



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 24 June 2024

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Speaker's Business

**Mr Speaker:** The Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil, Seán Ó Fearghaíl, has joined us in the Gallery today. You are very welcome, a Ceann Comhairle. I was very well received on a visit to Dublin earlier this year; I hope to return that kind gesture by extending our warm wishes to him and his colleagues today on their visit to Parliament Buildings.

## Members' Statements

**Mr Speaker:** The usual rules apply.

### Lough Neagh: Ownership

**Miss Brogan:** I also welcome the Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil here this afternoon.

As Sinn Féin spokesperson on the environment, I acknowledge and welcome the recent comments that were made by Nicolas Ashley-Cooper regarding the ownership of Lough Neagh. Mr Ashley-Cooper stated that he would like to transfer his estate's ownership of Lough Neagh into a charity or community trust model, with rights of nature included. That is a hugely positive development. Lough Neagh is of enormous historical, environmental and economic importance to the people of Ireland. Indeed, 40% of the drinking water in the North comes from Lough Neagh, and so it is only right that its ownership should lie with the people.

Setting aside the broader issues, many of the solutions that are being put forward by companies for dealing with the blue-green algae in Lough Neagh involve the use of the shore and the lake bed, so removing those from private ownership should help to simplify and speed up the process. Although his comments are welcome, Mr Ashley-Cooper also stated that there is currently no entity that is offering to take on the lough. I hope that the AERA Minister will begin discussions with local community groups, councils and other Departments to help to set up such a body as soon as possible.

### Vaccine Injured and Bereaved Awareness Event

**Mr Frew:** I want to raise awareness of an issue that has shamed the Assembly since September of last year. The vaccine injured and bereaved community has been trying to hold an awareness event in the Long Gallery and had proposed a date in September 2023. Although

the DUP was only too willing to sponsor that event, SDLP MLAs, on instruction from their leader, were not allowed to do so.

Sinn Féin MLAs were also not allowed to sponsor that event, even though SDLP and Sinn Féin Members opposite have helped constituents who happen to be vaccine-injured.

It is an absolute disgrace that parties and MLAs are not allowed to sponsor events for people who have been injured by medicine like those affected by the blood transfusion scandal and hyponatraemia. Those people and the vaccine-injured and bereaved are the same.

I plead with the parties opposite — and with the Alliance Party, some of whose MLAs also refused to sponsor the event — to search their hearts and consciences and allow the vaccine-injured and those bereaved by medicine to hold an awareness event in this Building, which should be open to all, to tell their story. To tell how medicine hurt them; to tell of their experiences of the symptoms that they go through daily; to tell how they cannot get proper, clear pathways of care and how they have been gaslit and even called anti-vax, even though they received the vaccine.

Things need to change for the better. I ask those MLAs who have a conscience to meet some of the vaccine-injured people on the steps of Stormont next Tuesday, 2 July, when they will be protesting.

## **Housing Executive Right-to-buy Scheme: Maintenance Costs**

**Mr Dickson:** Over the past year, I have become increasingly worried about some homeowners in my constituency who bought their flats through the Housing Executive right-to-buy scheme. They are not landlords but ordinary people who have a small flat that they inherited or purchased themselves.

This issue is the cost of maintenance that the Housing Executive is demanding for work to external aspects of the properties such as roofs, windows, balconies and stairwells, ranging from £1,000 or £2,000 to tens of thousands of pounds — amounts that the homeowners simply cannot afford.

I have spoken to many of my constituents in East Antrim who are at breaking point. One elderly lady faces a repair bill almost as high as the market value of her flat. Some homeowners are being asked to pay large sums for renovations on properties that are valued at

much less than the bill that they have been presented with. Even without the impact of cost-of-living increases, those demands are unreasonable and unaffordable.

Another resident, who has kept her flat in excellent condition, was recently asked to pay over £2,000 for minimal work done in a stairwell of her flat block; work that she was neither consulted about nor is able to afford. It was simply a paint job and the fitting of some PVC flooring tiles, which was inexplicably priced at £12,000 for the entire block of six flats. That constituent, like many others, has been paying a monthly service charge, which should have covered the cost of maintenance.

Furthermore, some homeowners have contributed to a maintenance fund set up by the Housing Executive, but that fund has not been either properly collected or managed. The shortfall leaves residents facing huge, life-altering costs that could have been avoided by the better management of a reserve maintenance fund by the Housing Executive.

Many are caught between two untenable choices: leave and face homelessness or stay and endure crippling legal costs and repair bills. Last year, I contacted the Minister for Communities, the permanent secretary and the chief executive of the Housing Executive. I have had little success in getting any progress. This matter cannot go on any longer. I have, once again, reached out to the Housing Executive chief executive, seeking a sustainable solution. It is time for the Minister for Communities to address this issue, to act now and to protect residents from financial ruin so that they can remain in their homes without fear of destitution.

## **Armed Forces Day 2024**

**Mr Stewart:** I associate myself with Mr Dickson's comments. That situation is shameful, and something needs to be done.

I highlight and pay tribute to everyone who organised and took part in the Armed Forces Day 2024 weekend in Loughshore Park in Jordanstown, which is in the heart of my constituency. It was, for anyone who was there, a fantastic event that was topped off by the air display from the amazing Red Arrows, which was enjoyed not only by the 100,000-plus people who attended the event but by everybody who lives up and down the coast of County Antrim and County Down. Anyone who witnessed it — you could not miss the

photographs over the weekend — will say how amazing it was.

It was also so good to see so many serving armed forces members on display in both the parade and in the recruitment village. I pay tribute to all those who took part, including members of my regiment, the Scottish and North Irish Yeomanry, which was there to recruit. It was also good to see so many benevolent organisations representing the interests of our veterans here. We have tens of thousands of people who served in our armed forces living in Northern Ireland, and days like Armed Forces Day are so important to them in acknowledging their service. Many people here and across the United Kingdom continue to serve in our armed forces, and days like those are important in recognising their selfless commitment. Again, I pay tribute to the organisers and everyone who took part.

### **Department for Communities: Staffing**

**Mr McCrossan:** Since the return of the Assembly in February, I have been continually raising issues and concerns about staffing, recruitment and retention in the Department for Communities. I have raised issues about temporary promotions, including those on some posts that have been temporary for seven years now. Concerns have also been raised with me that the avoidance of fair competition is affecting morale and causing frustration in the Department.

A response to a question for written answer that I received from the Minister for Communities last week outlined further concern for me, because he said that he is announcing a further 95 job reductions in the Department this year. That is on top of 600 in the previous year. That is a significant number of job cuts — let us be under no illusion: that is exactly what it is — in the Communities Department, and it raises important questions that are specifically about which areas are affected and the reasons behind those decisions.

While it is acknowledged and well played out in the House that financial pressures are facing the Executive and, in turn, individual Departments, the implications of such widespread job losses on the Communities Department's services cannot be ignored. Given the critical nature of the work that the Department for Communities carries out, particularly in areas such as housing — the House has an abysmal record on that, especially the Executive, given that they are not

even announcing the sufficient level of new builds this year, with the 400 that have been announced an insult to the many people in Northern Ireland who are waiting to be housed — it is crucial that public services do not suffer as a consequence of those cutbacks.

As a representative of West Tyrone, my thoughts are first and foremost with all the DFC staff who are stuck in this disastrous mess and affected by job losses. It is distressing to consider that individuals may be affected directly as a result of the Executive's inability to manage their Budget or, indeed, even provide a Programme for Government to outline the direction of travel for the Government. There is a pressing need for transparency about the locations in the Department where the job losses have happened, and I have requested that Minister Lyons provide a detailed account of those job losses to the House. There is a constant avoidance of providing answers to these important questions, and this matter cannot be dressed up: in real terms, it means 695 job losses.

The House is quick to criticise the austerity that London implements, but I do not hear the dissenting voices of Sinn Féin members of the Executive crying out about job losses and the effect that they are having in our communities, particularly when we cannot even deliver on something as simple and fundamental as housing for our people. This is a ridiculous situation, and the Minister for Communities and, indeed, the First Minister and deputy First Minister need to address it.

### **NHS Workers: Universal Credit**

**Ms Mulholland:** Cuirim fáilte roimh Cheann Comhairle Dháil Éireann go Stormont inniu. *[Translation: I welcome the Speaker of Dáil Éireann to Stormont today.]* I want to raise a critical issue that is affecting our dedicated NHS workers who are simultaneously reliant on universal credit in order to provide for their basic living essentials. While the recent announcement of a pay raise and back pay for NHS workers in Northern Ireland is very welcome, it has brought unintended consequences that we have to urgently address. Healthcare workers, like the public health nurse who contacted me last week, face the real and distressing possibility that the forthcoming lump sum pay award of £1,500 that is scheduled for August 2024 could significantly impact their universal credit payments.

It is not just about numbers; it is about the lives of single parents, caregivers and families who

rely on those essential benefits to survive and actually engage in work life.

### 12.15 pm

The constituent who contacted me is a nurse and single mum of four children. She has voiced her concern that the additional income will be counted as surplus earnings against her universal credit, thereby resulting in a reduction or, even more worryingly, a cessation of her benefits. The situation is not only unfair but very disheartening, as it undermines the very purpose of the pay award, which was to support and recognise the invaluable contribution of our healthcare workers. That mum should be planning some fun activities for her children over the summer, or even treating herself, which mothers are, at times, unlikely to do. Instead, she has the worry of how she will make good on her essentials.

One suggested solution was that the payment be made in instalments in her monthly pay packet over the past few months and next few months. Her universal credit would not have been affected by that. It now seems that she is no better off and may even be worse off as she could have to apply for universal credit all over again. We are well aware that one of the significant challenges with universal credit is the mandatory five-week wait for new claims. That delay can be devastating for families, leaving them unable to provide for essential items and services for their children during that waiting period. In the light of that, I have asked the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Health for an update on what we can do urgently, because it is imperative that we protect the financial stability of our NHS workers who have served our communities tirelessly. I urge both Ministers to prioritise those concerns and act swiftly to find some form of solution for those healthcare workers, because they deserve not just applause and gratitude but tangible support that reflects their dedication. That needs to extend to those who rely on benefits to allow them to engage in their employment in our healthcare sector.

### Carers

**Mr Elliott:** I rise to pay tribute to the many carers in our community. Whether they are domiciliary carers, family carers or volunteers, they add so much to our society that they are almost unpayable. Many domiciliary carers are on a very low wage — probably the minimum wage — but they go above and beyond what is required of them. Many do things for the people whom they care for that you would not expect,

but they go out of their way in all weathers. I recall, last winter, coming across a carer who had been travelling between calls in the snow and ice and got her car stuck. Those people demand our attention and support. I think also of the young carers who may be caring for a disabled or ill relative. Quite often, they are caring for a parent, who may not be overly old. Those young people, who are still at school, help to care for people who are unable to care for themselves.

Many carers are under so much pressure. I ask the question: who cares for the carers? That is vital. Those people need to be looked after and they need support. Sometimes, I think that many people in society ignore the problem. However, it is an issue. Many people are living longer now, which is a really good thing in society, but carers need our help and support. I ask and appeal to people: if you know of a neighbour or someone who may be unable to help themselves, please, call in and say hello. That is sometimes the major difference between being a good neighbour and someone who just passes by on the other side.

I commend all those who go out of their way to help others in the community. Sometimes, we look at the negatives in society, but that is certainly one of the positives.

### EU Customs Border: Green Lane

**Mr Allister:** In just 100 days, on 1 October, we will see not a loosening, as some have claimed, but a tightening of the EU border noose when the green lane customs border comes into effect. On 1 February, Gavin Robinson said that the green lane was gone and defended the principle behind the red lane. He said that the Government had provided constitutional harm that his party had repaired. However, when asked by the BBC about whether the Irish sea border had been removed, Mr Robinson said:

*"The green lane is gone."*

Then, on 8 April, he admitted overselling it, and, over the past weekend, he denied overselling it. The Donaldson deal embraced access to the EU single market; yet, last week, in the House, we had Deborah Erskine repudiate it and tell us that it undermines the integrity of the UK's internal market. Where does the DUP stand? That is the question that I find being asked increasingly by many people.

The DUP then told us that, come the autumn, the delivery would be clear. On 1 October, the green lane customs border will come into force

for the first time. As was the case with the green lane sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) border introduced by the Windsor framework on 1 October 2023, the green lane customs border will help to entrench the EU/Irish Sea border this year. Rather than removing the green lane, the introduction of the new customs border arrangements will further advance the development of the green lane, thereby helping to make the Irish Sea border and our alienation from the rest of the UK more firmly established.

It is nothing short of mind-boggling that the leader of the DUP should have sought to argue that that event in the autumn would validate the removal of the green lane when, in reality, it will result in the introduction of the next stage of the green lane. The application of the green lane customs border in addition to the green lane SPS border that is already in place and the red lane — all of which stay — is making the Irish Sea border the subject of the most complicated customs and SPS registration anywhere in the world. Those are not my words; those are the words of someone involved in the haulage industry right at the interface. That is strangling our economy —

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up.

**Mr Allister:** — and our main links with GB.

### **Ballynahinch Primary School**

**Mr Mathison:** I pay tribute to a primary school in my constituency: Ballynahinch Primary School. I give it credit for the fantastic road safety campaign that the P6 class ran with its teacher, Mrs Kirkland. The class took the opportunity to write a really persuasive letter to every local representative about how unsafe the area outside the school is. I had the opportunity to meet that class and its teacher. The enthusiasm for engagement with the issue and with their local reps was obvious. It was inspirational to see what can be done when a group of schoolchildren is given the motivation and enthusiasm to engage in the democratic process.

I was pleased to be able to advise the school, when I recently visited it, that both the organisations that they were campaigning with to deliver change — the Education Authority and the Department for Infrastructure — had agreed to take on board their concerns. They have approved the reinstatement of a school crossing patrol outside the school and agreed to add a pedestrian crossing to their programme of works for the year ahead. The class is delighted with that. It is important to pay

tribute to the teaching staff in the school for getting the kids so engaged on the issue.

More widely, it also shows what we can do in schools when we engage children and young people in writing for a purpose: not written exercises that exist in a vacuum but writing that has an outworking in the real world on an issue that makes a difference to them. I put on record my appreciation of the work that Ballynahinch Primary School and the team there have done and, particularly, of Mrs Kirkland's P6 class for the amazing outcome that it has achieved.

### **Fairview Primary School and Danielle Hill**

**Dr Aiken:** I welcome two outstanding results for people in my constituency and the wider Antrim area. First, I congratulate Fairview Primary School in Ballyclare for being awarded for its work on promoting mental health, particularly in a primary school setting. It has been recognised as the best school across the entire United Kingdom at doing so. Anybody who understands Fairview and knows the pupils and teachers there will stand with me and say that that is an outstanding result. Congratulations to Fairview Primary School in Ballyclare.

Secondly, I congratulate the great Danielle Hill, whom I mentioned to the Minister for Communities last week. Over the weekend, Danielle won the gold medal in the 50-metre backstroke and the silver medal in the 100-metre backstroke at the European Aquatics Championships. She is an outstanding example of a Northern Irish sporting superstar. I declare an interest, because she is one of the lead coaches at Larne Swimming Club and is very much to the fore of Team Larne. Indeed, my daughter has taken considerable inspiration from her, as have many young people in the area.

This is a great opportunity for the Assembly to recognise the hard work of Fairview Primary School in Ballyclare and the great work of Danielle Hill and all the team at Larne Swimming Club.

### **Wildfires**

**Mr Swann:** It has been reported that today will potentially be the warmest day of the year. As we move into the summer and our summer holidays, I want to raise public awareness of wildfires across Northern Ireland, which have been detrimental to farmland and our environment over the past number of years. I commend the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue



Service for its work on not just tackling those fires but promoting the "Stay safe" message to people who use the countryside for recreation and work.

To put things in context, in 2020-21, there were 1,948 wildfires reported and tackled in Northern Ireland. That figure came down dramatically in 2023-24 to 925, which is a reduction of almost 50%. Wildfires are still having a detrimental impact on our environment and, occasionally, on livestock, but that reduction shows the impact of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's proactive approach to educating the general public and engaging with rural communities and schools on its fire safety message, which is to stay alert, not to use open fires and not to be careless with materials, such as barbecues or any other open flame, that generate fire. To those who enjoy the Northern Ireland countryside, especially in the summer, I put on record this message: be fire-aware and fire-safe and support the work of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes Members' statements. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while the Minister takes his place for the next item of business and Deputy Speaker Aiken takes over at the Table.

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

## Executive Committee Business

### Fisheries Act 2020 (Scheme for Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

**Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I beg to move

*That the draft Fisheries Act 2020 (Scheme for Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

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

**Mr Muir:** I am pleased to bring the statutory rule (SR) before the Assembly for approval. The draft Fisheries Act 2020 (Scheme for Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 are made under powers conferred by the Fisheries Act 2020. The draft regulations were laid in the Assembly on 30 May 2024 and are subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure, hence today's debate.

Fisheries are a devolved matter, and the Fisheries Act 2020 provides the enabling powers for each of the fishing administrations of the UK to make schemes for financial assistance for marine and fisheries purposes. Tailored schemes for financial assistance are enforced in England, Scotland and Wales, and this statutory rule will provide the long-term legal basis for the payment of grants by my Department to Northern Ireland marine, fisheries — including inland fisheries — seafood and aquaculture stakeholders. I have met a broad range of stakeholders, and the opening of the scheme will provide much-needed support for the sector.

#### 12.30 pm

The scheme has been designed to support the needs of stakeholders, taking into account the contributions from those who responded to the Department's public consultation in 2022 and the subsequent stakeholder engagement. The statutory rule sets the overarching framework regulations for the payment of grants by my Department. It includes details of the application procedure, lists specific areas that are ineligible for funding and provides the Department with powers to attach conditions to grants, require the repayment of grants if

certain conditions are not satisfied and provide for the enforcement function in relation to potential offences. The statutory rule has been carefully developed to ensure that future grant schemes have the flexibility to meet new policies and the needs of the Northern Ireland fishing and seafood sector as they change over time. That includes the option to extend the types of funding that have been provided under previous grant support programmes, such as business diversification and progression towards net zero targets.

Subject to the Assembly's approval of the motion today, the regulations will be made and will come into operation to enable the application system to go live in July 2024. Approval of the statutory rule will enable £3.4 million of funding to be provided to stakeholders in the current financial year. The £3.4 million consists of £1.9 million replacement EU funding from Treasury, £0.5 million of green growth funding for fisheries, and £1 million green growth funding for blue carbon and marine recovery initiatives. For 2024-25, my Department will offer grant support under the following themes: investments on board fishing vessels and training; fisheries innovation, science and partnerships; environment and conservation action; blue carbon restoration; development of Northern Ireland's aquaculture; the processing and marketing of fish and aquaculture produce; and fishing port infrastructure.

In the longer term, the legislation will drive meaningful change to increase sustainability and economic resilience and deliver a significantly decarbonised sector and a thriving marine environment. The statutory rule is vital to deliver the vision that my Department shares with other fisheries policy authorities, as set out in the joint marine policy statement for:

*"clean, healthy, safe, productive, and biologically diverse oceans and seas."*

In conclusion, I thank the Committee for its prompt consideration of the SL1 at its meeting on 16 May 2024 and the draft statutory rule on 13 June. I acknowledge that the Examiner of Statutory Rules included the statutory rule in her report published on 11 June. Finally, I thank the Business Office for scheduling the motion for debate ahead of the summer recess, thereby enabling the 2024-25 financial support scheme, subject to the approval of the statutory rule by the Assembly today, to open as planned in July. I commend the motion to the Assembly and ask for the statutory rule to be approved.

**Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** I thank the Minister for bringing forward the regulation, which is important to the fishing industry.

The Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs first considered the Department's intention to develop a new financial assistance scheme for marine and fisheries at its meeting on 9 May. The Committee considered the proposed financial scheme in the context of a written briefing on DAERA's intention to make it a requirement for all fishing vessels under 12 metres that fish in Northern Ireland's waters and for Northern Ireland fishing vessels, wherever they fish, to have an inshore vessel monitoring system operating when they conduct fishing operations. The intent is for financial support to be made available for existing vessels in Northern Ireland's fleet through this new marine and fisheries financial assistance scheme.

After the meeting, the Committee wrote to the Department requesting further information about the proposed timelines associated with the development of the financial scheme, particularly on the finance for the scheme. We received a response from the Department on 28 May advising that the draft regulations had been cleared with the departmental solicitor and that the intention was for the motion to affirm them to be taken in the Assembly before the summer recess, thereby enabling the scheme to open for applications in July 2024. The response to the Committee stated that DAERA was considering how to best utilise the 2024-25 budget allocation to support the needs of the marine and fisheries sector and that funding opportunities should be consistent with those available under previous marine and fisheries support schemes but scaled to the available budget. The Committee noted that this will include supporting sustainability and support for, among others, the scheme requirement.

The Committee considered the SL1 at its meeting on 16 May and noted that, following EU exit, under devolved powers and the Fisheries Act 2020 the fisheries administrations in the UK are now able to establish and administer their own schemes of financial assistance. The purpose of the statutory rule is to establish such a scheme for Northern Ireland under paragraph 3(1) of schedule 6 to the Fisheries Act 2020 by regulations laid in draft and subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. The statutory rule will enable the Department to deliver its own scheme of financial support for a range of purposes that will benefit the fisheries, aquaculture and

seafood sectors and coastal communities across Northern Ireland. The Committee was content for the draft statutory rule to be laid and be subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure.

The Committee then considered the draft SR at its meeting on 13 June and noted that there had been no change to the policy content since the SL1 was considered and that the SR was subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure and will come into operation on a date following the Assembly motion to affirm it. Members then considered the seventeenth report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules and noted that the Examiner did not draw special attention to the SR.

The Committee agreed to recommend that the draft Fisheries Act 2020 (Scheme for Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be affirmed and made by the Assembly.

**Mr McAleer:** On behalf of Sinn Féin, I welcome the scheme for financial assistance. We acknowledge that the Act came about as a consequence of the loss of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), a consequence of Brexit.

Our hard-pressed fishermen and women need whatever support they can get to sustain the industry, their livelihoods and their communities. Fishing is more than just a job: for many, it is a way of life, passed down through generations, and it is the lifeblood of coastal communities. Our fishermen and women are also custodians of our waters. They have a vested interest, more than anyone perhaps, in ensuring that we have clean, healthy seas and sea life. That is why we are pleased that the scheme, among other recommendations, makes specific mention of financial assistance for the purposes of:

*"the conservation, enhancement or restoration of the marine and aquatic environment".*

We already owe our fishermen and women a debt for the work that they do in protecting our oceans, and I am sure that, with the right investment and support, they would be only too happy to play an even greater role.

The Department has allocated £3.4 million of funding from the Treasury for 2024-25, and that is welcome. It is roughly equivalent to what would have come from the EMFF. However, there is no certainty of funding for future years. The fishing industry requires consistent, reliable

support and clarity for long-term funding, and that should be sought as soon as possible.

We support the motion.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister told us that this is a scheme under the Fisheries Act, which it is, whereby all the devolved regions and England and Wales can make their own provision. What he did not tell the House and what the Committee does not even seem to have examined is the overriding fundamental constitutional issue that, under the protocol, the scheme is capped. The EU, our colonial masters for whom the Minister is but a slave in these circumstances, dictates how much can be granted in aid to our fishermen. Article 10 of the protocol subjects us to state aid rules. They apply only to Northern Ireland, and therefore England, Wales and Scotland do not have their hands tied behind their back in this regard. State aid rules have specified the maximum that the Minister can grant under the scheme to the fishing industry. It is mentioned in paragraph 9 of the explanatory document. There, in black and white, is the elephant that no one wanted to mention: all that the Minister is allowed to provide under the scheme is £16.9 million over five years. For this year, the first of five, he has provided 20% of that. It also says that the maximum that he can provide in any year is £4.01 million.

The fundamental issue is that this is a Minister who can only do Brussels' bidding and is not allowed to put our fishing industry into a position from which they can better compete with the EU, because the EU dictates how much grant aid he can give. It does so on the basis that we should not be allowed to compete with it from an advantageous position. Therefore, the Minister comes to the House with a proposal that, effectively, has been written in Brussels, because it tells us how much we can give to our fishing industry in Northern Ireland.

That is but an illustration of how appalling the continuing control and jurisdiction of a foreign Parliament and Commission is over an industry in Northern Ireland that, having already been crucified by the common fisheries policy for 40 years by the EU, is now but a small shadow of itself and still has to continue being dominated and controlled by EU limits on the aid that can be given to the sector. It is an appalling vista and situation.

It is little wonder that our fishing industry will not be allowed to flourish and grow back to what it was, since the EU still controls the purse strings. It is not that the EU gives the money,

but it controls how much the British Exchequer can give and how much its colonial slave — the Minister — can give to the industry. That is a fundamental affront, against which I am surprised — maybe I am not — to be the only Member of the House to protest.

**Mr Muir:** As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the regulations that the statutory rule provides for will be made as soon as possible after it is, hopefully, approved by the Assembly. The regulations will come into operation to enable the application system to go live in July 2024 to provide financial assistance to projects that enhance the marine environment and to support and progress economic resilience and, where possible, sustainable growth in the catching, processing and aquaculture sectors.

On Declan McAleer's points on future funding, I am conscious of that issue. The Finance Minister and I are working together on that, and we will engage with whatever shade of Government come in on 5 July to get certainty about that funding from April of next year, because we recognise its importance.

I commend the statutory rule to the Assembly and ask that it be approved.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the draft Fisheries Act 2020 (Scheme for Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** We will take a short pause to allow the Minister for Communities — he is here. Lovely to see you, Minister. You appeared as if by magic.

## **Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024**

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

*That the draft Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

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

**12.45 pm**

**Mr Lyons:** I am pleased to bring the statutory rule (SR) to the Assembly for approval today. The draft regulations were laid before the Assembly on 7 June 2024 and are subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure. The purpose of the draft regulations is to give councils the flexibility to hold meetings by remote or hybrid means. They will be made under the Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

As Members will be aware, during the pandemic, provision was made under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to allow councils to hold remote or hybrid meetings. The Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 were introduced as a temporary measure under section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and were in operation until 6 March 2024. Councils welcomed the ability to hold remote or hybrid meetings, and the Department has received representations from the local government sector asking that that flexibility be made permanent. The draft regulations that are before the Assembly today will do just that.

Whilst there is no statutory requirement to consult on regulations that are made under the 2021 Act and no formal consultation was carried out, my officials have engaged with councils on the draft regulations. An initial draft of the regulations was issued to councils on 12 March for comment, and a revised draft, taking account of comments that were received, was issued to councils on 3 May. Officials also engaged on the draft regulations with council legal officers. I thank councils for their responses on the draft regulations. I also thank the Communities Committee for its scrutiny of the policy and the draft regulations.

The proposed regulations are based on and very similar to the regulations that were in operation until 6 March 2024. They apply to council meetings, including committee meetings, subcommittee meetings and joint committee meetings. They will enable councils to hold meetings remotely or by hybrid means by, for example, videoconferencing, telephone conferencing, live webcast or live interactive streaming.

The draft regulations also define the conditions that a council member must meet in order to attend a meeting remotely, namely that a member must be able to hear and be heard and, where practicable, to see and be seen by other members or by members of the public who are in attendance. The conditions are the same as those that applied under the 2020 regulations. The draft regulations also provide

for hybrid meetings. Regulation 2(1) provides that a reference to a council meeting is not limited to a meeting at which all persons in attendance are present in the same place.

The draft regulations contain one provision that was not in the 2020 regulations. A council will be required, for the sake of openness and transparency, to make standing orders about its arrangements for remote meetings, including those:

*"setting out the process or basis for considering whether meetings are to be held remotely; governing the arrangements for and conduct of remote meetings; and regulating public access to such meetings and the availability of documents to the public in relation to those meetings."*

I understand that allowing each council to decide its arrangements for remote meetings may cause inconsistencies across councils. However, the intention of the regulations is to grant councils the flexibility to conduct their meetings in the way that best allows them to meet the needs of the council, its members and their constituents.

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** I thank the Minister for his remarks. I support the introduction of the draft Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations 2024. Members may recall that regulations that were made under coronavirus legislation that enabled councils to hold hybrid and remote meetings expired earlier this year, and the need to urgently progress their replacement was discussed in this place.

At the Committee's meeting with the Minister, it sought assurances that appropriate replacement regulations would be expedited and raised the need for urgency in progressing them. The Committee considered the SL1 for the regs at its meeting on 25 April 2024. I will not repeat the technical aspects of the regulations, which the Minister set out, but, in short, the regulations represent a more up-to-date and forward-thinking step in modernising how our councils conduct their meetings while ensuring accessibility, flexibility and resilience in our local governance.

At the Committee meeting on 25 April, members confirmed to officials that they were content for the Department to make the statutory rule.

However, members sought assurance from the Department and local councils that the regulations would be implemented equitably and that councils would make provision for that flexibility in their standing orders.

At its meeting on 9 May, the Committee considered a response from the Department that confirmed that it would be a matter for each council to make standing orders governing remote attendance. The standing orders will specify the basis and process for considering whether council meetings should be held remotely or in hybrid format and who is to assess or decide that. The regulations stipulate that a member attending remotely must meet specific conditions to participate in votes, namely having the ability to hear and be heard and, where practicable, see and be seen. That ensures that remote attendance does not compromise the integrity of the decision-making process.

The regulations promote equality by making council meetings more accessible and by contributing to strengthening diversity among our representatives, including, importantly for me in my constituency, those living in rural areas, people living with disabilities, those with caring commitments and many others who might otherwise face unnecessary barriers to their participation. The regulations can equally contribute positively to motivation, productivity and retention. The Committee followed up with the chief executives of the local councils on their plans for implementing the regulations in an equitable manner.

On that basis, the Committee is content with the draft regulations. We welcome the flexibility that they provide by allowing councils to continue their essential work under varied circumstances. The ability to hold meetings remotely or by hybrid means is not just a matter of convenience but an important step in ensuring resilience, participation, accessibility and inclusivity in our local governance. We have a duty to ensure that council members and the public can engage in the democratic process regardless of their physical location, mobility or care-giving obligations. The implementation of the regulations should be guided by the principles of transparency, accessibility and compliance with equality legislation to ensure that all council members and constituents can participate fully in local government.

In conclusion, on behalf of the Committee for Communities, I recommend that the Assembly approve the draft Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations 2024.

**Mr Kingston:** I join the Chair of the Committee in welcoming the Minister's introduction of the legislation. I was a member of Belfast City Council during the years of the pandemic. Like all councils, we suddenly had to introduce the option of online meetings, and, whilst we all recognised the limitations of attending online, it was a practical need and a reality. As the years of COVID progressed, we were able to advance to hybrid meetings and provide the option of a mixture of attendance according to what the regulations permitted.

Rather than continually extending the COVID-based regulations, the Minister has rightly introduced bespoke legislation, recognising that, in the modern era, the option of hybrid meetings exists for online attendance, as we have in the Assembly for Committees. As the Chair of the Committee said, from our correspondence with the 11 councils across Northern Ireland, we know that they await the passing of these regulations so that they can amend their standing orders and agree their individual arrangements according to their needs.

As a member of the Committee, I welcome the progress being made through this legislation. We recognise the advantages that it can provide for people with disabilities or caring responsibilities and particularly for more rural councils, where travelling distances are greater.

**Ms Mulholland:** It is with some relief that I see the regulations coming before the House. At its meeting on 22 February, the Committee for Communities agreed to recommend that statutory rules on the extension of provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 relating to local authority meetings be approved by the Assembly. However, they were then pulled with no notice to the Committee. The decision not to extend those regulations was communicated, as some will remember, on a Friday evening, with some councillors getting less than 48 hours to make alternative arrangements to be present in the chamber for the remainder of the meetings in March and going forward. We were told at that time that stand-alone legislation would be put in place at pace.

At that time, I was very clear that the removal of the regulations would serve only as a further barrier to getting involved in public life, especially to those with caring responsibilities, illnesses, conditions, disabilities, people with young families, such as me, and those who live in rural communities. I was contacted by one councillor who regularly had flare-ups of a bowel condition and felt that the removal of regulations made it very difficult for them to be

consistent in their attendance at committee. In the months since, my party has lost a very capable young councillor. He is the father of two very young children who were born whilst the regulations were in place. He cited the lack of flexibility for hybrid working as one of the main factors in why he had to step down from council. I am sure that there are many other local representatives who have felt that lack of flexibility over the past four months. However, all that said, I am really glad that the regulations are here and that, by the time councils come back after the summer, hopefully, each will be able to have its standing orders in place.

My one concern about the legislation is that every council area will have the opportunity and ability to define its own process for eligibility for hybrid working and for the standing orders that will govern it. I do not want to see a situation whereby different councils place different parameters on their cohort of councillors and where we could see some councillors being treated very differently or in a divergent way, dependent on their council area.

The legislation should and will offer a flexible approach to engaging with official meetings, and I believe that it will help those whom we most need represented in local government to be able to engage. I welcome the legislation.

**Mr Lyons:** I welcome the level of consensus that we have across the Chamber on these regulations, and I place on record my thanks to the Chair of the Committee and the Committee more widely for the positive way in which they dealt with the issue.

I want to raise a few issues that were brought up during the debate. It is correct to say that greater flexibility is now on offer permanently to our borough and district councillors. However, a number of Members mentioned issues around, for example, disabilities. I do not want in any way the message to go out to councils that they can roll back on their responsibilities and statutory obligations because these regulations are now in place. Council chambers should still be accessible. This legislation should not be seen as an alternative to ensuring that our chambers are fully accessible and that we have the support for those who are in them. In my opinion, it is second best to be at home doing this work remotely. I understand that there are times when that flexibility is necessary, but I always think that it is better to have people, where possible, in the chamber where the conversations are taking place and the decisions are being made. I do not want anybody to think in any way that we should not be doing everything that we can to make our

council chambers accessible and to make it possible for people to gather around when business is being done.

*That the draft Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 be approved.*

That takes us on to an issue that Sian raised. At the end of her contribution, she expressed concern that there will be the potential for different councils to take different approaches to how they put in place their standing orders for this issue. I think that I could have got criticism either way. If I had mandated the way that councils operate according to what I think is right and proper, I would have been in for criticism if I had limited it to the specific circumstances that I might think are appropriate. I believe in devolution and that people should be making their own decisions at the right level. I would not want anybody dictating to the House how we should do our business, and I do not think it right that I dictate to councils how they do theirs.

Councils have different standing orders for conducting their meetings and the timings of those meetings. They decide them for themselves, so it is only appropriate that councils can also put in place their own standing orders on this issue as well.

#### **1.00 pm**

Sian also raised the issue of the period during which there was no provision in place for hybrid or remote meetings. It is my duty to follow the law in this place, and the law stated that I should continue with the 2020 regulations only for as long as they were necessary in order to combat coronavirus. I know that people got comfortable and liked having the regulations in place, but I did not believe that there was a justification under the law as it stood for me to extend them. That is why I decided to allow those regulations to lapse, but, as soon as it was practicably possible, to bring in the regulations that are in front of us today. I said that we would do it before the summer recess. I have done that, and I have given councils the power to decide for themselves how meetings take place, as it would not have been appropriate for me to use coronavirus as a reason to keep the 2020 regulations going. I therefore used the alternative legislation that was in place.

I am grateful for the consensus in the Chamber, and I commend the regulations to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

## Committee Business

### **Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage**

**Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities):** I beg to move

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 8 November 2024, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill.*

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

**Mr Gildernew:** I request that Members support the extension of the Committee Stage of the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill to 8 November 2024. I recognise that it is a short Bill, but, nevertheless, it demands the same scrutiny as any other Bill, owing to the impact that its proposals may have, particularly on young workers.

At Second Stage, the Deputy Chairperson highlighted how:

*"The Bill will reduce from 22 to 18 the lower age limit at which otherwise eligible workers must be automatically enrolled in a pension scheme by their employers and reduce or repeal the lower limit of the qualifying earnings band so that contributions are calculated from the first pound earned." — [Official Report (Hansard), 3 June 2024, p68, col 1].*

We welcome the proposed changes, which will ensure that people save from a younger age, but we now need to give the Bill proper scrutiny and ensure that we, as a Committee, give ourselves sufficient time to gather evidence and engage with stakeholders. Indeed, we are planning to engage with the Youth Assembly to help gather views, as the Bill will have an impact on young workers.

Committee members have already identified the need for an appropriate communications strategy to ensure that young people are aware of the Bill and to explain what it might mean for them. We will take the views of the Youth Assembly on board and try to ensure that we use communications channels that will reach workers of a certain age and, indeed, future workers, on whom the changes that are

proposed in the Bill would have the most impact.

The Committee's call for evidence is now live on Citizen Space, and we have identified stakeholders from whom we wish to take evidence. We have also written directly to organisations that tend to employ or attract younger workers. We encourage people to engage with us as we go through Committee Stage into the autumn term. I ask the House to agree an extension to provide the Committee with additional time to scrutinise the Bill so that we can do our best to ensure that our scrutiny is as thorough and considered as possible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 8 November 2024, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill.*



## Private Members' Business

### Retaining and Inspiring Young Talent

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I ask Members to take their ease until we get the Minister to catch up with us, because we are well ahead of schedule. I will update Members when the Minister is before us. The next person to speak will be Sinéad.

*The House took its ease from 1.06 pm to 1.10 pm.*

**Ms McLaughlin:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly, while noting the educational and professional development opportunities for students studying away from home, regrets the large number of young people forced to leave Northern Ireland in order to pursue higher education who would otherwise wish to study and build lives here but are unable to; notes that the equivalent of a large university's worth of students are studying in Britain and a high proportion are unlikely to return; acknowledges the negative societal and economic consequences of this trend, particularly on our low levels of productivity; further notes that this so-called brain drain compounds the negative economic consequences of our low levels of educational attainment among school-leavers; calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Education to develop a strategy to reduce the number of students leaving these shores who would otherwise wish to stay, including growing undergraduate spaces here, and collaborating with the Irish Government to increase the volume of cross-border undergraduate entrants; and further calls on the Minister to report to the Assembly on agreed actions not later than December 2024.*

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

**Ms McLaughlin:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Has the Minister responded? Will he be in attendance?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** We have asked for the Minister's attendance, but we have not had any response as of yet. Sorry, the Minister is on his way. We will wait a moment.

Minister, welcome. Just get yourself settled, Minister, for a wee second.

Sinéad.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I think that we all agree that it is no surprise that some of our young people want to spread their wings once they leave school. Moving abroad can offer no end of new opportunities and experiences. I do not think that any of us would begrudge our young people who want to leave in search of different and new experiences. I have two daughters, both of whom moved away, but I am hopeful — fingers crossed — that Aoife, who is in her early 30s, will return home quite soon.

I understand why young people leave in search of new horizons. However, that having been said, there is no doubt that a real and pressing problem exists in our society and economy today when it comes to the sheer number of young people who are forced to leave our shores every year. They cannot set up the life here that they want because they cannot pursue the careers that they want here and because there are not the university places for them here, either.

As has been well documented, each year, the number of those young people stands at around 5,000. We know that two thirds of them do not return after their degree. An entire university's worth of students from Northern Ireland is currently studying across the water in Britain. That is self-sabotage. It is self-inflicted by government policy that drives our young people away and fails to tackle the root causes of the systemic issues that push them away. As has been outlined by the think tank Pivotal, those challenges include the fact that they are fed up with a segregated and divided society and are frustrated by the sectarian tensions that are still all too prevalent in our communities. Too often, the external perception of this place is that it is somewhere that still has not moved on and cannot get its act together. It is a feeling that is, no doubt, compounded by watching our political instability at home and from afar. As I have said, when things get too hard, the big parties sometimes take turns at bringing this place down and preventing any form of strong leadership or positive change. That would not incentivise anyone to come home.

Arresting the brain drain will require tackling those root causes, breaking down segregation, integrating our society and reforming our politics. However, it is important to say that it is not just a cultural issue. We are not just talking about it because we would like our young people to stay; the brain drain is a handbrake on our economy. It has a direct and profound impact on our low rate of productivity, which has repeatedly been our Achilles heel in this part of the world. According to the Productivity Institute, Northern Ireland's productivity level is 75% of the EU average and only around half the level experienced in the South. Its findings are clear: the brain drain has fuelled the low presence of highly skilled workers, which undermines our productivity time and again. Of course, it is not the only contributing factor; the low level of educational attainment among school leavers is also a significant challenge. For many years, we have suffered from chronically low levels of skills here that are rooted in educational underachievement. That is an issue that we have referenced in the motion. It is only compounded by the educational migration from these shores.

### 1.15 pm

There can be little doubt that the brain drain is fuelled by the lack of investment in skills and education by the Government over recent years. Queen's University alone has suffered a cut of almost £50 million in real terms in the past 10 years. That university is generating over £3 billion for the economy and leading the world in advanced manufacturing, ICT, creative industries and digital industries. What other jurisdiction is cutting higher education and investment in skills? The answer is none — certainly none that is serious about growing a knowledge-based economy. Given the expected growth in the number of 18-year-olds by the end of the decade, it is completely counterproductive.

The brain drain and lack of investment in higher education have particular consequences in a place such as Derry. That we are continuing to export a university's worth of students while failing to build the promised university in our own second city is pure madness. It is sabotaging the economy as a whole that we are not producing the skilled graduates of the future, who are needed for our economy. That is pure madness and has to stop.

When the previous Minister was leaving office, he announced a full review of higher education funding, but this Minister has rolled back on that commitment. Having somewhat praised the DUP, I have to be honest about its amendment

and say that I really fail to understand the point of it. Removing the Minister of Education's responsibility for this issue borders on irresponsible. We need everyone working together on this, especially the two Ministers who are clearly responsible for the area.

I also do not comprehend the logic of removing the duty to collaborate with the Irish Government. Does the DUP not want all young people to be able to easily study at Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin (UCD) or the University of Galway? Why take opportunities and possibilities away on a small island? Barriers already exist to cross-border mobility that none of us should be prepared to stand over. In 2020-21, students from the South made up 2.4% of students in Northern Ireland compared with only 0.6% of students in Ireland being from Northern Ireland. The reasons for that are many and well-documented. Universities in the South are already difficult to access. Recent progress by the Irish Government on the need for a fourth full A level is welcome. That followed calls from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Royal Irish Academy.

However, there are still a range of barriers and questions to answer about whether the system remains too restrictive. Anyone who has read the ESRI report on the issue will know that it also raised concerns that the small number of pupils in Northern Ireland studying languages impacted on the eligibility of our young people to take up certain courses. In response to questions for written answer, the Minister of Education does not appear to have accepted that as a barrier. He may not have engaged with the research, but it is clear that we need to arrest the decline in the study of modern languages if we are going to give more young people the opportunities that they deserve.

There is also a timing issue in that UCAS offers are made two weeks before those made by the Central Applications Office (CAO), driving more students to the UK system. Furthermore, schools must be fully supported to provide careers advice that includes guidance on the system in the South and the opportunities that exist on their doorstep.

It seems strange that the DUP would not want to get a grip on those issues and break down those barriers for the people whom they represent as well. We have only a short time in this mandate, and already we have said more times than I can count that there is nothing to fear from collaboration. At the core of this issue is opportunity and freedom of choice for all our young people. As they leave school, everyone

should have the freedom to move away, whether across the sea or across the border, but they should also have the freedom to stay and pursue their passions right here at home, contributing to the place where they were born and raised and driving economic growth. Both choices are fair and legitimate but we need to make sure that a choice really does exist and that no one is pushed away.

Whatever designation you deem yourself to be, it is in everyone's interests for Northern Ireland to work. That includes building a society where no one has to move away. That starts with putting on paper a strategy that is co-produced, ambitious and comprehensive. I hope that all parties will back the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Phillip Brett to move the amendment.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I pay tribute —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Just move the amendment, Phillip.

**Mr Brett:** Sorry. I do this every time. I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "productivity;" and insert:*

*"and calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop a strategy to reduce the number of students leaving these shores who would otherwise wish to stay in Northern Ireland."*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** OK. You have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. Over to you this time, Phillip.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I start by thanking the proposers of the motion for bringing the matter before the House today, though I have moved an amendment in my and my colleagues' names that I believe more accurately and concisely reflects the issues that the House is trying to focus on.

The vires for addressing the issue clearly lies with the Department for the Economy. The Department of Education's duties lie exclusively with education: early years provision; post-primary and special education; and the Youth Service. The Department for the Economy sets the current maximum student number (MaSN)

cap each year, and I think that, across the House, we all recognise that that is one of the major reasons why students choose to leave Northern Ireland's shores.

The current cap sits at between 6,000 and 7,000 across Northern Ireland's two universities, and the demand clearly outstrips the supply. Queen's University stated that, last year, it had 100 applicants from Northern Ireland for 60 places across all cohorts. That is why the Minister should look at how we increase the number of student places that are available here in Northern Ireland. It is also why we support the SDLP in its call to try to encourage additional student numbers here in Northern Ireland. I do not, however, agree with the negative economic consequences that the Member outlined in relation to Northern Ireland's poor educational attainment. Frankly, I do not think that that stands up to scrutiny.

I could quote several reports, but I will just read one into the record from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and the Nuffield Foundation, which states:

*"Pupils in Northern Ireland lead the way among UK nations in most measures of pupil outcomes, even moving ahead of the region of London, which is often widely revered for its high level of educational attainment. The highly positive outcomes displayed by pupils in Northern Ireland through the EPI study are more positive than seen in other international comparisons."*

It is important to recognise the strengths that we have in our education system here in Northern Ireland. I know that some parties and individuals are more focused on talking Northern Ireland down and undermining the great work that our teachers, our support staff and our pupils do, but I will always highlight the great work that goes on in our schools and across our universities.

I struggle with trying to square the motion that Ms McLaughlin moved. She said that she does not want students to have to leave Northern Ireland but, in the same breath, said that she wants to encourage students to take up study in the Republic of Ireland. The SDLP either wants to have the student numbers in Magee or at other universities here in Northern Ireland, with pupils remaining in Northern Ireland, or it wants students to go to other places. Therefore, the motion is somewhat contradictory. The whole House should focus on trying to increase student numbers here in Northern Ireland. Some may accuse the Opposition of wanting to

have their cake and eat it, but I would never accuse Ms McLaughlin or the leader of the Opposition of such things.

As I said at the start, I think that our amendment more factually and more concisely articulates the situation that is facing us here in Northern Ireland, and I know that the Minister, when summing up, will outline his ongoing work and a commitment to grow student numbers across our university campuses here in Northern Ireland. With that, I encourage Members to support our amendment.

**Mr Delargy:** I thank the Member for moving the motion. When I read through it, I saw a lot of things that have been brought up in the Chamber and clear policies that the Department is bringing through. The motion is very welcome, and I am glad to speak on it today.

When I read the motion, the first thing that I thought about was the number of my friends who have had to move away in recent years. They are teachers in Doha, healthcare workers in Australia and tradespeople in America. Sadly, they see very little compelling reason to stay and build their careers here. That is heart-wrenching, and we all understand the devastating impact that that has on their families and our entire community. It is an experience that many of us have felt personally.

That cannot continue. We must work together to do everything in our power to ensure that young people see their future here at home. Today, I want us to commit to working together to make sure that that can happen, that young people can stay in Ireland and build a life, get a good job and own their own home here and that young people from here are no longer built for export.

Imagine having an even bigger powerhouse of young, bright minds teaching in our schools, working with patients in our hospitals, contributing to our communities and innovating in industries here, being trailblazers for positive and progressive change. By working together in the Chamber to create new and exciting opportunities, good working conditions and fair pay, we invest in that next generation to ensure that we can build brighter, better and stronger futures on our island. It is a win-win: our talented youth get the chance to thrive, and our island gets the enormous economic benefit of everything that their skills and passion bring. Let us make this island that we call "home" the place where dreams can come true, careers can flourish and the future of every young person has endless possibilities.

Together, we have the power to deliver that real change, create a future where our young people have those opportunities at home and be a game changer for everyone in society. It is with that passion and that creativity and determination that we can build a brighter and more prosperous Ireland. To harness that potential, we must create a path that values education and creates ample opportunities with meaningful careers. Education is the cornerstone of any thriving society. It is through education that we equip our young people with the tools that they need to succeed, innovate and lead. Education is not just about imparting knowledge; it is about inspiring a love of learning, nurturing curiosity and fostering critical thinking. It is about creating an environment where every young person feels valued, empowered and encouraged to pursue their dreams.

Our current education provision, whilst strong in many respects, needs to evolve to meet the demands of the modern world. We must ensure that our schools and universities are not just institutions of learning but incubators of talent. That means investing in industries that have the potential for growth, such as technology, renewable energy and creative arts; supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs, who are the backbone of our economy; ensuring that young people have access to apprenticeships, internships and on-the-job training to give them the practical skills to succeed; and looking at our economy as a whole.

We must address the issues of fair wages and job security to ensure that young people are not stuck in low-paid, precarious jobs with little hope of advancement. I welcome that Ms McLaughlin raised the positive progression that we have seen in CAO applications, because I have worked with my colleague Mairéad Farrell, my party's spokesperson on further and higher education in the South, to ensure that that is advanced through the Dáil and through Conor's work as Minister here. That really shows the opportunity to create positive change and difference, working as an all-Ireland party, on all those all-Ireland issues.

I also note the mention of Magee. It is positive that we will see an additional 500 students coming to Magee this September. We all have to welcome that. That is positive progression and a step in the right direction.

Inspiring and retaining young people is not just an economic imperative but a moral one. It is about ensuring that every young person here has the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their background or

circumstances. It is about creating a society where talent and hard work are rewarded and every individual has the chance to contribute to the common good.

**Mr Honeyford:** As my party's spokesperson on the economy, I will come at this from the economic perspective. Our economy has been in deficit since the 1930s. Something has to change. We can no longer continue year on year to do the same thing and, effectively, need to be bailed out each year. A region of lack, with its people moving away, is not one that I want to live in, nor do I want future generations to go through that. We should work for better and give the next generation hope for a better future. That includes better job opportunities and wages, and the belief that this place is one where everyone can prosper, have a good job and make the most of the opportunities that are in front of them. That is the key issue.

There is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation here: to grow our economy, we need an educated workforce; to attract new investment and jobs, we need skills at the other side of that. Also, importantly, our young people and student population need to see the opportunities and career opportunities in which they can thrive. That is key. I do not see going away to study — having opportunities to study in Scotland, England, Wales or the Republic — as the problem. It is more about having a thriving economy here that attracts them to come back to careers and job opportunities that enable them to see their future here.

**1.30 pm**

The motion describes the issue, but, fundamentally, I am disappointed that it offers no hope. It is just words of regret and negativity without any words of vision or direction that we can debate. Furthermore, the motion does not mention apprenticeships. Last week, I had a group of students in my office. We threw this to them; that is one of the first things that they read. There are so many apprenticeship opportunities for them in England, particularly, and they are not referenced. A greater number of apprenticeships leads to more careers, so young people are lost to our economy. That has been missed in the motion. I would love to be debating solutions and looking at what we can do to improve our economic outlook. That would be a healthy debate.

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

**Mr Honeyford:** Yes.

**Mr O'Toole:** I am intrigued as to why the Member thinks that we are being negative in a motion that is about a public policy problem. It talks specifically about a strategy to reduce the number of people leaving Northern Ireland. That is the solution that we are looking for. We want to increase the number of student places and encourage more people to stay.

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

**Mr Honeyford:** I said that the motion was negative because it uses the words "negative" and "regrets". There is no solution other than asking somebody else to come up with a strategy. There is nothing here for us to debate. You are the Opposition, Matthew. You declare yourself as the Opposition. Come with things that —.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Will the Member address his remarks through the Chair, please?

**Mr Honeyford:** Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Opposition should bring forward stuff that we can debate, not give us stuff that we can read ourselves. We know the problem. I want to look at solutions.

I can look at my experience. I have two kids, both at university. My son has just finished his degree in Loughborough, England. That has been a brilliant experience for him. It has been a time to grow. Thankfully, he is one of the 30% who will return. He comes home tomorrow. If you ask my wife about that on Wednesday, she might regret that part of it. *[Laughter.]* He is attracted home by friends, sport and community, but, centrally, he is starting a new career opportunity in Belfast. That is his reason for coming back. The problem is not that he went away; the going away has been positive. He spent time away from here, and he was able to shape himself and be around different cultures and opinions that shape your outlook.

My daughter has just finished her first year at Trinity in Dublin, so I am pure Alliance, with one in England and one in the South. I could talk you through all of the problems in the CAO entry process for students to the Republic's universities and what needs to be changed to increase opportunities for our students. I could do that all day long. The problem is that the motion does not give us the opportunity to do that; it just says, "Go and do this". Recently, I heard the stat that, pre1998, approximately 10% of students at Trinity College were from Northern Ireland; today, it is less than 1%.

There is obviously a problem, and it is restricting opportunities for our young people to gain entry to the South's universities. Something needs to happen.

We have a motion that is without solutions or ideas and an amendment that tries to remove more opportunities for our young children, which is also disappointing. I will throw in one solution. I have talked in the Chamber many times about reforming our further education colleges and looking at the technical university model that we have seen in other parts of Europe. That would increase skills and opportunities and provide a serious alternative to the research university model that we have. Technical universities would give opportunities for everybody, not provide just academic learning. It is hard to debate that when the motion simply calls for a strategy. Again, I say that the motion does not offer detail.

I agree that there is an issue and that we need to look at our economy and how to grow it, but we should be solution- and delivery-focused and should debate policies and solutions.

**Mr Elliott:** Today's debate is interesting. It focuses very much on academic students in Northern Ireland and those who leave here, but I will touch on something that Mr Honeyford raised, and that is the issue of apprentices and those who take on a vocational career. They are equally as important to society as those who choose the academic route.

I am not saying that the SDLP missed that in its motion, but I did look at the potential for tabling an amendment. I then thought that the motion was focusing on academic issues and therefore decided that it should be kept to those. It would, however, be unwise for us not to focus to some degree on those who wish to take a vocational route and use their skills in that way.

I am sure that all of us have tried to get a builder, plasterer, joiner, electrician or plumber recently. It is quite difficult to get one, but if people can get one, most of them know how to charge. They have a very good future here in Northern Ireland. There is lots of work for them and huge potential for them to grow a business. I wish them all well, because they are doing an exceptionally good job.

I will now deal with the issue of those who take the academic route. I ask that the Minister address the cap on the number of students attending local universities. I am not entirely sure about the issue. Is it appropriate to have a cap? Can it be amended? Figures released some time ago, which may not be exactly right

for this year, show that almost 30% of our students undertake university study across the water, or not in Northern Ireland, I should say.

I have listened to some universities say that, if the cap were raised in Northern Ireland to allow more students here to go to local universities, that would help retain those young people here after they had finished their studies. I have also heard it said that raising the cap might increase fees for students who are studying in Northern Ireland, but I understand that students who go across the water to, for example, England pay approximately double the student fees that students here currently pay.

Is there therefore potential to lift the cap or, at least, to allow some more local students to attend local universities by increasing it? That would provide universities with an income, and it would help them raise some funding. My understanding is that universities are concerned that, unless there is investment in them, we will suffer economically and struggle even more to keep our students in Northern Ireland. That is something at which we need to look. I am not promoting the issue here now, but I would like to hear the Minister's view, because, if we are having this debate, it is critical that all the issues be on the table and that we hear how we can improve the situation.

I also commend the regional colleges. We called them techs, or technical colleges, in my time. Some younger people may not remember them as techs, but the regional colleges have done a lot of work to help skill local communities. They try to tailor a lot of their courses towards what local industries want. For example, tourism and light engineering are very important to my constituency, and I know that the South West College (SWC) tries to promote relevant courses.

Finally, I —

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way. I hear everything that he says about regional colleges, but will he agree with me that the situation does not bode well, given that, owing to staffing issues, the Northern Regional College (NRC) cannot even provide an electrical installation course for first-year apprentices this year?

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

**Mr Elliott:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. If that is happening, that is detrimental to the area, given

the potential for a course to be run there. I know that there is sometimes an issue with numbers; maybe that is not the issue here, but some regional colleges need a certain number of students to make a course viable, and I accept that.

It is an interesting debate today. I hope that we look at all aspects of not just higher education but vocational and apprenticeship routes and the issue of the cap at local universities.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** I call Sian Mulholland.

**Ms Mulholland:** Apologies. I was talking when I should have been listening. *[Pause.]* Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I cannot get my speech up. *[Pause.]* There we go. My apologies.

Neither I, as party spokesperson for children and young people, nor my party has any issue with young people going elsewhere to study. It can be a wonderful experience that opens individuals' eyes to diversity and affords them independence from their families and parents. My issue is the lack of young people returning after that education experience. That is where our responsibility lies. We are caretakers of this place. It is up to us to create an environment that young people want to come back to. We have a profound duty to every single one of those students who gets on a ferry, on a plane or in a car to go to university. We need to foster a stable and welcoming environment that encourages them to return home after completing their education to invest in this place. It is essential that we create a region where young people feel confident about building their future, supported by robust economic opportunities, social cohesion and political stability.

We therefore have to prioritise policies. It is not just about one policy. We have to prioritise all policies that enhance job prospects, as my colleague David has said. We have to improve our public services and ensure that there is a high quality of life. Why else would anyone come home? We have to make this an attractive place for graduates to return to and to invest and build families in. This commitment to stability and inclusivity will not just help to retain our talented young people but stimulate long-term growth and prosperity for the entire community, because it has a knock-on effect.

Part of that creative stability has to include reform of these institutions. One thing that I have consistently heard from my best friend in America, my brother in Europe and my cousin

in Australia is this: why would I come back when Northern Ireland can hardly sustain a half-functioning Government? We need to make sure that we create a stable political environment that fosters a culture of collaboration and mutual respect and where no one party holds disproportionate power to collapse these institutions ever again. Such reforms will build public trust, encourage political engagement and ensure that the focus remains on serving the best interests of all our citizens, thereby providing the stability that we need for our young people to see a future here. If we can create the political will to work together, it will put across a much more positive view of this place.

Like David, I had a great team of work experience students with me last week who helped me out by giving me their views on this motion. The first comment that I heard was that university is not the only way. Although the motion highlights a critical issue regarding the exodus of students pursuing higher education outside Northern Ireland, it overlooks an equally important aspect: the need to support those seeking education through non-university channels, such as vocational training and apprenticeships. Many young people prefer or are better suited to those alternatives, which are vital for meeting the diverse needs of our economy and addressing those skills shortages. By focusing predominantly on university education, the motion fails to recognise the value of vocational routes and the necessity of enhancing those opportunities to retain and develop talent in Northern Ireland. It is imperative that any comprehensive strategy on reducing the brain drain includes robust support for all vocational and apprenticeship programmes and ensures that all students can access the education and training that best suit their aspirations and abilities.

One of the biggest issues raised by the young people was that of CAO reform, which my colleague David also referenced. One of the comments was, "My teachers told me more about studying in Europe than they did about studying in the South of Ireland". We need to change that. It is down the road.

Ms McLaughlin and David both mentioned the waiting period of the two-week window, the non-alignment of the results coming out, the need for a fourth A level and the need for languages, as only 4% of students are taking languages at that level. Our work experience students brought up all those issues with me.

**1.45 pm**

**Mr O'Toole:** I have two specific personal connections or reasons to be particularly interested in the subject. I will come on to a couple of comments about the text of the motion in a little while.

First, I represent South Belfast, and my constituency office is on University Street. I am a stone's throw from Queen's University, our largest university and oldest institute of higher education, which, along with Ulster University, as most of us agree, does not have enough capacity or space to accommodate the needs of our society, economy and young people.

Secondly, I am one of those who left and came back. I am happy to be corrected, but I think that I am the only serving Member who left the region and was away for such a long time. I have personal experience because I left in 2001 to study as an undergraduate in Scotland and did not return until 2020, when I became an MLA. It gives me a unique insight into the mindset of people who leave, whether they wish to leave initially or not, and the barriers that keep them away.

We need to be bluntly and, at times, brutally honest with ourselves about the consequences of our young people leaving in such numbers and the barriers that cause them to stay away, which is why I was intrigued to hear that one criticism of our motion was that it is too negative. We specifically talk about solutions, but, when we talk about a serious public policy and societal challenge, it is important to recognise that we are not here for the power of positive thinking. It is not a booster competition. We are not simply cheering one another on; we are not cheerleaders. We are here to debate and interrogate serious public policy challenges. The number of young people who leave here and feel that they cannot come back is a serious public policy challenge.

I will touch on some of the important research that has gone into the motion. Pivotal is a relatively new think tank in the North that has examined in some detail the negative economic consequences of the large numbers of undergraduates and school leavers who leave Northern Ireland. We know that a university's worth of young people study across the water, and there are large numbers who feel that they cannot come back. I will come on to the question of those who do not want to go through higher education, because their economic contribution is just as important or, in many cases, more important than those who study at university. However, every motion cannot cover every related topic on every subject, so it is not a fair criticism that the

motion does not explicitly mention apprenticeships.

The Pivotal research has shown clearly the dire economic consequences of our losing highly productive, motivated young people. Mr Brett talked about our high-performing education system. It is true to say that we produce many graduates who get lots of As in their A levels; that is not the same thing as an effective education system. If it were, our overall levels of educational attainment would be much higher. Our highly selective education system, which tends to favour the better off — many of those who are better off send their kids to university across the water, and those kids never come back — has profound economic and social consequences for this society. Those who do not face up to that are kidding themselves. Profound challenges are created, as Pivotal has found.

John Fitzgerald and Edgar Morgenroth, two economists, have studied the productivity consequences, as has the Productivity Institute, which is a relatively new institute, of which Queen's is a partner, of our levels of losing young people. There are real economic consequences. We have lots of great industries in Belfast and across the region, such as the cyber and creative sectors. The Minister will have engaged with those industries in his few months in the job. Those industries need skilled people, but the rest of our economy needs them too. Too many of our most qualified young people are leaving to study and not coming back. There are huge challenges.

I give way briefly, because I will get an extra minute.

**Mr Honeyford:** This is just to give you an extra minute, so that we can hear you develop your strategy. Can you outline three issues or solutions that the SDLP would like to see, so that we can, at least, have something we can move forward with debating?

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

**Mr O'Toole:** I appreciate that.

I am not a Minister; I do not hold ministerial office. My job is to be the leader of the Opposition. David, you — through the Chair — completely mischaracterise our motion as not having any solutions. It specifically calls on two Ministers to reduce the number of students leaving these shores. That would include raising the number of undergraduate spaces.



That, by definition, is a solution. I am sorry, but my job is to be leader of the Opposition not to do the jobs of the Executive parties for them. Our motion includes specific policy challenges. If the Executive parties do not want to face up to the extent and depth of those challenges, that, I am afraid, is for them.

This society has moved on enormously in the past 26 years. We have created huge economic opportunities since the Good Friday Agreement, but we still export far too many of our young people. Part of what drives them away is the sense that our politics and society have not moved on. In the new Programme for Government, it would be hugely welcome if the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Education could work together to produce a strategy to, first, increase the number of undergraduate places here and, secondly, encourage and incentivise those who have left to come back. There are huge reasons for us to be positive about the future.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please? Thank you.

**Mr O'Toole:** We need to do our jobs and give those young people a reason to come back.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** The next person to be called will be the Minister, who would normally have 15 minutes to speak. However, I am looking at the timings as we approach Question Time at 2.00 pm. If you are happy to continue now, we will suspend closer to the time, or do you want to come back after Question Time?

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** It might be better to come back.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Dr Aiken):** OK. Ladies and gentlemen, the next item of business in the Order Paper is Question Time. On resumption of this item of business, the next Member to speak will be the Minister for the Economy.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 1.52 pm.*

*On resuming (Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Ní Chuillín] in the Chair) —*

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### The Executive Office

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** We will start with listed questions. Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

### Junior Ministers: TEO Committee

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the junior Ministers will give evidence to the Committee for the Executive Office. (AQO 626/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister):** The relationship between Ministers and their Assembly Committee is hugely significant, and we place great importance on developing a collaborative and constructive relationship with the Committee for the Executive Office. We met the Committee in February to discuss our priorities for the Department, and our senior management team has briefed the Committee on our legislative, budgetary and policy intentions.

In relation to future meetings with the Committee, we recently wrote to the Chair in response to the Committee's invitation to Ministers to give evidence. We advised her that we and our junior Ministers are happy to do so once a suitable date can be agreed.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. [*Translation: Thank you, Minister.*] First Minister, we are approaching six months since the Executive were restored. Will you detail the responsibilities of each junior Minister?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Both our junior Ministers have been proactive on the ground, visiting a lot of our very good community organisations that do great good relations work. That is certainly an area that both Ministers have focused on. Equally, they have been in Brussels representing the Executive Office at an occasion for building our international relations.

By and large, the junior Ministers do a great job in jointly representing us at various events and meetings with different groups. They have a broad remit in supporting the Executive Office and, from time to time, carry out different

responsibilities and focus on a different remit, particularly in attending meetings with relevant groups or on particular areas. They cover everything across the office.

**Ms Bradshaw:** First Minister, when you were at the Committee with the deputy First Minister, you agreed that you would come back before the summer recess. We expected, in our forward work programme, that you would come to the Committee this Wednesday. No explanation was given for why you were not coming. We really wanted to see you both at the Committee, because we have been so let down —.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Is there a question, Paula?

**Ms Bradshaw:** We wanted to raise those points, and I ask you to explain why you are not coming to account for the late and poor communication that the Committee has been getting from your departmental officials every week.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am aware that our Department has liaised with the Member to try to find an appropriate date. I am also aware that her Committee will, perhaps, close up earlier than other Committees at the end of the session, so perhaps there is a difficulty in finding a date. Equally, I am aware that we will meet later this afternoon, so hopefully we can discuss these things then.

**Miss Brogan:** The First Minister will know that the Finance Minister, Caoimhe Archibald, has been working on behalf of the Executive to get a better financial deal from the British Treasury to ensure that we get better public services in the North. Will the First Minister outline when the June monitoring allocations will be made?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for her question. I understand that our Finance Minister, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, is ready to make recommendations to the Executive on June monitoring allocations that would see the available, much-needed money being allocated to Departments to deal with the raft of pressures across all Departments, including additional money for Health or for the pay and grading review for education support workers. That is the normal, routine business of the Executive and the Assembly, and we should meet urgently to try to provide clarity for our Departments on their budgets.

**Mr Bradley:** My question has partly been answered, but I would like a more detailed

response on the duties that the junior Ministers have undertaken in this mandate.

**Mrs O'Neill:** As I said, our junior Ministers can be credited with being out on the ground, meeting so many groups and looking at the excellent work that they do across our community. The junior Ministers carry out a raft of functions from deputising from time to time for me and the deputy First Minister to attending meetings in their own right, including everything from events in Brussels to meeting local groups. They attend meetings on issues such as ending violence against women and girls and engaging with young people. Both Ministers have engaged positively throughout their tenure.

## Housing Supply Strategy

2. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the housing supply strategy will be published. (AQO 627/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is important that the Programme for Government be agreed with the Executive before we confirm what will be included in it. We have spoken previously about our priorities for the mandate, which include housing. We have also highlighted the importance of childcare, reducing hospital waiting lists, ending violence against women and girls, special educational needs, Lough Neagh and developing a globally competitive economy.

**Mr McCrossan:** I asked the First Minister specifically about housing and whether it would be a stand-alone outcome in the Programme for Government. Minister, your party committed to building 100,000 houses. The Executive, which you lead, are now committed to building only 400 this year. Is that a failure on your part, as First Minister, to deliver housing for all?

**Mrs O'Neill:** There is no escaping the fact that housing must be built on a scale and at a speed that will address our housing situation. That is an absolute priority, and we must have that ambition. I am wedded to what was previously committed to. I am also absolutely clear that the priority of identifying 400 houses does not cut it, so I want to be constructive and work with the Minister. I know that our Finance Minister also wants to work with the Communities Minister to ensure that we do whatever we can to raise the number. That figure has been put out there in relation to the draft Budget, but we have to do better. We must do better, and I am determined that we will, because we have to give people access to good housing. We need to see action to reflect the scale that is required.

**Ms Ferguson:** First Minister, do you share my concerns about the ongoing Tory austerity and underinvestment in our public services? Do you agree that that is having a seriously negative impact on delivering social and affordable homes?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I absolutely concur, as every Member in the Chamber should. We know that the Executive's Budget has been significantly underfunded by the British Government for well over a decade to the detriment of our public services, whether in health, education or housing. It is an unacceptable fact that we have been underfunded. We have been funded well below need, and I am glad that there is now at least some acknowledgement of that fact. That is the direct result of Tory austerity, which has meant that less social housing has been built, our waiting lists have increased and public services have declined sharply. It is just not acceptable. That is why we must speak with one voice to make the case for properly funded public services here.

I am glad that our Finance Minister and the Executive are working to ensure that our finances are on a stable footing so that we can invest in essential public services in health, education, childcare and key infrastructure projects. Specifically on housing, greater public investment is definitely part of the solution, and we need to bring forward other innovative solutions so that we do what we can to plan for the future to increase the supply of social and affordable housing.

On the question of improving public services and supporting people, we have to give hope to people and families who have been on waiting lists for seriously long times that we will build homes. I am determined to do that, and I will work with all Executive colleagues to get a proper housing supply strategy in place that allows us to deliver and make it happen for families who need homes.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

## **Casement Park: East-West Council**

5. **Mr Durkan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they discussed funding for Casement Park at the inaugural meeting of the East-West Council in March 2024. (AQO 630/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Our statement to the Assembly on 7 May set out the matters discussed at the inaugural meeting of the East-West Council on

26 March. The meeting focused primarily on the Council's strategic direction and governance, including its terms of reference, its future direction and the establishment of Intertrade UK. It did not deal with specific issues, and therefore discussions did not include the issue of funding for Casement Park.

**Mr Durkan:** It is disappointing that Casement was not raised at that opportunity. I wonder whether it was raised at an earlier meeting on 5 February with the Prime Minister. However, we welcome the First Minister's commitment last week that Casement will be built on her watch. While we appreciate and welcome that confidence, is the First Minister as confident that it will be built in time to host the European Championships in 2028?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for the question. He should not be surprised that the subject was not raised, because it was the inaugural meeting of a new body that will focus primarily on improving relations and having conversations. It is not intended to replicate any of the other structures that we have. It is not the forum in which to raise the issue, but I can assure the Member that I have raised it with every British Minister, including the Prime Minister, at every opportunity that I have had. Next week, when we are post 4 July, whoever comes out on the other side of the election to occupy Downing Street will have me knocking at their door to talk about the huge significance that hosting the Euros here would have and the huge economic boost that it would bring. I want us to be part of that. I do not want us to miss a moment there.

Whoever comes into 10 Downing Street and whoever occupies the Treasury, we want firm commitments from them on the financial package that gets Casement Park built and gets us to be part of the Euros.

**Mr Sheehan:** Does the First Minister agree that holding Euro 2028 in a state-of-the-art Casement Park is an unprecedented economic opportunity on which we cannot afford to miss out?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, absolutely. It is a prospect about which we must all be ambitious. It will lead to the betterment of our wider society and bring an economic boost. The investment in sport will leave a legacy. There will be a tourism impact from it. The benefits are therefore immense. It is an opportunity not to be missed, and one that we must maximise.

I say to the Member that Casement Park remains a flagship project for the Executive. It is a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, and, as I have said in the past, Casement will be built, in the same way in which the Kingspan Stadium and Windsor Park have already been delivered. It is now important that we get to the other side of the election and get immediate, firm confirmation from the British Government on their stated funding commitment. We need to get that without delay so that we can move on at pace and secure our place for the Euros.

**Ms Mulholland:** How up to date is the list of capital projects on which the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) is currently advising the Executive?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The information on that is a bit wider than the question, so I am happy to write to the Member with more detail, if that is OK.

## Maze/Long Kesh Potential

6. **Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the social, economic and reconciliation potential of a regenerated Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQO 631/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** At 347 acres, the Maze/Long Kesh (MLK) site is twice the size of the Titanic Quarter. It has great potential in itself but can also be an economic driver not just for Lagan Valley but for the whole region. The site has immense potential as an economic hub, with around one million people living within 30 minutes of it, and it occupies a strategic location on a key transport corridor. The three existing tenants on the site deliver unique and varied activities but illustrate what really can be achieved. The Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) has brought a substantial area of the site back into use and estimates that its current business levels attract approximately 375,000 visitors across a schedule of 20 events. The Ulster Aviation Society (UAS) collection of aircraft and memorabilia is one of the top attractions in the area, with an estimated 9,200 visitors annually. Air Ambulance has been tasked over 4,200 times since its operations commenced in 2017, delivering significant social and economic benefits through lives saved and early interventions.

It must also be a site for the community, and dedicated areas are envisaged for community and sports use. We must build on the common ground that we all share to realise the potential of the site for the benefit of all. We are

absolutely committed to working with the Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation to achieve that.

**Mr Gildernew:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire. [*Translation: I thank the First Minister.*] I particularly welcome the commitment to build on the common ground that we all share to realise the potential of the Long Kesh site for the benefit of all. As such, First Minister, can you outline the next steps in moving forward with that?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The deputy First Minister and I and the junior Ministers were all at the Balmoral show, and it is on such days that you get to see the site's real potential, which is evident to us all. The agriculture show excelled itself again this year, but we need to match the site's potential with a similar level of ambition. As I said, the site has such enormous potential for business, housing, recreation, learning and sport for us all. I want to see it developed in the same way in which we have witnessed with the regeneration of other sites, particularly the Ebrington site and Crumlin Road Gaol. Those sites have been opened up to be really inclusive spaces and are the building blocks for a shared society.

On your question about next steps, the deputy First Minister and I have accepted an invitation to meet the corporation board to take stock of the current position and to hear its thoughts on the development of a road map for the site. That meeting will inform how we proceed. The scale of the investment required is huge, for sure, but the cost of doing nothing is even greater. We do not want to see any more delays. A regenerated MLK site will work for everyone, and I want to work with the deputy First Minister to see that happen.

**Mr Honeyford:** Regrettably, in relation to the previous question, we are down to the wire on a timeline for Casement Park. Can the First Minister give us a timeline for the Maze/Long Kesh site? I welcome what she has just said about it, but we need to get on and see the potential for all our community so that we can benefit.

## 2.15 pm

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is important that we meet the board, as I said, because that is our first step. The board may have refreshed its thoughts on a road map for the development of the site. We are going to have that meeting very shortly, and that will allow us to proceed in a way that is more informed and taps into the potential that

we have. Crucially, however, it starts with the meeting that we are going to have with the board. I am hoping that we will be able to do that in the coming weeks, and then we will be able to report more and talk more. As the Member knows, we have talked about this matter in the House on a number of occasions and we are all passionate about doing it. Now it is time to turn that ambition into action.

**Mr O'Toole:** First Minister, I welcome the fact that you are going to meet the board. Obviously, we now have junior Ministers for meetings, and those meetings are happening, but it has also been the case that the members of the board of the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, with all due respect to them, are, effectively, getting paid £6,000 a year to have meetings. That is a decade of that site largely lying unused.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Is there a question, Matthew? This is Question Time.

**Mr O'Toole:** Can you give us a clear timeline for when we are going to get an update?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The development corporation is established under statute, and it has a wide range of powers to enable it to effectively take forward the regeneration of the site. I have already mentioned some of the areas where the site has been developed and that there is even more potential. Indeed, since its inception, the development corporation has had functions to do with retaining the site, with ensuring that listed buildings are preserved and around health and safety concerns. It has also been developing its plans for how it sees the site expanding into the future. I am going to focus on the positivity and the potential, and I am going to work with the development corporation to make sure that we realise that.

## **Mother-and-baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses: Public Consultation**

7. **Mrs Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their work to progress the public consultation on policy proposals arising from the report on mother and baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses. (AQO 632/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** We remain committed to introducing legislation in the Assembly for a statutory public inquiry and redress scheme as soon as possible. It is important that victims and survivors are at the centre of that, which is why

a public consultation on the key policy proposals is essential. We look forward to meeting the Victims and Survivors Consultation Forum this afternoon, with the intention of making an Assembly statement tomorrow and opening the public consultation later in the week. This is a major milestone, but there are a number of complex and sensitive issues for us all to consider carefully. It is also important we listen and hear a wide range of views. The consultation will include online and face-to-face events to make sure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to contribute during the 12-week period. This remains one of the most difficult parts of our past, and we are all personally committed to help right the wrongs of the past for those victims and survivors.

**Mrs Dillon:** Thank you, First Minister, for that answer. It will come as a great relief to many victims and survivors of mother-and-baby institutions, Magdalene laundries and workhouses that this is finally moving forward. Can you give us an assurance that, as has been the case in the past, victims and survivors will be central to the consultation and that they will be made aware of what is in the statement before it is made to the House?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for asking that question. As I have said before in the House, I welcome the fact that she and other Members have worked constructively across the House on this issue, given the sensitivities around it. As the Member will know, the deputy First Minister and I have been working at pace with our officials on the launch of the public consultation ahead of the summer recess. I am really pleased that we are now at that that stage.

I really personally acknowledge — I will do so again tomorrow — all those who have campaigned for years to get to this point. I also acknowledge that the suffering that everyone endured was traumatic and terrible. Those people have waited for far too long to get access to truth and accountability. The deputy First Minister and I look forward to meeting the Victims and Survivors Consultation Forum this afternoon with, as I said, the intention of making a statement in the Assembly tomorrow and then opening the public consultation later in the week. It is so important that we hear all the voices — those of birth mothers, adopted adults and family members — all of whom are critical and absolutely central to the process. We are committed to meeting the victims and survivors through this process, and I urge them all to engage in it and to make their voices heard.

## Language Commissioners: Work Plan

8. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the work plan for the commissioners appointed under the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 will be agreed. (AQO 633/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** With your permission, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, junior Minister Reilly will answer question 8.

**Miss Reilly (Junior Minister, The Executive Office):** The Executive Office is responsible for taking forward the necessary arrangements to implement the provisions of the Identity and Language Act 2022, including the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, the Irish language commissioner and the commissioner for the Ulster-Scots and the Ulster-British tradition. We have given initial consideration to the appointments process and hope to make an announcement about the necessary recruitment competitions in due course. Our officials have undertaken the initial work, which includes the practical arrangements for establishing those bodies. We have already indicated that the competitions for up to eight public appointments to those new bodies will be run at the same time. The experience, in our Department, is that a public appointment process takes approximately a year from the initial decisions made in respect of the process.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, junior Minister. The Committee recently had a presentation on the report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT). The Committee is very keen to see how that work could be dovetailed with the work of the new office. What discussions are taking place in that space in the Department?

**Miss Reilly:** It will be no surprise to the Member, when we talk about those offices being established and operating along with the commissioners, that it is an absolute priority for me and the Department that the process is done properly and effectively, in order to make sure that the offices are fit for purpose. I am happy to take that back to the Executive Office.

**Mr McHugh:** What steps have been taken to progress the establishment of the three new bodies under the Identity and Language Act?

**Miss Reilly:** The preparatory work has begun to establish the three new bodies under the

Identity and Language Act. This place that we call home is rich and diverse when it comes to language, culture and identity, and we want to make sure that that is reflected in and protected by the offices and commissioners. Officials have undertaken preparatory work, including on the practical arrangements that are required to establish the three new bodies under the Identity and Language Act and on engagement with different language groups, in order to ensure that the process is properly informed. It is important that the process is done properly and effectively so as to ensure that the offices are fit for purpose.

Ministers have given initial consideration to the appointments process as well, and we hope to make an announcement about the recruitment competition in due course. We are determined to make progress on the process. It is a substantial piece of work but one that we will absolutely deliver.

## T: BUC Review: Update

9. **Ms Á Murphy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Together: Building a United Community (T: BUC) review. (AQO 634/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I ask junior Minister Reilly to answer the question.

**Miss Reilly:** The Together: Building a United Community strategy reflects the Executive's commitment to improving community relations between people from different political, ethnic and religious backgrounds here. Since 2013, a huge amount of progress has been made in key thematic areas such as shared housing, shared education, removing interface barriers and engaging with young people. The make-up of society is increasingly diverse, and we need to make sure that our good relations approach continues to engage effectively with all those who live here. Officials are developing a final draft of the review for Ministers' consideration with a view to developing a refreshed approach to good relations and establishing what that will look like, building on progress to date.

**Ms Á Murphy:** I thank the Minister for her answer and am happy to hear that the review to build on the great work of T:BUC is under way. I am especially pleased to note that engaging young people is a key area of focus. Can the Minister outline what T:BUC has delivered for young people during the course of the programme?

**Miss Reilly:** I concur that engaging with young people is extremely important. It is important because young people are key to our society. As I mentioned, T:BUC of course stands for Together: Building a United Community, which is recognised in delivering on the ground and investing in our young people, across communities, over the past decade.

The planned interventions programme in particular funds community activity aimed at providing positive alternatives for young people who are at risk of becoming involved in antisocial behaviour, sectarianism and recruitment by paramilitary gangs. Since 2015, through various projects, the programme has been delivered to over 30,000 young people. The outcome is that over 90% of those young people have improved self-confidence and are less likely to be involved in negative behaviour. That shows the value of investing in our young people, believing in them and encouraging them to believe in themselves. Programmes such as T:BUC provide opportunities for our communities to take positive pathways, work together, learn from each other and build a better place for our people to live, work and thrive in. As an Executive, we are committed to improving community relations here and look forward to building on all the progress made to date.

**Mr Tennyson:** Further to the benefits that the junior Minister has just outlined, what work is being done in the Executive Office to protect and insulate good relations funding from cuts in this financial year and the next, given the difficult budgetary position?

**Miss Reilly:** Yes, I am happy to provide that for the Member. We are currently considering the budget allocations across the Executive Office. When that is finalised, we will consider the recommendations from officials on how good relations funding should be distributed across T:BUC headline actions and broader good relations programmes. All preparation work is complete, including the assessment process for all 2024-25 applications for good relations funding. Letters of offer to successful applicants will be issued where appropriate after a budget for each programme in 2024-25 has been confirmed.

### **School Transport: Foyle**

10. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will reinstate funding to support the school transport provision for Fountain Primary School, Foyle. (AQO 635/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Again, I will ask junior Minister Reilly to answer the question.

**Miss Reilly:** Through Urban Villages, £92,600 of funding has been provided to the Fountain Primary School and Nursery Unit transport scheme from September 2017 to March 2024. Urban Villages was never intended to be a core funder. The idea and aim was to provide additionality to existing provision in areas. Revenue funding for all Urban Villages community-led and cross-cutting projects ceased on 31 March 2024. Funding for the Fountain Primary School transport scheme was part of that funding. Officials have put together a range of options for the future of the Urban Villages programme. We are committed to continuing to promote thriving places and achieve the best outcomes for all our citizens. We will, of course, update Members on future plans for the programme once options have been considered.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Junior Minister, have you considered and responded to the request from the Education Minister to reverse the decision to remove funding from that school's transport? If so, what rationale have you used?

**Miss Reilly:** As I said, Urban Villages provided £92,600 of funding to the Fountain Primary School and Nursery Unit transport scheme from 2017 to March 2024. I am aware that the Minister of Education visited the school recently. I have been in Derry on a number of occasions, along with junior Minister Cameron. We visited Greater Shantallow Community Arts Centre, New Gate Arts and Culture Centre and Foyle Women's Aid, and we saw at first hand the great work, in particular in the community and voluntary sector, and the vision that they have for their communities. I worked and will work alongside anyone and everyone, because we see and recognise the importance of the positivity that Urban Villages brings to Derry.

We have seen other positive outworkings throughout Derry, whether that be the Magee campus expansion, the redevelopment of Meenan Square or the investment in Ebrington. Our Department and other Departments will continue with that positive work and ensure delivery for the people of Derry. Over one million people have benefited from the Urban Villages programme in Derry, which has helped to boost and support community work, tourism and heritage projects. The Urban Villages team will operate in Derry in the Fountain area, Bishop Street and Bogside until at least 2027 to allow the planned capital projects to complete, and we will continue to work with our

colleagues in other Departments as well to find out how we can best support and deliver for communities in an impactful and sustainable way.

**Mr Delargy:** The Minister will be acutely aware of the investment already going into the Fountain, Bishop Street and across my area, the Moor. Can she provide any more updates on some of the specific programmes and achievements to date?

**Miss Reilly:** As I mentioned, over one million people have benefited from the £2.4 million investment in Derry through the Urban Villages programme. That has helped to boost and support community work, tourism and heritage projects, education, arts and culture by investing not only in capital projects but in the capacity required to ensure sustainability and long-term positive social and economic impacts on the city. The Executive Office will continue to speak to delivery partners on the ground to ensure that their input is considered as we move forward and to determine the best way to build on all that has been achieved so far. Collaboration with our Executive colleagues will be key to that work, and I look forward to updating Members on future plans for the programme, once options have been considered.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Miss McIlveen is not in her place. I call Alan Robinson.

## Paramilitary Exploitation of Children

12. **Mr Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action their Department is taking to address the exploitation of children by paramilitaries. (AQO 637/22-27)

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** You have literally half a minute.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We are determined to build a safer society free from the negative influences of paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control. We are doing that through a number of initiatives that work to protect children and young people from exploitation by paramilitary and criminal gangs. That includes projects such as the planned interventions programme funded through T:BUC, which provides positive alternatives for our young people at risk of becoming involved in antisocial behaviour, sectarianism and recruitment by paramilitary gangs. In addition, the Communities in Transition project, which is part of the tackling

paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime programme, delivers projects that raise young people's aspirations. It aims to create better life choices for young people and delivers interventions focused on combating child criminal and child sexual exploitation. Our delivery partners and officials work closely with the statutory agencies with lead responsibility for those matters.

2.30 pm

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, Alan; time is up.

That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

## Tribeca Project

T1. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after saying that he can be robust in opposition while sincerely respecting the fact that they are trying hard to put the best foot forward for this region in order to encourage investment in and a positive perception of this place but that, unfortunately, an area in the northern part of Belfast city centre that is commonly known as the "Tribeca project" is, after years of progressive deterioration, compromising the perception of the city and the region, what should be done about that area. (AQT 421/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** We should all be passionate about trying to lift up all our city centres, communities and high streets. The Executive have done work on that in the past. It is important that we send out a positive message that Belfast is very much open for business and that we have some fantastic innovative businesses in our city centre. However, there are issues that need to be resolved. I note the recent appointment of the night-time czar, which is a great addition. You will know that the responsibility for regenerating the city centre comes under the direct remit of the council. Our Department and, I am sure, every other Department will be more than happy to continue to promote that positive message about Belfast city centre regeneration, including on housing projects and city centre revitalisation. It is about creating a night-time economy and a daytime economy, where homes are built and we can accommodate the huge number of students that we have. There is huge potential in that. We should focus on building up those positives and dealing with the challenges.



**Mr O'Toole:** First Minister, I appreciate those general answers, but I was asking specifically about Tribeca. North Street is a disaster. Members of both our parties, including, I think, you, have met the developers. If Belfast City Council and others cannot progress the project up to and including the acquisition vesting of all or part of that site, are you willing to step in and, on behalf of the Executive, take the necessary steps, including, potentially, using financial transactions capital, to acquire all or part of that site so that we can overcome the specific dereliction in that part of the city, which is really letting us all down?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Let us continue to work together to resolve any issues. I will not make up policy on the hoof on behalf of the Executive, but I will certainly continue to pledge my support to working with Belfast City Council to find the solutions that will allow us to make Belfast the most vibrant city that it can be so that we can attract visitors, as we do in great numbers. It is about working with the retail sector, the hospitality sector, the tourism sector and across the board to make it the best place that it can be. I will not be found wanting on that.

## SuperCupNI

T2. **Mr Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they are aware that this year's SuperCupNI takes place between 21 July and 26 July and whether they agree that it is a great opportunity for young people to compete with the best across the world and to showcase the north coast and Northern Ireland in its entirety. (AQT 422/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** I absolutely concur with the Member. I know that the House was earlier debating opportunities for our young people. That is a great example of an opportunity for our young people to compete with people from across the international community on the sporting field. It is a really positive experience for so many people. I hope to have a chance to be there for some part of it at some stage when it comes here. I could not concur with you enough about what it means. It is about investment in the north-west, all the visitors that it brings, the legacy of sport and investing in our young people. It is absolutely positive.

**Mr Bradley:** Thank you for your answer, First Minister. Will you commit the Executive Office to working closely with the organisers of the competition to promote it annually?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I will certainly take that back to our office. We can discuss how exactly the cup is

supported. If there are other areas that we need to look at, I would be happy to do that.

## Spirit AeroSystems

T3. **Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, given that the media are reporting the potential sale of Spirit AeroSystems, they agree with group chairman, Sir Michael Ryan, who has said that any dismantling of the business would be extremely detrimental to the long-term future of Belfast business, and, by extension, the region's aerospace industry, and to give her assessment of the potential impact. (AQT 423/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is a very current story in the media and is about a major employer, so we need to work with the industry and with the business itself to see what is within our remit in terms of support. The business is a big employer in East Belfast, and I respect that. We have not had any direct correspondence on the matter yet, but I am sure that that will come, given that it is a breaking story.

**Ms Bunting:** I thank the First Minister for that. Will she, the deputy First Minister and the Economy Minister undertake to take action? Will she outline the action that she will take to secure the integrity of the business?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am very happy to talk to our Economy Minister on any engagement that has he has had. I have engaged with Bombardier in the past — obviously, now it is Spirit AeroSystems. As I have said, it is a major employer, so let us see what we can do to support it.

## International Relations Strategy

T4. **Ms Brownlee** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after stating that 75% of the democratic world is heading to the polls this year, which means that the world is changing and so are policies, how the Executive Office has integrated that into its international relations strategy. (AQT 424/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** You are right that two thirds of the world are going to the polls. That is some change in one year. Who knows where we will be by the end of this year with the changes that are afoot? Our international relations strategy has to reflect where we are at and where we are targeting. In a post-Brexit world, with access to both the British and EU markets, what markets does that open up for us, for example in manufacturing? We have to reflect

that in our international relations strategy, which will be embedded in a new programme that we bring forward. We will probably make a statement to the Assembly on that at some point in future.

**Ms Brownlee:** Thank you for your answer. Do you have any idea of when an implementation time frame will be announced?

**Mrs O'Neill:** We only have one more week left of the Assembly session, so it will be September before we are able to bring that forward. It is a piece of work that has been ongoing for some time and we will probably be able to bring it back very early in the new political season — if you want to call it that — from September.

## Votes at 16

T5. **Ms Mulholland** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that we go to the polls next week, for an assessment of votes at 16 and where they think that that would make a difference in Northern Ireland and in our politics. (AQT 425/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** It is not strictly within the remit of our Department, but I will give you my view of votes at 16. I believe that voting should be expanded to young people. They are well in tune with what they need and what they want. Is that not what politics is about? It is about voting for change and getting the opportunity to have your say on something, so I would like to see the voting age extended. On a party political basis, that is something that I campaign for and I regularly engage on with the Electoral Office and the powers that be in electoral law.

**Ms Mulholland:** I asked that with indulgence; I know that it is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office. Will the First Minister commit to writing to whoever the new Secretary of State is post 5 July to ask that the power to bring in votes at 16 here be devolved to the House?

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is certainly my personal view of what should happen. We can discuss it again in the Executive Office, but it is certainly my view that that power is something that we should have. We should have control of the maximum number of powers that have an impact on our lives here and on the people whom we represent, so I concur with that.

You were speaking about young people and 16-year-olds. Over the past two weeks, I think every Member in this Chamber has brought

young people in here for work experience. That is a fantastic thing that we all should encourage. We want young people to be part of the electoral system and the democratic system; we want our politics to reflect society; we want our politics to have more young people and more people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds; and we want our politics to reflect the world that we live in. So my message to all young people — I am sure that you will concur — is that there is a role for them to play in politics and voting is a key element of that. I, like you, am of the view that the voting age should be lowered.

## June Monitoring Round

T6. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when, given that £370 million will supposedly be available, the June monitoring round will be released and tabled with the Executive. (AQT 426/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** Our Finance Minister has indicated that she is ready to make allocations. I would like to see the Executive meeting sooner rather than later so we can get that money allocated.

I do not know where you got your specific figure from; that is for you to refer to. Certainly, there is money to be allocated in June monitoring, and I want to get that done as soon as possible, because it gives certainty to Departments that are struggling with the budgets that they currently have. There is additionality, and I hope that that will happen in the coming days.

**Dr Aiken:** I declare an interest: of course, I sit on the Finance Committee, so I am fully aware of what is available in our departmental expenditure limit and the capital that is due to come through. Minister, time is running out for the allocation of those funds to vital public services. What will your combined office do to expedite that process, given that, as you said, we have only a week left before the Assembly breaks for the summer?

**Mrs O'Neill:** As I said, the Finance Minister has written to say that she is ready to make the allocations. I want that meeting to happen. I hope that we get agreement for that meeting. We do not need to wait until the other side of the election for that to happen. This is about business continuity and business as usual, but that is my view of it. I will still try to get an Executive meeting scheduled so that we can have that discussion.

## Economic Policy: TEO Role

T7. **Mr Honeyford** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the recent release of economic data, to outline the role of the Executive Office in setting economic policy. (AQT 427/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Economy Minister sets out the vision for the economic strategy, as he has done since he came into office, and it is based around four key things: more and better-paid jobs; productivity is a huge area; there is huge potential in the green economy; and regional balance, because we need to make sure that everybody shares in the prosperity agenda — that is really important. The Economy Minister takes the lead on the strategy, but the deputy First Minister and I, in our international relations strategy and diplomatic engagements, complement and overlay the work that is done in the Department for the Economy.

**Mr Honeyford:** Thank you for your answer. Will you set out the work, then, that the economic policy division that is part of your Department has carried out since restoration?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Again, that is about liaising with Invest NI and the Department for the Economy. I am happy to send to you in writing the remit of the policy division. I do not have that in front of me, but it is around the areas that I just mentioned and working with the other key players or stakeholders, whether that be Invest NI or Department for the Economy officials. That linkage is strong. I will write to the Member.

## Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

T8. **Mr Chambers** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the number of applications received to date by the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme and the number of applicants who have received an award. (AQT 428/22-27)

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) bereaved scheme reopened to new clients in April 2021. Previously, only victims who had registered before 31 March were eligible. VSS self-directed support schemes have provided £13.5 million in funding to date to support bereaved victims and survivors.

On the victims' payment, £45 million has been paid since the scheme opened. I will write to the Member about the number of applications.

**Mr Chambers:** First Minister, what is the average timescale from application to decision?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I do not have the average time frame in front of me. What I can say is that there are concerns about the length of time that it can take to process an application. However, each application is unique and can be complex when it comes to assessment and the historical nature of much of the evidence. We are keeping that under constant review and are looking for ways to continually improve the throughput of cases. We are engaging closely with the victims and their representative groups, which bring these issues to us, so that we can continue to improve the situation for victims who come forward.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up. We now move to questions for the Minister for the Economy. Hold on. Sorry, we are waiting for the Economy Minister. Members, take your ease for a wee minute.

2.45 pm

## Economy

### SEN Provision

1. **Ms Eastwood** asked the Minister for the Economy what action his Department is taking to improve special educational needs provision in education, employment and training for people with learning disabilities. (AQO 640/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** My Department has a range of provision for young people with special educational needs that is delivered through further education colleges, universities and across our vocational training provision. There are significant gaps in provision, however, and they have been worsened by the loss of the European social fund. That is not acceptable. Everyone should be able to access opportunities and fulfil their potential. I have therefore asked officials to review the current provision and provide me with recommendations to improve support for young people with special educational needs. I have also asked my officials to examine legislative protections and bring back advice as soon as possible. It is my hope that practical support and legislative protections can be strengthened in this mandate. That will require collaboration across Departments.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the Minister for his response. I am really encouraged by it. I am sure that he is aware of the fantastic campaign that Alma White and her son, Caleb, have been undertaking over the past number of months to raise awareness of post-19 provision for young adults with SEN. The Minister said in his initial response that he will consider collaborative working: I assume that that will be along the lines of working with the Minister of Education, for example.

**Mr C Murphy:** I had the pleasure of meeting Alma White last week in my office here. Yes, it will be a question of collaborating with other Departments. With that post-19 cohort, there is a significant responsibility for the Department for the Economy, but that will require us to have a joined-up approach with the Department of Education. We are already working on the disability strategy, which is led by the Department for Communities. The Department of Education special needs end-to-end review is co-chaired by Education and the Department of Health. When I spoke to Alma last week, I undertook to talk to the other Ministers involved to make sure that, in the first instance, if there are things that we can do in the here and now to improve access to training and to provide proper, fulfilling experiences for people with special educational needs, we do so. I also talked about legislation, which is generally a longer-term solution, but I have asked officials to come back to me. If legislation is required, I hope that it can be done in this mandate.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Eóin Tennyson to ask a supplementary question — sorry, not Eóin. I call Peter McReynolds for a supplementary question.

**Mr McReynolds:** I did not indicate.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** OK.

**Ms Bunting:** The Minister will be aware of Four G, which conducts a similar service in the Dundonald area for a number of boys and girls who fall into the category. Minister, there is a dearth of provision once special educational needs pupils hit 18. Will those young people be a priority for your Department, and what action will you take to demonstrate that they are indeed a priority and will not be left by the wayside once they leave school?

**Mr C Murphy:** I agree with you that there is a dearth of provision. That has not happened recently but has been going on for many years. It is an inequality, and, if we are to do anything in our job in this institution and the job of those

of us who hold ministerial positions, it should be to try to tackle inequalities and injustices wherever they are. I gave a commitment to try to do that. I have worked on the issue in my role as a constituency representative. I understand people's frustration when lack of provision leads to a cliff edge at the age of 19, beyond which there is little or no provision. I have undertaken to do what we can in the Department to work with the other Ministers, where there is crossover, and there are areas of crossover with the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department for Communities. I will work with those Ministers, and, if legislation is required, I will try to get it through in this mandate.

## **Workers' Rights: NDNA Commitments**

2. **Mr Tennyson** asked the Minister for the Economy how he will deliver his Department's commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' on workers' rights. (AQO 641/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** I plan to consult on proposals to bring forward an employment rights Bill to protect and enhance workers' rights. As well as supporting the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', the new legislation will help deliver on the good jobs objective in my economic plan. Payment of the real living wage is a key element of a good job. While minimum wage setting powers have not been devolved at this stage, I recently announced my Department's support for a full-time living wage franchise here to encourage the uptake of the real living wage. My Department will provide £125,000 per year to Advice NI to carry out that important work.

**Mr Tennyson:** I thank the Minister for that answer. Will that legislation include provision to expand basic rights on day 1 of employment, such as the right to parental leave?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes. As I say, I hope, next week, to announce a consultation on the full range of issues that will be in the good jobs Bill. My intention is to come to the Chamber to do that next week. That will include a range of matters. The consultation document will go out. Of course, people can respond and, if they think that it should cover other areas that are not in it, they can feel free to make that contribution to it or, indeed, offer observations or insights on some of the issues that are addressed. A fairly comprehensive piece of legislation will come from that, so it is a significant consultation document. I look forward to being able to

launch that next week and have feedback on it over the summer.

**Mr Durkan:** Does the Minister agree that exploitative zero-hour contracts should be banned as part of that employment Bill? I know that it will go out for consultation — I look forward to that — but can he indicate at this stage whether he thinks that the legislation should include such a ban?

**Mr C Murphy:** I have already said on a number of occasions that it will and should include such a ban. Exploitative situations for all workers should be tackled wherever we can do that. As I said in response to a previous question, if there is one thing that we can do here, it is to tackle inequalities and injustices, and we should set our minds to that. It is my intention to do that. Obviously, I will put it out to consultation and see what the return is, but I would be surprised if there were not strong support for that.

## Employee Ownership

3. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy what action his Department is taking to promote employee ownership. (AQO 642/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Employee ownership has the potential to increase productivity and create fairer workplaces. However, currently, the North has only a limited number of employee-ownership businesses, and I would like to see that increase. I have directed my Department to undertake research on employee ownership. That will include an examination of the advantages or disadvantages of employee ownership as a business model, consideration of case studies of businesses that have become employee-owned and a look at the potential for the growth of employee-owned businesses. The research will be published in the latter part of the summer. Invest NI is already working with the business sector, including the social economy sector, to promote employee ownership for businesses with succession planning.

**Mr Kelly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin.

*[Translation: I thank the Minister for his answer.]*

Can he expand a little on the benefits of employee-owned businesses for employees and employers?

**Mr C Murphy:** It is, if you like, an approach to business succession that is not well illuminated here. It is not well known. It is growing. A week or two ago, I attended a conference, which was the third in a series of conferences over three days — in Newry, Cookstown, I think, and then Belfast — at which there was significant interest in that model. The benefits are subject to qualifying conditions. There can be a significant tax incentive to encourage businesses to adopt the employee ownership model, with an exemption from capital gains tax on the sale of shares to the employee ownership trust. Owners have a viable succession plan option that keeps the business embedded in the community. For many owners, safeguarding the future of the business and its employees is an important objective, and selling to your workforce does not mean severing ties with the business. For employers, having employees engaged directly with the business not only improves general working conditions but, as analysis by WPI Economics estimates, employee-owned businesses are around 8% to 12% more productive and 25% more likely to see increased profits than those that are not employee-owned.

## Non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive: Closure

4. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on closing the non-domestic renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme. (AQO 643/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** It is frustrating that the future of RHI is still undecided. It is a problem that I inherited and one that should have been dealt with long ago. A permanent solution, as raised in last year's Court of Appeal judgment, is necessary for all legitimate participants in the scheme and for the taxpayer. Delay risks further litigation. The urgent need to close the scheme is underlined by Ofgem withdrawing its administrative services by April 2026 at the latest.

I first circulated an Executive paper on 4 April 2024. It seeks to uplift tariffs and confirm the Executive's intention to close the scheme. That confirmation is needed if my officials are to develop a detailed proposal for closure and to negotiate with Treasury on using the funding available for another scheme. It is frustrating that the Executive have not been allowed to make a decision on the future of RHI.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the delay in allowing the Executive to

make a decision delaying the tariff uplift for RHI?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, the delay in taking a decision delays everything. It also acts to frustrate the view of the Court of Appeal, which was that this thing should move on at pace, that people should get certainty in relation to tariffs and that the Executive should give some certainty in relation to the future of the scheme. It is extremely frustrating not to be able to have the issue discussed in the Executive. I have tried to do so on a number of occasions, and I intend to bring the matter back to the Executive at the next available opportunity. I hope that that is sooner rather than later.

**Dr Aiken:** Obviously, the Minister has been doing a lot of detailed work on the closure of the RHI scheme. What quantum of funds is likely to be required for the closure of the scheme?

**Mr C Murphy:** Getting to the point at which that can be calculated involves entering a discussion on what might be an acceptable outcome regarding tariffs and the funding that might be available to us from Treasury. We have to get to the first base, which is that the Executive have to take a decision and signal an intent. That is what I have been bringing to the Executive for a number of weeks, but I have been unable to get a decision; I have been unable to get even a discussion. We need that decision to be taken. On the back of that, we will go off and do the calculations, and I will bring a further paper to the Executive to outline the costs and the possibilities of funding to support them. That will allow the Executive to take a fuller decision on the closure.

## Stendhal Festival, Limavady

5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of how the Stendhal Festival, Limavady has contributed to the economy since its inception. (AQO 644/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Tourism NI has provided significant financial support to the Stendhal Festival in recent years, amounting to £58,000 for the past five years in which the festival has taken place. Data in relation to the performance of events supported under the national tourism event sponsorship scheme is provided by event organisers as part of their post-event evaluation. Data on the performance of the event since its inception is not available, as funding has not been provided for every year of the event since its inception. However, I have no doubt that music events such as the

Stendhal Festival encourage visitors to explore more of the North by providing authentic and positive cultural experiences in dramatic landscapes.

**Mr Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will his Department, along with Tourism NI, continue to identify ways to support locally grown events such as Stendhal?

**Mr C Murphy:** One would like to be in a position to support all events, but the big challenge with supporting any event is the finance available. That means that, when you get down to decision-making, you need evidence to support it and you need money available to spend on the event. That means that events such as that festival and other events end up competing with each other for limited funds. That can mean that some gain and some lose out.

I have no doubt that the festivals are good events. They attract visitors — I am aware of people from my locality who go to that musical event — and they bring business and tourism into the area and, therefore, support the local economy in that part of the north-west. I would like to be in a position, as, I am sure, would Tourism NI, to support all such events, but the question is the funds that it has available and how it tries to disburse them across the many competing demands.

**Ms Hunter:** We have some of the lowest funding for the arts across these islands. Does the Minister share my concern that that could be detrimental to events such as the Stendhal Festival and could put young people off going into that career? Will he consider attending the Stendhal Festival in the coming weeks?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Minister, answer whichever question you want to. You got two.

**Mr C Murphy:** I am a bit like you, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle: I am getting too old for these musical events.

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

**Mr C Murphy:** There are too many people at them.

I agree: it is unfortunate that, when budgets become tightly squeezed, often the first thing to suffer is the arts. Not only are the arts necessary for the enrichment of our lives, but the events are an economic generator in a lot of areas. It is a challenge. The funding is,

obviously, not my area, but, with the new Government coming in, hopefully, the Executive can succeed in trying to secure sufficient funding. I would hope to see the arts getting an uplift, as I would for other vital public services.

**Mr Delargy:** Will the Minister provide more detail on what his Department does to promote music and arts events across the board?

**3.00 pm**

**Mr C Murphy:** Tourism NI is responsible for the administration of tourism events funding in the Department. Since 2019, Tourism NI has provided over £1.6 million of financial support to events and festivals that promote the arts, such as theatre, arts and music.

Tourism NI has also supported the event and festival organisers with skills development and capacity building through one-to-one mentoring and masterclasses on topics such as delivering environmentally sustainable events and developing commercial opportunities.

**Mr Honeyford:** Thank you Principal Deputy Speaker, and I definitely do not think that you are too old to be going to a live event. *[Laughter.]* That is terrible.

Given how important live events are to our tourism industry, will the new tourism action plan that is being developed outline how the Department will strategically promote our own, home-grown events?

**Mr C Murphy:** Not only are we developing the action plan, we are putting together a group, in the spirit of co-design, made up of a mixture of people from across the industry to try to advise. With that, we have very limited funds to give out, which is unfortunate, and I hope that the situation improves, but we want to try to direct support where the benefit is greatest.

Undoubtedly, many events are largely created through voluntary work from people on the ground who provide a huge amount of their time on a voluntary basis to promote their areas. Wherever possible, we need to provide support — not just financial assistance but support that is available to ensure that people get better skilled at running festivals and events. Those are enormously beneficial, not just for community cohesion but for attracting people to local areas. We will continue to give them all the support that we can within the limits and budgets that we have available to us.

## **Belfast City Centre Night Czar**

6. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how his Department plans to engage with the newly appointed Belfast city centre night czar. (AQO 645/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** The Department recognises the importance of a thriving night-time economy in ensuring that our towns and cities are attractive places in which to live, work and invest and to visit. My Department is exploring how it can best support the night-time economy. Engaging with the relevant stakeholders, such as the newly appointed night czar, Michael Stewart, in Belfast, will be an integral part of that process. My Department has contacted Michael to arrange a meeting.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I am pleased to hear that you will be meeting Michael Stewart shortly. It was a wonderful appointment, and I think that he will do a great job.

As a representative of South Belfast, I see such an overlap between a thriving night-time economy and a really satisfied student population. Obviously, they are both under your remit, and I encourage you to embrace that new appointment and see what you can do for the benefit of Belfast city and beyond.

**Mr C Murphy:** The appointment of such a person is very useful because those matters are not the single responsibility of any Department. Someone who can draw them together will be very useful.

The student accommodation situation in Belfast is developing very rapidly, and you can see that throughout the city centre. It might herald a move from some of the more densely packed areas in South Belfast, where students have congregated, to a different living environment in the city centre. There seems to be a very significant trend there. We need to continue to work with the universities to make sure that, where students enjoy nightlife, it does not impact on residents who live in the various parts of South Belfast, and that we have a nightlife atmosphere that is as safe as possible and as conducive to enjoyment as possible.

We have a very great offering in Belfast, as I am sure you are aware. Like me, you read about it rather than experience it, but there is a very great offering of nightlife. We want people to be able to enjoy that in a very safe fashion. That means ensuring that universities play their role in assisting students to enjoy that in a safe way as well.

**Mrs Erskine:** Key to the night-time economy is having proper infrastructure, such as taxis and public transport, in place. The night czar has raised the issue of a lack of taxi provision in particular around the city centre. Those workers are concerned about the VAT consultation that is going on at the moment in respect of Treasury's plans. There seems to be a nonchalant view of that from the Department. Is the Minister working with DFI in relation to those VAT plans? Is he working with the taxi industry? We cannot afford to have fewer taxi drivers in the system.

**Mr C Murphy:** I agree with the point that the Member outlined that a safe night-out environment means a safe way of getting home. That is particularly the case for women getting home from night-time entertainment and our night economy. That is critical. As I say, the appointment of a person to try to draw those strands together may be helpful, because it cuts across many Departments. The taxi industry is DFI's responsibility. I agree with you: we do not want to see fewer taxis. We want to see more taxis providing that support for people who are out enjoying the economies in all our towns and cities.

The VAT issue is one for the Department of Finance. When I was Finance Minister, we raised VAT issues with Treasury on a number of occasions but not with much success, mind you. However, if there is a new government, there might be a different approach to that. I am sure that the Finance Minister will raise that with Treasury, along with a range of issues that the Executive want to raise. I am very happy to offer support and to collaborate with other Ministers in order to ensure that we have the best night-time economy possible.

**Mr O'Toole:** Minister, this question specifically relates to Belfast. I welcome Michael Stewart's appointment. Right in the middle of the Cathedral Quarter, which is our key hospitality district for not just Belfast but the entire region, a huge stretch of dereliction has been facilitated either by default or design over the past couple of decades. I asked the First Minister about that in questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Will he work with others in the Executive to deal with that issue in order to find a way of recovering that part of Belfast, which is known as the Tribeca Quarter, from dereliction, should Belfast City Council not be able to progress it?

**Mr C Murphy:** I noticed your comment on that last week. I was surprised that you did not mention that your party had the Infrastructure

portfolio in the previous Executive when you were criticising people over the years for not taking any action. Of course we want to see dereliction — *[Interruption.]* Well, it is one thing to pass the buck to everybody else; it is another to look in on yourself and the performance of your party in the Executive on these matters. Your party has been in every Executive apart from this one, I think, since the inception of the Good Friday Agreement, yet you find a way to criticise every other party for its performance.

That aside and going forward from a positive and constructive Opposition perspective, I certainly agree to work with other Ministers. There are issues of dereliction across all our towns and cities, including Belfast. Some of those relate to things like the cost of living and the cost of doing business, which has resulted in businesses struggling. That means that there are issues with rates, as well as other things. The Department of Finance runs a scheme to try to encourage people back into unused premises. That is in the context of a very limited Budget. Ten per cent of the Executive's income comes from rates, so if we were to forgo more of that, we would forgo more money for other public services, which, I am sure, he and others in the constructive Opposition would criticise us for not spending money on, so it is a vicious circle. We all have a responsibility to play our part. I am very glad to join my Executive colleagues, just as I have been in all the Executives that I have sat on, which included some of your colleagues.

**Miss Brogan:** Will the tourism partnership board include hospitality representatives, and will the tourism action plan include actions that will help the hospitality sector?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, it will. If we want to make sure that the tourism strategy, which the Department has produced but not yet concluded, is as effective as it can be, the principle of co-design that I have always argued for needs people from the hospitality sector in there making their arguments. I have taken that approach to various areas of responsibility across the Department in order to make sure that we have input from people in the industries that we are trying to work with and provide policies for. That is how we get the most effective policy and the most buy-in to that policy from across the various sectors that we deal with.

I had the opportunity, and I have had many such opportunities since I came into office, to talk to people from the tourism and hospitality sector. I had a North/South Ministerial Council meeting on tourism this morning at which I



talked about the bigger issue of branding and other matters with the Department that is responsible for tourism in the South.

Yes, of course, that sector will be included. We want to make sure that the tourism policy is as effective as it can be. In doing that, we will work as closely as we can with the industry that it affects.

## Carer's Leave

7. **Ms Egan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he will include paid carer's leave in the proposed employment bill. (AQO 646/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** I intend to introduce an employment rights Bill in the current mandate in order to ensure that our employment law framework operates effectively for employees and businesses. I am aware that there have been calls for carer's leave to be a paid right, which goes beyond the provisions that are in Britain, the South of Ireland and, indeed, the EU. The cost of providing paid carer's leave would be considerable and would have to be fully funded by the Executive. In addition to the cost of providing paid carer's leave, there are other possible implications, such as the availability of funding for any HMRC system changes that would be required.

Those changes would require considerable set-up costs, and the ongoing annual costs would be substantial.

Carer's leave is one of the issues in an employment rights Bill that I intend to consult on, and any policy proposals for new legislation will be informed by the outcome of the consultation process. Those, in turn, will all need the necessary approvals from the Executive and the Assembly.

**Ms Egan:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Carers play an invaluable role in our communities and in our economy. Has the Minister engaged with any carers on the proposition for paid carer's leave legislation?

**Mr C Murphy:** The officials have been consulting on what will go into the Bill. I agree with you on the contributions that carers make. Saying that carers should be paid for all leave sometimes seems to be a ready response: that would lead to a series of considerably bigger questions. We need to make sure that people are aware, when we go out to consultation, of the issues that we face in that respect. We need to go into the process with eyes wide open. If we go down the road — I am not

arguing for or against doing so because I am open to the points that will be made during the consultation — we need to make sure that we are ready for the consequences of doing so. The Assembly and Executive will have to decide on that. I encourage the Member to respond to the consultation, and I am happy to hear from carers. I know that officials have worked through all the sectors that will be impacted by legislation.

**Mrs Dillon:** Minister, will you outline what, if anything, your Department is doing to support unpaid carers either going back into the workplace or remaining there so that they can continue with their opportunities in life?

**Mr C Murphy:** The issue of carer's leave and the barriers to entering or remaining in the workforce that performing such an important role may present, particularly for women, is a complex issue that stretches far beyond the policy remit of my Department. However, we have played and do play an important role.

My Department has several programmes available to all qualifying members of the public who wish to retrain. Details on each of those programmes and career information may be found on indirect. The existing right to request flexible working also offers carers the opportunity to request working arrangements that allow them to balance their caring responsibilities with work. However, more can and should be done.

I have been working with the Labour Relations Agency and other stakeholders to encourage employers to accommodate flexible working, and a proposed Bill also presents a potential opportunity to strengthen that right.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Claire Sugden is not in her place. I call Mr Stephen Dunne.

## Higher-level Apprenticeships: North Down

9. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he plans to increase the number of higher-level apprenticeships available in North Down. (AQO 648/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** Higher-level apprenticeships (HLAs) are demand-led with employers creating opportunities in line with business needs. HLAs are a success story and have grown significantly since they started in 2017, exceeding original forecasts. Year-on-year, we

have seen an expansion in the range of HLAs being offered across our economy. That growth enables more employers to use apprenticeships to attract new talent, as well as providing existing employees with a route to gaining new skills where they move to a new job role.

More recent statistics show that 65 higher-level apprentices had a home address in North Down. HLAs are delivered by all six further education colleges, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the three local universities, offering access across the North.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline any plans that he has to work with his Executive colleagues to facilitate more apprenticeships in Executive Departments? For example, the Department for Infrastructure is experiencing significant recruitment challenges, which is, ultimately, having an adverse impact on front-line services.

**Mr C Murphy:** Public-sector apprenticeships are important, and I will encourage all Departments to step up to the plate in that regard. It is a challenge to manage all of that as well as budgets, but they are important routes for younger people and those who are already in employment to upskill. As I said in my initial answer, HLAs are proving to be more and more popular as the years go on. They have been a success story. We need to make sure that the public sector pulls its weight and that Departments get involved and improve the numbers where they can. I will encourage other Ministers to do that.

**Ms Á Murphy:** What is being done in the Department for the Economy to promote apprenticeships?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Minister, very quickly.

**Mr C Murphy:** If I can get the answer quickly. The annual Northern Ireland apprenticeship week showcases how apprenticeships can transform the future for apprentices and businesses by helping them to release their potential. In addition, a twice-yearly apprenticeship advertising campaign reinforces the benefits of apprenticeship for the individual and employer.

**3.15 pm**

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** That ends the period for listed questions. We move to topical questions.

## **Magee Campus: Increase in Student Numbers**

**T1. Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for the Economy exactly how many student places will be created in September as a result of the Budget allocation of £4.1 million to the expansion of Magee campus. (AQT 431/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** As I have said, that is part of an overall ambition to raise the university population of Magee to 10,000 students. That was a New Decade, New Approach commitment. It falls to my Department to deliver that. We are trying to incrementally increase the number there in line with discussions with the university and the Magee task force. I cannot give an exact figure for how many people will be enrolled this September. That will require people to apply and come on to courses. I am happy to get that answer and give it to the Member in due course.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I have been asking for an answer to that question for some time. Obviously, preparations must be well under way. On the basis of those figures, 500 new students could come in. Have you any idea whether those will be additional places above the maximum student number (MaSN)? Will existing courses be expanded, or will there be additional courses? That is important so that we can plan for the economy. We would like to know: we are going into July next week.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Minister, answer. Sinéad, it is not a statement; it is a question.

**Mr C Murphy:** Firstly, we will consider MaSN in relation to Magee. We have been doing that. It will be for the university to decide the range of courses and the number of places that it offers. We will supply support and encouragement. We have been doing that through the task force to make sure not only that there are places and staff available to take additional students but that the entire remit of the city and north-west region generally is brought together for one purpose: to support that which is seen to be the central economic catalyst for growth in the north-west. The full weight of my endeavours as Minister is behind all that, and we will try to ensure that the university and city deliver in that regard.

## **Spirit AeroSystems**

**T2. Mrs Dodds** asked the Minister for the Economy, aware that he met her party

colleague Gavin Robinson on Spirit AeroSystems, what specific representation he had made to the company to try to keep the Belfast operation intact and save jobs. (AQT 432/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** The Member is correct. I met the MP for the area, or maybe he is the outgoing MP; I am not sure what his status is at this time. We are concerned, and concerns have been presented to us by people who work in the company. They are concerned about its future, what may happen if the company is bought over, who might buy it and what that could do to the jobs that are currently available here. I went to Spirit and met the company management and trade union people, and we discussed those issues. We agreed that there would come a point at which representations will be necessary. This morning, there were reports that we are moving closer to that point. I gave an undertaking to Gavin Robinson — other Members have raised the issue here, including at Question Time — that we will play our full role and Invest NI will play its full role in trying to keep the jobs and as much of the business here as possible. We will use our influence with the British Government to make sure that, when they talk to some of the companies involved, they understand the importance of the jobs and the continuation of the development here. We are absolutely fully on board for doing all that. We have ongoing dialogue and will keep a close watching brief on this. We have committed to intervene, if and when that necessary point arrives.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you, Minister, for that. It is really important. A large ecosystem of companies across Northern Ireland, including my Upper Bann constituency, supplies to bigger companies such as Spirit. Have you had contact with those companies, and do you recognise the importance that that large employer has for their survival?

**Mr C Murphy:** We recognise that ecosystem, as you say, around the company. Of course, we are trying to help all manufacturing and supply chain businesses and keep them growing, not only by supplying local companies and companies working here but by increasing their export potential, which gives them more sustainability and depth in their business.

We have not been engaging with local companies specifically on the issue, because it is very much a decision for Spirit AeroSystems and for Airbus, Boeing and the other companies that may be interested in it. Our primary objective is to protect the jobs and production

there. That, in turn, will give a degree of certainty to the supply chain companies as well. I hope that we will be successful in that regard, but, as I said in my initial answer, we are committed to doing all that we can to make sure that we retain those jobs and all of the production here.

### **Belfast Metropolitan College: Castlereagh Campus**

**T3. Mr McReynolds** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he can provide any update on the proposed closure of Belfast Metropolitan College's Castlereagh campus. (AQT 433/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** That is a matter for Belfast Met. We have been kept abreast of developments, but decisions on the operation of the campus are a matter for the college, not the Department. The Department does not take those decisions; they are taken by the college management. A number of representatives have brought the issue to my attention. In my dialogue with the MP for the area about Spirit AeroSystems, we also discussed the Castlereagh campus. Other representatives have raised it with me as well, but it is a matter for Belfast Metropolitan College.

We are keeping an eye on the situation. We want to make sure that our colleges grow and continue to have the capacity to offer as many student places as they can. We want to continue to grow the number of students in our further education colleges, so I want to see no action taken that jeopardises the ability to do that. The operational decisions about how campuses are managed are matters for the colleges themselves, however.

**Mr McReynolds:** I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware that the consultation closed in February: we are now in June. Can he assure me that he and his officials are doing everything that they can to ensure that that important education facility remains open and is supported to deliver on the aims of the 10X strategy? Summer is nearly here, and staff and students are contacting me about the proposed closure.

**Mr C Murphy:** We recognise clearly its importance. One of the biggest challenges to growing the economy, which is an Executive priority, relates to skills and the availability of people with the necessary skills to enter the workforce. Colleges are critical to all of that. I have had conversations with the college heads collectively on a number of occasions, and I

have encouraged them to collaborate and to ensure that the colleges operate to full capacity. We have tried to provide as much support for the college sector as is possible under the current budgetary arrangements, but it is the biggest sector to receive support from the Department for the Economy. We will continue to provide that support.

I do not get involved in individual decisions, but, overall, I want to ensure that colleges have the facilities, the staff and the ability to provide as many places for students as possible so that we can continue to grow numbers in the FE sector.

## Review of Higher Education Funding

T4. **Ms Nicholl** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the review of higher education funding, specifically an update on student financing. (AQT 434/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** It is another matter for which the overarching picture is one of financial challenge. Had we more money available to us, we would have more students and more support for them. We have the ability to increase emergency support for students in-year. We have already done that this year in order to add support. When it comes to the overall package, however, we are trying to work through the implications of the budget that we have just received to try to stretch it as far as we can when we allocate it.

The debate that will resume after Question Time will return to this point, but the number of students who are able to do courses at colleges and other education and training facilities here is hugely important to growing our economy. We are trying to provide support to students and to institutions so that they can take in more students, but it is a big challenge, because our budget is essentially the same as last year's, which is, in effect, a reduction.

**Ms Nicholl:** I thank the Minister for his response. I appreciate that there are budgetary constraints. In the work that has been done, is there an intention to address the existing inequalities for distance learners and part-time learners?

**Mr C Murphy:** We constantly talk to the universities and colleges about ensuring that there is accessibility for everyone who needs it. We have a high level of economic inactivity. Some of that relates to people who have not been in the education system or who did not go through it fully because they fell out of it for one reason or another. A lot of it, however, relates

to people who are trying to come back into the system. Just like people coming back into employment, students have to have the ability to access education on terms that are suitable for them or that appeal to them at that time in their life. We want to ensure that the colleges and universities run courses that are accessible to people.

We have an objective to get more economically inactive people back into training, education and employment, and we are working closely with the universities and colleges to ensure that we are on the same page and that accessibility is a key factor for them.

## Flood Compensation: Newry and Armagh

T5. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on flood payments, particularly to people in Newry and Armagh. (AQT 435/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** The schemes are administered by the district councils. The enhanced flood support scheme provides support of up to £100,000 to businesses that are directly flooded, and the flooding hardship scheme payment of £5,000 is for occupants who are not eligible for other supports. There is also a flood hardship payment of £2,500 for small and medium-sized enterprises that were not directly flooded but were unable to access their premises or to trade.

The majority of hardship payments — around £200,000 — barring a few for which information was incomplete, have been issued. To date, councils have issued letters of offer to 39 enhanced scheme applicants, and approximately £2.2 million of funding has been provided to councils to enable those payments to be made. Councils have made payments of just under £1 million to businesses. The delay in making payments is due to information not being submitted by businesses, for example proof of payment for works incurred. For businesses that have not made payments for work incurred or planned, owing to, for example, cash flow problems, the Department has agreed that councils can make advance payments. Councils meet loss adjusters weekly to ensure that there are no bottlenecks to hold up any claims and that council staff make themselves available on the ground in Newry and Downpatrick to assist businesses in submitting the information required to progress their claims.

**Ms Kimmins:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I particularly thank his officials for the work that they have done in helping us with businesses that are in unique circumstances. Is there any unspent money from the funds allocated to flood support? Will that be used for the original purpose of helping businesses that have been affected by flooding?

**Mr C Murphy:** The primary objective is to ensure that businesses that need support get it. If some of that is due to a lack of information, we are prepared to work with them to make sure that they can get that information in and access the schemes that we have already decided. If it turns out that some of the £10 million is unspent, we will look at ways of using that to continue to support businesses in the affected areas.

### **Hospitality Businesses: Support**

T6. **Ms Eastwood** asked the Minister for the Economy, acknowledging his awareness that hospitality businesses such as Clenaghan's in Aghalee, Lagan Valley, an otherwise viable business that had to close its doors, are under considerable strain owing to a perfect storm of high rates, energy prices and skills shortages, what he is doing to address that situation. (AQT 436/22-27)

**Mr C Murphy:** We are supporting businesses in a range of ways. We continue to provide support to Tourism NI for promoting more visitors coming to areas and therefore availing themselves of hospitality. We recognise that getting skilled employees is one of the biggest challenges. We had a presentation this morning at the North/South Ministerial Council on how the view of hospitality as a part-time job for students but not a career is changing. There is a scheme to promote good employee conditions in hospitality to ensure that more people both join and stay and that they consider it to be a career. We have to provide appropriate courses for hospitality work, ensuring that they give people the right skills to meet the needs of the hospitality industry, and we are talking to the industry about that. We are also working through the tourism agencies to promote the idea of working in hospitality as a career choice rather than something that people go into part-time or while they consider moving on to what they intend to be their career.

We recognise the significant challenges to hospitality posed by issues such as the cost of living, cost of energy and cost of doing business. We will, of course, continue with the incoming Government the argument for more

financial support for the Executive to ensure that we have more money to spread around all businesses.

**Ms Eastwood:** I thank the Minister for his response. What representations has he had with his colleague the Finance Minister on rates?

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Minister, you have less than a minute.

**Mr C Murphy:** I know the situation from my time at Finance, and, with that hat on, I would say that we reduced business rates by 18% just as COVID was coming in. We then had a rates holiday for about two and a half years. We have to remember that rates contribute about 10% of the Executive's income, so, if we forgo more rates, it becomes about the balance between allowing businesses to pay less in bills and having less money available for public services. That is a delicate balance to strike, and I am sure that the Finance Minister will consider it among all of her options.

**Madam Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Minister; your timing was perfect. Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

**3.30 pm**

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

## Private Members' Business

### Retaining and Inspiring Young Talent

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That this Assembly, while noting the educational and professional development opportunities for students studying away from home, regrets the large number of young people forced to leave Northern Ireland in order to pursue higher education who would otherwise wish to study and build lives here but are unable to; notes that the equivalent of a large university's worth of students are studying in Britain and a high proportion are unlikely to return; acknowledges the negative societal and economic consequences of this trend, particularly on our low levels of productivity; further notes that this so-called brain drain compounds the negative economic consequences of our low levels of educational attainment among school-leavers; calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Education to develop a strategy to reduce the number of students leaving these shores who would otherwise wish to stay, including growing undergraduate spaces here, and collaborating with the Irish Government to increase the volume of cross-border undergraduate entrants; and further calls on the Minister to report to the Assembly on agreed actions not later than December 2024. — [Ms McLaughlin.]*

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after "productivity;" and insert:*

*"and calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop a strategy to reduce the number of students leaving these shores who would otherwise wish to stay in Northern Ireland." — [Mr Brett.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call the Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, who will have up to 15 minutes.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. [Translation: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.] I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and thank the Members who tabled it.

It is important to be clear that, although many students from the North study elsewhere, the data shows that we perform better than many

comparator regions at retaining our talent. For instance, around 75% of local students stay here to study at our universities, which is a higher proportion than for Wales or any English region. Additionally, about half our students who study in Britain return home to work within 15 months of graduating, which, again, is a higher proportion than for Wales, Scotland and most English regions. Only London and the north-west of England perform better in that regard.

Nevertheless, we must do more to retain our talent here. That will help us to achieve the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment of 10,000 student places at Ulster University's Magee campus in Derry. Reaching 10,000 students will require an increase of at least 4,500 students at Magee over the coming years. It will mean delivering new undergraduate and postgraduate places. It will require work to promote Magee as a destination campus, enabling an increase in the number of students retained in the area while attracting more people from elsewhere in these islands and further afield to live, study and work in the Derry area.

The expansion of the Magee campus is key to promoting regional balance in line with my economic plans, and it will assist in efforts towards increasing productivity and creating good jobs. A larger pool of talented and skilled graduates emerging from Magee will attract firms to the north-west and fuel innovative start-ups in the area, contributing to increased business success and prosperity and improving the prospects for economic development in Derry and the surrounding region.

To help deliver the commitment, I established an independent task force under the leadership of Stephen Kelly and Nicola Skelly. The task force will publish its agreed action plan before the end of this year and will remain in place for the remainder of the mandate to monitor implementation. The funding required to implement the recommendations will be prioritised as part of future-year budgets.

While there is a particular focus on the expansion at Magee, I will work with all our higher education institutions to ensure that we provide as many opportunities as possible for people to study here. There are several hundred reluctant leavers annually who do not stay in the North even though they have applied to an institution here as a first preference. We need to make sure that those individuals can stay here, not only by making sure that there are sufficient places but by ensuring that the right opportunities are available. We also know

that there are and always will be determined leavers who simply do not apply for a university place here and actively choose to leave the region for a variety of reasons. That might be from a desire for new experiences in a new environment, for the opportunity to pursue a particular course offering or to attend a particular institution.

There is third group of students who leave but whose motivations are harder to capture and who may be persuadable. In respect of that group, we have much more work to do to address perceptions about a lack of good job opportunities or future quality of life here. We need to take action to change that mindset and show the value of staying here for a third-level education and a future career.

As Members will be aware, I want to increase the proportion of working-age people in good jobs, promote regional balance, raise productivity and reduce carbon emissions. Delivering on those objectives will help to create a thriving economy that works for everyone, which will make the North a more attractive place in which to live and work, thereby helping to retain our best and brightest. Creating opportunities for graduates will help not only to retain more of our local students but to attract students from elsewhere, including the South.

As Members will be aware, it is a priority for me to improve student mobility across Ireland. Prior to his becoming Taoiseach, I had a positive discussion with Simon Harris TD in his then capacity as the responsible Minister on the steps that we can take together to reduce barriers across the island. I have recently reached out to my counterpart, Minister Patrick O'Donovan TD, with a view to continuing that dialogue. I intend to explore, as part of that engagement, ways in which we can remove barriers to cross-border study.

Progress to reduce barriers to North/South student mobility and enhanced cooperation on higher and further education across Ireland is being made through initiatives in both jurisdictions. For example, from next year, postgraduates from the North who are studying in the South will be able to access tuition fee loans. The Irish Government have been proactive in providing funding for the expansion of Magee and have improved cross-border mobility by reviewing A-level grade equivalences. There is much more to be done, but I am encouraged by the engagement to date, and I intend to build on that going forward.

We should also recognise that there are pathways alternative to university that will be the best route for many of our young people to follow. Tom Elliott and a number of other Members mentioned that in the debate. There is a gap in the motion where it does not focus on this. In that regard, my Department is working with the Department of Education to ensure that, in careers advice, we ensure that not only children but parents are aware of the variety of pathways that are available to people to move into higher-level apprenticeships (HLAs) as well as higher and further education. Clearly, awareness is required there, and perhaps the wording of the motion reinforces that. We could start a pilot scheme in the Chamber to make sure that people are aware of the full gamut of pathways available to people. If we are going to look at that issue strategically, the conversation needs to be broader than simply increasing university places. We need to make it clearer to young people that their skills can be developed both through our local universities and through alternative pathways.

I encourage anyone who is considering undertaking a higher education course either at home or in any other jurisdiction to explore the opportunity to study here at any of our further education colleges. The colleges, in addition to further education courses, offer a wide range of high-quality higher education courses. As well as that, my Department's higher-level apprenticeship programme offers an alternative route to the kinds of qualifications at levels 4 to 7 that traditionally have been available only through study at a higher education institution. Higher-level apprentices are employed and attend college or university, usually on a day-release basis. More than 70 separate qualifications are now offered as HLAs by the six regional further education colleges, the College of Agriculture and the local universities in a wide range of sectors, including engineering and manufacturing technologies, computing, finance, hospitality and health and social care.

I turn to some of the other points that were mentioned aside from apprenticeships and the higher-level apprenticeships options. The Chair of the Committee raised the issue of the maximum student number (MaSN), and he is aware, as he has received information from me and my officials in Committee, that we are committed to working with the higher and further education sector to grow student numbers sustainably. As the 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) document that committed to expanding Magee campus recognised, significant expansion of higher

education here is likely to require changes to the MaSN, but, of course, those are all budget-related, as he is also aware. While we want to work with the universities and will do so and will have a dialogue with them and with the colleges to try to grow student numbers, that has to be done in a way that we can sustain ourselves from the finances that are available to us. I assure the House that we will continue to work with those education institutions in the time ahead to ensure that that is the case.

I assure Members that we will work with, as I said, the HE and FE sectors, colleagues in the South and others to ensure that everyone who wants to can stay here to study and to build a prosperous and a fulfilling future, making a valued contribution to a healthy and thriving economy that benefits everyone in our society. I concur with the desire expressed in the motion to see that people who want to stay here and whose first option is to stay here to study are able to do so. That, of course, presents challenges, not least financially, but we will continue to work with the institutions to develop the best possible options for all of our young people and those returning to studies in the future.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** Thank you, Minister, for that response. I call Phillip Brett to make his winding-up speech on the amendment. You have up to five minutes.

**Mr Brett:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank all the contributors to the debate. Ms McLaughlin and Mr Delargy once again spoke articulately and passionately about their home city and the pressures that young people face in trying to secure a future there. Ms McLaughlin accused my party of being irresponsible and our amendment of being unnecessary whilst continuing to say how terrible Northern Ireland is and how there is no opportunity or hope. It is irresponsible to take every opportunity that you can to talk down Northern Ireland and undermine the great things that we, as a society, have to offer. Sometimes, as political leaders, it is our role and duty to instil hope in the next generation. By consistently saying that there is nothing to offer here or by talking down your home city, you sometimes predict your own downfall.

Mr Honeyford summed up the SDLP motion as one of negativity and sound bites with no substance. He spoke articulately about the importance of apprenticeships, and I know that he and his colleagues continue to raise that issue in our Committee. As a House, we need to value the vital role that apprenticeships and our FE sector play. That leads me on to the

points that the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott made. He said that each region and constituency has its unique needs and aspirations. He spoke of the need to continue to invest in the tourism and hospitality sectors and, indeed, the trade sector in Fermanagh, which, like him, has struggled in the past to get much-needed workers to carry out important skilled labour for households.

Ms Mulholland, who is not in the Chamber, said that one of the biggest barriers to people returning to Northern Ireland is political instability and the nature of the political institutions here, though she did not quite get to articulate whether the reform of how we appoint our Justice Minister keeps people from returning to Northern Ireland. Perhaps when there is an election, Alliance wants only to highlight its view on political reform in Northern Ireland.

The leader of the Opposition, who is no longer in his place, spoke eloquently about having Queen's University in his constituency and about his experience of having to leave these shores for the glitz and glamour of working for Her Majesty's Government. I am sure that, like him, all Members are relieved that he decided to come back and offer political service here to the people of Northern Ireland. Where would the House be without the leader of the Opposition?

The Minister eloquently articulated the Executive's combined and clear desire to see a growth in student numbers at the Magee campus. My party is happy to support that, just as we are happy to support the growth of student numbers across our entire higher and further education sector. However, as the Minister rightly outlined, there is a clear gap in the motion in that, on occasion, we want to afford our people in Northern Ireland the hope that 75% of the students who decide to go into higher education stay here. That is the envy of other parts of these islands. On occasion, we need to speak about the strengths of what we have to offer.

The Minister also spoke about the "persuadables", who are our favourite people during elections. We need to offer people the opportunity to study in Northern Ireland, as well as in other parts of the United Kingdom or in the Republic of Ireland. It is important for our young people to have those choices. I tried to study at university in the Republic of Ireland, but Trinity College made the wise decision to refuse my application and, instead, Queen's University had the misfortune of having me.



There is clear agreement among all those who spoke in the debate that we want the best future for all our young people, regardless of our constitutional aspirations. That means widening participation and investing in skills, but, more importantly, for me, it means giving hope. As political leaders, we say that Northern Ireland is open to everyone and that it is a place to work, study and raise a family. As a House, we must send a clear message that we want people from whatever walk of life to study here, to raise a family here and to make Northern Ireland work. I ask Members to support our amendment.

**3.45 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Blair):** I call Cara Hunter to wind on the debate on the motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

**Ms Hunter:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Members for their contributions. We gather today to discuss a matter of significant concern that strikes at the heart of our future: the exodus of our young people to seek higher education and opportunities elsewhere. While we acknowledge the immense educational and professional developmental benefits that come with studying away from home, we must confront the unfortunate reality that, as has been mentioned, some of our best and brightest minds continue to seek opportunities on brighter shores and feel forced to leave Northern Ireland not by choice but, often, by necessity. That trend, as it has been referred to today, is called the "brain drain". It sees the equivalent of a large university's worth of students migrate to other parts of these islands annually. Regrettably, many of those students — up to two thirds — do not return. That outflow has profound implications, not just for the individuals who leave but for our society and economy as a whole.

Let us first consider the societal impacts. Our communities thrive on the energy, innovation and ambition of our young people, who are truly the lifeblood of our towns and cities, infusing them with new ideas and fresh perspectives. When those young individuals leave, the social fabric of our communities weakens, as we lose our future leaders and community builders: the very people who could drive the social progress that we so desperately need in Northern Ireland.

The economic consequences are equally troubling. In the North, we already grapple with low productivity. That challenge is exacerbated by the departure of our educated young people.

Those young people take with them not only their skills but their potential contributions to our economy. That loss of talent means that there are fewer entrepreneurs, fewer skilled workers and fewer innovators to drive economic growth. That cycle hampers our ability to compete on the national and global stages. Moreover, the brain drain compounds the negative effects of the low levels of educational attainment among our school leavers. We are caught in a vicious cycle whereby limited local educational opportunities can push our youth away, just as the cap in university places that has been discussed today can. Their departure further diminishes the educational and professional landscape here at home.

I have had experience of that over the past eight weeks, having said "Goodbye" to two of my cousins from west Tyrone. They are two wonderful, intelligent and capable young people who desperately wanted to stay but did not see a future here. Later, I will touch on political stability and its undeniable link with prosperity for our young people: they are interwoven.

It is really important to raise the issue today. I am sure that all of us are out on the doors, and, recently, when I have been on the doors, I have found that the parents are the ones buying their young people tickets to go to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Boston. I find that really sad, because we lose so much talent.

The SDLP calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Education to develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at reducing the number of students who leave Northern Ireland but would prefer to stay. That strategy should include increasing the number of undergraduate spaces available locally. By expanding our capacity to educate our youth at home, we can provide them with the opportunities that they seek without necessitating their departure. Additionally, we must look beyond our borders and seek collaboration with the Irish Government to facilitate cross-border undergraduate entrants. By doing so, we can enhance the educational landscape of the North, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic environment that attracts and retains students from both sides of the border. At last week's meeting of the Education Committee, I raised the possibility of looking at strengthening relationships north and south of the border, particularly for schools in our border communities with sixth form colleges and identifying where we can work collectively to allow students in those border communities to prosper and take on different subjects.

There were some really interesting comments from Members, and I will touch on as many of them as possible. Sinéad talked about her two daughters who are abroad. Those are two bright, young minds who would be huge contributors to our economy. Derry has a shortage of dentists, so Aoife would be a great addition.

Mr Delargy, who is also based in the Foyle constituency, touched on the impact of losing his friends who are teachers and health workers, which we desperately need at home, to different parts of the world as they seek better opportunities on brighter shores. That is not to condemn those who seek opportunities abroad but to recognise that their potential and talent is desperately needed here at home.

Mr Honeyford touched on an important aspect: we need to attract them back. We need to build back better. We need to prove to our young people who have gone elsewhere that Northern Ireland or the North is a place that they can call "home", a place where they can raise families and a place where there are opportunities. That goes hand in hand with political stability. Over the past seven or eight years, this place has collapsed multiple times, and young people are just totally disillusioned with the Assembly and with so many of us. They do not recognise our politics as politics that work, and we really need to change the perspective of those looking in from outside. I echo Miss Mulholland's contributions: it is time for us to put a focus and an emphasis on our young people and recognise the link between politics and bringing them back here in the future.

It is imperative that the Economy Minister report to the Assembly on agreed actions no later than December 2024. We feel that a timeline is crucial to ensure that we do not lose more ground in the fight to retain our young talent.

While we celebrate the opportunities that studying and living abroad can offer, we must address the unintended consequences of such opportunities. The brain drain is not just an academic issue; it is a societal and economic challenge that requires our immediate and intensive action. By expanding local educational opportunities and fostering cross-border collaboration efforts, we can begin to stem the tide and build a future where our young people can thrive in Northern Ireland. Let us commit to working together to create an environment that nurtures and retains our brightest minds, ensuring a prosperous future for all.

The House has probably heard that I lived in America a thousand times. I had a green card

and contemplated staying in the United States, but I absolutely love Ireland. I love where I am from. For me, it is about ensuring that the children who live in America, Canada, Europe or elsewhere recognise that we can make this place work and that, in the House, we can collaborate and recognise our similarities. We have more in common than not, and it is time to use that for good and to build a solid future for our young people and our next generation.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 21; Noes 42.*

### **AYES**

*Mr Beattie, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Mr Brooks, Ms Brownlee, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brooks and Mr Kingston*

### **NOES**

*Dr Archibald, Mr Baker, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Egan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Miss Hargey, Mr Honeyford, Ms Hunter, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr McAleer, Miss McAllister, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mrs Mason, Mr Mathison, Mr Muir, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Ms Sheerin, Mr Tennyson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Ms Hunter and Ms McLaughlin*

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Main Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly, while noting the educational and professional development opportunities for students studying away from home, regrets the large number of young people forced to leave Northern Ireland in order to pursue higher education who would otherwise wish to study and build lives here but are unable to; notes that the equivalent of a*

*large university's worth of students are studying in Britain and a high proportion are unlikely to return; acknowledges the negative societal and economic consequences of this trend, particularly on our low levels of productivity; further notes that this so-called brain drain compounds the negative economic consequences of our low levels of educational attainment among school-leavers; calls on the Minister for the Economy to work with the Minister of Education to develop a strategy to reduce the number of students leaving these shores who would otherwise wish to stay, including growing undergraduate spaces here, and collaborating with the Irish Government to increase the volume of cross-border undergraduate entrants; and further calls on the Minister to report to the Assembly on agreed actions not later than December 2024.*

*Adjourned at 4.08 pm.*