Health to identify how the two jurisdictions can work together to reduce waiting lists, harmonise healthcare pay rates, and deliver bespoke specialist services on an all-Ireland basis.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Minister of Health, Mr Mike Nesbitt, will now respond to the debate. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

**Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health):** Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. Perhaps I should begin by repeating something that I said in yesterday's debate: I have no ideological or political objection to further cooperation with health authorities in the Republic. I have no issue with exploring opportunities for reasonable cooperation on health, and, indeed, I look forward to my first engagement with my counterpart, Minister Stephen Donnelly. I understand that I am due to meet him next week.

When it comes to health and well-being, doing what is right will always be my main priority. My mantra, of course, is for better outcomes. Given that health services in countries across Europe are under pressure to varying degrees, it makes sense that we work together with our nearest neighbour in a mutually beneficial way to improve outcomes for everybody. There is, of course, a long-standing principle of cooperation and collaboration with health services in the

Republic of Ireland, where it has been demonstrated that it is safe, deliverable and beneficial to patients and their families in both jurisdictions. Indeed, we have seen very good examples of that in the all-island congenital heart disease network, a single service for children and young people across the island of Ireland; and in the North West Cancer Centre, which I shall return to later.

Specialist paediatric services, which are referenced in the motion, are, by their nature, relatively low-volume, high-complexity services, and many already operate on the basis of clinical cooperation with other specialist centres in both Great Britain and Ireland. For example, paediatric gastroenterology has on-call support with the South and referral pathways to Great Britain centres. Where there are further viable opportunities for cross-border collaboration in vulnerable or specialist services, these could and should be fully explored within available resources. Therefore, it is not so much a question of cooperation as of capacity. The child health partnership programme board, which was established to provide strategic direction for the child health partnership may consider vulnerable and specialist paediatrics as part of the future work plan of that partnership.

Regarding paediatric and perinatal post-mortem services, I will say, first, that I, of course, fully sympathise with the devastating loss that many people and families have experienced, and that includes at least one Member of the House. Therefore, I recognise the importance to them of having the causes of a pregnancy loss or of a child's death examined and understood in a professional and empathetic manner. Mr McGrath talked of two words: "efficiency" and "compassion"; I would add "professionalism" and "empathy". Paediatric and perinatal post-mortem services have been provided to Northern Ireland by Alder Hey Children's NHS Foundation Trust in Liverpool since 3 January 2019. That is when the service in Belfast became unsustainable, following the resignation of the sole paediatric pathologist. Families accessing the service receive all the clinical advice, psychological support and aftercare that they require. I understand that the uptake of the service is comparable with the uptake when it was based in Belfast.

That said, I certainly do not disagree that a service based on the island of Ireland could be somewhat easier for families who find themselves in that situation. However, until a full assessment of feasibility has been carried out, it is not possible to say that an all-island paediatric pathology service would be clinically

or economically viable. My Department remains committed to progressing scoping work with the Department of Health in Ireland to explore the feasibility of an all-island approach to those services. Progressing the feasibility assessment will require the commitment of Governments in both jurisdictions in order to proceed.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Minister, I met your counterpart in the South on various occasions, and he is openly willing to explore cross-border opportunities. He suggested that the impetus must come from the Northern Minister. All-island healthcare makes sense when it comes to sharing resources and expertise, tackling waiting lists and ensuring better health outcomes and efficiencies. The cross-border healthcare directive needs to be reinstated. Centres of excellence make sense. Does the Minister agree that Daisy Hill Hospital is primely positioned to become a centre of excellence and that it should be a hub hospital serving its natural hinterlands of the counties of Armagh, Down, Monaghan, Louth, Cavan and, potentially, even Meath? What does the Minister think?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I think that the Member has made a very good constituency pitch ahead of the next Assembly election. I will turn to the configuration of hospitals in the weeks ahead.

Returning to the children's services that I was talking about, I assure Members that significant efforts were made to retain the service in Northern Ireland prior to 2019. However, the provision of perinatal and paediatric pathology services is under considerable pressure across the UK and, indeed, globally, due to a shortage of paediatric pathologists. Our first priority must be to ensure that Northern Ireland maintains access to high-quality, reliable and timely pathology services at Alder Hey, at least in the interim, so that bereaved parents can continue to receive pathology reports as quickly as possible. I am reassured, on the basis of the feedback received, that parents have felt supported by the interim service provided at Alder Hey.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for giving way while talking about this important topic. He will know that, a number of weeks ago, Sinn Féin tabled a motion on baby loss certificates, which incorporated a discussion of this issue. I had hoped to be able to raise this point with the DUP Member who spoke on it earlier. For many families — I know many who have experienced this — having to send their baby on a plane to Liverpool is more traumatic. In the absence of being able to recruit a paediatric pathologist in

the North, does the Minister agree that it makes sense to have access to that service on this island, whether in Dublin or elsewhere, to make it easier for families going through that really horrible experience?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Chair of the Health Committee for her intervention. Would I like the service to be available locally? Yes, of course. Is it currently possible to do that? No, it is not, so what are the best alternatives? The Chair makes a compelling point about not having to get on a plane and fly. The scoping exercise will be conducted.

Mr Robinson made some points about the unacceptability of the service not being available in Northern Ireland. I assure him that I have taken advice from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and it appears that there is a move nationally to centralise services by having fewer centres, which is not the direction of travel that the Member wants to see, because of the international shortage of pathologists with a specialist interest in paediatrics. Alder Hey is one of those new centres. There are currently no trainees in the pipeline, and any internationally recruited postholders are likely to go to those national centres.

I remind the Member that the service was stopped because of the pathologist's retirement. I also suggest that, perhaps, it is the sort of job that people should not do for life. For example, when I was on the Policing Board, there were police officers whose job was to look through extensive files of images of child abuse and child sexual abuse. That is not something that any individual should do for a 30- or 40-year career, and that is part of the problem with paediatric pathology services.

Mr Robinson also talked about the Health budget. I gently say to him that there was no mention of assessed need in his remarks. The Minister of Finance successfully argued with the Treasury that our block grant should be based not on population but on need, yet it seems that, when it comes to the Health budget, need is forgotten. It is a big quantum, but it is there for a reason.

I mentioned the North West Cancer Centre. Based at Altnagelvin Hospital, it serves the whole north-west corner of the island, but it is not the only example of such cross-border cooperation on cancer care. The all-island cancer consortium — the Ireland-Northern Ireland-National Cancer Institute Cancer Consortium — was established in 1999, following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The consortium is credited with

saving lives and enhancing the quality of life for many cancer survivors by supporting work on cancer clinical trials infrastructure and an all-island joint research project, providing upskilling and training opportunities for scientists, doctors and allied health professionals. Meanwhile, cancer policy units in both Health Departments have had ongoing engagement over the past couple of years on identifying potential projects to submit as Shared Island Fund applications. Such projects include the use of artificial intelligence in screening applications, development of virtual rapid diagnostic clinics, further development of services at the North West Cancer Centre and development of community-based support services.

The motion highlights healthcare pay rates. Let me say at the outset that there is no easy fix. Although I acknowledge that pay rates are an integral element of the functioning and efficiency of healthcare services, I must point out that rates of pay across Health and Social Care (HSC) are linked to Agenda for Change terms and conditions. There is an established and valued policy of pay parity with England for Agenda for Change workers. It was hard-won. There is a nationally agreed set of terms and conditions under which all healthcare staff in HSC, with the exception of doctors and dentists, are employed. Those agreements are the basis for my Department's commitment to pay parity with England. The part of the motion that refers to harmonising healthcare pay rates poses me, frankly, an enormous problem.

Members will be aware of a Strategic Investment Board (SIB) assessment of pay and related issues across the public sector in Northern Ireland. My Department will engage with the Strategic Investment Board to look at wages, the cost of living, tax and other relevant factors across all neighbouring jurisdictions, including the Republic of Ireland. We need to better understand the differences between jurisdictions and attempt to determine potential areas of focus for our region. We should be mindful that different taxation rates, housing costs and overall cost-of-living factors are key parts of the picture alongside pay.

Waiting lists are a big concern for all Members, and, at this point, I make a plea to them. It is easy to make demands in the House for more investment in staff pay, tackling waiting times and a long list of other areas in which improvements are badly needed. We cannot be blind, however, to the current budgetary realities. We cannot engage in denial. Our waiting lists are not good. We can all agree on that. I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when

patients are suffering pain and discomfort. Long waiting times also have a societal impact that goes much wider than individuals. Waiting times in Northern Ireland are wholly unacceptable, and tackling them is one of the areas on which I have committed to focusing over the next three years.

Some progress has been made under the elective care framework, but there is much more to be done. The framework, published in June 2021, was updated on 24 May this year. It sets the strategic direction for the development and reform of effective and efficient delivery of elective care services here over the next five years, and it details measures that are needed to address the unacceptable waiting lists. For many years, we have been heavily dependent on the availability of additional, non-recurrent funding to tackle waiting lists.

The funding has been used to secure extra capacity both in-house and in the independent sector, including providers in the Republic of Ireland, across a range of elective specialities.

### 3.00 pm

Nuala McAllister asked about returning to the Committee with thoughts about bringing back cross-border programmes. We shall do that in due course. The Member also asked when we will have news about the structure of our hospital network and suggested that there would be a statement in June. However, it is more likely that it will come before the House in the week beginning Monday 8 July, because of the general election purdah period.

In addition, my predecessor introduced the Republic of Ireland reimbursement scheme in June 2021 as part of the elective care framework to help reduce lists. The scheme provided an option for patients to seek and pay for routinely commissioned health service treatment in the private sector in the Republic and have the cost reimbursed up to the cost of treatment to the NHS in Northern Ireland. I take Mrs Dodds's point that some cannot afford to pay up front.

I am running out of time, so I am glad I did not go for the 12-minute option before we broke. I acknowledge that Mr Donnelly said that the Bengoa report is on the shelf: it is not on the shelf. Some actions have been taken: for example, the day procedure units at Lagan Valley and Omagh Hospitals. I can inform the House that I was in discussions with Professor Bengoa as recently as yesterday, and he will have more to say about the reform of our health

service in the months to come, certainly before the end of the calendar year.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Minister. Recess is on Friday 5 July and not Monday 8 July, in case you want to bring something forward before that date.

I call Mark Durkan to make a winding-up speech on the motion. Mark, you have 10 minutes.

**Mr Durkan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* We have a health system whose prognosis is critical, where "urgent" no longer means "urgent", and "red flag" has lost its urgency. Patients face prolonged waits and uncertainty at the expense of their health. The erosion of those categorisations reflects a system under immense strain where timely access to care not only is compromised but, in some cases, seems to be a pipe dream. Practically every health service waiting list in the North is breaking records: bad ones. Half of the people waiting to access mental health services wait longer than nine weeks. Over 17,000 people are on a waiting list for occupational therapy and have been stripped of their dignity. Almost 25,000 people await orthopaedic surgery, with some, crippled by pain, being told they will wait seven years to access a knee replacement. How is that acceptable? Patients across the spectrum of health services are being referred for treatment for conditions that were once manageable but have become unbearable as a result of the unconscionable delays. The failure to deliver timely healthcare not only costs the public purse dearly but costs lives.

We stand at a critical juncture, facing formidable health challenges that were not created overnight. In fact, pre-pandemic, our waiting lists were 100 times bigger than those in England, a region with 30 times the population of here. The festering wounds of the health service went unsalved during political collapse. Past Health Ministers have failed to invest in health, and that saw our workforce driven to the picket lines not just to demand fair pay but to fight for the safety of the patients whom they care for. There was little attempt to resolve the situation. As a result, health has paid the heaviest price after more than a decade of mismanagement of, albeit, a shrinking public purse by the two big parties and a refusal to implement transformation as per the Bengoa report. The Executive had the key to reforming the health system but did not bother to turn the lock.



Embracing cross-border healthcare is born of necessity but also practicality. It is an imperative response to our growing waiting lists and healthcare disparities. As has been highlighted, collaboration with the South will allow the maximisation of available healthcare resources, provide opportunities for medical professionals through shared expertise and offer the potential for cost savings and better allocation of healthcare funds.

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

**Mr Durkan:** I am sorry. I will come to you at the end, if I have time, Patsy.

The success of the ROI reimbursement scheme is testament to the need to drive cross-border solutions. During its last iteration in 2022, over 2,000 patients availed themselves of the provision in just 14 months. People are contacting my office and, I am sure, those of others by the dozen, desperately seeking updates on the return of the scheme.

Painful time frames prove devastating for patients and their families. People are living in agony, their lives turned upside down in a health system that no longer catches people when they fall. Patients are turning to their credit union books, dipping into their life savings or, even worse, borrowing money from God knows who and God knows where to access healthcare. That is becoming an all-too-familiar story. While the scheme was not perfect, as Mrs Dodds was eager to point out, it offered a glimmer of hope.

The current system is ridiculous. We have patients criss-crossing the border weekly in their busloads for procedures in the North, such as cataract surgery; meanwhile, patients here cannot access the same treatment in a timely manner. That said, the North West Cancer Centre stands as a shining example of successful cross-border collaboration. Its success underscores the power of partnership and regional cooperation in delivering specialised healthcare services where they are needed most. I am conscious that it was the Speaker who was Health Minister at that time, as he often reminds us. Sadly, the pragmatism and vision that he demonstrated in that role seems to be lacking in his colleagues today.

Despite the state-of-the-art cancer services in the north-west, widening health inequalities have hit hard in that highly deprived region. The fact that a child in Derry has a life expectancy that is 11 to 15 years shorter than that of a child in a more affluent area is harrowing. The expected lifespan of a man in Derry is lower

than one in countries such as Lebanon and Cuba, according to research conducted by the Department of Health. The state of health here is not like Beirut: it is worse. It is incredible that, in a place as small as Northern Ireland, there are such disparities across and within council areas.

The largest inequality gap in the Western Trust and other trust areas was in deaths due to drug misuse. We see the impact of drug misuse and addiction: the bereaved parents whose lives have been shattered and the individuals feeling that they have nowhere else to turn. The escalation both in the severity and volume of cases is heartbreaking. At the moment, far too many vulnerable people fall through the gaps of addiction and mental health support services, and many cross the permeable border daily. It is no coincidence that drug-related deaths have trebled in a decade. It is a direct consequence of Tory austerity and failed leadership here.

On the motion, the harmonisation of pay, especially in border regions, is of particular importance to prevent our specialist staff leaving in their droves. It used to be the case that nurses, doctors and allied health professionals (AHPs) had to take a plane across the water or across the world for better-paid opportunities. Now, they just have to hop into their car and drive a few minutes down the road. Recently, I spoke to one health specialist who is paid two thirds more for her expertise across the border, as are several of her ex- and now new colleagues, who have headed South for more reward. Who would blame them? The failure to pay health service staff what they are worth is an embarrassment; worse than that, it is draining the lifeblood of the health system, and any savings that it achieves are false. Look at the spending on locums and agency staff and at the failure to deliver services. That is something that I implore the Minister to consider with regard to the capitation formula for trusts. He spoke of Agenda for Change and the need for pay parity. There has to be a weighting in border areas to prevent that haemorrhaging of staff across the border.

The Health budget is stretched to breaking point like a threadbare blanket, unable to cover all the needs. Inevitably, vulnerable people will fall through the gaps. However, we are no clearer on how the Government plan to address the crisis in health, and where are we with transformation? It is all well and good pumping money into a system — I wish that we could pump even more into it — but that system is crying out for reform. We need to do things differently to ensure maximum impact of the money that is spent.

We should explore or do more than explore all-island collaboration on bespoke specialist areas such as tier 2 obesity services, cross-border enhancements in social work services in safeguarding and data sharing, as well as perinatal and paediatric pathology services. That is vital. It is unacceptable that, since 2019, post-mortem examinations have had to be carried out in England due to a lack of specialist staff, adding further distress to grieving parents. Five years ago, I received assurances from the permanent secretary that work was under way to seek a cross-border solution. It is unforgivable that, to date, there has been no progress.

The DUP's position on this and its rationale for opposing the motion are typical of its approach to nasal amputation: it cuts off its nose to spite its face, an approach that continues to cost people dear. It is no wonder that our health service is in such a state when you look at the approach of our two biggest parties. They say that health is a priority when, clearly, politics always comes first.

Sinn Féin has had only one Member in the Chamber for the majority of the debate. I am glad to see that she has now been joined by a few more. I was worried that abstentionism had extended — sorry, been reapplied — to Stormont as well. I agree with Ms Kimmins's view, however, that getting into a car and driving, even for a couple of hours, is preferable for families to having to get on a plane on that most awful of journeys.

We must build a healthcare system that is responsive, resilient and compassionate —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up, Mark.

**Mr Durkan:** — a system that leaves no patient behind and values our heroic health service staff, who carry out Herculean tasks daily.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly acknowledges the daunting challenges facing our health service; laments that Northern Ireland has fallen behind the Republic of Ireland and the rest of these isles on several healthcare outcomes; understands that a solution to our healthcare challenges will*

*not come solely through increased funding, but also through reform of our services; recognises that a key element of this will be further collaboration with the healthcare service in the Republic of Ireland; acknowledges that certain bespoke specialist services, in particular perinatal and paediatric post-mortem services, which are currently not available in Northern Ireland, could be delivered more efficiently and compassionately on an all-island basis; calls on the Minister of Health to work with the Irish Minister for Health to identify how the two jurisdictions can work together to reduce waiting lists, harmonise healthcare pay rates, and deliver bespoke specialist services on an all-Ireland basis.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to take their ease, please, because we need the Minister in the Chamber for the next item.

**3.15 pm**

## **All-Ireland Tourism**

**Ms McLaughlin:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the importance of tourism as a driver of an all-island economy; further notes that the biggest port of entry for Northern Ireland visitors remains Dublin Airport; expresses concern that the UK Government's electronic travel authorisation (ETA) scheme poses a fundamental risk to all-island tourism; calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Irish Government to link the Wild Atlantic Way with the Causeway coastal route, promote Derry as the destination city linking both jurisdictions and include counties Armagh and Down in Ireland's Ancient East; and further calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the First Minister and deputy First Minister to formulate an agreed Executive position against the UK Government's electronic travel authorisation scheme, and to report to the Assembly on the progress of these issues no later than September 2024.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have five minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List. The Business Committee has therefore agreed that 16 minutes be added to the total time for the debate.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I am pleased to move the motion on all-Ireland tourism. For the past 26 years, tourism has driven higher employment, productivity and better well-being for so many people. In 2019, the sector contributed over £1 billion in revenue. Prior to the pandemic, it employed almost 71,000 people in the region, which is an increase of 9% since 2017.

We have a huge opportunity to work together as an island to build on that, including by extending the already successful Wild Atlantic Way brand into Northern Ireland. Since I was elected, I have been making the case for the extension of the Wild Atlantic Way and, importantly, the promotion of Derry as the regional capital that links our two jurisdictions. I am also happy to confirm our support for the Sinn Féin amendment on the inclusion of Counties Fermanagh and Tyrone in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. Supporting the integration and inclusion of those brands is not diluting our own tourism brands, as each region will continue to promote its own tourism assets, from the lakes of Fermanagh to the walls of Derry, the glens of Antrim, the Mountains of Mourne and many other beautiful places in between.

I have to be honest and say that, when I pressed departmental officials at the Economy Committee a few weeks ago about the integration of those globally recognised Irish brands, I was surprised to hear about the slow pace of progress. This concept has been discussed for many years, but I see no evidence of an action plan on linking those brands or of costings for signage, for example, which will be fairly significant. We all know the benefit of linking up those routes, so let us get on with it to attract people to that part of our island so that they can see our integrated offering.

In Newry, Mourne and Down, my colleagues have been campaigning for the inclusion of Counties Armagh and Down in Ireland's Ancient East. Bringing those counties into the brand could drive exponential growth in the tourism industry. However, it is not only a vehicle for economic growth: including Armagh and Down in Ireland's Ancient East is a vehicle for reconciliation. Given the enormous shared history of those counties for both major traditions on this island, the potential for telling our shared story to the world through an increased tourism offering cannot be overestimated. I hope that we can make progress at pace on the expansion of those brands.

There is also so much more that we can do for the sector as a whole. If we invest, we can grow it to be at least a £2 billion industry by 2030. However, we all know that the all-island tourism market faces significant challenges, not least in the form of the electronic travel authorisation scheme. Dublin Airport remains the biggest port of entry for most visitors to this part of the island. The proposal threatens that mobility and represents an existential challenge to the sector in some areas. The scheme, which is estimated to result in a loss of more than £160 million per year, is both flawed and misguided. It could have been dreamt up only by a Tory Government that lack knowledge and understanding of this island. Research has shown, in black and white, that that would discourage people from moving North to South, and the sector as a whole has been sounding the alarm. The Minister needs to work with the whole Executive to agree a position against the ETA.

We do not feel able to support the DUP amendment, which would snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. A time-bound exemption to the electronic travel authorisation scheme would not solve the problem; it would only lead to confusion on the part of our visitors. The full roll-out of the scheme by early 2025 must be stopped, and we are asking for a statement on progress on the issue by no later than September this year. While I understand that the Minister has written to the Home Office Ministers on that, we cannot keep on just writing letters. Hopefully, a new Government in Westminster will be more receptive to his engagement. I want to see the plan from the Minister and concrete actions.

Finally, I urge the Minister to progress the development and funding of the tourism strategy and the action plan to go alongside it. While the Minister's new partnership board is welcome, we need to see long-awaited delivery to support our communities and their potential by building on the progress of the past 26 years —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sinéad, your time is up.

**Ms McLaughlin:** — and making investments that are worthy of the sector's potential.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Sinéad. I call Phillip Brett to move amendment No 1.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the SDLP spokesperson —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, Phillip; just move the amendment.

**Mr Brett:** Apologies. I beg to move amendment No 1:

*Leave out all after "tourism as a driver" and insert:*

*"of the Northern Ireland economy; further notes that a significant port of entry for Northern Ireland visitors remains Dublin Airport; expresses concern that without appropriate mitigations, including an effective communications plan, the UK Government's electronic travel authorisation scheme poses a risk to inbound tourism in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic; calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Irish Government to explore links between the Wild Atlantic Way with the Causeway coastal route, promote Londonderry and the north-west as the destination linking both jurisdictions and include counties Armagh and Down in Ireland's Ancient East, whilst continuing to value and promote Northern Ireland's own distinctive tourism brand, Embrace a Giant; and further calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance to implement a limited and time-bound exemption of between five and seven days from the electronic travel authorisation scheme for tourists and tour operators travelling between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, and to report to the Assembly on the progress of these issues no later than September 2024."*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** You are grand. You have five minutes to propose your amendment, but you only have three minutes to make a winding-up speech. Start again.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you. I was trying to squeeze in as much as Ms McLaughlin managed to get in during her five-minute contribution.

I am pleased to move the amendment in my name and the names of my colleagues. Like Ms McLaughlin, I recognise the vital role that tourism plays in the economy here in Northern Ireland. There can be no underplaying of the revolutionary role that tourism has played in all communities across Northern Ireland, but we have some concerns with the Opposition motion.

Central to the building of Northern Ireland's tourism brand has been the recognition that Northern Ireland has a unique offering. I think of Ms McLaughlin's home city and the Our Time

Our Place and LegenDerry campaigns, both of which were unique to Northern Ireland. The motion does not recognise that and seeks to undermine the important role that we have as a stand-alone tourism offering on these islands. The Embrace a Giant Spirit campaign, which was launched by the Department in 2019, has been tested in the market, and the figures provided by the Department show that there was a 30% increase in the number of people showing an interest in visiting Northern Ireland due to our stand-alone and strong brand.

We fully support practical relationships and cooperation between both jurisdictions on this island on cross-border tourism, and that includes creating cohesive messaging on either side of the border. However, that needs to be taken forward through a partnership rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. As the House will be aware, responsibility for the development of the tourism product here in Northern Ireland rests with Tourism Northern Ireland, and that needs to be the outworking of the Minister's approach.

Colleagues on the Economy Committee will have read the opinions of respondents, including those from Ms McLaughlin's home city, on the tourism strategy that went out to consultation before the Minister took up office. I made the point at the Committee that all the evidence showed that there was no overwhelming demand from the sector for an all-island approach. The sector, rightly, wanted to see Tourism Ireland focusing on the market within Northern Ireland rather than Northern Ireland's being an afterthought. I encourage those who want to oppose our amendment to read the responses of those involved in the tourism sector here in Northern Ireland, because they reflect —.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I appreciate what he is saying.

However, I have worked for many years with the chamber of commerce in Derry, and we have pushed for Derry to be part of the Wild Atlantic Way for as long as it has been up and running. We saw the opportunity for us to be at the beginning and end of something quite significant and special on the island.

**Mr Brett:** I understand the unique case that you make. However, the point that I will continue to make is that Northern Ireland has a great tourism brand and any attempt to dilute that would simply undermine tourism right across Northern Ireland.

I will turn quickly to the ETA. I think that parties are united on the issue. However, an important thing to remember is that the European Union will introduce its own ETA scheme as well. I am sure that the Member will want to contact the European Union to tell it not to introduce that scheme. I know that her party leader continues to try to stop Brexit; maybe he could try to push this issue. What we need in this is a collaborative approach and the Executive and Assembly speaking with one voice. I am sure that, in summing up, she will make it clear that the alternative to the ETA here in Northern Ireland is to not have one in the United Kingdom.

When the Minister responds to the debate, I would be keen for him to update the House on a number of issues. One relates to the air connectivity review that his Department commissioned. I think that findings have come back to his Department. Air connectivity into Northern Ireland's three airports will continue to be a major source of tourism. We need to continue to build on that. I think that the Minister is looking at the terms of reference of the partnership board and whom he wishes to appoint to it. I am sure that the House would welcome an update on that.

My party would highlight the vital role that tourism from GB plays here in Northern Ireland. Tourists from GB are the single biggest group of visitors who choose Northern Ireland as a destination. The motion does not recognise that. There is more to be done to build on that, so all Members should support the amendment.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Your timing is spot on. Thank you, Phillip.

**Ms Á Murphy:** I beg to move amendment No 2:

*After "Ireland's Ancient East" insert:*

*"and counties Fermanagh and Tyrone in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands"*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Áine. You will have five minutes to propose the amendment and three minutes to make a winding-up speech. I remind Members that all other contributors will have five minutes.

**Ms Á Murphy:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. *[Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* I propose amendment No 2 to make the case for the inclusion of counties Fermanagh and Tyrone in the motion and to outline my constituency's link to Ireland's Hidden

Heartlands. As an MLA who represents Fermanagh and South Tyrone — in my biased opinion the most idyllic constituency — I am keen to see its inclusion in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

The local tourism sector in Fermanagh has grown in recent years, not just because of the uniqueness of its offering but because the local community and hospitality sector have poured so much time, energy and, most importantly, investment into making our county the best possible tourist destination it can be. I am sure that most people will be familiar with our infamous Stairway to Heaven, Marble Arch Caves, Boatyard Distillery and Belleek Pottery, to name but a few of the attractions that we have on offer. Fermanagh has been aptly described as the "Lake District of the North", and for good reason: Lough Erne covers two thirds of the county. Every year, thousands of visitors come to enjoy all that the lough has to offer, from fishing to boating to water sports. It is also a popular destination for historians due to its rich Celtic history. The Shannon-Erne waterway connects Lough Erne to the River Shannon, creating a route into the inland waterways of Hidden Heartlands counties.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is the most recently established of the three strategies that were launched in 2018. According to Fáilte Ireland, the strategy attracted 449,000 overseas visitors, generating €178 million. That money supports local economies, creates jobs and opportunities and makes rural towns and villages economically sustainable. As time moves on and the Hidden Heartlands strategy reaches a wider audience, I am confident that the number of visitors will continue to grow. It would be a huge missed opportunity if Fermanagh and Tyrone were not included.

I will conclude my remarks there. I look forward to listening to other Members' contributions on a sector that deserves a lot of praise and support into the future.

**3.30 pm**

**Mr Honeyford:** Alliance believes in better: breaking down division and working for a shared future are what drive us. In a tourism context, that means attracting more visitors and greater spend into our economy. With 83% of visitors coming to this island through the South, we, collectively, should work hard to remove barriers — any and all barriers that are within our power to remove — that prevent us from attracting more of those visitors to the North. We should also be working to encourage a rebalancing on the island of the connectivity in

order to bring more visitors to the North. In the previous debate, I talked about the infrastructure and improving it to bring better links across Northern Ireland. That would rebalance the connectivity and attract more people here directly.

The UK's ETA is a major risk to our tourism industry, which generates only 5-6% of our GDP — half of what it should be. If we are to match other regions, a solution to how the ETA operates here needs to be found quickly. I encourage the Minister —.

**Dr Aiken:** I thank the Member for giving way. The Member may or may not be aware that the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) did considerable work on the ETA and the issues surrounding it. Will the Minister comment on whether he has received that report from BIPA? The British Government — as they are, until their time runs out in a few days' time — indicated that they would look favourably at derogations for the ETA. It would be useful if they could do that. Sorry.

**Mr Honeyford:** I am not sure whether that was an intervention for me. I will leave Steve to —.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** You have an extra minute.

**Mr Honeyford:** Cheers. I know that the Minister has spoken about that, and I would appreciate it if he came back on it as soon as possible.

Tourism is an area of our economy that we can grow quickly, starting by removing the barriers that we inflict on ourselves. We only have to watch the TV to see that the Euros are on. We should have a Minister banging the door down in Downing Street to make sure that we are involved in delivering the Euros in 2028. We have the opportunity, and we have everything sitting for us to capture not only the Euros in 2028 but other events thereafter. The fact that we seem to be happy to let that opportunity be missed is absolutely disgraceful. As an Assembly, to help this place, we should be arguing and fighting for the delivery of the Euros.

I said in today's earlier debate — it is important to repeat it in the context of tourism — that Alliance aspires to enhance North/South economic cooperation, bringing shared economic opportunities across the island of Ireland while, equally, supporting trade with GB, which remains our biggest market. To drive economic growth and, in this case, tourism numbers and spend, Alliance believes that we

need to better connect this island. I chatted about that in the previous debate. Yes, we have two jurisdictions and two currencies, but the key to attracting tourism and tourists here is to make the visit North as easy and as natural an experience as possible. We should be confident in ourselves, maximise our sell and encourage spend in the North through our attractions and by removing even the subtle barriers that are in the way. Last week, the Economy Committee heard from experts about those barriers.

The DUP amendment says stuff, but Phillip said something very different in the Chamber, and I disagree with him on that. I look at what we have to visit here, and it is really special. As mentioned, we have world-famous historic sites, and it is a region that we live in and enjoy. Marketing our home and our people, rather than trying to include something different from an overall campaign for international visitors, is what will attract. We need simple, consistent branding. The DUP amendment slightly misses the point of the motion, but, equally, does not take away from it. Phillip, however, said something very different. He talked about our unique branding. I say in slight jest that the amendment does not include our branding; it misrepresents it. The branding is, "Embrace a Giant Spirit", which I actually had to google, but the amendment says, "Embrace a Giant". Therefore, the branding may not be as effective or as easy for the DUP to remember as it said it was. When you want better, follow the professionals and give them a brief. As any sales executive will tell you, keep the message simple and consistent, and maximise your sell to the world. Let us keep politics out of this and work to improve our economy. Let people's imagination tell the story. We should ensure that Northern Ireland is included, covered and well promoted in the package.

The Wild Atlantic Way is branded, and visitors come to it from around the world. When I think of the Wild Atlantic Way, I think of the Cliffs of Moher, the Ring of Kerry and the beaches in Donegal, each of which is a destination in its own right. It seems crazy that the Wild Atlantic Way offering does not also include the Giant's Causeway and the north coast. On the way, people would see Downhill, Portstewart and Portrush. It is about simple, consistent branding. That is the key to getting international visitors.

The Ancient East would include my constituency of Lagan Valley, and what is not to like? It would attract more visitor spend in the local bars, shops and restaurants. How can we market the Ancient East but not include the Mourne or Belfast, or, in Lagan Valley, the

Georgian village of Hillsborough, which has the only royal castle on this island? It would be remiss of me not to mention the Maze, which is next door, and we should be moving on with developing that site.

Selling our assets to the world and using them as an economic driver for tourism is of benefit to all. Growing that 5·6% of GDP and pushing it to 10% is what we should be aiming —

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

**Mr Honeyford:** — for, and we need to get on with doing that.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I appreciate that, David.

**Mr Beattie:** I will start by apologising for missing topical questions to the Minister for Communities. My timing was just pretty shoddy.

The motion and the DUP's amendment No 1 are good, and I have no issue with Sinn Féin's amendment No 2 either. The debate brings me back to my childhood, when I used to holiday on the lakes in Fermanagh with my mother and father. It is a good subject to discuss.

We are all fortunate to live on this island, be that in Ireland or Northern Ireland. We have a rich heritage, history and culture. The motion and the amendments mention some of the wonderful tourist attractions that we have that draw people here from across the British Isles and from across the world: the Wild Atlantic Way; the Causeway coastal route; the walled maiden city of Londonderry; Fermanagh and Tyrone in the Hidden Heartlands; and Armagh and Down in the Ancient East. Those are all wonderful things that make us stand out. We have exceptional golf courses, lakes and mountains. We have the Titanic museum and superb hospitality, food, sporting events and leisure activities. All the ingredients are there, but we just need a plan.

I will concentrate on three elements, and I hope that people will not mind if I concentrate on Northern Ireland, because it is sometimes missed when we look at the whole, but it is part of the whole.

I visited the Tourism Ireland office in New York just after COVID restrictions had started to ease. Its representatives talked about the routes between North America and Ireland reopening. Those routes are vital to tourism, but all go into the Republic of Ireland and not

Northern Ireland. It is key that we try, through our tourism strategy, to get more direct routes from the United States and the rest of North America into Northern Ireland. There has been much talk about US pre-clearance for Northern Ireland. That would be an absolute game changer for us, although I acknowledge that it is a difficult issue to resolve.

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

**Mr Beattie:** Yes.

**Mr O'Toole:** I think that some colleagues know what I am about to intervene on. Is the Member aware that, in the past four years, we have spent £10 million [*Laughter*] on subsidising and trying to get long-haul routes out of Belfast International Airport, and it has not worked. Although I do not disagree with the aspiration, it would appear that it is pretty hard to do, and we could therefore direct our energies elsewhere, but I acknowledge the aspiration.

**Mr Beattie:** I am glad that you do not disagree, and —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I advise you that you have an extra minute.

**Mr Beattie:** — I am glad that you are a person of aspiration. I am also a person of aspiration, so I will keep that aspiration. We should still aim to get in long-haul routes. I still think that getting US pre-clearance is important, however.

Electronic travel authorisation is an absolute obstacle to tourism, without a shadow of a doubt. If it were gone, that would be by far the best outcome for everybody. We all know that. I attended the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce mission brief on business growth, however, and it outlined how the ETA is a real issue and said, as the DUP has said, that we could create a five-day waiver for movement, including tourists and tour operators, by working with the Irish Government to create a mobility task force for the island of Ireland. The five-day waiver is not ideal, but, as the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce said, it is a solution to the problem that has been put in front of us. Those are two issues: direct flights from North America and the ETA, to which we need to come up with sensible solutions if we are not able to get rid of it. However, I concede that, as the motion states, getting rid of it is the best thing to do.

The last issue that I would like to raise is our hospitality sector. There is no point in having all those things if we do not focus on our

hospitality sector. Our hospitality sector is part of the draw to get people to come to this part of the island and across the whole of the island, and it will help to create an economic bounce. However, to fully staff the sector, we need controlled migration. That means working to reduce the minimum salary threshold from £38,000 to something more akin to the average wage here, which is £32,000. What we are basically saying at this time is that those key people whom we need to come and work in our hospitality sector cannot come here because they cannot earn £38,000. Our average wage is around £32,000. We are therefore being priced out. To allow Northern Ireland to compete in an all-island tourism strategy, we must provide the tools that give our hospitality and tourism businesses a level playing field. Reducing VAT for hospitality and tourism to 13.5%, which is in line with what they have in Ireland, would provide a huge opportunity for the industry here. It is OK to have an all-Ireland strategy, but there must be a degree of harmonisation, and reducing VAT for the hospitality sector could help us with that harmonisation.

We have to look at what is in front of us. The ETA issue is in front of us, and we have to deal with it. The DUP's amendment provides a solution, which is the one that the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce gave us as well, although it is not ideal. Lastly, it is about the aspiration of direct routes from North America to Northern Ireland and US pre-clearance for those leaving Northern Ireland to go to North America. Those may be aspirations, but let us think big, not small.

**Mr McMurray:** I welcome the motion. The tourism industry is important to the Northern Ireland economy. If there are opportunities to develop and grow the economy, within reason, they should be explored. From the outset, it must be noted that there is already much all-island collaboration in the industry. While the motion is welcome, the industry is ahead of the curve when it comes to this matter, as is often the case. I want to touch on the Wild Atlantic Way, which is slightly outside my constituency — well, it is at the other end of Northern Ireland. I have spent a fair bit of time in the Atlantic off the north coast. Ever since I was a child, I knew that the north Antrim coast was the Atlantic. It is very important there. In a previous life, my wife and I, before we had children, spent many's a weekend and longer exploring the coasts, crags and surf breaks of Ireland's west coast and, as a result, the Wild Atlantic Way, and I can categorically say that the beaches, cliffs and islands off our North Atlantic coast are as consistently stunning as those along any part of the Wild Atlantic Way.

**A Member:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McMurray:** Thank you very much.

I can understand precisely why it would be beneficial and desirable for the Wild Atlantic Way to follow the Atlantic coast all the way round to where it meets the North Channel and, in effect, becomes the Irish Sea.

There are numerous microbusinesses that have flourished not because there is anything new about the landscape, but because the package of the Wild Atlantic Way resonates with domestic and international visitors alike. A tourist making their way around the Donegal section of the Wild Atlantic Way, perhaps unaware of our constitutional nuances, will simply see that it ends somewhere around Lough Foyle, and although the golden strands of Benone, Portstewart and Portrush and the spectacular Fair Head will be waving at them, they will not progress any further.

South Down has a logical and cast-iron claim to be included in Ireland's Ancient East. Carlingford lough has served to connect the Cooleys and the Mourne and the people of them, and to have it finish, in tourists' eyes, somewhere around Omeath, with Kilbroney and Slieve Martin within view, seems like an unutilised opportunity. Incorporating Ireland's Ancient East into our tourism package would be most welcomed by the industry. South Down has a natural beauty — Strangford and Carlingford loughs, the Mourne Mountains and the Dromara hills — a rich ancient and built heritage, with souterrains, cashels, abbeys and castles, as well as sites from our recent industrial past, such as the County Down Railway. However, it is not just the ancient that makes it so appealing to visitors; there is a thriving activity tourism sector and a top-class hospitality sector.

My constituency of South Down would benefit from the extension of Ireland's Ancient East into the district, given the natural physical linkages that exist.

**3.45 pm**

While the concept of Ireland's Ancient East is a great way to capture the essence of what is on offer, it perhaps does not accurately reflect the wide scope of the product that is on offer. The reason that matters is twofold: it is about getting visitors to consider the area as a destination and then presenting the range of possibilities to them. As I understand it, collaboration is going on already and many stakeholders from the



North are leading on developing the evolving brand. That encapsulates the motion and elements of the DUP amendment: there is room for both.

The Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands have all been referenced in the debate. They allow for differentiation when people visit the North. As I understand it, having an overarching theme and further localised themes within that is a technique that is fairly commonplace in the tourism industry. Those terms essentially package things in a way that is easy to understand and encourages people to visit Ireland. For too long, Northern Ireland has not utilised the potential for tourism to develop its economy. It is essentially an opportunity to promote our part of the island. Economies of scale would suggest that, by being part of the larger brand, my constituency would benefit from an extension of that brand while keeping what is unique to it. While extending is grand and important, the industry must also evolve in this matter.

I will touch on a final couple of points. While it is correct that the motion should refer to tourism as an economic driver, we should be cognisant of the fact that it should not be seen as simply a numbers game in which the aim is to see exponential growth. Growth is important but so, too, are sustainability and regeneration: it is not about what the visitor can extract from the site but about ensuring that it is given back. Cognisance should also be given to the numbers that an area can comfortably support and to ensuring that locals are fully supportive of the developments that are to come through the tourism.

**Mr McGrath:** Whether it is from Downpatrick to Dunmore or Malin to Mizen, the island of Ireland boasts almost 33,000 square miles of natural beauty. It has a heritage and history of many thousands of years and a people known the world over for their humour, generosity and kindness. This shared home that we inhabit has words and wonder and music and mythology woven through its rich history and heritage. All across the world, people make their journeys to this island to visit an ancestral home, catch up with family or enjoy a holiday. Regardless of why people make the journey here — for some, it is even a spiritual pilgrimage — one thing is inevitable: they return home changed for the better, such is our impact on them.

As custodians of this ancient isle, it is our duty to struggle with that most difficult of dichotomies: how do we manage a landscape that is aged and shaped by its natural

surroundings and then package a tourism product that is shaped by poets and dreamers that we can market to outside nations? That is an unenviable task, but it is a worthwhile one. It is because of our ability to do that that we have created such well-known tourism brands in South Down as the legacy of St Patrick, the Mourne Mountains, the 'Game of Thrones' tour, historic golf clubs in Newcastle and Ardglass and the world-renowned Fiddler's Green Festival in Rostrevor. That is a only snapshot of what we have to offer in one part of this isle.

There is much more that we can still do, and we will do it through our ability to bring our tourism product to others, whether that is through improved park-and-ride facilities in Newcastle and Downpatrick or access to the wider island by using the Carlingford ferry or what will soon be available through the completion of the transformative development of the Narrow Water bridge. The opportunities for the further enhancement of our tourism product will be limited only by our ambition.

By matching our tried-and-tested tourism brands, which have been referenced in the debate, with those in the South, such as Ireland's Ancient East — of which South Down is an essential part — and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, I have no doubt that we will be able to inhabit, share and grow in the affections of people the world over. To do anything less than that would be absolutely ridiculous. We have the products. We have everything in place, but we just are not doing the marketing and making the connections to bring the two halves together.

In doing that, what will we do? We will enhance the economies on both sides, we will encourage jobs and we will bring prosperity. There is absolutely nothing to be lost by connecting the tourism products and selling what we have in spades and what we do best. That is why I support the motion.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am pleased to speak in the final SDLP Opposition day motion of the term. Soon, in a week or two, we will be in recess.

The purpose of the motion is to highlight and underpin what we share on this island and the potential to share more in a way that maximises tourism potential, but I will underscore what was said by the two Members from South Down — my party colleague, Colin McGrath and, before him, Andrew McMurray of the Alliance Party — which was that sustainability and sustaining those landscapes is as important as maximising the benefit from them.

It is critical that we deliver on the overdue promise of linking up the Wild Atlantic Way to the ancient city of Derry, the glorious north coast and all the history that goes along with it and, indeed, linking Ireland's Ancient East with the rest of the east of the island. It is, frankly, absurd that Ireland's Ancient East does not include the site of St Patrick's burial or all the monastic and neolithic sites that populate that part of the island. The amendment to include gorgeous places such as Fermanagh in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is, of course, well intended, and we will support it.

I will touch on a couple of comments that were made by colleagues. There is much to agree with in the DUP amendment. Although we are not wholly supportive of all of it, I acknowledge that specific progress has been made in ameliorating the ETA. It is, however, important to send out a message from the Assembly that we reject it outright. It can be ameliorated, but it is a fundamental risk to the whole island. Having a few days of grace, as it were, is not as good as having the thing gone entirely, so I encourage the Executive to come to a position to oppose it and, ideally, to persuade or at least lobby the incoming UK Government to get rid of it.

I notice one slight anomaly in the DUP amendment, which states that Northern Ireland's distinctive tourism brand is "Embrace a Giant". I think that it is missing a word; I think that it is supposed to be "Embrace a Giant Spirit". I know that the party leader, Gavin Robinson, is a big gentleman, but I am not sure that we should encourage every tourist who arrives in this part of Ireland to embrace him literally. Certainly, I am sure that voters in East Belfast will be encouraged to do so for the next wee while — but I digress.

It is not impossible to extend brands such as the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East while celebrating and amplifying what is specific and local, and, yes, that will include what is specific and local to Northern Ireland. That does not, in any way, compromise locally distinctive identities and brands. In Question Time earlier, the Communities Minister talked about Ulster Scots and the contribution of the Scots Irish and Ulster Scots to North America and the creation of the United States. That will be a distinctive part of the tourism offer in this part of the world that people will not get in the same way in Cork or Dublin.

Of course, we have to have a distinctive regional brand. There will be different parts of history to celebrate. Someone who is spending part of the day in Downpatrick, looking at St

Patrick's grave and the ancient neolithic history in that part of the world, could, that afternoon, drive up to Mr Honeyford's constituency and visit Hillsborough Castle, which is about an entirely different period in our history, both the Anglo-Irish and, indeed, the modern-day links with the royal family. That is plurality. The richness of this part of the world — this part of the island and other parts of the island — is something that we should celebrate. It is nothing to be afraid of, and that is what our motion is all about. Indeed, the city of Belfast is, in many ways, an example of that. It is the second city of the island but also a city where an enlightenment happened in the 18th century. It had radical Presbyterians who set a new course for the whole island. That history is fascinating and entirely, as it were, cross-community and cross-border. We should work to maximise the benefit of the richness of all those brands and identities.

I am really pleased that we had what was, I hope, a fruitful debate. There is a clear view that we can benefit from extending those brands on a cross-border basis and that we can have a plural offer to tourists who come here. In my closing remarks, I will, however, underline the point that we waste £2.5 million a year subsidising long-haul flights out of Belfast that have not been here for more than half a decade and are unlikely to be here in the near future. Most people who come to the North come via Dublin Airport. That will continue to be the case into the future. Let us give them a bright, shining, diverse and fascinating tourism offer on this island and in this part of the island, but let us not kid ourselves that we will replace Dublin Airport as a major international air hub any time soon, because we are not.

**Mr McNulty:** I wholeheartedly welcome the opportunity to speak on this important SDLP motion. It will come as no surprise to Members to hear that I am a proud south Armagh man, and why would I not be? South Armagh has some of the most compelling tourism assets in Ireland. It has historic sites that predate the pyramids and a myriad of heritage sites that beautifully and powerfully illustrate the shared tapestry of our history.

If you have never been to the top of Slieve Gullion and crawled into the court cairn there, which is the highest surviving court cairn in Ireland, I encourage you to see and experience it. I have made representations to Ministers here saying that I believe firmly that the corbelling of the court cairn should be repaired. It was opened in the '60s, when an archaeologist who borrowed a tractor from Sean O'Grady of Ballinalleck excavated the

court cairn and removed the corbelling at the top. That corbelling should be replaced as it was so that the excitement of the experience for children who crawl into that court cairn can be increased.

Over the last number of years, I have worked alongside my local SDLP colleagues to advocate for the inclusion of County Armagh and County Down in the Ireland's Ancient East destination marketing brand. My rationale and determination in that regard are simple. It is about harnessing the potential of the tourism product in our region. It is about putting the spotlight on all that we have to offer and turning a hidden gem into the jewel of our tourism crown. That is where my focus and that of my party lie. The SDLP has been working with local tourism providers, statutory agencies, the Irish Government and all parties in building a strategy to significantly and sustainably boost cross-border tourism in south-east Ulster. Our case has been put forward so successfully that our proposal to include Armagh and Down in Ireland's Ancient East received cross-party and cross-community buy-in at Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, even from the DUP.

There is a clear synchronicity between Armagh and Down's tourism offering and the four pillars of Ireland's Ancient East: ancient Ireland; Anglo Ireland; medieval Ireland; and early Christian Ireland. Each of the four pillars of Ireland's Ancient East can be found in my area or within a stone's throw of it, from Viking history and Norman castles in Carlingford, historic sites in south Armagh that predate the pyramids in Egypt, St Patrick's resting place in Downpatrick and the tomb of Brian Boru at St Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh, which is the seat of the Anglican Church in Ireland.

The tourism offering in Armagh and Down is as rich as it is diverse and presents a unique opportunity for the history and heritage of Ulster to secure a more prominent place in Ireland's Ancient East. The home of Orangeism is at Dan Winter's cottage near Loughgall. Near Armagh city, we have Eamhain Mhacha or Navan Fort, which is the mesmerising historical ancient capital of Ireland and which the Egyptians recorded on a prehistoric map. The Quaker village of Bessbrook manufactured linen and produced granite that was exported across the British Empire, and just around the corner in Derrymore House, the Act of Union was drafted.

I would struggle to find a better way to show that we are serious about a genuinely shared future. We should work together to see Fáilte Ireland market our shared history and our

intertwined heritage around the world proudly and unapologetically. The motion gives us an opportunity to harness the power of our heritage and demonstrate that a rising tide really can lift all boats. I must also give an honourable mention to the Armagh Rhymers, who have been keeping Ireland's ancient Celtic traditions alive. I will never forget the day that they walked into my primary school and mesmerised every one of us with their rhyming.

In his maiden speech to the House of Commons over 40 years ago, Séamus Mallon rightly pointed to the fact that our history belongs to us all, simply by virtue of the fact that there are sites in south Armagh alone that predate Britain in Ireland, the Vikings in Ireland and even the Celts in Ireland.

It is on that basis that I commend the motion to the House in the strongest terms. Counties Armagh and Down are definitely a part of Ireland's Ancient East, and it time that we made that official so that we can reap the clear dividend from that for the communities that we all serve.

**4.00 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call the Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy. Minister, you have 10 minutes to respond.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.*] I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and thank Members for their contributions.

Tourism provides employment for 70,000 people here, 70% of whom work outside Belfast. That highlights the importance and the potential of tourism to the local economy, with places to see and visit in communities across the North. Its strong subregional presence means that tourism already has a sustainable basis for people across the North, wherever they live, to have the opportunity to earn a living in their neighbourhoods. For that reason, it is a key sector in delivering regional balance, which is one of my key priorities. Tourism also has the capacity to contribute to good jobs, by providing employment opportunities for all; to productivity, by embracing new and emerging technologies, both in the sector itself and in attracting people here; and to decarbonisation, because tourists are thinking about green issues when selecting their destinations, and Tourism NI already works closely with business operators to embed sustainability in how they deliver their business.

Tourism was identified as an area of cooperation under the Good Friday Agreement, recognising the potential for the growth of the sector on an all-island basis. That is why Tourism Ireland was established and tasked with promoting Ireland as a destination for visitors from across the globe. As Economy Minister, I will fund Tourism Ireland properly so that it has the resources to attract more people here. If we want the North to be part of a traveller's full Irish experience, it needs to be promoted in that way too.

In discussions with Minister Martin, the Tourism Minister in the South, I outlined the clear potential from extending Fáilte Ireland's regional brands into the North. The Wild Atlantic Way already stretches 2,500 kilometres from the Old Head of Kinsale in County Cork to the Inishowen peninsula in Donegal, a driving route that showcases visitor attractions along Ireland's rugged west coast. The coastline that embodies the spirit of the Wild Atlantic Way, shaped by the ocean, does not stop at Lough Foyle. It continues from Derry past Benone beach and Mussenden Temple and from there on to Dunluce Castle via the Giant's Causeway and beyond to Dunseverick Castle in Ballintoy. That has been recognised, with Ireland's three agencies — Tourism Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland and Fáilte Ireland — already working collaboratively to bring together experiences for visitors on the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway coastal route.

That Shared Island initiative, which is worth almost €8 million, will identify key discovery points along both existing routes. It is bringing the routes closer together through new signage and will provide a small capital grants scheme for tourism experiences. It will be backed up by a destination marketing plan along the routes, together with the aim of achieving longer visitor stays and greater economic benefits in the north-west and across the north coast. It places Derry as the destination city, and it opens up the opportunity of incorporating the Causeway coastal route into the northern section of the Wild Atlantic Way. The project reinforces the belief of Ministers North and South in the untapped benefits of all-island tourism and the opportunity that it provides to create good jobs in local communities. In that context, discussions continue on extending the Wild Atlantic Way branding to the North.

One of the amendments suggested including Counties Fermanagh and Tyrone in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, which I agree with. Fáilte Ireland's Hidden Heartlands focuses on the nature-based experiences of waterways and walking trails, stretching from north Cork up to

Cavan and Leitrim. The peace and tranquillity of that landscape follows the winding trail of the River Shannon up to the Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark. The Fermanagh lakelands share those characteristics, and there is a natural fit for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands to be extended further. There already is considerable collaboration between Cavan County Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council on tourism development. The extension of the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand will only build on that good work, providing even more opportunities for sustainable economic growth in the north-west.

The third of Fáilte Ireland's regional brands is Ireland's Ancient East. Starting at the south-eastern coast with Waterford and Wexford and extending northwards, it brings life to the culture, heritage and history of the region, drawing on Irish mythology and the Viking and Norman histories of the area.

It would take little imagination for the likes of Navan Fort, the Mourne and Strangford to be incorporated into that brand experience, along with the areas associated with St Patrick: Lecale, Downpatrick and Armagh. Linkages already exist in that area for tourists to explore, with the recent announcement of funding from the Shared Island Fund for the Narrow Water bridge, which will bring together Louth and the Mourne. I have agreed to meet representatives from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to hear how parts of Armagh and Down might be included in Ireland's Ancient East.

The benefits that such regional brand opportunities can deliver is recognised in communities. My proposals have been developed following extensive engagement with councils and tourism operators on the ground. I have already been told clearly and repeatedly that there is a real appetite for those brand experiences to be extended to the North, and I welcome the views of all parties in the Chamber in support of that. People are rightly excited about the possibilities that the brands will provide by encouraging visitors to come here more often and stay with us for longer. Those on the ground are best placed to guide and deliver the needs of the industry. That is why I am establishing a tourism partnership board to deliver strategic actions for the sector by the sector.

I turn to the ETA. Seamless all-island travel is key to building on the growth that we have seen in our tourism sector since the Good Friday Agreement. I am therefore extremely concerned about the introduction of the British

Government's electronic travel authorisation scheme and its potential to deter tourists from including the North in their itinerary. I see it as a real risk to the huge growth potential for tourism here. That view is shared by the industry. I welcome in particular the representations made by the Tourism Alliance.

In 2019, international visitors, who would require an ETA if it were to be introduced, contributed £220 million to the local economy, and that could be impacted on by the introduction of the ETA scheme. The bureaucracy and cost involved may deter many visitors who arrive in the South from travelling North. Given the fact that 70% of overseas holidaymakers come from the South, that poses a very serious threat. I am pleased to hear that those concerns are shared across the Benches.

The ETA is consistently raised as one of the tourism industry's biggest concerns. For that reason, I wrote to the British Minister of State for Legal Migration and the Border in April, seeking an urgent meeting to raise my concerns and find solutions that will protect our tourism industry. I have had no response to that letter. I intend to write again to seek an urgent meeting with the new British Home Secretary following the general election. In addition, given that the concerns about the ETA are shared across the political spectrum, my preference is for an agreed Executive position to be communicated to the British Home Office. I therefore intend to bring a paper to the Executive to seek their agreement to the First Minister and deputy First Minister also writing to the new British Home Secretary after the general election.

I turn to a number of the points that were raised during the debate. There were many consistent views, particularly in relation to the electronic travel authorisation scheme. There were a few broadcasts from various parts of the country for the tourism offering there. I do not disagree with any of those.

On amendment No 1, I find myself agreeing with the leader of the Opposition in that I do not think that there is a difficulty in having international brands that complement local brands. That is the experience. People will know of various advertisements that they see if they are considering going on an international trip and that, within those, there are subsectors of particular localised brands. I do not see a challenge in adopting those national brands and retaining localised brands, which give people who come to the area additional experiences and interest.

My concern with the DUP amendment is also in line with what the leader of the UUP expressed. Doug Beattie stated that "getting rid" of the ETA is "the best thing to do". I do not think that we should set short the Executive's position. I want to see the Executive challenge in a robust way the very existence of the ETA. I get where the DUP is coming from in its amendment. I do not think that we will necessarily seek to divide the House on it, but my proposition to the Executive will be for them to press not for a limitation on its use but for no use. We are getting the clear message from industry that anything that creates an additional bureaucratic hurdle will be a deterrent to people coming to the North. Our best and first option should be to get rid of the ETA. As I said, I do not see any need to divide the House on that. We have a fairly common approach; it is just a matter of nuance. Hopefully, the Executive will back my proposition so that it will be not only me going to the Home Office but the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The Chair of the Economy Committee raised questions about the tourism partnership board. As he mentioned, we have put the partnership board together to enable cross-departmental engagement on relevant issues. The membership will be drawn from relevant Departments as well as including representatives from the tourism sector, the hospitality industry and local government. Once finalised, letters of invitation will be issued. I intend to provide the board with a draft action plan. The final document, however, will be co-designed by the board, and I am happy to share with the Committee the terms of reference and any further information and updates that it wishes.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up, Minister.

**Mr C Murphy:** I beg your pardon; I was in full flow.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I know.

**Mr C Murphy:** I support the motion and the Sinn Féin amendment. I do not wish to oppose the other amendment, but my position is that we need to take a strong and robust position on the ETA.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Philip McGuigan to wind up on amendment No 2. You have three minutes.

**Mr McGuigan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank*

*you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]* The first thing to say from a Sinn Féin MLA's point of view is that there is a rational, common-sense argument that policy integration across all areas of government on this island will improve outcomes for the citizens of Ireland whom we are elected to represent.

Now that I know that I have only three minutes to speak on the motion, to recap what everybody said, there is, by and large, broad support for the motion. Different people have different emphases. There is agreement on support for our tourism sector and on the need to work together on the island to do that. There is certainly agreement among all Members who spoke that we need to work to remove any barriers that would hinder that, the ETA being a clear example. As the Minister and others have said, there is, perhaps, a difference in emphasis, but I accept what the Minister said about amendment No 1 and finding a working way forward whereby he hopes to get the Executive to reach an agreed position.

As I said, there is broad agreement among all the parties, with slightly different emphasis on some of this stuff, such as how closely we should work together. Everybody who spoke clearly identified and pointed out the many places, attractions and offerings that we have in the North that bring tourists here. Members pointed out some other complexities that we need to work on.

Sinn Féin wants to build a more inclusive and sustainable economy for all. We want to work with others to make that happen. Tourism, despite its challenges, is bouncing back after the pandemic, and we need to build on that. The Minister mentioned the fact that 70% of jobs in the tourism and hospitality sector are outside Belfast. It is a sector that brings regional balance, and we need to ensure that that is built on by maximising our tourism potential, thereby benefiting the many tourism and hospitality businesses, those who are employed in the sector and the communities that tourists visit. Full potential will be reached only by working on an all-island basis.

As Sinn Féin's tourism spokesperson, I, like others, have raised the compelling case for expanding into the North Fáilte Ireland's successful tourism and marketing strategies, such as the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and, as called for by our amendment, the Hidden Heartlands. Tourist experiences and how they are marketed are fundamental to the attractiveness of any destination. As others have said, we can do two things at once: the Causeway coastal route where I live can benefit

while maintaining its unique identity from being on the Wild Atlantic Way.

I had a lot more to say, but my time is up —

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** It is.

**Mr McGuigan:** — so I am happy to support this.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Philip. I call the second Phillip, Phillip Brett, to wind up on amendment No 1. You have three minutes, Phillip.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Principal Speaker. The collegiality that dominates our Economy Committee has transcended it and come into the Chamber, which is good to see. With that, I welcome the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party to our Committee.

Members made a number of important contributions. Miss Murphy and Mr McMurray spoke eloquently of the tourism offering of their constituencies and the need for them to be included.

Mr McNulty gave a helicopter view — pardon the pun — of the great tourism offering in his constituency. I will meet him for some apple pie with Hilda at Dan Winter's cottage.

#### 4.15 pm

Mr Honeyford summed up the Alliance Party's position well. He said a lot of nice words but not what those words stood for. I am therefore not quite sure whether the Alliance Party is voting for the motion or the amendments, but he eloquently outlined the offering in Lagan Valley and his party's commitment to it.

Mr O'Toole rightly raised the issue of my mistake in amendment No 1. I simply embraced the giant, and perhaps I was writing my literature for the Westminster election in North Belfast rather than the amendment for today's debate. He also, as he consistently does, raised the issue of direct flights from the United States, and it is something on which we will all work together to try to deliver.

Mr Beattie, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, rightly highlighted the commitment in the Command Paper to achieving pre-clearance and the need for us to do work on VAT to support our hospitality sector.

The Minister gave a useful update on the tourism partnership board, and the Committee

looks forward to seeing its membership. I am sure that it reflects and is inclusive of all aspects of our tourism offering right across Northern Ireland. He did not get a chance to update the House on the air connectivity review that his Department commissioned, but I know that he will keep the House abreast of developments.

There is a consensus in the Chamber that we all value the role of Tourism NI's branding, but we want to see continued cooperation across this island and all the islands. Hopefully, Members can find it in their hearts to support the DUP amendment and work together to achieve a collective position.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Phillip. I call Cara Hunter to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion for the Opposition. The Member has five minutes.

**Ms Hunter:** Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. First, I thank the Minister for being here. I wish him all the best. It is great to see him back in the Chamber.

It gives me great pleasure to wind on the motion. I argue that mine is one of the prettiest constituencies: it is beautiful, coastal and focused on tourism. I am therefore delighted to speak about all-Ireland tourism today.

Much like the lush green pastures that roll from Armagh into Monaghan, or the peaks of the Mourne that gaze majestically to the tops of the Cooley peninsula, and just as the fish swim without a thought through Lough Foyle, between Donegal and Derry, our island is shared and connected by geography, history, culture and family. Our island — our Ireland — must be understood, communicated and sold as one.

No matter what Members' views are on our constitutional arrangements or future, it is the responsibility of the House to ensure the best outcomes for our people and their prosperity. To ensure the best outcomes for tourism, we must endeavour to convey, market and sell the island as one: a beautiful, rich and mythical destination.

Strand two of the Good Friday Agreement commits us to working on a cross-border basis on tourism, so we must work together to sell this beautiful place that we all call home: the unmissable jewel at the heart of what the writer and Ulster Presbyterian William Drennan called the "Emerald Isle".

Last year, nearly 32 million people passed through Dublin Airport into Ireland. We must do all that we can to ensure that those who holiday in Ireland holiday in all of the island. In the North of Ireland — Northern Ireland — we have so much to offer. For example, in my constituency, we have Dunluce Castle. If Members have not visited it, I suggest that they do.

Many Members, like me, will have met people abroad who have told them about their wonderful experiences of holidaying in Ireland, be it sipping a pint of the black stuff in the Gravity Bar, kissing the Blarney Stone or strolling through the beautiful streets of Galway. Too often, however, they recount trips to the island in which the North was overlooked and forgotten. By committing to an all-Ireland tourism strategy, we ensure that tourists will not fail to take the opportunity to experience the breathtaking beauty of our counties, that they will receive the warm embrace of our people and that they will make memories that will be recounted to others around the world about our humour, Northern soul and the place that we are lucky to call home.

The now iconic zigzag sign of the Wild Atlantic Way has become a beacon for the many tourists exploring the unparalleled beauty of the island. The simplicity of its success is undoubted. Although so many tourists breathe in the beauty of sights from Cork to Donegal, the abrupt end of the journey at the Donegal/Derry border, however, makes no sense and comes out of nowhere.

I will just touch on some Members' comments. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the debate. Áine Murphy made an important point. She talked about the importance of Fermanagh and Tyrone as Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. I am a former Tyrone representative in council, and I completely agree that it is stunning. I have done the Stairway to Heaven, and it is breathtaking for two reasons: it is absolutely beautiful, and it is a very steep incline. Mr Honeyford said that he believes in better and that we can do much more with our tourism and attract more visitors. A real barrier to that is the dire and urgent need for improved infrastructure. I thought that that rebalancing of connectivity was really important. Mr Beattie touched on the importance of the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland, which has undoubted potential, but we must invest in upskilling our people.

The Giant's Causeway must be understood to be as essential as Newgrange, the Titanic museum as unmissable as the Guinness

Storehouse, and Crumlin Road Gaol as much a must-see as Kilmainham. By linking the Wild Atlantic Way to the Causeway Coast and by extending Armagh and Down to Ireland's Ancient East, and by placing Derry as a cosmopolitan centre of Ireland's north-west, we stand to capitalise on our tourism potential.

I call on all Members to remember that there is nothing to fear in working together on matters of clear mutual interest. Whether you bounce to the beat of a bodhrán or a Lambeg drum, much like the Irish rugby team, our shared success is best realised standing "Shoulder to shoulder" and together as one. I encourage Members to support this important motion.

*Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.*

*Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the importance of tourism as a driver of the Northern Ireland economy; further notes that a significant port of entry for Northern Ireland visitors remains Dublin Airport; expresses concern that without appropriate mitigations, including an effective communications plan, the UK Government's Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme poses a risk to in-bound tourism in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic; calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Irish Government to explore links between the Wild Atlantic Way with the Causeway Coastal Route, promote Londonderry and the North West as the destination linking both jurisdictions and include counties Armagh and Down in Ireland's Ancient East and counties Fermanagh and Tyrone in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, whilst continuing to value and promote Northern Ireland's own distinctive tourism brand Embrace a Giant; and further calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance to implement a limited and time-bound exemption of between five and seven days from the Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme for tourists and tour operators travelling between Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, and to report to the Assembly on the progress of these issues no later than September 2024.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members should now take their ease.

## Executive Committee Business

### Defective Premises Bill: Further Consideration Stage

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order. Leader of the Opposition, can you behave yourself? Thank you

*Moved. — [Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities).]*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members will have received a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the single amendment for debate. The amendment will be debated under the group heading "Limitation periods: determinations under appeal". I remind Members that, once the debate on the amendment is completed, the Question on the amendment will be put. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

#### Clause 2 (Limitation Periods)

*The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:*

In page 3, line 18, after "otherwise)" insert ", but a claim shall not be regarded as having been finally determined if, on the date on which this section came into operation, the determination in question was under appeal".— *[Mr O'Toole.]*

**Mr O'Toole:** Following useful conversations with the Minister and others, the amendment is not moved.

*Amendment not moved.*

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I appreciate that. As the sole amendment has not been moved, there is no opportunity for debate on the Bill.

That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Defective Premises Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

*Adjourned at 4.24 pm.*