Northern Ireland
Assembly

Disabled People's Parliament 2025

Friday 21 November 2025

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The Disabled People's Parliament met at 1.30 pm (Madam Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair).

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Good afternoon, everyone. It is my privilege to welcome you all to the Assembly Chamber for the 2025 Disabled People's Parliament. I begin by recognising the significance of this moment. Today, the Chamber belongs to you all.

Deaf and disabled people from right across the North bring the experience, expertise and insight that we all need to shape better policy, better understanding and, ultimately, better outcomes for the communities that we all serve. This Parliament has been co-designed with organisations representing a wide range of disabilities, alongside individuals who have generously shared their lived experience throughout the planning process. I extend a sincere thanks to the members of the consultative panel and every group and organisation involved. Your work has ensured that today's discussions are rooted in the realities that people face every day, whether they are in health, housing, education, employment, transport, independent living, caring responsibilities, social security or the persistent challenge of social isolation. Those issues, identified through a public survey of more than 1,000 people, form the framework of our business this afternoon.

Behind every item in the Order Paper, as you know, is a real story about a barrier that has had an impact on someone's life. Today, those impacts are being brought directly into the Chamber, where they deserve to be heard. The motion before us affirms a simple but powerful truth: laws and policies work best when shaped by those who live with their consequences. Deaf and disabled people should not have to fight for a say in decisions that affect their independence, health, income, education or safety, yet, so often, those barriers are created when decisions are made without those voices at the table. Today is about changing that and ensuring meaningful involvement and strengthening communication across Departments so that unintended consequences are understood, anticipated and avoided.

I formally welcome the participation of the Minister of Health and the Minister for Communities this afternoon. Ministers, your presence and willingness to respond directly to the issues raised is deeply appreciated by all. It sends an important signal about listening, partnership and a shared commitment to improving the lives of deaf and disabled people right across Northern Ireland.

Most importantly, to all of you participating today, thank you for your courage, honesty and leadership. Your contributions will help shape thinking, not just in the Chamber but across public services, policy design and political life here. As Chair of today's proceedings, I am here to support you, to ensure that your voices and views are heard with the respect that they deserve and to help create the conditions for meaningful and constructive debate, so I will not be putting anybody out. *[Laughter.]*

I hope that this Parliament challenges and motivates us and strengthens our resolve to remove the barriers that restrict opportunity and equality. Your experience is expertise, and, today, it stands at the centre of democratic decision-making, exactly where it needs to be.

Before we move to formal proceedings, I would like to invite Amanda Paul to speak on behalf of the consultative panel and briefly set out the background to this Parliament.

Amanda Paul: On behalf of our organising panel, I extend a warm welcome to all present. I particularly acknowledge the presence of two Ministers, Mr Michael Nesbitt, Minister of Health and Mr Gordon Lyons, Minister for Communities, who have joined us to engage with our representatives. It is important to highlight that the disabled community involves every Department in the Executive. It is disappointing, therefore, that, out of eight Departments plus the Executive, only two Ministers are in attendance.

Recent Government statistics indicate that one in four people in Northern Ireland lives with some form of disability. I often watch BBC Parliament, and, on many occasions, on important matters, only a handful of our politicians are in attendance. I am aware that that is not all that they do, but surely being here at this important event to support us should be a high priority. To those politicians who are not here, who have not taken the time to lend us their support, shame on you: but this will not be your only opportunity. Let us improve on this next time around. For those who are here, it is our sincere hope that you will not just listen to our representatives but really hear them and truly reflect on their contributions. If you really hear our voice, it should result in meaningful actions and measurable improvements for disabled people.

Under the previous Executive, I and other disabled individuals in the Chamber, dedicated approximately two years to developing a disability strategy. The strategy was weeks away from public consultation when, regrettably — guess what? — our Executive collapsed. Work goes on within the strategy, the UN Convention and the Equality Act, but we need to stop kicking things down the road. Some of my colleagues have been working on this for the last 30 years. It is now time to get these things moving. We know that, in this climate, everything cannot happen at once, but these policies give us a framework to work on. I thank the Department for Communities for listening, but why is everything taking so long? Let us get true co-design documents both published and actioned. At this time, our reliance is on legislation that is three decades old and well out of date. That is just not good enough. The implementation of the updated strategy is now necessary and urgently required.

Another matter that I would like speak on briefly is the urgent need for the independent living fund (ILF) to be opened. We have been told time and again that there is no budget for it, but, surely, given that it relates to the most disabled in society, it should be given a much higher priority. It would benefit the recipients, their families and the communities in which they live. Restoring the ILF would enable recipients to fully engage in community life and have control and independence each and every day.

In Scotland, despite some major budget constraints, the Government still made the decision to reopen the independent living fund in 2024. I congratulate the campaigners who managed to make their voices heard and their Government who really listened.

Despite that, disabled people in Northern Ireland remain at a disadvantage compared to those in Scotland. Many positive stories are heard as a result of the reopening of the Scottish fund. Surely, when all the evidence is weighed up, our Executive cannot fail to support us in the reopening of the fund. After all, the fund helps those with the most complex needs. We urge the Minister to do the right thing and reopen the ILF in Northern Ireland.

To summarise, Northern Ireland needs a strong, co-designed disability strategy that disabled people can fully support. That requires continuity with the good work that went before and a renewed effort to produce results. Circumstances will not change for disabled people until our Government give proper priority to all citizens, including those with disabilities. That will take hard work and even a bit of humility, but we need to set in place a positive future for our disabled community.

Of course, funding will be needed to open the ILF. Can we, in Northern Ireland, not see the bigger picture? This relatively small ask in budget, compared with many other projects, would make such a marked difference. I urge the Minister, once again, to do the right thing and make the necessary decision to allow us to live full and independent lives. That is our challenge to you. Please listen to all those who will speak after me, and really hear what they are saying. Thank you.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker Thank you very much, Amanda. That sets the context.

Impact of Laws and Policies on Deaf and Disabled People

The Assembly Clerk: I beg to move

That this Parliament affirms that laws and policies are most effective when informed by the lived experience of those they affect; recognises that Deaf and disabled people seek to enjoy only the same freedoms and opportunities as all citizens, and that barriers are too often created when decisions are taken without their involvement; believes that the issues raised today will demonstrate the adverse impact these barriers have on the physical and mental health of Deaf and disabled people, their educational and employment opportunities, and their frequent isolation from society; calls on Ministers, Departments and public bodies to ensure the full involvement of Deaf and disabled people in decisions which affect them; and further calls for strengthened interdepartmental communication so that the impacts and unintended consequences of new laws and policy changes are properly assessed and addressed. — [Disabled People’s Parliament]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Joanne Sansome to address the motion.

Joanne Sansome: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Equal access to appropriate healthcare and services, including relevant and appropriate equipment, was the highest-ranking issue selected by all those who completed the public survey to inform today’s session. We received 1,025 responses from individual and collective voices. I will endeavour to echo the real concerns and issues while offering the Ministers a solutions-focused way forward.

Northern Ireland is experiencing chronic, systemic inequalities in healthcare access. They are characterised by barriers to primary and secondary care and preventative services due to communication failures, underfunding, structural prejudices and gaps in the provision of assistive equipment. That results in poor health outcomes, reduced life expectancy and heightened risks from preventable conditions, compounded by deprivation and inconsistent service delivery across Northern Ireland. The absence of centralised monitoring and tailored adjustments exacerbates those disparities, particularly for those with disabilities, but it extends to broader groups.

In healthcare services, we underuse GP services as a result of the increasing difficulties in making appointments; diagnostic overshadowing - our symptoms being blamed on our disability rather than being checked out; and, alongside those difficulties, a lack of home visits for people with complex needs who cannot get to the practice. The coordination between primary and secondary care is all over the place. Preventative stuff like health checks, cancer screening and cervical screening is at only 30% for us, compared with 70% for the general public. Dental visits and promotional programmes are, again, statistically lower, because outreach is not adapted to meet all communication needs. Indeed, communication is a big “Fail”. Professionals are not trained well in different communication methods. That results in little to no easy-read materials, extra time in appointments or much regard for other formats, such as the provision of sign language interpreters, which messes with consent and care quality. Those factors are compounded by underfunding and grant cuts to community groups, specialist services and advocacy and, often, families are left to pick up the slack.

1.45 pm

There is a postcode lottery in services, particularly compared with other parts of the UK, especially after the age of 19. Broader barriers, such as prejudice, info gaps, language issues, transport costs in rural areas and access for older people or people with multiple disabilities, limit everything. That impacts mental health and other underfunded areas, despite having a strategy. Women's issues, such as sexual health or maternity care, are often ignored. In healthcare settings, equipment and technology are often unavailable, or staff are hesitant to use hoists etc, which can have an impact on safety and access to treatment in hospital.

Amanda Paul: Thank you, Joanne, for taking an intervention. I want to add my perspective, which is based on personal experience. During my most recent hospital stay, I noticed, to my delight, that there was a tracking hoist in the room. That was a welcome sight, since previous admissions to hospital had left me fully confined to bed. That was stressful when it came to my mental health and basic matters such as toileting. When I needed the hoist, however, I was informed that staff had not been trained in its use, nor had they seen it being used for several years. The nurses suggested speaking to the ward manager, which I did, to see whether anything could be done. She informed me, however, that she also had no idea when the hoist was last serviced or looked at, thus it was not safe to use. I also noticed that the hoist could not even go into the bathroom. What use is that? Who designed that?

I contacted an MLA, who, I understand, raised the matter with hospital management, who agreed to meet me. I have spoken to the MLA at every available opportunity, but the meeting has never been arranged. It is frustrating to see money being spent on equipment that is there for our use but sits unused, without any training being given or servicing being done.

On the subject of equipment, disabled people are often more comfortable in their own home. I am very fortunate that I am cared for by a great district nursing team in Hillsborough, which visits me regularly and gets advice from a consultant. Their nursing support has kept me out of hospital for more than two years. Hospital admissions for those with complex needs might be reduced if more patients had access to well-funded Hospital at Home services. Appropriate equipment and quality care can often be provided in a home environment.

Joanne Sansome: Thank you, Amanda. As I and many of us know only too well. assistive technology, such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, prosthetics and walking aids, are limited by prescriptions, mirroring the UK and Irish trends, but it is worse in Northern Ireland, due to underfunding and/or a failure to offer any mitigations, even when it has been deemed a medical necessity by medical professionals at the top of their field who know the person's complete history. That type of deprivation can have a negative impact on our quality of life and affect our life expectancy, while also failing to comply with article 25 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). That underscores that not only is access to equipment poor and unfit for purpose, but it denies us health support, thereby violating our human rights.

In order to address our health inequalities, there are many things that the House, the Department and public bodies can do.

This House could reflect the theme of this year's UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which is:

"Fostering disability-inclusive societies for advancing social progress",

and consider laws and policies that support an equitable, rights-based approach, like Danny Donnelly's private United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Obligation on Public Authorities) Bill, which would implement a co-produced disability strategy to work cross-departmentally and strengthen anti-discrimination laws.

Health and social care trusts could be merged into one regional team to remove the postcode lottery and change the management-led decision-making approach to a meaningful co-produced approach that has staff who work in the system alongside the patients whose lives are impacted by the system at the heart, rather than those who commission research and balance budgets. Co-production work should include policy reform, training and resource enhancement.

The Minister could mandate disability-related training for all healthcare staff, including training on the use of such tools as Makaton and easy-read materials, as well as regular refreshers on how to use manual handling equipment; restore funding to community organisations and expand the Hospital at Home programme; prioritise reasonable adjustments, such as adapted screenings and assistive tech integration through multi-agency partnerships; monitor progress; involve those with lived experience in all planning; and follow up to assess improvement.

Consistent application should reduce those inequalities over time. If symptoms persist, advocate for legislative changes at all government levels, utilising a multi-ministerial, Executive Office and Shared Island approach. It is time to take action on recommendations and remove Health and Social Care from life support. Operate and deliver rehabilitation, and keep the promise of Build Back Better. Thank you.

Ann Rainey: *[Charles Rainey spoke on Ann Rainey’s behalf]* I am here to speak on behalf of my sister. She is non-verbal, so cannot give this speech herself. I offered to put her experiences into words. Rest assured that the speech has been read to her and she has given her consent. Her name is Ann Rainey, and she approves this message.

This is not the first time that Ann and I have spoken in the Building. In July, we celebrated 10 years of the current independent living fund in Northern Ireland here. To Ann and her carers and friends, the issue of independent living is intimately bound up with the support that she receives from the fund. The ILF goes beyond the “time and task” approach of direct payments and gives many severely disabled people a life worth living. Ten years ago, there were 596 severely disabled people benefiting from the fund. Today, there are 321. Together with families, friends and communities, our celebration in the Great Hall was also for all their lives, past and present — sadly, now decreasing as the years go by.

Ten years ago, the original ILF was closed to all by the UK Government. Here, in Northern Ireland, and in Scotland, disabled people, families and allies raised our voices and were heard, and it was retained. In both jurisdictions, we clearly care about our people more deeply. Why was it retained? It was retained because it provides excellent value for money. It is twice as expensive for the Department of Health if a severely disabled person has to live in a nursing home than it is for them to live independently. If you factor in the additional engagement with society that it enables, the wider economy actually gets back £13 for every pound that is spent. Over the past 10 years of its life, that means a staggering £800 million for a £70 million investment.

What is independent living? First, it is a worldwide philosophy enshrined in article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It promotes and produces choice and control — autonomy and dignity — for individuals. Supporting that is the purpose of the ILF.

The ILF supplements the constantly reducing levels of domiciliary care and direct payments that trusts provide and supports severely disabled people to engage with society. Basically, direct payments will get you out of bed, but the ILF gets you out of the front door. Practically, it keeps us out of nursing homes and hospitals, providing additional support hours and equipment where necessary. For the small number of severely disabled people who need additional assistance, it means that they can live by themselves or with family. They can learn, work, contribute to society, visit friends and have a life worth living.

Lee Martin: *[Caroline Wheeler spoke on Lee Martin's behalf]* Will the Member give way?

Ann Rainey: *[Charles Rainey spoke on Ann Rainey's behalf]* I will.

Lee Martin: *[Caroline Wheeler spoke on Lee Martin's behalf]* I am speaking on behalf of Lee Martin from Enniskillen.

The independent living fund is a lifeline not only to Lee and all his family but to his uncle, who is 51 and lives with carers in Lisnaskea. On 3 December, hopefully, Lee will be 41. Lee worries about something happening to me or to him. He worries more about something happening to me, because his lifeline would be cut off: I do the administration.

Does the Principal Deputy Speaker understand that the ILF has given Lee the comfort of living independently in his own home in the community, being supported by the community, along with carers? It is a complete lifeline.

Ann Rainey: *[Charles Rainey spoke on Ann Rainey's behalf]* Thank you. I very much understand that. I feel the same, as does our family.

In our house, Ann decides what she wants to eat for the day. She is a big fan of 'Masterchef' and often chooses for her dinner dishes that are being prepared on screen. She decides for herself when to have a lie-in, when to get up, what to do and where to go. None of those choices would be available in a nursing home. Without the ILF, Ann would not be going anywhere; she would not be here today to speak to you. She thanks you all for inviting her and for listening.

Without the ILF, hundreds of our most severely disabled peers are definitely going nowhere. Opportunities are being denied them. It is like the COVID lockdown: remember that? People hated it and just wanted to get out of it. Imagine never escaping that and knowing that you never will escape it: how would that feel?

Minister Nesbitt, it was the decision of two of your predecessors, Minister Jim Wells and Minister Simon Hamilton, in response to our campaign, that finds Ann here today. They let those 596 people enjoy a life worth living. Our words cannot express how much that matters and the world of difference that it makes.

David McDonald: I thank the Member for giving way. I emphasise the point that Amanda made: the ILF reopened in Scotland as of April 2024, a year and a half ago. It has been well received — people are singing its praises — and it is saving the Scottish economy money. It is saving people's souls for social endeavour. It is letting some of the most severely disabled people get on with their lives; the target is almost 1,000. Is it not time that we opened the ILF in Northern Ireland, for economic and social reasons and to save people's souls?

Ann Rainey: *[Charles Rainey spoke on Ann Rainey's behalf]* The answer to all those questions is yes. For the past 10 years, we have been campaigning for the fund to be reopened to new members in Northern Ireland. As you mentioned, Scotland did so only a year ago, and I urge you listen to what people there have to say. In 2023, those people did not have a life worth living, but, in 2025, they do. We know what it is worth, and we wish our peers to enjoy its worth as well.

2.00 pm

In summary, I will quote one of the new recipients in Scotland:

> *"[The Independent Living Fund means that I can] live a purposeful life, and contribute to society, and not just take from the system."*

Ann and I thank you for listening.

Una Reid: Good afternoon, everyone. I work in policy and information in Disability Action. I often see the issues around care and their impact. Who are the unpaid carers? They are family members, friends or neighbours who care for someone with a disability, illness or age-related condition. Carers span all demographics: the young, working-age adults and older people. As of the 2021 census, 222,000 people in Northern Ireland were providing unpaid care, around 180,000 of whom were of working age and 125,000 of whom were employed, balancing care with their job and often not being able to pursue the career that they really want.

Young carers often miss school to look after other siblings, reducing their life chances. Students in full-time study and people who earn more than £196 per week cannot receive carer’s allowance, yet many care for their loved ones. Carer’s allowance is £83·30 per week. If someone looks after another person for a minimum of 35 hours, that equates to £2·38 per hour. If they are caring round the clock, that is 168 hours, which equates to 49p per hour. We can see that care is very undervalued.

Caroline Wheeler: Will the Member give way?

Una Reid: Yes, I will.

Caroline Wheeler: I am from Enniskillen. I am the mother of Lee and sister to Graham, who is an ILF recipient too. I have been an unpaid carer from the age of eight. I provide a lot of administration work to run the care packages. I am an award manager for the ILF, a scheme administrator for the direct payments and a controller for the Office of Care and Protection (OCP)

My brother Graham was 51 last April, and Lee will be 41 on 3 December, as I mentioned before.

We carers are the invisible thread that gives the disabled the independence to live with carers in their own home. More needs to be done to aid unpaid carers, give them a living wage and make their lives matter by recognising the work that we do. We save the Government billions of pounds each year, and we are the backbone of Northern Ireland.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Caroline. Would you like to continue, Una?

Una Reid: Following on from that, on a personal level, I am a carer too. I look after my husband, who has many needs. I work, but even if I did not, I would receive no financial help, because I get the state pension. Many pensioners are not on pension credit where there is an underlying carer’s amount that is just above the threshold. Care is unpaid, and often couples care for each other.

I was very unwell last year and worried for my health and that of my husband. I realise the vulnerability in relying on family, friends and neighbours, who kindly give their care freely. That begs the question: who looks after the carer? It could be anyone at any time, in all walks of life. It could even be a politician. Ill health does not discriminate. I feel the emotional toll that all carers feel, but I am lucky to work for a disability organisation that understands that I may take time off for urgent appointments. Not every employer looks favourably on carers taking time off.

Carers frequently report feeling isolated, exhausted and overwhelmed. Their mental health suffers. Support is limited, yes, but they get on with it.

There is hope, however, and there is advocating for better financial support, mental health resources and legal protections such as carers’ leave. The Northern Ireland Assembly is beginning to listen, with proposals to improve carers’ rights and access to services on the table.

Still, we must do more. As a community, we must recognise unpaid carers not just as helpers but as heroes. We must raise our voices, challenge the silence and demand policies that reflect the value that carers have. When we support carers, we support families, communities and the very heart of society. Let us commit to making Northern Ireland a place where carers are seen, heard and supported. Let us turn gratitude into action.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Una. I call the Minister of Health, Mr Mike Nesbitt.

Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health): Thank you very much, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Thank you to all the Members of this Parliament. You look like you belong here — perhaps more so than some of our colleagues.

I do not wish to get off to a controversial start, but I was brought up to talk about people with disabilities, not disabled people, because you are, primarily, people. I was a bit surprised, therefore, at the title of this Parliament being the Disabled People’s Parliament. With your indulgence, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I will use my own language from here on in.

To begin with, I will take the opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the Disabled People’s Parliament. It is important that people such as I hear your voice. I spend a considerable amount of time in the ministerial office in the Department of Health. There is a huge amount of paperwork to do there — I think that we do over 30% of all the paperwork and correspondence of all the Government Departments — and I have a lot of internal meetings. Although that is all essential work, it is not real. It only becomes real after Tuesday, when I get out and about and visit health and social care settings and engage with people such as yourselves. That is when I can get a real understanding of what I can try to do.

I will address the issues, one by one. Issue 1 is “Equal access to appropriate healthcare and services, including relevant and appropriate equipment”. Amanda, if you email me the details of your experience, we will see what we can do to get that machinery up and running. That issue is a basic right for people with disabilities. Of course, they should, and must, have equal access to equipment and services that will enable them to live independently and as well as possible, and to provide them with the ability to have choice and make decisions about their lives.

I appreciate that there are a number of challenges for individuals, particularly, at times, with communication. There is ongoing work within the regional communication support service. That service is contracted by my strategic planning and performance group (SPPG), which works with sign language interactions (SLI). That work aims to enhance experiences of people who suffer deafness or deafblindness when it comes to the communication barriers that they face when trying to access health and social care communications.

I hope that you are aware of my reset plan. That was published in July this year. It represents the next steps in the outworking of the three-year plan for health and is based around three pillars: stabilisation — it is critical we do that fairly quickly; reform of how we deliver health and social care; and delivery of better outcomes. The plan is designed to reshape the health and social care system so that it is more accessible, equitable and sustainable. For people with disabilities, that should mean better local access, faster treatment and stronger protections against inequalities, as I am aware that there are inequalities for people with disabilities.

The reset plan sets out how we will achieve my strategic vision. We know that people with disabilities, who often require timely interventions, benefit directly from shorter waits and faster access to treatment.

At the heart of the reform that I want to see is what we are calling the neighbourhood model. Simply put, if you need health and social care, in an ideal world you will get it in your own home, and if not at home, then as close to your front door as we can possibly get it. It is what we often refer to as shifting left, away from the focus on acute hospitals and into community care as close to your home as we can achieve.

That neighbourhood approach will help to tackle health inequalities, which has become something of an obsession of mine. When I took up the post, I had no idea that two people born in this city on the same day in the same maternity ward could grow up maybe no more than a mile apart but because of the environment and the area in which they live, one might be in the area of the greatest deprivation and one in the least. That means that their healthy life expectancy will vary by 14 years. How is that even acceptable a quarter of the way into the 21st century in a First World country?

Therefore, in recognition of the need to ensure equal access to appropriate equipment, the Department recently completed a regional review of assistive technology and equipment provision. That has resulted in the setting up of a regional assistive technology equipment oversight board that works towards the implementation of recommendations from that review. The work is also a component within the reset plan, and the focus is on a regionally consistent approach to assessment and provision. If any of you follow me, you will know that one of my aims as Health Minister is to get rid of those horrible postcode lotteries whereby, depending on where you live, your access and service may be better than in other areas. I want regionally consistent, standardised services. From a housing perspective, my Department works with the Minister for Communities, who is here beside me, through the interdepartmental accessible homes strategic forum. The forum ensures joined-up working in the delivery of accessible homes for people with disabilities.

I now move to issue 2, which is living independently. Living independently is not about just practical support, it is about your dignity, your choice, your equality. For people with disabilities it means having the same freedoms as anybody else to shape their lives. Independent living is, quite simply, a right and is, perhaps, something that many individuals take for granted. For disabled people, it means the freedom to decide how to live, where to live and with whom to live. It is about dignity, equality and the chance to participate fully in all areas of society. I recognise fully the difference that supporting all elements of independent living makes. Quite simply, it transforms your life.

Therefore, my Department continues to support the provision of the independent living fund to recipients in Northern Ireland. We put in £7·2 million in this 2025-26 financial year. I acknowledge the vital importance of ILF awards to those who receive them in Northern Ireland, and the positive contribution that they make to your lives, enabling you to exercise control and personal choice, and live independently in the community.

I hear what you are saying about the need to reopen the ILF fund. As I hope you are aware, my Department has faced and continues to face an extremely difficult and challenging financial landscape. Difficult and unpopular decisions have had to be made through necessity. With a significant change in the budget it is unlikely that we will be able to make all the decisions that we want to make in the future. However, my officials have continued to liaise closely with ILF Scotland's senior management team and the ILF Scotland/Northern Ireland advisory group regarding the potential to reopen the scheme. In reflecting that engagement, I am advised that officials will later this month provide advice for consideration by my permanent secretary and myself regarding that proposal. It remains the case, however, that due to the very significant and challenging financial position that I face, the issues of funding, affordability and sustainability remain key for my consideration.

As Amanda has asked me to do the right thing and make the right decision, let me take a moment to talk about the decision-making process. Yes, I am a Minister, and Ministers are put in place to make decisions. However, our ability to make decisions is not unchecked, and it is far from uncommon for me to sit with the permanent secretary, who is my senior official, and say, "Here's something I want to start doing because it's good".

2.15 pm

The official will look at the proposal, and he may say, "I agree that that's a really good proposal, but I am the accounting officer and I have legal duties with regard to this Department's budget and, on that basis, I have to tell you, regrettably, that you cannot afford to do it, so it's not going to happen". I am just trying to be honest and open. I want to reopen the ILF. Can I do it? I do not know yet, because I do not know my budget for next year. I understand that ILF Scotland's Northern Ireland advisory group is meeting on 9 December. That is an Assembly sitting day. I do not know to what extent I will be required in the Chamber, but I will make it my business to spend time at that meeting, if only to hear directly from the group members about this important issue. As Health Minister, I remain committed to supporting all individuals to live independently in accordance with their wishes and in a home of their choosing.

Last but by no means least, issue 3 is unpaid care and support. One of my Department's key objectives is to support people to live independent lives in their community. The invaluable support that unpaid carers provide enables many thousands of vulnerable people and people with disabilities to do that. It is imperative to me that carers are supported in their caring role so that they can continue to care for as long as they wish and are able to do so. I am aware that unpaid carers report that respite care services and provision are often inadequate or difficult to access, and that that places a strain on their own well-being. That affects those who care for disabled adults and older people as well as parental carers caring for children who often have complex needs.

To help to tackle the inadequacies that are felt by carers, those they care for and their families, my Department is currently working in a collaborative partnership with Carers NI and carers with lived experience as part of the social care collaborative forum. That group has made some significant progress, and I will list some of that. A cross-departmental senior officials group has been established to look at cross-cutting issues that affect carers in a collaborative way. The carers' register function on Encompass went live in July 2025. Trusts are now in the process of migrating cases over from their local systems to the regional digital service. Thirdly, carers can create their own account on the My Care app and request proxy access to the account of the person who is receiving care. Once that consent is given, the carer can view appointments, manage medications, communicate with care teams and access test results. I have the My Care app, and it is a magnificent app altogether.

Health and social care professionals can see who is registered as a carer, whether they have been offered a carer's assessment and what the outcome of that assessment has been. The supporting carers' workstream is continuing to look at ways to improve information for carers. Finally, the Health and Social Care (HSC) leadership centre recently completed an independent evaluation of the implementation of the 2006 Caring for Carers strategy. The supporting carers workstream is currently examining the next steps.

The Equality Act 2010 provides protection from discrimination to nine different groups, as well as, by extension, carers, in that they cannot be discriminated against because they are caring for somebody. The whole of the UK holds the same position on that, but I am aware that some carers would like the list of protected groups to be extended to include unpaid carers. That type of change would require cross-departmental support. I have asked my officials to raise the topic for discussion at a future meeting of the cross-departmental senior officials group.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I thank you and Members of the Parliament for giving me this opportunity to address these important issues today. I will simply reiterate my commitment to improving services for all people with disabilities in Northern Ireland, to ensure that they are given equal opportunities and equal access to our health and social care system, and to do all that is possible to support people with disability to live the lives that they wish to live.

Amanda Paul made the point that only two Ministers are here today. I am not going to criticise the others because they are all busy and I do not know what their schedules are like today. However, I am convinced — I am sure that Gordon will agree — that there is very little that we want to achieve as an Executive and an Assembly that can be achieved by a single Minister or a single Department. Collaborative working is the only way to go, if we want to achieve for you.

I apologise that I am not able to stay for the rest of today, so I will explain why. At least once a month, I try to visit an establishment called Kimberley House. It is a Praxis care home in Newtownards, and, for many years, I have visited a young resident there: he is 30 now. Today is the Friday that I go to see him this month. If I am not on time, Rory gets very upset, so I need to run. Thank you very much.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Farah Black: Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, Ministers and everyone gathered here today, I am Farah Black, the founder of Spend-Abled. I deliver this speech seated in my wheelchair, not as a symbol but as a reality — a reality that far too many people in Northern Ireland have to live with every day. I am not asking you to imagine disability, because you could not. I am asking you to look directly at the lived truth of people who, for eons, have been excluded, overlooked and left behind by a transport system that was never built with us in mind.

Let me be plain. A society where disabled people cannot travel freely is not an equal society. That is not living; it is abandonment. Transport is the foundation of freedom. Without it, everything falls apart: independence, dignity, opportunity, community, participation. None of it is possible if people cannot physically move freely and/or independently.

For disabled people in Northern Ireland, every journey is a risk. Do they have a ramp? Will it work? Will they know where it is? Will the driver stop for us? Will the staff help or look the other way? Will the taxi charge me more because I have my wheelchair or other equipment? Will they even pick me up, or will they tell me, "No, there is no space in the boot for your wheelchair", or, "It is a two-man job"? Those are not dramatic questions. They are everyday realities for us, and that uncertainty erodes your self-confidence and energy. It eats up your self-worth and takes huge chunks out of your mental health. Your sense of belonging: there is not one.

When transport fails our community, it fails everyone. You cannot take a job if you cannot get to it. You cannot maintain your health if you cannot attend your medical appointments. You cannot pursue your education if the bus, train or taxi thinks you are invisible. You cannot be a part of your community if there is no safe, affordable way to participate. Transport is not a separate issue. It is the backbone of every opportunity that this society claims to offer.

There is also an emotional cost that no one talks about. In that moment, when a bus flies past you, you feel invisible. In that moment, when you sit alone at a station with no help in sight, you feel scared. There are moments when you feel that you have failed your child because the system makes things impossible. Those moments stay with you. They shape you and the person whom you have failed. They shrink your world until it becomes just your home and then your room.

No person in Northern Ireland should have to live that way. Here is the part that really matters politically: inaccessible transport is expensive. It is costing our country millions of pounds through missed work, missed education, preventable health problems, deepening isolation and increased dependency on our already heavily pressured social care and mental health care services. When we can move freely, however, we can contribute fully, and we can work, shop, study, socialise, volunteer and raise families. We can do all that and support our local economy. We can do it all.

The purple pound is real, and Northern Ireland is missing out because we stumble at the first hurdle. Disabled people are not looking for extravagance. We just want a transport system that works for everyone. We want buses, planes, trains and taxis with affordable and easy accessibility. We want staff who are trained through lived experiences, not outdated theories. We want rural routes that connect communities instead of isolating them. We want taxi operators to treat us with the fairness and respect that we all deserve. We want decision-makers who include us from the beginning and do not see us as an afterthought. "Nothing about us without us" means nothing; it is just a slogan.

We need to work hard together. We need to get transport working for all of us. I would like you to imagine a Northern Ireland where disabled teenagers can travel to college without fear because they are seen; where parents can take their disabled children out without having to plan a military operation; where rural towns are connected instead of forgotten; where wheelchair users board public transport without fear; and where accessibility is the norm everywhere. That is a Northern Ireland worth building, and it is within our reach.

Ministers and Members, this is not just about transport but about health. It is about the missed appointments and the isolation, and the harm that that causes people. It is about education, because access shapes opportunity. It is about our economy, because a moving population is a contributing population. It is about communities and human rights, because no person should be denied participation because the bus did not stop for them.

2.30 pm

Northern Ireland has the chance to lead, to be the first to choose solutions over excuses, to build the first of its kind — a country where the disabled are not fighting to move freely but are supported to thrive.

I am delivering this speech from my wheelchair, not as a limitation but as a reminder that the disabled are here, we are present, but we cannot keep waiting on the sidelines hoping that maybe — just maybe — that day will arrive. I promise to work with every Government, local authority, operator, Minister and community to create a transport system that will include all of us.

I want to leave you with this: it is time to join this movement for accessibility, not because it is politically convenient or looks good in a report, but because every person in Northern Ireland and beyond deserves to live freely, to feel that they belong, and to thrive. The movement is real, and it has begun. Together, we can build a Northern Ireland where no one person is left behind.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Farah. Before I bring Eoin in, I just want to say that if concerns are raised that do not involve the Minister for Communities or the Minister of Health, I will ensure that the Hansard report of the debate is sent to the relevant Minister and Department. Just to give you that assurance. Eoin, over to you.

Eoin Kenny: Hello, and thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to highlight the issue of education opportunities.

I have a learning disability. People with learning disabilities are at the heart of Mencap, as the organisation helps them to realise their true selves and understand what they can achieve with support to have their voices to be heard.

I would like to talk about the need for reasonable adjustments and educational opportunities for people with a disability. According to recent research, people with disabilities in Northern Ireland are almost three times as likely to have no educational qualifications. Also, only 5% of people with learning disabilities are employed, according to the UK Government. We need to normalise education for people with learning disabilities within mainstream education. We need to encourage acceptance.

When it comes to my personal story you will see why, in many ways, good educational support is needed. I was very lucky to have parents who knew how to support my learning. I was lucky that, from the time that I was in primary school, I got the right kind of support, and after I left secondary school, my parents were able to help me as I entered North West Regional College. However, they had to work hard, and sometimes had to really fight, for me to get the right support to allow me to progress through college.

When I started primary school, the Education Authority recommended that I got only a few hours with a class assistant each week. I was allowed to attend a speech therapist, and that helped me to communicate better. During that time, I found it hard to communicate with people as I was very withdrawn and shy. There is an overwhelming crisis that many people are expressing a big concern about, and that crisis is getting bigger.

Caleb White: Will the Member give way?

Eoin Kenny: Of course I will.

Caleb White: My name is Caleb and I am 17 years old. When I am older, I want to be an inventor. When I leave special school at 19, my employment options will be limited. I want a lifelong care plan to allow me to fulfil my potential and achieve my dreams. My friends and I, along with many others, want to be seen, heard and included in your world. We want laws to give us a future. We are human beings, just like you. Ministers and Departments can choose to help me and so many others in this mandate. My question is this: will you?

Eoin Kenny: Thank you, Caleb, for your wonderful contribution. The key thing is how early intervention can help, as it did in my case. With the right support, families can plan for their child's education journey and help them to be the best versions of themselves. Of course, no person with a learning disability will be able to succeed without reasonable adjustments being made to help their school, college or apprenticeship journeys. That can be done within the mainstream curriculum as it was done for me.

Joanne McDonald: Will the Member give way?

Eoin Kenny: Of course I will, Joanne.

Joanne McDonald: I want to talk about how reasonable adjustments are important for people with a learning disability. We all need the right support to do our best, whether that is in mainstream education or special education. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. I went to a special school, which was the right place for me. The support that I got helped me to develop to be the person I am today. Learning is a lifelong journey, and staff need training so that they know how best to support people with a learning disability to reach their full potential. When we get the right support, we can learn, achieve all our goals and take part fully in our society.

Thank you very much for listening to me today.

Eoin Kenny: Thank you, Joanne, for a wonderful contribution. Today, there is a lot of frustration with the SEN system. Many people are experiencing long delays in getting individual support, which is adding to the overwhelming crisis for families. I want the different Departments in Northern Ireland to work closely together. When we work as a team on the changes that we are planning, we can do a much better job of helping children and young people who have a learning disability.

Rory McCartney: I want to talk to you about the ongoing review of personal independence payments (PIP), which is an issue that affects thousands of disabled people. PIP provides essential support to cover the additional costs that disabled people face every day. Those are not frivolous expenses or luxuries, but the basic necessities of daily life that simply cost more when you are disabled. Let me give you one example of that. When public transport is inadequate or inaccessible, disabled people must rely on taxis to get to medical appointments, to get to work or simply to participate in their community. Those additional costs add up day after day and month after month. The reality is stark. Disabled people are already more likely to live in poverty than those without disabilities. They face systemic barriers to employment, higher living costs and persistent economic disadvantage. PIP helps to level that uneven playing field.

Niamh Scullion: I work for Disability Action and previously worked as a creative freelancer.

Disabled creative freelancers can face significant barriers when accessing benefits due to the mismatch between fluctuating irregular freelance work and rigid welfare systems. Many benefits require predictable hours, stable income and strict reporting, which are often incompatible with project-based, fluctuating creative work.

Disabled freelancers may also face long gaps between commissions, and inaccessible application processes for benefits that rely on extensive paperwork or medical evidence. Fear of losing essential support, such as PIP or housing benefits, discourages many from taking short-term projects. Additionally, welfare assessments often fail to recognise the realities of creative labour, leading to under-assessment and financial insecurity.

Rory McCartney: That is why getting the PIP review right is critical. With PIP assessments set to determine whether disabled people on universal credit receive extra vital support, getting the Timms review right is not just a matter of policy, it is a matter of survival.

There are some positive moves in all of this. The Timms review of personal independence payment assessment is being co-produced with disabled people. However, that will be meaningful only if it includes the voices of the full diversity of disabled people. That is where I want to focus our attention today: the voices of disabled people in the North.

We have our own unique context with different public services, infrastructure and challenges. Disabled people in the North face specific barriers and costs that may differ from other areas. Their lived experience is vital to ensuring that PIP remains fair and adequate. When we talk about lived experiences, we are talking about real expertise. Disabled people know what works and what does not. They know where the gaps are. They know which support makes the difference between isolation and participation, between poverty and security, between managing and struggling.

That is not just good practice — it is essential for creating a policy that actually works. Therefore, I am calling on the Department for Communities to ensure that throughout its consideration of the Timms review disabled people from the North are meaningfully included in that co-production process, not just as a token gesture but as equal partners with real influence over the outcomes.

The future of PIP will determine whether thousands of disabled people can continue to live with dignity and independence. We must get this right, and we can get it right only by listening to, and genuinely collaborating with, disabled people themselves.

Nothing about us without us.

Nuala Toman: I am from Disability Action. Disabled people have the right to social security, an adequate standard of living, social protection and to live free from poverty. Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities makes that responsibility clear, yet across our communities too many disabled people experience the opposite. We face higher living costs, reduced income opportunities, inaccessible housing, soaring energy costs, food insecurity and a welfare system that is adversarial, particularly in the context of what Rory outlined, with the focus on reducing access to PIP and the current debate around limiting access to Motability, which facilitates disabled people's right to independent living. If we are honest, many in the Chamber today would not have been able to travel here without access to the Motability scheme.

2.45 pm

In the society that we live in, the risk of poverty for disabled people is not just likely, it is almost inevitable. Adequate social protection is not about simply surviving, it is about having enough to participate fully in society, pursue education and employment, contribute to society without barriers, form connections and live with autonomy, choice and dignity.

The current system forces disabled people to prove their disability time after time. It is a system that leaves people waiting for assessments and creates fear and stigma. That is not a system that offers social protection; it is a barrier. We heard from David, Amanda, Caroline, Lee and Anne about the importance of the independent living fund. If we are to talk about social protection, the independent living fund is an essential part of the fabric that is required for disabled people to participate fully in society.

The ongoing threats to welfare provision, combined with the position that labels disabled people as scroungers, are not just abhorrent, they are dangerous. The media's current reflections and the positions taken by the Westminster Government influence negatively perceptions across society of disabled people, and lead to an increase in hate crimes. Those perceptions need to be challenged, and we ask the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to challenge the stigmatisation and negative portrayal of disabled people.

We need a welfare system that is built on trust and real co-design. We need a social security system that addresses the real costs of disability, which are estimated to be over £1,000 per month. The current disjointed system barely touches the side of those costs. Disabled people should not be forced to choose between eating and breathing, and that is the grim reality for many who cannot turn on their heating or use essential machinery at home due to rising energy costs. No disabled person should have to rely on a food bank. Sadly, however, the largest portion of people accessing food banks in this jurisdiction are disabled people.

We need housing that is secure and accessible, energy and transport policies that consider disability, and employment pathways that do not punish disabled people who try to engage. Most importantly, we need a societal shift that sees social security as a human right and an investment in collective well-being, a fair society that protects everyone. We know that there is a draft anti-poverty strategy. We would ask that the strategy is adequately resourced, contains legislative commitments, realises commitments that are made under section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and that decisions on resources at Executive level are taken on the basis of objective need.

We need a fair society that protects everyone. If we get things right for disabled people, we get things right for everyone. A society that protects disabled people does not merely reduce poverty, it unlocks potential, participation and equality for all.

David Mann: I have been severely sight impaired from birth, and now have a developing hearing impairment as well.

Social isolation has been alluded to by many of the Members who have spoken. It is a vicious circle: the less social contact you have, the more depressed you get; the more depressed, the less confidence you have; and the less confidence, the more difficult it is to get out and meet people. There are many routes by which social isolation can be mitigated, for example, family, neighbours, voluntary and community organisations, both specialist and mainstream and, of course, statutory services.

However, I will concentrate this afternoon on a couple of areas where lawmakers and budget allocators can make a difference. The greatest trauma for many people who acquire a disability as they age is no longer being able to drive safely. That is particularly true of people who are losing their sight. Independence and flexibility disappear, and isolation sets in. Therefore, we need to see much more investment in community transport, especially rural community transport. Current schemes are inflexible. They need advance booking, they are often limited in the distance that they can take you and they depend on volunteers. Let us acknowledge and commend those volunteers, but why is such a vital service dependent on volunteers? Trains, buses and taxis are not. The Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs need to collaborate to prioritise the expansion of that service.

I turn now to the challenges that are faced by many people who want to get out and about in our towns and cities. No amount of mobility training with a cane or a dog can remove the myriad and often unpredictable hazards on our pavements, including parked vehicles, overgrown hedges, dog mess, shop displays, cafe furniture and wheelie bins. If you bang your head on a lorry’s wing mirror during your twentieth or thirtieth walk along a particular street, you may well simply shrug it off — shrug off the incident, not the head — but if that happens on only the first or second attempt at independent mobility, your confidence can be shattered and you simply will not try again.

The Minister for Infrastructure recently issued proposals to curb what she terms “inconsiderate” parking. “Antisocial” would be a better word. Sadly, her proposals are inadequate. In most instances, they would sanction — that is to say that they would give the seal of approval to — cars parking on pavements with two wheels still on the carriageway. A vehicle with three quarters of its mass on the pavement would make many pavements impassable and force pedestrians out into the road, with all the dangers that that entails. The proposed measures would only prohibit parking with all four wheels on the pavement. Therefore, we call on the Minister to radically review her proposals before submitting them to the Assembly.

Many of our cafes, pubs and restaurants put chairs and tables out on the pavement in a vain attempt to recreate a sunny continental resort. In reality, they are just pens for smokers. Local councils have the power to introduce licensing schemes to regulate the extent and design of such enclosures. We call on the Minister for Communities to ensure that all councils implement and enforce such schemes.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, you will be relieved to know that time does not permit me to go into the details of what could and, indeed, should be done to combat dog mess on the pavement. Instead, I simply ask everyone to help bring about a fundamental change in public and political thinking so that pavements are recognised as being exclusively for pedestrians — walkers and wheelers — so that we can combat our social isolation by getting out and about without fear. Thank you.

Laura Murphy-Sloan: Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak today to highlight the barriers to employment. I am here representing Adapt NI. We are the only organisation in Northern Ireland providing specialist employment support for the deaf, hearing loss and tinnitus communities. My sign name is “Laura”.

I want to begin with why I am here. Every day, we support people who are skilled, motivated and ready to work, yet they face barriers that stop them from entering work, progressing in work or feeling included in their workplace. I want you to feel the urgency of that because those barriers are avoidable. That urgency is growing. Right now, we are fighting to secure the future of specialist employment support beyond March 2026, when the Shared Prosperity Fund ends. We are working alongside the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and other organisations on the NI Can't Wait campaign to push for long-term, stable investment in services that should never be at risk.

Adapt NI launched, without even a laptop or a phone and only determination and lived experience, in 2022 to continue specialist employment support. In 2025, it is unacceptable for the only service of its kind to have no confirmed budget for the following year. That uncertainty is a barrier to us and a barrier to the communities that we support. This comes at a crucial moment because the sign language legislation that is moving through Stormont represents long-awaited recognition for users of BSL and Irish Sign Language (ISL) in Northern Ireland. That legislation will place obligations on public bodies, raise standards and help to ensure that communication rights are respected. However, legislation alone cannot create access. It must be backed by infrastructure, training and specialist support that organisations such as ours and others can provide. Without secure funding, those rights, promised in legislation, risk becoming symbolic rather than real.

What are the barriers that people are facing right now? They begin even before someone applies for the job. Recruitment processes remain inaccessible, job adverts are without clear information, telephone screenings automatically exclude deaf applicants and there is no offer of communication support. In fact, many people disclosing their deafness feel that that will count against them during that process.

Laura Lyttle: May I intervene?

Laura Murphy-Sloan: Yes.

Laura Lyttle: I interrupt to emphasise the impact of poor communication support. As a deaf BSL user who is also deafblind, I depend on interpreters and tactile communication. When that is not arranged, I cannot fully participate, whether it is an interview, a training session or a staff briefing. Often, the support arrives late or not at all. Sometimes, the interpreter booked does not have the right skills for deafblind communication. Those gaps push me out of opportunities that I am qualified for. If employers and services were to plan communication support properly and recognise the specific needs of deafblind people, that would remove one of the biggest barriers that we face.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Laura, and, indeed, thank you, Christina, for interpreting for Laura. Laura, you may continue.

Laura Murphy-Sloan: Thank you. At interview stage, things can sometimes get worse. Interpreters are not always provided, lighting and acoustics can be poor and interviewers can lack deaf awareness. Brilliant candidates are overlooked because the environment does not allow them to show their strengths. If somebody wants to retrain or upskill, they may find that online courses have no captions or that the tutors are not deaf-aware and there is then minimal support. The very opportunities that should enable progress end up shutting people out, and, even once in work, barriers can continue. Meetings happen without interpreters; technology is inaccessible; and people experience social isolation and constant exhaustion. Essential schemes such as Access to Work can be slow and complex, and there are rigid rules around them that can make them difficult to access if, for example, you work fewer than 16 hours a week.

3.00 pm

Why do barriers matter? They matter because they do not just affect individuals. They limit employers, weaken communities and hold back society by preventing people who want to contribute from doing so. The problem is not the person; it is the environment.

Eva Hanna: Will the Member give way?

Laura Murphy-Sloan: Yes, I will.

Eva Hanna: Four years ago, I became a full-time wheelchair user. I quickly realised how many barriers exist that most people never even have to think about. When I started applying for jobs, it was honestly nerve-wracking, not because I doubted my ability but because I had no idea whether the workplace would be accessible, whether people would understand my needs and whether I would be judged before I had even had the chance to prove myself.

Disabled people want to work. We want to be part of the world, to contribute, to have purpose and to use our skills like anyone else. We have the same drive and motivation. Having a disability does not make us less capable; it just means that we have to do things differently.

This year, I got my first job since becoming paralysed. It happened only because my employer was truly inclusive.

They listened, made adjustments where needed and treated accessibility as standard rather than something special. That is what inclusion looks like, and it should not be rare. If we want more disabled people in employment, we need accessible transport, flexible workplaces and employers who are supported to make real adjustments. We do not lack ability or ambition; we just need a system that lets us in and a society that believes that we belong there.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Eva. You may continue, Laura.

Laura Murphy-Sloan: Thank you.

What needs to happen? We need to have accessible recruitment from the very start. We need support schemes that work in real life and not just in policy documents. We need deaf awareness to be embedded across workplaces so that communication is shared and is not left to one person to manage. We need stable, long-term funding so that organisations such as ours can deliver specialist support. For our organisation in particular, the support that we can give under the upcoming sign language legislation will depend on the funding that we receive.

Every day at Adapt NI, we see what is possible when barriers are removed. People thrive, employers benefit and workplaces become more equal and more effective.

Nuala Toman: Beside me is Gerard Heatley, who is a deaf man from Northern Ireland. I am privileged to be with Gerard today to assist him by communicating his words.

Gerard Heatley: Access to safe, inclusive housing is a fundamental human right, yet for deaf individuals in Northern Ireland, that right remains out of reach. Despite repeated applications and requests for assistance being made, suitable housing options are virtually non-existent. The reality is clear: affordable and accessible housing for deaf and disabled people is almost impossible to find.

The housing system designed to support vulnerable groups often fails those whom it is meant to protect. According to the Equality Commission, deaf people experience the highest level of discrimination among disabled groups, largely because our needs are overlooked. While legislation, such as the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 exists, the Housing Executive does not adequately consider those provisions when processing applications or engaging with deaf applicants. Current policies do not prioritise disability on housing lists, even when existing homes are unsafe or unsuitable. For deaf individuals, that creates additional challenges. Essential adaptations, such as visual alarms, vibrating doorbells and accessible communication with housing officers, are rarely standard, though they should be. Accepting the first available property is not an option when safety cannot be guaranteed. The constant anxiety of missing a fire alarm or a visitor at the door is a daily reality.

For decades, the Housing Executive required me to live in ground-floor accommodation. Only after challenging that discriminatory practice, with support from Disability Action Northern Ireland, was I granted a management transfer in June 2025. That experience underscores a broader issue: the housing crisis is not only about affordability; it is about dignity, independence and equality.

When policy-makers speak of affordable housing, we must ask, “Affordable for whom?” When they promise choice, where is ours? Despite countless applications, appeals, letters and meetings, the response remains the same: “Wait, and wait longer”.

New developments continue to arise, marketed as modern living and vibrant communities, yet deaf and disabled people are excluded from the design stage entirely. All we seek is a home that ensures safety, enables communication and supports independent living. Those are basic rights that should never be negotiable. We urge government bodies, housing providers and local councils to integrate accessibility from the design stage of all housing developments; make application processes fully accessible for deaf and disabled applicants; fund essential adaptations promptly to ensure safety and independence; and move beyond consultation to co-design, working directly with deaf and disabled communities. Until that happens, I and thousands like me will remain trapped not by our experiences of deafness or disability but by a system that refuses to move with us.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Gerard. Our last speaker is the Minister for Communities, Mr Gordon Lyons.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities): Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the organisers for bringing together today's Parliament and debate. I thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, for your presence here today. I also thank all of the Assembly staff, our translators and all of those who have made today's event not only possible but accessible. Most of all, I acknowledge and thank those who have contributed to the debate today. I know that it is not easy to speak in this place, especially about issues that are so personal to you. However, as a result, we have had powerful, passionate and principled speeches. The atmosphere here has been much more polite than perhaps we are normally accustomed to, Principal Deputy Speaker.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Speak for yourself, Minister. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyons: Thank you.

The Principal Deputy Speaker has shown a different side to herself today. Normally, she is very strict when it comes to time; she lets us go over by only a second or two at most. I hope that that new-found flexibility will extend to us next week. She is shaking her head, so I assume that this is a one-off. It was right, because we should hear from all of you. You all spoke not just about your personal experiences; I know that you were speaking on behalf of many other people as well. I thank you for that.

I received the invitation to come here today. Normally, when something comes in for a Friday, it is nearly always an automatic decline because, on Fridays, most MLAs are in their constituencies. However, I made an exception. I made an exception today because this is important. It is also deeply personal to me. It is an issue that I have a deep interest in, so it is genuinely a privilege and a delight for me to be here today. I thank you for making it possible.

3.15 pm

Deaf and disabled people deserve the chance to live freely, to work and to participate fully in society. Too often, barriers stand in the way. As Minister for Communities, my responsibility is to help remove those barriers in the areas that I am responsible for, such as social security, housing and employment.

The Executive's disability strategy will help deliver the lasting change that we all need to see. I guarantee you that it will not simply be a wish list; it will contain substantive actions that will make a real difference. From the outset, I assure you that it has been a genuine co-design process involving deaf and disabled people, their families and carers and representative organisations. I thank all those who took the opportunity to share their views and assist my officials in the work.

From an early stage, it was clear that the sector had a number of key asks about what it wanted to see in the new strategy. One of the strongest and most universal messages was the desire to establish a Northern Ireland disability forum, wholly comprising deaf and disabled people, with a role in supporting the strategy's monitoring and reporting processes. Another was the call for reform of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which stakeholders believe is no longer fit for purpose. I can confirm to you today that both of those key asks are commitments in the latest draft of the strategy.

On Monday 24 November, I will announce the details of the draft strategy and its public consultation. That will be your opportunity to review what we plan to do and help ensure that it truly reflects everyone's needs and aspirations. Once the consultation closes, I will publish a detailed action plan with clear actions, timelines and responsibilities, subject to Executive agreement. I will continue to work with you during implementation, because, as I have said on many occasions, I am committed to ensuring that every individual, regardless of disability or health condition, has the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

The UK Government's 'Pathways to Work' Green Paper set out a clear commitment to help disabled people to try work without the fear of losing the support that they rely on. For too long, the system has made work a risk. People should not have to choose between financial security and the chance to see whether work is right for them. I welcome proposals that will allow disabled people to take up work on a trial basis, safe in the knowledge that their benefits will not be affected if the work proves unsuitable.

I was also pleased that proposals to change PIP rules were removed from the Universal Credit Act 2025. That was the right decision. The Timms Review of PIP is now under way, the first full review of its kind. It will be co-produced with disabled people and representative organisations. The review will help ensure that the system supports better health, higher living standards and greater independence. I thank Rory McCartney for raising the issue and highlighting the personal importance that it has for him. I can confirm that I have emphasised to Minister Timms the importance of lived experience, and the lived experience of people in Northern Ireland in particular.

I will move on to another important issue: housing. Housing is the foundation that provides the stability that we need for so much in our lives. Housing is about not just bricks and mortar but people, places and potential. The housing supply strategy, which was developed following extensive consultation with stakeholders, including disability organisations, recognises the need for affordable and accessible homes for a diverse range of needs. Too many disabled people still live in homes that do not meet their needs. That is why my Department is working with Executive colleagues and the Housing Executive to develop an action plan to deliver practical solutions to those issues.

I am also reviewing the disabled facilities grant to make the process quicker, easier and more responsive. Proposals for change will be included in a public consultation next spring, and I encourage everybody with lived experience to take part in that. In addition, as part of the fundamental review of social housing allocations, work is under way to look at how specialised accommodation, such as sheltered housing, wheelchair-standard homes and adapted properties, is allocated. The aim is clear: it is to create a fairer system that gives applicants better access to quality homes and, importantly, supports independent living.

I will move on to another issue on which we need to do far better: Northern Ireland's disability employment rate, which, quite simply, has not been good enough. I am determined to change that. That is why I have launched the disability and work strategy, which aims to support 50,000 disabled people into employment over the next decade. Again, the strategy was co-designed with those who have lived experience. It focuses on tailored support, employer engagement and breaking down structural barriers. That is incredibly important. I wish to thank Eva Hanna, in particular, for her intervention, because she so clearly outlined the importance of work and the small steps that can be taken by employers that make such a massive difference in helping people to get into the workplace. Thank you for your contribution on that, Eva.

I will take this opportunity to acknowledge the vital role that the voluntary and community sector plays in representing people and communities and promoting well-being, resilience and inclusion. Its work is at the heart of building stronger, more connected communities. I am proud to support the sector's efforts to deliver well-being and inclusion outcomes by means of investment through a range of programmes that empower communities, provide housing support, enhance employability and promote participation in sport, culture and heritage.

I will also highlight the progress on what I hope will be one of my proudest achievements during my time in office: the Sign Language Bill. That legislation's being passed will be a landmark moment for the deaf community in Northern Ireland. It will give formal recognition to British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language and will place clear duties on public bodies to promote and facilitate their use. It will mean that there is better access to information, services and opportunities for deaf people. I am very proud that the House is progressing it.

I am also committed to inclusive urban regeneration. We need to ensure that deaf and disabled people are not just consulted on but actively involved in shaping the places that we all share. Through strong engagement with organisations such as Disability Action, Guide Dogs and the RNIB, my Department has embedded accessibility and inclusion into projects such as the Five Cs project and the Belfast Streets Ahead programme.

There is still so much more work to do; work that government cannot and should not do alone. That is why it is so important that we hear from you all today, and, while I do not have direct responsibility for all that, I am glad that the Principal Deputy Speaker will be sharing your contributions — I hope that you do not mind me singling you out for your incredibly passionate and powerful speech, Farah — with other Ministers. Those contributions demonstrate not just the importance of but the requirement for us all to work together.

It is not just about ticking boxes, either. I see so much of this work as unleashing potential: the potential that so many people have but that is held back by barriers that we should have knocked down a long, long time ago. I understand the issue and am committed to doing everything that I can to play my role in that.

As we look ahead, I want to be very clear: I will continue to listen and learn, because I know that we do not always get it right. I hope that we will also act together with deaf and disabled people to create a culture of inclusion and build a society in which your voices are heard and you can shape decisions, not as an add-on, but as a core part of every engagement that we have.

I hope that this has been a useful debate and session for you. It certainly has been a good debate for me. Madam Principal Deputy Speaker has not had to tell me to sit down, call "Order" or tell me to behave myself, so I suppose that that is one benefit that I can take from it as well. We have had a good engagement. Please be assured that I will listen, learn and do everything that I can to work alongside you to deliver the change that we all want to see. I see this as unleashing potential in people, more than anything else, and that should be the focus for all of us. Thank you very much.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister, and just to assure you, we will return to normal on Monday. *[Laughter.]* I must also say that Joanne Sansome, on your left, was the pace-setter for breaking the rules *[Laughter]*, so we will say no more. She gave me warning out in the Hall.

Closing Remarks

To all the Members of the Disabled People's Parliament, which is how you wish to be described, thank you very much. As we bring today's proceedings to a close, I express my sincere appreciation to everyone who took the time to share their experiences, frustrations, hopes and, indeed, ideas. The range of issues that we explored include healthcare, social security, education, independent living, transport, employment and housing and it reflects the breadth of challenges facing deaf and disabled people across Northern

Ireland. However, it also reflects the depth of insight, expertise and determination that you have all brought to the Chamber today.

Your contributions have been very thoughtful, honest and impactful. They have challenged us all to think more clearly about the barriers that persist, and they remind us why inclusive decision-making is not optional but essential. The personal testimonies delivered today are not simply commentaries on policy: they are lived realities that demand attention, action and, indeed, accountability.

I thank the Minister of Health and the Minister for Communities for their engagement and responses to the motion. Thanks also go to the Minister for Infrastructure, who met participants earlier today but was unable to stay for the Parliament. The attendance of Ministers sends an important message about the value of this Parliament and the importance of listening directly to the people most affected by the decisions that they take.

My thanks also go to Assembly Members who joined us throughout today, particularly Kellie Armstrong and Danny Donnelly, to my right here, who attended throughout today’s proceedings and the entire debate.

My thanks also go to the organisers and individuals who co-designed this event through the consultative panel. Your commitment has ensured that this Parliament reflects the diversity and complexity of the community that it represents and that it remains firmly rooted in lived experience.

To everyone who participated: thank you for your leadership, courage and generosity in sharing your experiences. It is not easy. I understand that the insights that you have provided today will form a report on the Parliament, which will be shared with all Executive Ministers, all Assembly Committees and, indeed, all MLAs.

I hope that you leave today knowing that your voices and your views have been raised and highlighted in this Chamber. I look forward to reading the Parliament’s report and following its recommendations and their outcomes. This Parliament is important. It is an important reminder that policy is strongest when shaped by those who live with its impact, and I hope that today’s sitting contributes to meaningful progress, stronger collaboration and a renewed commitment to removing barriers that limit opportunity and equality.

Thank you all once again for your time, your honesty and your contributions.

Adjourned at 3.31 pm.