



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)
and
**JOURNAL OF
PROCEEDINGS**

Volume 115
(12 May 2016 to 21 June 2016)

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Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Archibald, Ms Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Mrs Sinead (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Farry, Stephen (North Down)
Fearon, Ms Megan (Newry and Armagh)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hanna, Ms Claire (South Belfast)
Hazzard, Chris (South Down)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Little Pengelly, Mrs Emma (South Belfast)
Lockhart, Ms Carla (Upper Bann)
Logan, Philip (North Antrim)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCann, Eamonn (Foyle)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuinness, Martin (Foyle)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McKee, Harold (South Down)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNulty, Justin (Newry & Armagh)
McPhillips, Richie (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Mullan, Gerry (East Londonderry)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (Speaker)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ó Muilleoir, Máirtín (South Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Palmer, Mrs Jenny (Lagan Valley)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitríona (South Down)
Seeley, Ms Catherine (Upper Bann)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Smith, Philip (Strangford)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)

Principal Officers and Officials of the Assembly

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Principal Deputy Speaker	Ms Caitriona Ruane MLA
Deputy Speakers	Mr Danny Kennedy MLA Mr Patsy McGlone MLA
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Clerk Assistant (Acting)	Mr Paul Gill
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Examiner of Statutory Rules.....	Ms Angela Kelly

Ministerial Offices

The Executive Committee

First Minister	Mrs Arlene Foster
Deputy First Minister.....	Mr Martin McGuinness
Minister for Communities.....	Mr Paul Givan
Minister for Infrastructure.....	Mr Chris Hazzard
Minister for the Economy.....	Mr Simon Hamilton
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Miss Michelle McIlveen
Minister of Education.....	Mr Peter Weir
Minister of Finance	Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir
Minister of Health.....	Mrs Michelle O’Neill
Minister of Justice.....	Ms Claire Sugden

Junior Ministers

The Executive Office	Ms Megan Fearon Mr Alastair Ross
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 12 May 2016

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon.

Assembly Business

Notice of First Meeting

The Clerk to the Assembly: It falls to me at the beginning of the sitting, as Clerk to the Assembly, to read the notice for the meeting.

In accordance with Standing Order 2(1), I hereby give notice that the Assembly will meet, as required by section 31(4) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, in Parliament Buildings at noon on Thursday 12 May 2016. Please stand for the Speaker.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Undertaking and Roll of Membership

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Please be seated. Before we proceed with today's business, I offer my congratulations to all of you following the election. As well as welcoming back former Members, I extend a particular welcome to those who are present in the Chamber for the first time.

Before I move on to business, I wish to make Members aware that the Clerk to the Assembly, Mr Trevor Reaney, has announced his intention to retire next month. I am sure that I speak for all of you in wishing him well in his retirement.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: He will be replaced by Mrs Lesley Hogg, and I am delighted that Mrs Hogg is able to be with us today. On your behalf, I wish her success in her new role. Let us move on.

The next item in the Order Paper is the signing of the undertaking and the Roll of Membership. Standing Order 3(3) states that a Member shall be regarded as having taken his or her seat only when they have signed the Roll of Membership. In addition, the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016 has amended the Northern Ireland Act, making provision for a new undertaking that Members must sign before signing the Roll. I will therefore not take any points of order until after the undertaking and the Roll have been signed by all Members present and I have confirmed that Members have taken their seats.

I will now explain the procedures for the signing of the undertaking and the Roll of Membership. I will invite Members to come forward in their party group, and I will call the parties in alphabetical order. I will then call independent Members in alphabetical order. When each party name is called, I will ask Members of that party to proceed through the Aye lobby on my right. Members will then come forward to the first table to give the undertaking.

Paragraph 2(2) of schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016 provides that I, as the person who, under the Assembly's Standing Orders, takes the Chair at the first meeting of the new Assembly, shall determine the transitional procedure for giving the undertaking for Members of the Assembly who are elected at the 2016 election.

I therefore determine the following procedure. All Members shall have the opportunity to give the undertaking before

he or she signs the Assembly's Roll of Membership. Members shall give the undertaking by printing their name, entering the date and signing the page provided on which the undertaking has been printed. The giving of the undertaking shall be supervised by Assembly officials. Any Member who does not give the undertaking during this item of business may do so at a later date by appointment through the Speaker's office. A Member may not sign the Assembly's Roll of Membership unless he or she has given the undertaking in accordance with this procedure. My decision on whether a Member has properly given the undertaking shall be final, except where a Member gives the undertaking at such time after my successor has been elected, in which case the decision of my successor shall be final. The signed undertaking page will be kept as the official record of Members having given the undertaking.

Members should then move to the second table and sign one of the Roll pages. Again, Members should enter today's date and print and sign their name, but, for the Roll, they must also enter a designation of identity, as "Nationalist", "Unionist" or "Other". Members should note that Standing Order 3(7) provides that a Member who does not enter a designation of identity will be deemed to be designated "Other".

The process of giving the undertaking and signing the Roll may take some time. I ask Members for their patience during this procedure.

Before we proceed, Members may find it helpful if the undertaking is read into the record:

To undertake:

to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it;

to work collectively with the other members of the Assembly to achieve a society free of paramilitarism;

to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality;

to call for, and to work together with the other members of the Assembly to achieve, the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures;

to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;

to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism;

to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment.

We shall now proceed. I invite members of the Alliance Party to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Members gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Ms Kellie Armstrong United Community
 Ms Paula Bradshaw United Community
 Mr Stewart Dickson United Community
 Dr Stephen Farry United Community
 Mr David Ford United Community
 Mrs Naomi Long United Community
 Mr Trevor Lunn United Community

Mr Chris Lyttle United Community

Mr Speaker: I invite members of the Democratic Unionist Party to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Members gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Mr Sydney Anderson Unionist
 Mr Jonathan Bell Unionist
 Mr Maurice Bradley Unionist
 Ms Paula Bradley Unionist
 Mr Keith Buchanan Unionist
 Mr Thomas Buchanan Unionist
 Ms Joanne Bunting Unionist
 Mrs Pam Cameron Unionist
 Mr Trevor Clarke Unionist
 Mr Sammy Douglas Unionist
 Mr Gordon Dunne Unionist
 Mr Alex Easton Unionist
 Mrs Arlene Foster Unionist
 Mr Paul Frew Unionist
 Mr Paul Girvan Unionist
 Mr Paul Givan Unionist
 Mrs Brenda Hale Unionist
 Mr Simon Hamilton Unionist
 Mr David Hilditch Unionist
 Mr William Humphrey Unionist
 Mr William Irwin Unionist
 Mrs Emma Little Pengelly Unionist
 Ms Carla Lockhart Unionist
 Mr Philip Logan Unionist
 Mr Gordon Lyons Unionist
 Mr Nelson McCausland Unionist
 Miss Michelle McIlveen Unionist
 Mr Adrian McQuillan Unionist
 Mr Gary Middleton Unionist
 Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley Unionist
 Mr Robin Newton Unionist
 Mr Edwin Poots Unionist
 Mr George Robinson Unionist
 Mr Alastair Ross Unionist
 Mr Christopher Stalford Unionist
 Mr Mervyn Storey Unionist
 Mr Peter Weir Unionist
 Mr Jim Wells Unionist

Mr Speaker: I invite members of the Green Party to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Members gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Mr Steven Agnew
 Ms Clare Bailey

Mr Speaker: I invite members of the People Before Profit Alliance to come forward.

The following Members gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Mr Gerry Carroll Socialist
Mr Eamonn McCann Socialist

Mr Speaker: I invite members of Sinn Féin to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Members gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Ms Caoimhe Archibald Nationalist
Mr Cathal Boylan Nationalist
Ms Michaela Boyle Nationalist
Ms Linda Dillon Nationalist
Ms Megan Fearon Nationalist
Ms Michelle Gildernew Nationalist
Mr Chris Hazzard Nationalist
Mr Declan Kearney Nationalist
Mr Gerry Kelly Nationalist
Mr Seán Lynch Nationalist
Mr Declan McAleer Nationalist
Mr Fra McCann Nationalist
Ms Jennifer McCann Nationalist
Mr Raymond McCartney Nationalist
Mr Barry McElduff Nationalist
Mr Martin McGuinness Nationalist
Mr Daithí McKay Nationalist
Mr Oliver McMullan Nationalist
Mr Alex Maskey Nationalist
Mr Ian Milne Nationalist
Mr Conor Murphy Nationalist
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín Nationalist
Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir Nationalist
Mr John O'Dowd Nationalist
Mrs Michelle O'Neill Nationalist
Ms Caitríona Ruane Nationalist
Ms Catherine Seeley Nationalist
Mr Pat Sheehan Nationalist

12.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I call the members of the Social Democratic and Labour Party to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Members gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Mr Alex Attwood Nationalist
Mrs Sinead Bradley Nationalist
Mr Mark Durkan Nationalist
Mr Colum Eastwood Nationalist
Ms Claire Hanna Nationalist
Mr Daniel McCrossan Nationalist
Mr Patsy McGlone Nationalist
Mr Colin McGrath Nationalist

Mr Justin McNulty Nationalist
Mr Richie McPhillips Nationalist
Ms Nichola Mallon Nationalist
Mr Gerry Mullan Nationalist

Mr Speaker: I invite the member of the Traditional Unionist Voice to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Member gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Mr Jim Allister Unionist

Mr Speaker: I invite members of the Ulster Unionist Party to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Members gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Mr Steve Aiken Unionist
Mr Andy Allen Unionist
Mrs Rosemary Barton Unionist
Mr Doug Beattie Unionist
Mr Roy Beggs Unionist
Mr Robbie Butler Unionist
Mr Alan Chambers Unionist
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson Unionist
Mr Ross Hussey Unionist
Mr Danny Kennedy Unionist
Mr Harold McKee Unionist
Mr Mike Nesbitt Unionist
Mrs Sandra Overend Unionist
Mrs Jenny Palmer Unionist
Mr Philip Smith Unionist
Mr Robin Swann Unionist

12.45 pm

Mr Speaker: I invite Ms Claire Sugden, as an Independent Member, to come forward and give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

The following Member gave the undertaking and signed the Roll of Membership:

Ms Claire Sugden Unionist

Mr Speaker: Finally, I invite any Member present who has not already done so to come forward to give the undertaking and sign the Roll of Membership.

I thank Members for their cooperation and patience during the giving of the undertaking and the signing of the Roll of Membership. Any Member who has not been able to give the undertaking today may do so at a later date by appointment through the Speaker's Office.

Standing Order 3(3) states that my decision as to whether a Member has taken his or her seat is final. I can only make that decision after examining all the entries in the Roll. To that end I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. Thank you.

The sitting was suspended at 12.47 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Speaker's Business

Concluding Remarks

Mr Speaker: Order. I will enjoy saying that for the last time. Before moving on to the rest of today's business, I would like to take this opportunity to make some brief remarks at the beginning of this new Assembly term.

Once I have presided over the election of my successor, I will leave office. Therefore, before we move on to that business, I would like to give you my remarks about the working relationships here and my appreciation of how well and effectively the Assembly can work on those issues that our electorate expect. I also want to put down my understanding of how the Assembly has become vital to our wider community and how that is reflected at times when it appears that we have encountered impasses and difficulties. What you begin to hear, sometimes just through the chattering classes, is speculation about the collapse of the Assembly, and then you start to hear the more concerned, focused and informed opinions about how vital it is that a community that has our history of conflict and division really needs the Assembly to be part of the cement in the process of reconciliation and healing.

In my view, the election has demonstrated that despite the negative commentaries that all of us pick up and the reactions at times on the doors — they are legitimate comments one way or the other — you also get a very clear affirmation of how vital the Assembly is to our day-to-day existence and the people's expectation of a future more peaceful than our past.

Many Members will know that, throughout my time in office, I have focused on the Assembly's need to show respect towards all its people. It has been a tremendous opportunity to host so many events and meet so many different elements of our diverse community. In that context, I am delighted to look out today on a Chamber that has 50% more women than there were following the outcome of the previous election. We have much more to do on that front, but it is a very good beginning. I know that I am leaving behind many who will continue to focus on the composition of the Assembly going forward, reflecting the actual composition to ensure that, in mathematical as well as electoral terms, we represent the entire community.

I want to give my thanks to the three former Deputy Speakers, Roy Beggs, John Dallat and Principal Deputy Speaker, Robin Newton, for their support and cooperation. It is important for the occupants of the Chair to be able to depend and rely on each other to enforce and deliver the Speaker's rulings. I could not have wished for a better working relationship amidst some very challenging and difficult issues, and I sincerely thank them for that.

I also want to thank the Assembly Commission members. It is a vital corporate function but very much, in most circumstances, out of the public eye. I want to acknowledge the role and contribution of Pat Ramsey, Peter Weir, Judith Cochrane, Caitriona Ruane, Sam Gardiner, Paula Bradley and Karen McKeivitt. It is easy for those on the outside to underestimate the difficulties

and challenges that the Assembly Commission often faces in delivering its statutory obligations and achieving agreement amongst diverse views. However, it can best be done through constructive discussions, developing strong working relationships and leaving the politics for the Chamber. I thank the Assembly Commission members for their cooperation on so many issues.

It is appropriate also that I thank the staff of the Assembly. I have been a Member here since 1998, but it was really only during my time as Speaker that I gained the fullest appreciation of just how much work is required behind the scenes to support the operation of the Assembly and to deal with the challenges and pressures that Assembly staff face daily in what is often a very confrontational and difficult environment.

I have a renewed admiration for them. I thank them — I think that I do so on behalf of all in the Chamber — for their support and also the occasional banter.

I also give my thanks to the Clerk/Chief Executive, Trevor Reaney. At the end of next month, Trevor will be following me into retirement — not oblivion, I am certain. I thank him for his work and support. In even the most difficult exchanges, Trevor maintains calmness, courtesy and respect, and he offers solutions. He is most characterised by his absolute commitment to serving the best interests of the Assembly, its Members and staff. I thank him for his leadership.

I also thank my colleagues and friends in the Speaker's Office. I know that previous Speakers have acknowledged the calibre of support, expertise and experience that exists there, but I will name Robin Ramsey, a vital source of knowledge, experience and vision. He has an absolute commitment to ensuring that the Speaker gets the best possible support. I want to thank Frances Leneghan. Behind all the previous incumbents of the Speaker's Chair, she is the woman who ensures that it will all happen and be done according to the script. Paul and Christopher complete the picture in a remarkable team that we should all be proud of.

I will comment on the role of the Speaker before I step down from it. From the outset, I made it clear that I recognised the importance of the role of the Speaker in representing every single Member of this establishment. I was the representative of 107 other MLAs; it was not a party political position. In a few minutes, the Assembly will elect a new Speaker to do that and to uphold the independence and impartiality of the office. However, it is equally important for Members to remember that after the Speaker is elected. When Members come to see the Speaker in relation to issues that they are concerned about, they should not come with just their party or personal perspective. They should not come without at least acknowledging that the Speaker has a responsibility to be impartial and to take account of all the diverse views in the Assembly. The Speaker is not there to become involved in a ping-pong between party political interests; there are plenty of other structures and opportunities for those issues to be addressed. The Speaker — this is important for everybody, and it is to everybody's advantage — should be protected in the independence and impartiality of the role.

The Assembly is moving on. I welcome a new generation and wider perspectives. There are a few left who like

me were here in 1998, but those remaining Members represent a very significant corporate memory of how far we have come and the work that was required to achieve it. That is important because, sometimes, we hear complacent voices about focusing on the imperfections of this institution rather than appreciating where we might otherwise be without the Assembly. There are many difficulties ahead, but I am entirely optimistic about the future and the Assembly. However, I lay down a challenge: it is for every single Member in the Chamber to try to make the most of the Assembly. We have seen that we can move forward only when we find agreement. I welcome very much the approach that has developed in recent terms, where people simply stay at the table in the midst of all the disagreements until a solution emerges. Much more will be achieved through positive energy focused on finding that agreement and respecting other opinions, even though there is much negative energy to feed on if we were to take account of it. My colleague in Westminster, Speaker John Bercow, speaks of the need for the Speaker to be impartial between the parties but never impartial about the institution. Similarly, here, the Speaker should be fair and impartial between all shades of opinion but should never be impartial about recognising the importance of the Assembly and wanting the best for it.

It has been a privilege to end my time in this place as Speaker. I sincerely wish you all the very best for the future, and I sincerely wish my successor all the success and support that I enjoyed. Thank you all very much indeed. *[Applause.]* I will say it one more time: order. *[Laughter.]* I have had the opportunity to scrutinise the entries in the undertaking and Roll of Membership. I am satisfied that all Members have taken their seat in accordance with Standing Orders.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was slightly surprised when I read the notes indicating procedure for this morning, which referred to Members giving a designation of “Nationalist, Unionist or Other”, with initial capitals and quotation marks, but paragraph 6 of strand one of the Good Friday Agreement specifically puts “nationalist, unionist or other” in lower case with no quotation marks. For the avoidance of doubt, my colleagues and I have given our designation as united community. You may regard it as something different.

Mr Speaker: I accept the point of order and the point that you make, but you will be aware that our procedures are based on the original legislation, and Standing Orders have to reflect that accurately. I take your point about the grammatical issue, and I indicate that, regarding designations of identity, other Members of other political groupings here took similar objection to the available options. However, I made it clear before we started that process that it would be for me to decide the basis on which they would be designated for the purposes of voting and procedures. Twelve Members entered designations that I deemed to be “Other” for the purposes of Standing Orders. Details of all the designations have been placed in Members’ pigeonholes, and copies are available in the Rotunda.

Assembly Business

Election of the Speaker

Mr Speaker: Members will be aware that I am not seeking re-election as Speaker. Therefore, I will remain in the Chair only for the process of electing the Speaker and, once my successor has been elected, will step down immediately.

I advise Members that the election of the Speaker will be conducted under the procedures that have been set out under Standing Order 4. I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose that another Member be elected as Speaker. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded by another Member, as required by Standing Order 14. I will then verify that the Member seconded is willing to accept the nomination. I will then ask for further proposals and follow the same procedure for each.

When it appears that there are no further proposals, I will make it clear that the time for proposals has passed. If Members indicate that they wish to speak, a debate relevant to the election may then take place. At the conclusion of the debate or of the nominations, if there are no requests to speak, I shall put the Question that the Member first proposed shall be Speaker of the Assembly. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I shall put the Question in relation to the next nominee and so on until nominations are exhausted. Once a Speaker is elected, all other nominations will fall automatically.

Do I have any proposals for the office of Speaker of the Assembly?

Mrs Foster: With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, before I make my proposal, I will say that this is the first day of the new mandate, and it is a new era. Every election brings change, and I thank you, as outgoing Speaker, for your service to the House. I also thank the outgoing Clerk for his service to the House.

I nominate Mr Robin Newton for Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Is there a Member to second that proposal?

Mr Douglas: I second the nomination of my good friend and colleague Robin Newton.

Mr Speaker: Are there any other nominations?

Is the nominated person prepared to accept the proposal?

Mr Newton: I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

The time for proposals has expired. A number of Members have indicated that they wish to speak — at least one has. I remind Members that they may speak only once in the debate. Members have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mrs Foster: I am delighted to propose my party colleague Robin Newton for the office of Speaker. If elected today, I am sure that Robin will bring great dignity and sure-footedness to the position. He has a long and distinguished career in public service, first with Belfast City Council and then here in the Northern Ireland Assembly. During his time in the Assembly, he has served as a junior Minister and led the DUP team on the Policing Board.

2.15 pm

Robin has been honoured by Her Majesty The Queen and is a Member of the Order of the British Empire. He was first elected in 2003 and is thereby a veteran of the House. That makes me a veteran of the House as well, which I am rather alarmed at, but anyway —

Mr Weir: Some of us are even older.

Mrs Foster: Yes.

He had many years' experience of the procedures of the Assembly even before he was elevated to Principal Deputy Speaker last year. Over the last 15 months in post, Robin has proven himself in the role, and he is superbly well qualified to hold the post. Indeed, over the last 15 months in particular and across his whole career, Robin has demonstrated that he is an ideal candidate for the post.

If such a thing exists in the House, Robin Newton is a conciliator. I suspect that, at times, it will take all his natural skills to manage this new term. I have no doubt that he will carry out his duties in a fashion that will be recognised by Members as impartial and fair, and I urge all Members to support Robin Newton as our next Speaker.

Mr McGuinness: First of all, like the First Minister, I pay tribute to you, Mitchel, as Speaker. I think that, in your stewardship of that office, you clearly followed on from the Trojan work that was done prior to your appointment by a fellow Derry man — William Hay, now Lord Hay. In the last two terms of the Assembly, the work done by William and yourself sent, I think, a very powerful message to everyone about the ability of unionists and republicans to inhabit the Chair in a way that showed them to be totally fair and impartial. I also think the work that you did to raise up women within the Assembly was very important. I join you in congratulating all those women who have been elected to the Assembly and look forward to the day in the not-too-distant future when even more are elected.

I have no difficulty whatsoever in supporting Robin Newton as the new Speaker of the Assembly. I think he will follow the practice of William Hay and yourself and will recognise his duties and responsibilities to everybody in the House to ensure that there is fairness and that no one can leave the House and say that the office was demeaned in any way by a partisan approach. That certainly did not happen with William Hay, it did not happen with you and I have every confidence that it will not happen with Robin either. I wish him well.

Question, That Mr Robin Newton be Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Robin Newton be Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

I formally declare that Robin Newton has been elected Speaker. I congratulate him and invite him to take the Chair. *[Applause.]*

(Mr Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

Mr Speaker: I thank Members for entrusting me with the very important office of Speaker of the Assembly. I particularly appreciate, and the deputy First Minister referred to this, the very radical move of selecting someone from outside the Maiden City to hold the post. *[Laughter.]* I thank my predecessor Mitchel McLaughlin for his dedication to the Assembly and his even-handed treatment of Members. I appreciated that as a Member on the Benches and in the role of Principal Deputy Speaker. Despite his short time in office, he leaves the Assembly held in very high esteem and is recognised not only in here but further afield. We wish him well, as the First Minister said, for the future.

The Assembly returns after the election with a diverse range of opinions on all the issues and, indeed, facing many challenges over this mandate.

I fully accept the requirement of the office to preside in an independent and impartial manner and to uphold the standards that my predecessors have set. I recognise that it is the role of the Speaker to be firm, to protect the interests, integrity and procedures of the House and to be fair in the way in which business is conducted. Therefore, Members can be assured that I will be doing my best to uphold the rights of all parts of the Chamber to express their views and the concerns of their constituents.

The people of Northern Ireland are looking to us. They want this Assembly, and I want this Assembly, to prove to them that we are moving forward, agreeing as much as we can and expressing our differences with courtesy and respect when we cannot. In this new term, we should be setting out with high ambitions for the next five years, and I look forward to working with every Member on meeting those ambitions. Let us work for the days ahead.

Election of the Deputy Speakers

Mr Speaker: Standing Order 5(1) requires there to be three Deputy Speakers elected. The procedure for electing Deputy Speakers is the same as that for the election of the Speaker. I will ask for proposals, which must be seconded. I will then confirm that the Member accepts the nomination and will continue until there are no further proposals.

I remind Members that a debate may take place after I announce that the time for proposals has passed. Do we have any proposals for the office of Deputy Speaker?

Mr McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I nominate the Member for South Down Caitríona Ruane.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a seconder?

Ms J McCann: I second that.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member prepared to accept the nomination?

Ms Ruane: Aontaim leis. I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Is there a further proposal?

Mr Eastwood: I nominate Mr Patsy McGlone.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for Mr Patsy McGlone?

Mr Attwood: I second the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Does Mr McGlone accept the nomination?

Mr McGlone: Glacaim leis. Go raibh maith agat. Thank you very much. I accept.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further nominations?

Mr Nesbitt: I nominate Mr Danny Kennedy.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for Mr Danny Kennedy?

Mrs Dobson: I second the proposal.

Mr Speaker: Does Mr Kennedy accept the proposal?

Mr Kennedy: I accept.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

The time for proposals has expired. A number of Members have indicated that they wish to speak, so I remind Members that they may speak only once in the debate. Members will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mr McGuinness: I have no hesitation whatsoever in nominating my friend and colleague, Caitríona Ruane the Member for South Down. She is one of our most experienced MLAs, a former Minister and a Chief Whip, who clearly demonstrated the ability to work with Members from other parties in a very positive and constructive way. It was heart-warming to see, during her stewardship of that position, the way in which she and others interacted, and genuine friendships, I think, were forged.

Gender is a very important issue for my party, Sinn Féin.

It is also a very important issue for all the parties here given that we have seen increased numbers coming into the Assembly as a result of the election. I pay tribute to the work that Caitríona has done and to the women from other parties who worked with her to ensure that we continue to forge positive working relationships and, indeed, friendships, which I believe are very important. I have no hesitation whatsoever in nominating Caitríona for this important post.

Mr Nesbitt: I begin by congratulating you, Mr Speaker, on your elevation and wish you well during the course of the mandate. I am delighted to nominate the MLA from Newry and Armagh Mr Danny Kennedy. Before I do so, I pay tribute to Roy Beggs who performed the role in the previous mandate. Roy brought professionalism and attention to detail to the role from which I think we all benefited. He was quite fearless in the face of some heated debates; he demonstrated that fearlessness in a quite impartial manner — indeed, I think I was on the losing side of some of his rulings during the course of the mandate.

Those returning from the last mandate will recall that Mr Kennedy, I think, shouted “order” from a sedentary position more often than the Speaker did from the Speaker’s Chair, so it will perhaps be a relief if we move him up to the far end of the Chamber and make him legal. As we are talking about veterans, Danny is a veteran of the Northern Ireland Assembly. He is a very popular man, a committed politician, and I believe that he will bring a unique and refreshing style to the role. Order.

Mr Eastwood: I begin by congratulating you, Mr Speaker, on your elevation. I know that you will carry out your role with fairness and impartiality as you have done in your previous roles. I also thank and congratulate Mr Mitchel McLaughlin for all the effort he put in. He was a fair, impartial and, at times, tough-when-needed Speaker and he deserves our thanks for that. I give praise to all the previous Deputy Speakers, and Mr John Dallat in particular who is no longer in the Assembly. He is somebody that we in the party will miss very much, and I think that the people of East Derry will miss him as a public representative too.

I am very happy to propose somebody today who was first elected to the House in 2003; someone who is a previous general secretary of the SDLP; a Gaeilgeoir; a champion of rural issues, and somebody who, in his position as Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, showed a great wisdom and fairness and an ability to get to the point. We are very glad to propose Mr Patsy McGlone for the position of Deputy Chair — sorry, Deputy Speaker.

Question put, That Ms Caitríona Ruane be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Allister: No.

Mr Speaker: Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put in three minutes.

Order. Members will resume their seats.

Question put, That Ms Caitríona Ruane be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Allister: No.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Do we have Tellers?

Order. As only one Teller has been nominated for the Noes, the Ayes have it. *[Laughter.]*

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Ms Caitríona Ruane be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Question, That Mr Patsy McGlone be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Patsy McGlone be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Question, That Mr Danny Kennedy be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Danny Kennedy be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: As three Deputy Speakers have been elected, the item of business is concluded. I offer my congratulations to the successful candidates, and I look forward to working with all the Deputy Speakers. As the requirements under Standing Order 5(1) have been fulfilled, it is now appropriate to move on to the election of a Principal Deputy Speaker.

Election of the Principal Deputy Speaker

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the nomination of a Deputy Speaker to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. The process will be conducted in accordance with Standing Order 5A. I will begin by asking for a nomination. Any Member may rise to nominate one of the Deputy Speakers to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. I will then confirm that the person nominated is willing to act as Principal Deputy Speaker, and then a debate relevant to that nomination will take place. The Business Committee has agreed that only one Member should speak on behalf of each party in the debate. At the end of the debate, I will put the Question on the nomination. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I shall ask for a further nomination, and the process will be repeated.

Do I have a proposal for a Deputy Speaker to be nominated to act as Principal Deputy Speaker? Members should rise to make the proposal.

Mr McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to nominate the Deputy Speaker Caitríona Ruane, Member for South Down, as Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a seconder?

Ms J McCann: Mr Speaker, I second that nomination.

Mr Speaker: Deputy Speaker Ruane, do you agree to act as Principal Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ruane): Glacaim leis. I do accept.

Mr Speaker: Standing Orders provide for a debate to take place on the nomination. Members may speak only once in the debate. Standing Order 5A(7) requires the debate to be relevant to the nomination. I will not allow Members to stray into any other area. Members will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mr McGuinness: I have no hesitation whatsoever. I am absolutely delighted to propose Caitríona Ruane, my friend and Member for South Down, as the new Principal Deputy Speaker. Further to my comments earlier regarding her vast experience in the House, her experience as a Minister, her work as a Chief Whip and her work with colleagues in the Assembly across the board, she is eminently suited for this position. She is a very strong advocate for women. I think that we all look forward to you having a great term as Speaker — we wish you every success in the future — but we look forward, in the next term of the Assembly, for the first time in the House since Eileen Bell, to having a woman Speaker.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, thank you very much. Just to make it clear, we will not be supporting this nomination as the Ulster Unionist Party intends to propose Mr Danny Kennedy as Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Do you have a seconder?

Mrs Dobson: Yes, I am happy to second that.

Mr Eastwood: Just to make it clear, we were very happy to vote for and support Ms Ruane's nomination to be Deputy Speaker. Unfortunately, though, we cannot support her nomination as Principal Deputy Speaker, nor can we propose anyone for that position. We do not believe the position has any point. It is a pointless position that is more about carving out positions than actually making this place

work more efficiently and effectively. Therefore, we cannot support the proposal.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to put on record our compliments to the outgoing Speaker, Mitchel McLaughlin, and wish you well in the role that you have taken on this afternoon. I certainly agree with Colum Eastwood: there has proven to be little value in having, formally, a Principal Deputy Speaker. I think that it would be a sign of maturity in the Assembly if we were to move away from the presumption that the two largest parties occupy the posts of Speaker and Principal Deputy Speaker all of the time. That said, I welcome you to your role. While we have established that we no longer have to have a Speaker from Foyle, we have at least returned to having a Speaker from East Belfast. I recall that that set us off in good terms in 1998.

Mr Allister: Mr Speaker, first of all, I congratulate you on your election. I trust that it means that the national anthem will be restored to its proper place within the remembrance event and that my staff member can cancel his singing lessons.

The position of Principal Deputy Speaker is a fictional post. It has no powers above that of Deputy Speaker. It was created, of course in 2011, as a sop to those with a penchant for titles. Those who, in a previous life, enjoyed various commanding titles felt the need to be appointed as Principal Deputy Speaker even though it is a post without substance. Of course, we had the deputy First Minister once rejoicing in the title of Steward and Bailiff of the Manor of Northstead and more infamous and commanding titles besides. This is an office created as part of the demonstration of the trappings of office and control freakery of Sinn Féin and the DUP. The person proposed for it has to be the most unsuitable person; a totally divisive figure in this House, a disaster when she was Education Minister and someone who continues to bring division to everyone and everything she touches. She is someone whose own claim to fame is probably most infamously that of matron of the Colombia three. To suggest that such a person should be elevated to the post of Principal Deputy Speaker is an insult to the many victims of the IRA, an organisation whose volunteers she still defends to this day.

It will be interesting to see in the House whether those who spent the last six weeks telling us that they were in the business of stopping Sinn Féin will in fact, today, be the facilitators of Sinn Féin to this high office of Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that cross-community support is required.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 66; Noes 27.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Other

Mr Lunn.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr Kelly.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr McKee, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

Other

Mr Agnew, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Hussey.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>[71.0%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>[67.3%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>[10.0%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Ms Caitríona Ruane be Principal Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I offer my congratulations to the Principal Deputy Speaker, Caitríona Ruane. That concludes this item of business.

Appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the appointment of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I will conduct the process of filling the offices in accordance with the procedures set out in section 16A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44(1).

I will begin by asking the nominating officer of the largest political party of the largest political designation to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the First Minister. I will then ask the nominating officer of the largest political party of the second largest political designation to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the deputy First Minister.

As the persons nominated to fill the vacancies shall not take up office until each of them has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, when I have received both nominations, I will ask each of the persons nominated to accept the nomination and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office.

Before we proceed, Members may find it helpful if the Pledge of Office is read into the record:

To pledge:

(a) to discharge in good faith all the duties of office;

(b) commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means;

(c) to serve all the people of Northern Ireland equally, and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination;

(ca) to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future;

(cb) to participate fully in the Executive Committee, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council;

(cc) to observe the joint nature of the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister;

(cd) to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement;

(ce) to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it;

(cf) to work collectively with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve a society free of paramilitarism;

(cg) to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality;

(ch) to call for, and to work together with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve, the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures;

(ci) to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;

(cj) to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism;

(ck) to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment;

Paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement states:

"We believe that the essential elements of support for law and order include endorsing fully the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system, actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas and actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions, including the Policing Board."

Members, the Pledge of Office has now been read into the record of proceedings, and I will proceed with the nomination process.

I have received notification from the nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party advising me that Lord Morrow will serve as nominating officer for the party today. I call Lord Morrow to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the First Minister.

Lord Morrow: It is with profound pleasure that I nominate my party leader and constituency colleague, Arlene Foster, for this position.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Mrs Foster, are you willing to take up the office of First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs Foster: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter from the nominating officer of Sinn Féin advising me that Jennifer McCann will serve as nominating officer for the party for this item of business. I call Ms McCann to nominate a Member of the Assembly to be the deputy First Minister.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. It is a great honour and privilege for me to be asked to make our party's nomination, and I am very honoured to nominate my long-time friend and colleague Mr Martin McGuinness to be deputy First Minister.

Mr Speaker: Mr McGuinness, are you willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr McGuinness: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of deputy First Minister, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: There will be an opportunity for speeches. I will begin by calling the First Minister and then the deputy First Minister to address the House.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): I am deeply humbled to have affirmed the Pledge of Office and to return to

Stormont as Northern Ireland's First Minister. When I became First Minister back in January, I said that I could think of no greater honour than to serve my country and the people of Northern Ireland, and, today, that sense of honour is magnified as I look back at the huge vote of confidence placed in me and my party by the electorate.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): The media made much of the election campaign being a personal campaign. I do not often say it, but, in some respects, they were right. It was personal. I take the role of First Minister extremely personally. I feel an enormous sense of responsibility, not just to the people who voted for me and my party colleagues but to everyone who lives here. I am determined to keep Northern Ireland moving forward and to make it a safer, peaceful and more prosperous place.

I want everyone who lives here to be proud of this vibrant, beautiful part of the world. That positive ethos will be at the cornerstone of everything I do over the next five years.

3.00 pm

The election was fought and won on the basis of my five-point plan and I believe it forms the foundation for a Northern Ireland that can continue to take centre stage for all the right reasons. We have come so far, but, with determination and a can-do approach, we have the potential to achieve so much more.

When I sat down with my 37 newly elected party colleagues on Monday, I told them that I wanted this to be a mandate of delivery. I want to get things done for the people of Northern Ireland. We all have a job of work to do and the voters have entrusted us to build on our vision for the future. I will work with other parties to get the best results for Northern Ireland. I believe that we can agree a Programme for Government over the coming days that will keep us on a winning footing.

The past five months have been the most demanding and the most rewarding of my life. When I was asked by the media if I was relieved that the electorate had once again voted to make the DUP Northern Ireland's largest party, I said I was elated. I was elated, and I still am. I feel incredibly proud to be Northern Ireland's First Minister. I have said it many times since January but it is worth repeating: growing up as a young girl in rural Fermanagh who wanted to make a difference, who wanted to make Northern Ireland a better place, I could never have dared imagine that one day I would be chosen by the people of Northern Ireland to be their First Minister. So, I want to thank everyone who has helped me on this wonderful journey, personally, professionally and politically. I am immensely grateful to each and every one of you.

Public duty is not always easy, but the worthwhile things in life never are. There may be hurdles and difficulties along the way, but we stand, I believe, on the cusp of a new and exciting era for Northern Ireland. We have a Fresh Start, we have a new mandate, and we must — and I am determined that we will — capitalise on every opportunity to build on the strong economic foundations to underpin the future stability of Northern Ireland.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): First of all, heartiest congratulations to every one of the Members

of the House who have been returned as a result of the recent election. I want to congratulate you on your appointment as the new Speaker. The widespread support in the Assembly for your appointment is, I think, testimony to the belief in the House that you will follow in the footsteps of William Hay and Mitchel McLaughlin and be a Speaker that we can be proud of.

I want to thank Jennifer, my friend and colleague, for the nomination. I want to thank my party. I pay tribute to the 27 other members of my party who were elected in the election and thank, wholeheartedly, everyone in the constituencies who voted for Sinn Féin.

I want to congratulate Arlene on her appointment as First Minister. She and I, and our ministerial colleagues when they are appointed, will have a huge responsibility to move forward to continue to deliver on the Fresh Start Agreement, which is now over six months old. It has been a good start, but there is more work to be done, not least putting the final piece of the jigsaw in place in relation to victims and how we deal with the past. I earnestly hope, in the aftermath of putting together the Programme for Government and appointing Ministers, that a way forward can be found to meet the needs of victims — all victims — in our discussions with the Secretary of State.

There was a lot of talk during the course of the election about colours, and who was what colour and who was not — orange and green, and red, white and blue. I am a very proud, unapologetic Irish republican and my politics are green, white and orange because I do believe in bringing the green and the orange together, with the white of peace in the middle. I do think that that is absolutely achievable at some stage in the future. I absolutely respect those people on the other side of the House who are red, white and blue. The challenge for us, and the challenge for Arlene and me and for other Ministers, is for us to continue with the good start and to recognise the importance of working together, building new relationships, putting the past three years into the dustbin of history and moving on to deliver for the people whom we represent.

I want to live in a society that is diverse — our society is diverse — and I want that to be an inclusive society. I want us to stand up for those who are discriminated against. I want us to stand up for the marginalised, for the poor and for those who feel that they are not being treated fairly. I want to stand up alongside ministerial colleagues to deliver on tackling social deprivation and providing much-needed employment for the people whom we represent.

All of that represents a huge challenge to us, because one of the great difficulties that we faced, particularly during the last term of the Assembly, was the austerity agenda being imposed on us by a Conservative Government in London — a Government that cut billions out of our block grant. Of course, during the last term of the Assembly, opportunities were taken by opportunistic politicians to blame the Executive and the Assembly for that. It was a very dishonest approach, in my opinion, because nowhere did I hear in the criticisms of the Executive any criticism of the economic policies being pursued by a Conservative Administration in London which were detrimentally affecting our ability as elected politicians here to deliver for all of our people, whether they live in east Belfast, west Belfast, the Bogside or Portadown.

This is an opportunity for all of us to move forward. Ideologically, we are different from the unionists. There is nothing wrong with that; everybody is entitled to their position. Allegiance-wise, we are completely different, but I come from that school of thought that fervently believes that we have the ability to work together. Not only can we build working relationships, but we can build friendships that will last until the day we die. I did it with Ian Paisley, and Ian Paisley did it with me. Queen Elizabeth and I had all sorts of reasons not to meet each other, but we rose above it in the interests of trying to show people that reconciliation was achievable. We need reconciliation in our society, so let us all go forward together. We are all human beings, and we all represent people. People out there depend on us, and we have a duty and a responsibility to live up to their expectations.

As my final comment, I pledge today to work with our unionist colleagues in a positive, responsible and constructive spirit to build a better future for everyone.

Mr Speaker: There will now be an opportunity for others to speak. Members should limit their remarks to not more than three minutes. I have the names of some Members who have already indicated that they wish to speak. I ask all Members who would like to contribute to the debate to rise in their places, and I will endeavour to accommodate as many as possible. The briefer you are, the more opportunity there will be for others.

Mr Nesbitt: I begin by congratulating the other 107 successful candidates who are gathered here today as Members of the Legislative Assembly. I also commiserate with the unsuccessful candidates. I know the feeling of not finding favour with the electorate, and it is not a feeling or an experience that I would choose to repeat.

My congratulations go to Mrs Foster and to Mr McGuinness. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I wish them well in their onerous leadership positions for these devolved institutions. I think that it is noteworthy, if not a cause for concern, that none of the five big parties grew in numbers in the election. Two shed a couple of seats each, and the other three of us just managed to maintain the status quo, but this is not the time to rerun the election and its themes. Instead, I repeat my good wishes to Mrs Foster and to Mr McGuinness. Like any Executive Minister or any other Member of this legislative Assembly, they will have my support and the support of the Ulster Unionist Party when the time is right.

Where they will not have our support is at the Executive table, because the Ulster Unionist MLA group has decided unanimously to form the first official opposition of the Northern Ireland Assembly. *[Interruption.]* This is a big and bold move to bring a better and more normal democracy to the people of Northern Ireland. Let battle commence.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Colum Eastwood.

Mr Eastwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker — *[Interruption.]* No announcement is coming, just so you know.

I first of all offer my sincere congratulations to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. The people have spoken, and we are very glad to support your nominations. It is a very difficult job; you both know that. You will have our support when you deserve it. I think we have some work to do before any of us should be

making announcements about whether we are going into government. We fought the election on the basis that we would negotiate hard, work hard and put forward proposals for the Programme for Government. We continue to do that, and we will see where that goes. We want to see a Programme for Government that we can sign up to. If we cannot do that, we will be in opposition; if we can, we will be in government. We want that Programme for Government to look after the people and the areas that have been left behind and to begin to make this place about delivery.

This time five years ago Peter Robinson said:

“Four or five years from now, we will not be judged on the size of our first preference votes but on what we have done to make life better for the people whom we represent. We will be judged on delivery.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 64, p11, col 1].

I do not often quote Peter Robinson, Mr Speaker, but I think, on that particular occasion, he was speaking sense. I do not think that anybody out there will say that we have delivered what we could. In this mandate, whether we are in government or opposition, we will work constructively to ensure that we can deliver as much as we possibly can for all those people who so dearly need our help.

Mr Ford: I add my congratulations to Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness. It is clear that their parties have been given a mandate to lead the Government. The challenge now is to turn it into delivery and not just some of the promises which we saw.

I congratulate Mike Nesbitt on the sound bite of the day, but some of us believe that government is a bit more substantial than the sound bite of the day. I congratulate Colum Eastwood on the quote of the day, because the sad reality is that the Executive and the Assembly, over the last five years, did not deliver all that was promised when we stood here five years ago. There is much that remains to be done. That is a challenge for those who have been given office today and for others who will join them, and it is a challenge for the Assembly to hold the Executive to account. Despite the number of votes that were given, there is absolutely no doubt that they were given by only 55% of our people, and there is a very substantial body that does not believe that the Assembly has delivered in the 18 years that we have had.

I say to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that if they are going to take action on those key issues, they will get the support of the Alliance Party for the work that they are doing in the right direction. If they do not, they will be challenged by us because there is a need to ensure that delivery is achieved in key issues, in particular the need to deal with the threat of violence on our streets that still exists, and of which we have been so sadly reminded in recent days, and the need to move to a united community so that those divisions will be overcome and that violence will be ended. That is what, unfortunately, we have so far failed to do in 18 years. That is the challenge that needs to be addressed, and it is up to those who have just assumed office to lead that challenge and up to the rest of us to ensure that that carries through.

Lord Morrow: Mr Speaker, before I say anything more, I congratulate you on your elevation to the position of Speaker. I certainly have confidence that you will do an

excellent job, as you did when you were Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish you well and hope that I and everyone around the Chamber will give the support that you deserve.

I congratulate my party colleague Arlene Foster on her position as First Minister. This is an historic day for Northern Ireland. I am sure it has not gone unnoticed that during the election campaign, and when the results were announced, Arlene Foster secured the largest personal vote of any MLA in the Chamber today. I do not think that anybody has missed that point; I certainly did not anyway. *[Laughter.]*

3.15 pm

As a constituency colleague of hers and one who fought the election along with her, I know the energy that this woman brings to anything. You can take my word for it: she is full of energy. I want to wish her well in the weeks, months and years that lie ahead. I have no doubt that Arlene Foster will bring much good to Northern Ireland. Whether it is in Northern Ireland or outside Northern Ireland, she will be a great ambassador for this part of the United Kingdom, and I want to wish her every success.

In relation to Mr Nesbitt's announcement, it is obvious that he has lost the battle within his own party and we have had the outfall of it here today. During the election campaign, there was no strategy from him at all. He was neither in nor out, and now, because he has now tested his own party, they have said, "Mike, it is time to get out." I suspect that the next call will be, "Time, Mike, for you to go."

Ms J McCann: I will start off on behalf of myself and our party by congratulating Arlene on her reappointment as First Minister.

It was a great honour and privilege to be asked to nominate Martin for the post of deputy First Minister. Everyone knows that he is a committed and tireless worker, and everyone has seen the great leadership that he has shown, not just in these institutions but to people outside them, right around the world. His style of leadership is highly respected, and he does not ask anyone to do anything that he would not do himself. He has never been afraid to challenge those who have tried to destroy the peace process or disrupt the political institutions and the political process that we have made such progress on.

He puts the hand of friendship out to anyone; that is the sense of the person that you have. Having worked with him in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I, as junior Minister, and my other ministerial colleagues have seen the great personal sacrifice that he has given to the role and the tireless energy that he has all the time. He is always there; he is the one who is always out front, and he is the one who is always doing most of the difficult lifting for the rest of us. He has earned the respect of people right across the political divide, and he has set a really high bar for leadership. I know that we can go into this new mandate with a true leader at our side who will work with anyone and who is genuine about partnership working and power sharing. His style of leadership gives us a lot of determination and commitment ourselves to take the progress that we have made and make further progress.

Mr Allister: Anyone looking at the Order Paper today and seeing the item

"Appointment of First Minister and deputy First Minister"

might be forgiven for thinking there would have to be a vote on such a matter, as there was yesterday in the Welsh Assembly on the appointment of the First Minister. Any new Member of this House who came expecting to be allowed to vote on this issue, well, welcome to Stormont.

Of course, the reason there is not a vote is that the rules were changed to save the blushes of the DUP, which, for the past six weeks, has spent the time with the deceptive message that it was in the business of stopping Sinn Féin. Then, today, when it comes to the appointment to the equal office of First and deputy First Minister, to save its blushes from walking through the Lobbies to put its partner Martin McGuinness in as equal to that office, the situation is contrived where there is no vote.

Of course, that is to save that embarrassment. Although, I do have to say that it is very difficult now to bring embarrassment to the DUP Benches. Last September, the First Minister told us that Sinn Féin was inextricably linked to the IRA. This week, the Chief Constable told us that nothing has changed: the IRA still exists and still has its structures. As far as Sinn Féin is concerned, nothing has changed: it still denies the reality of the IRA. However, for the DUP, it does not matter; office matters more than any of that. The lure of office overcomes any principle and any talk about inextricable linkage. In the words of the First Minister, she is now partnering a party in government that is inextricably linked to the IRA, which the Chief Constable says still exists. That says it all for me. Lest there is any doubt, my position will continue to be one of opposition to the dysfunctional Government.

Mr E McCann: I rise only to comment on one of the deputy First Minister's remarks. He referred to opportunist politicians or political parties that concentrate their fire on the Executive in relation to austerity and let the British Government off the hook. As he accurately remarked, the British Government are the original source of the austerity measures. The deputy First Minister did not make it absolutely clear to whom he was referring. Lest there be any possibility whatsoever that he included People Before Profit in his strictures on people not attacking the British Government strongly enough, we deny and refute that absolutely. We question whether there is any political party represented in the Assembly that has more vigorously and consistently, in association with our comrades and brothers and sisters across the water, fought so hard and directly against the austerity measures emanating from Westminster. Our criticism of the Executive was not to put all the blame on them but to draw attention to the fact that they were not fighting hard enough against the Tories. That was our criticism.

We are faced with a situation in which the Tory party across the water has more austerity in mind.

Mr Speaker: Mr McCann —

Mr E McCann: The Tory party is in disarray —

Mr Speaker: Mr McCann —

Mr E McCann: The Tory party is in disarray. After the vote, whichever way it goes —

Mr Speaker: Mr McCann —

Mr E McCann: — on 23 June, it will be toast; it will be completely dysfunctional. *[Interruption.]* This is the time to put pressure on the Tories. This is no time to hide behind constitutionality and the position of the Executive. If you are against austerity, fight against austerity.

Mr Speaker: I simply wanted to point out to you, Mr McCann, that, since you had strayed from the microphone, Hansard was not able to pick up what you were saying. *[Laughter.]*

Mr E McCann: Do you want me to say it all again? Do you want me to say it again?

Some Members: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr E McCann: I am quite happy to.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Steven Agnew.

Some Members: Follow that.

Mr Agnew: I will not even try to follow that, thank you. Mr Speaker, this is my first opportunity to welcome you to your new position and congratulate your new deputies also. I congratulate the incoming First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is clear — we have seen it already today — that we have an emboldened opposition corner. We will provide an effective challenge to those who choose to take up seats in the Executive.

Throughout the election campaign, I said that the Green Party wants to see delivery for the people of Northern Ireland. If that comes from the Executive, we will welcome it, but, if it does not come, we will lead the way in bringing forward the change that Northern Ireland needs. Just today, there was a queue outside the Bill Office door to see who could be the first to bring forward legislation for marriage equality. I brought forward that first motion in the last Assembly at a time when other parties did not want to speak about it. Now parties are literally crawling over each other trying to be first to get to the door to bring forward that legislation. That is the effect that an opposition can have. Regardless of whether it is a formal opposition or an informal opposition, as we have had in this corner, that is the role that my party plans to operate. It is a constructive opposition. It is an opposition seeking change, but it is about delivery for the people of Northern Ireland. It is not opposition for opposition's sake or opposition without positive proposals for change. That is what we have seen from the Green Party and now, with my colleague Clare Bailey, that is what we can expect even more of.

Ms Sugden: It is my pleasure to stand here as the only independent MLA in Northern Ireland. I think my success demonstrates that people are getting sick of the old party system, and I think today might actually demonstrate a sea change in politics in Northern Ireland. We have our first female Principal Deputy Speaker, and, whilst I voted against it on the principle of the institutions and a carve-up between the two main parties, I think it is a good thing for women in politics. We will move forward into the next five years with a female First Minister, and I am pleased to say that.

I want to comment on opposition and say "Fair play" to the Ulster Unionist Party. Things are changing, and I think Northern Ireland is about to move forward. This election, for me, marks Northern Ireland really moving on to the issues that matter to people on the ground, and I look

forward to the next five years. Congratulations to all those MLAs elected to the Assembly, and I look forward to working with every single one of you. Thank you.

Committee Business

Business Committee: Membership

Resolved:

That the following shall be appointed to be members of the Business Committee:

The Speaker (ex officio);

Mr A Attwood;

Mr T Clarke;

Mr S Dickson;

Mr G Kelly;

Mr C McGrath;

Mrs S Overend;

Ms C Ruane;

Mr R Swann; and

Mr P Weir — [Mr Speaker.]

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the Adjournment, I advise the House that the Northern Ireland Act 1998, recently amended to the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016, requires the offices of the Ministers to be appointed within 14 days from today. When the parties have indicated that they are ready for that to take place, the Business Committee will meet to consider an Order Paper for the next meeting.

Adjourned at 3.28 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 25 May 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

**Water and Sewerage Services Bill:
Royal Assent**

**Special Educational Needs and
Disability Bill: Royal Assent**

Budget Bill: Royal Assent

**Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill:
Royal Assent**

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that 22 Bills received Royal Assent. The Water and Sewerage Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 became law on 23 March 2016.

Private Members' Business

**Assembly and Executive Reform
(Assembly Opposition) Bill: Royal Assent**

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 became law on 23 March 2016.

Executive Committee Business

Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill: Royal Assent

Environmental Better Regulation Bill: Royal Assent

Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Environmental Better Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 became law on 11 April 2016.

Employment Bill: Royal Assent

Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 became law on 22 April 2016.

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mental Capacity Bill: Royal Assent

Rural Needs Bill: Royal Assent

Shared Education Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the Assembly that the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 became law on 9 May 2016.

Justice (No. 2) Bill: Royal Assent

Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill: Royal Assent

Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill: Royal Assent

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Royal Assent

Fisheries Bill: Royal Assent

Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 became law on 12 May 2016.

Private Members' Business

Licensing Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Licensing Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 became law on 12 May 2016.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Carál Ní Chuilín and Mr Declan McAleer replace Ms Caitríona Ruane and Mr Gerry Kelly as members of the Business Committee. — [Ms Ruane.]

Minister of Justice

Mr Speaker: I will conduct the process for filling the office of Minister of Justice in accordance with the procedures set out in Part 1A of schedule 4A to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44A. I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise and nominate another Member to hold the office of Minister of Justice. If Members rise from more than one party, I will call first the Member from the largest of those parties to make a nomination, which is the convention for other items of business.

The Act requires that one nomination must be processed before a further nomination can be made. I will, therefore, take only one nomination at a time and put the Question on that nomination. If the Assembly resolves by parallel consent that the Member nominated shall be Minister of Justice and that person takes up office as required by the Act and Standing Orders, no further nominations may be made. I will call for further nominations only if those conditions are not fulfilled.

The Business Committee agreed that a Member making a nomination may speak for up to three minutes, following which there will be an opportunity for debate on the nomination, with Members also having an opportunity to speak for up to three minutes.

As the person nominated to fill the vacancy shall not take up office until he or she has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, after the Question has been determined, I will ask the person nominated to affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office.

Before we proceed, Members may find it useful if the Pledge of Office is read into the record:

"To pledge:

(a) to discharge in good faith all the duties of office;

(b) commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means;

(c) to serve all the people of Northern Ireland equally, and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination;

(ca) to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future;

(cb) to participate fully in the Executive Committee, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council;

(cc) to observe the joint nature of the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister;

(cd) to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement;

(ce) to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it;

(cf) to work collectively with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve a society free of paramilitarism;

(cg) to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality;

(ch) to call for, and to work together with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve, the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures;

(ci) to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;

(cj) to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism;

(ck) to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment.

Paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement says: We believe that the essential elements of support for law and order include endorsing fully the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system, actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas and actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions, including the Policing Board."

Mr Speaker: I will now proceed with the nomination process. Do I have a nomination for a Member to hold the office of Minister of Justice?

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to nominate — it gives me great pleasure to do so — Claire Sugden as our new Minister of Justice.

Many in the House will know that, over the last number of weeks, the First Minister and I have been charged with the responsibility of putting an Executive together. We made clear from the very outset our determination to do so. There was a lot of discussion in that process about who would be Minister of Justice, and it is no secret that the First Minister and I offered the position to the Alliance Party. Sadly, the Alliance Party turned that offer down. Our thoughts then turned to who would be Minister of Justice. We recognised that, unless we had a Minister of Justice, we would not be able to put a Government together and, in all probability, an election would follow. There ensued other discussions between the First Minister and me with a view to finding a Justice Minister and a candidate for the position whom we had confidence in to take on what is a very onerous and challenging responsibility.

Claire came into the House, as we all know, after the sad occurrence of the death of David McClarty. She has been in the House for several years, and we have been very impressed by her performance. We had that conversation with her initially and a number of conversations since, and she has expressed herself very determined to do the job in order to ensure that our society continues to move forward and to assist us in putting a Government together. She can be assured of the First Minister's and my full support. I have no doubt whatsoever that she will enjoy the full support of all our ministerial colleagues appointed in this sitting of the Assembly. She is a very progressive young

woman and is obviously highly political. She certainly enjoyed the support of her constituents in the Assembly election. We have every confidence in her ability to do the job, and it gives me great pleasure to nominate her as our new Minister of Justice.

Mr Speaker: Claire Sugden has been nominated. Claire Sugden, do you accept the nomination?

Ms Sugden: I accept.

Mr Speaker: The nomination is now open for debate. I remind Members that they may speak for up to three minutes.

Mr Hamilton: This is my first opportunity to congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your appointment as Speaker of the House.

It is a great pleasure to speak in support of the nomination made by the deputy First Minister of Claire Sugden to be our new Minister of Justice on what is, for many reasons, a historic day in the political history of Northern Ireland. Claire's appointment as Justice Minister will symbolise the new generation of leadership that is emerging not just in the Assembly and the Executive but right across Northern Ireland.

As the deputy First Minister said, Claire has proven herself in this place since replacing David McClarty as a Member for East Londonderry. Many inside and outside the Chamber have been very impressed by her contributions to debates and the proceedings of the House. She has at all times been thoughtful, measured and constructive. I think that we have all seen that she possesses the skills and abilities to be a very good Minister. Of course, she has — no mean feat for an independent Member — proven herself to the electorate of East Londonderry with what was a tremendous result in the recent Assembly election.

Claire is, like me, the child of a prison officer. I know that that personal experience, as well as her undoubted capabilities, will stand her in good stead and make her an excellent Justice Minister serving all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: Let us start with a quiz question, shall we? The clue is that the Member is in the House:

"This house of cards is falling, and good will come of that only if the jokers at the top come crashing down too and do not get up again." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 107, p93, col 2].

I will let that one float.

12.15 pm

First Minister McGuinness prides himself on being the custodian of the Good Friday Agreement. He will single-handedly defend the values and principles of 1998 against the whole world. What is more important as a building block than d'Hondt, the mechanism that ensures that, unless you have the seats here in the Chamber, you do not get the seats down the hill around the Executive table? D'Hondt is the basis of this cross-community devolved set of administrative set-ups.

After 2010, what happened in 2011? With 16 seats, the Ulster Unionist Party got one seat at the Executive table, and the SDLP, with 14, got one, but Alliance, with eight, got two. What a corruption of 1998, but that is nothing compared with what is happening today, because with just one seat in the Chamber, never mind d'Hondt, you

get a seat at the Executive table. Is it any wonder the Ulster Unionist Party opposed the devolution of policing and justice in 2010? What happened to the snowmen of the DUP and "Not in my lifetime; not in the lifetime of this institution"?

Mr Storey: The Member says "snowmen". He has a short memory.

Mr Nesbitt: I would give way to the Member. The Member obviously wants to speak. The Member clearly wants to speak from a sedentary position.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to address all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Nesbitt: I certainly shall, Mr Speaker, and I hope I get the opportunity.

We are not in favour of this, because it is a corruption of the Good Friday Agreement. The person who said:

"This house of cards is falling, and good will come of that only if the jokers at the top come crashing down too and do not get up again." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 107, p93, col 2].

is our new Justice Minister, who is propping them up again. I remind the DUP of this, which was said by the same person in October 2015:

"one side of the House, the largest political party has decided that its dirty, inconsistent mess is more important than moving Northern Ireland forward." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 108, p110, col 2].

Sounds like a great choice.

Mr Eastwood: I will begin, on a personal basis, by wishing Claire Sugden well. In the same vein, I congratulate David Ford on a job well done. It is clear, though, that we are in absolutely no position to support a nomination for somebody when we have corrupted the process. We corrupted it once before, and we are doing it again now. Our strong view is that the position of Justice Minister should be allocated by d'Hondt. What is even more disturbing is that, even though we have had some evolution in our politics this last few weeks, the opportunity to evolve our politics even further today has been missed. It is very clear to our electorate that this is a position for which no nationalist need apply.

Mr Ford: It is clear from the announcement that has already been made in the Great Hall that Claire Sugden is to be the Minister of Justice, and, like Colum Eastwood, I personally wish her well. The deputy First Minister referred to the fact that the post was first offered to Alliance. It is no secret that we put forward five proposals that we believe would have made this place function better and delivered better for the people of Northern Ireland and that those proposals were rejected by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

As is their right, they have sought to look elsewhere, and they have now asked Claire Sugden to carry out the job. That is their right, and clearly there are the numbers in the House to carry that. Though I cannot personally support that nomination — it is not because I have a fixation with the d'Hondt system, which I do not — I certainly wish Claire well in the task that clearly lies ahead of her. She has, as the deputy First Minister said, onerous

responsibilities to carry out. I am certainly well aware of the major issues that are faced by the Department of Justice, the massive issues that confront that Department over budget, Programme for Government, the specific issues for justice and the ongoing issue of reforms that have been put in place over the last few years and that need to be continued.

The fact that the new Minister has, at least, a lack of public preconditions gives me some concern as to how that will be carried through. Indeed, as in the words of Harold Macmillan some years ago, there is no doubt that, like Health and unlike most other Departments, Justice has “events” to face. There will be significant — very significant — challenges ahead.

I know from my background that I am handing over a Department that has made a positive contribution over the last six years, which has seen Justice fully embedded into the devolved sphere and participating, with other Departments, in a joined-up — to some extent — government, but there is much that lies ahead that needs to be done, and there are very significant challenges. What we have achieved was based on the proposals that Alliance put forward before we accepted the job in 2010. That work must continue. From the point of my colleagues, we will judge the new Minister not on her age or her gender; we will judge her on how far that reform programme continues.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish Claire Sugden very well and every great success in the role. On a personal level, we have worked together in what was formerly known as the “naughty corner”, and I know that she is very capable of doing the job. That said, there has been an opportunity wasted to take another step in normalising politics in Northern Ireland. I question why, in 2016, we are still treating Justice differently and maintaining a provision that says, “We have to keep them-uns out.” We have heard from the First Minister, who said that there could not be a Sinn Féin Justice Minister, although there can be a Sinn Féin Health or Education Minister. We will see how those Ministries are divvied out today. We still treat Justice differently, and that sends a signal that we are not ready to move on. That is a shame.

It is no secret that my party had discussions with the First and deputy First Ministers in relation to the Justice post. We were very clear that we would serve in Government only if we felt that we could progress our agenda and achieve more in Government than out of Government. The reality was that our agenda was very different from that of the DUP and Sinn Féin, which is why I am delighted that Clare Bailey and me will be in opposition and will be here to hold those parties to account. We will do all that we can to progress the Green Party manifesto through our work from these Back-Benches, through private Member’s Bills and through holding the Executive to account.

Mr Allister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Claire Sugden is an able, likeable, affable person; no one could think otherwise, but she has to know, as indeed we all know, that this is a nomination of desperation — the desperation of Sinn Féin and the DUP to extricate themselves from the cul-de-sac of their own construction: when policing and justice were devolved prematurely, when several political lifetimes turned into the several days of the Hillsborough talks, and, in consequence, they had this impasse.

I like Claire Sugden as a person. Indeed, I like some of the things that she has said politically. In one of those thoughtful, measured speeches that Mr Hamilton referred to her making, she famously and accurately described the leaders of the Administration as “jokers”. How right she was. Yet today, for the sake of office, she is willing to become the patsy of the jokers. That says a lot about this position — seduced into office by the jokers. Less than two weeks ago, Ms Sugden boasted in the House that she was an independent. No longer, I am afraid. Today, she has become the placewoman of Marlene. Whether or not she finds making up the numbers on the dark side as fulfilling as she thinks, time alone will tell.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the debate. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind the House that the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that the resolution must be passed by parallel consent.

Question put, That Ms Claire Sugden be the Minister of Justice.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 63; Noes 30.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mrs O’Neill, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCartney and Mr Robinson.

NOES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mrs S Bradley, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Hanna, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Mullan.

Unionist:

Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr McKee, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Other

Mr Agnew, Ms Bailey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Butler and Mr McCrossan.

Total Votes	93	Total Ayes	63	[67.7%]
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	25	[67.6%]
Unionist Votes	54	Unionist Ayes	38	[70.4%]
Other Votes	2	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (by parallel consent):

That Ms Claire Sugden be the Minister of Justice.

Mr Speaker: I now ask Claire Sugden to affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Sugden: I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Claire Sugden appointed Minister of Justice.

Mr Speaker: I can now confirm that Claire Sugden, having affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office, has taken up office as Minister of Justice in accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I offer Claire Sugden my hearty congratulations.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ministerial Appointments

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the appointment of Ministers. I will conduct the process for filling those offices in accordance with the procedure set out in section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44. I will ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in section 18(5), to select an available ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly. If a nominating officer declines to nominate, I will invite the nominating officer of the next political party determined by the formula to nominate a Member to hold ministerial office. When all ministerial offices have been filled, then, in accordance with Standing Order 45A, I will ask any parties that declined to nominate if they choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

I call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: I select the Department for the Economy, and I nominate Simon Hamilton.

Mr Speaker: Will Simon Hamilton confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Hamilton: Mr Speaker, I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for the Economy and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Simon Hamilton appointed Minister for the Economy.

Mr Speaker: Simon Hamilton is now Minister for the Economy. I offer Mr Hamilton my hearty congratulations.

I call on Martin McGuinness, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mr McGuinness: I would like to choose the Department of Finance and appoint Máirtín Ó Muilleoir as our new Minister of Finance.

Mr Speaker: Will Máirtín Ó Muilleoir confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Deimhním, a Cheann Comhairle, go bhfuil mé toilteanach oifig an Aire Airgeadais a ghlacadh, agus dearbhaím téarmaí an ghealltanais oifige a leagtar amach in sceideal 4 de Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Finance and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir appointed Minister of Finance.

Mr Speaker: Máirtín Ó Muilleoir is now Minister of Finance, and I offer him my hearty congratulations.

I call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: I select the Department of Education, and I nominate Peter Weir.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Peter Weir confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Weir: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Education and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Peter Weir appointed Minister of Education.

Mr Speaker: I offer Peter Weir my hearty congratulations.

I call on Mr Mike Nesbitt, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, I am not nominating to the Executive.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

12.45 pm

Mr Speaker: The nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party has declined to nominate a member of his party. I will, therefore, assume that his party is declining all ministerial offices that may arise under the formula, and I will now move on to the next party.

I call on Mr Martin McGuinness, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Department for Infrastructure, and I nominate Chris Hazzard as the Minister for that Department.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Chris Hazzard confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Hazzard: Glacaim le hoifig an Aire Infreastrúctúir. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Infrastructure, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act.

Mr Chris Hazzard appointed Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I heartily congratulate Mr Chris Hazzard on his appointment.

I call on Mrs Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: I select the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and I nominate Michelle McLlveen.

Mr Speaker: Will Michelle McLlveen confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Miss McLlveen: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural

Affairs, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Miss Michelle McLlveen appointed Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: I call on Mr Colum Eastwood, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mr Eastwood: I will not be nominating a Minister to this Executive.

Mr Speaker: The nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party has declined to nominate a member of his party. I will, therefore, assume that his party is declining all ministerial offices that may arise under the formula, and I will now move on to the next party.

I call on Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mrs Foster: I select the Department for Communities, and I nominate Paul Givan.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Givan: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Communities, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Paul Givan appointed Minister for Communities.

Mr Speaker: I offer Mr Paul Givan my hearty congratulations.

I call on Mr Martin McGuinness, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a Member to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Department of Health and nominate Michelle O'Neill as the new Minister of Health.

Mr Speaker: Will Michelle O'Neill confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs O'Neill: Glacaim le hoifig an Aire Sláinte. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Health, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill appointed Minister of Health.

Mr Speaker: Michelle O'Neill is now the Minister of Health, and I offer her my hearty congratulations.

I thank the House for its patience. That concludes the appointment of Ministers under the d'Hondt process. I offer my congratulations to all who have taken up office.

The nominating officers of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party were entitled to nominate a person to hold a ministerial office but

declined to do so. In accordance with Standing Order 45A, I will now ask those parties whether they choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition. Mr Mike Nesbitt, does your party choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition?

Mr Nesbitt: We ask to be recognised as part of the official Opposition and intend to initiate a new era for the Northern Ireland Assembly. We will not take our seat, as you know, at the Executive table. We should take our seat over there, because First Minister McGuinness should sit beside First Minister Foster, as they do so comfortably at Stormont Castle.

Mr Speaker: Mr Colum Eastwood, does your party choose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition?

Mr Eastwood: Yes, we would like to be recognised as a member of the official Opposition. I congratulate all the Ministers who have been appointed. They will have our support when they deserve it, but we will hold them to account when we need to.

Mr Speaker: The Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party will now be recognised as the official Opposition.

Appointment of Junior Ministers

Mr Speaker: I have received correspondence from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the appointment of junior Ministers. The letter states:

"Pursuant to the procedure for the appointment of junior Ministers specified in paragraph 3(1) of the determination made on 8 December 1999, as approved by the Assembly on 14 December 1999, we have appointed Alastair Ross MLA and Megan Fearon MLA as junior Ministers in the Executive Office."

Mr Speaker: Will Alastair Ross affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Ross: I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Alastair Ross appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: Will Megan Fearon affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Ms Fearon: Glacaim le hoifig Aire shóisearaigh sa Choiste Feidhmiúcháin. I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of junior Minister in the Executive Office, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Megan Fearon appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the business of appointing the junior Ministers. I offer to both of them my congratulations as they take up office.

Statutory Committees

Mr Speaker: As this is a business motion, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Orders 46 and 47, this Assembly determines that nine Statutory Committees shall be established, as follows:

the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs;

the Committee for Communities;

the Committee for the Economy;

the Committee for Education;

the Committee for the Executive Office;

the Committee for Finance;

the Committee for Health;

the Committee for Infrastructure; and

the Committee for Justice.

Terms of reference, quorum and composition of the Committees shall be as prescribed in Standing Orders 48 and 49. — [Ms Ní Chuilín.]

Statutory Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons

Mr Speaker: I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in Standing Order 48, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly to be the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

I have received notification from the nominating officer of the Social Democratic and Labour Party advising me that Mr Alex Attwood will serve as nominating officer for the party for the remainder of today's business.

I remind parties of the requirement of Standing Order 48(5) that nominating officers shall prefer Committees in which they do not have a party interest over those in which they do. For the avoidance of doubt, that means I will expect parties to refrain, as far as possible, from selecting Committees that coincide with the ministerial offices held by their party.

I now call on Mrs Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the party that has the highest figure under the formula, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mrs Foster: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I select the Committee for Justice, and I nominate as Chairman Mr Paul Frew.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Frew: I accept, Mr Speaker.

Mr Paul Frew appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mr Speaker: I call on Mr Martin McGuinness to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mr McGuinness: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I select the Committee for the Economy and nominate Conor Murphy as the Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Murphy: Glacaim leis an phost. I am willing to take up office.

Mr Conor Murphy appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Speaker: I call again Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee for Finance, and I nominate for Chairperson Emma Little Pengelly.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Mrs Little Pengelly: I am willing to take up that office.

Mrs Emma Little Pengelly appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr Mike Nesbitt to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a Member to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, I select the Committee for the Executive Office and nominate myself as Chair. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Kennedy: You should think about it.

Mr Nesbitt: How long have I got? *[Laughter.]* Yes, Mr Speaker, I am.

Mr Mike Nesbitt appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Martin McGuinness to select and nominate.

Mr McGuinness: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I select the Committee for Education and nominate Barry McElduff as the Chairperson.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McElduff: A Cheann Comhairle, tá mé sásta glacadh leis an ról. I do accept.

Mr Barry McElduff appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

1.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee for Health, and I nominate Paula Bradley for Chairperson.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms P Bradley: Mr Speaker, I am willing to take up office.

Ms Paula Bradley appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr Alex Attwood to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person of his party to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mr Attwood: Mr Speaker, on behalf of the SDLP, we choose the Committee for Communities, and I am pleased to nominate Mr Colum Eastwood MLA.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Eastwood: I am.

Mr Colum Eastwood appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee for Infrastructure and nominate Mr William Humphrey.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Humphrey: Mr Speaker, I am pleased to take up office as nominated.

Mr William Humphrey appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Martin McGuinness to select and nominate.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and propose Linda Dillon as the Chairperson of that Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms Dillon: I am willing to accept the post.

Ms Linda Dillon appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: I call on Mr David Ford to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person of his party to be its Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Mr Ford: I nominate Chris Lyttle as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Lyttle: Yes, Mr Speaker, I accept.

Mr Chris Lyttle appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Mike Nesbitt to select and nominate.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, I select the Committee for the Economy and appoint Steve Aiken as Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, appoint —

Mr Nesbitt: Steve Aiken.

Mr Speaker: Steve Aiken.

Mr Nesbitt: He is an MLA. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Is Mr Steve Aiken willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Aiken: Yes, I am willing to take up the office to which I have been nominated.

Mr Steve Aiken appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Speaker: I again ask Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, I request a short adjournment to consider matters as allowed under Standing Orders.

Mr Speaker: Can I ask the Member how long she anticipates?

Mrs Foster: Ten minutes.

Mr Speaker: A request has been made for an extension to the time limit, and Standing Order 48(8) requires Assembly approval for such a request.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly approves an extension of the time limit by 10 minutes.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease.

I call again on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee for Justice and name Pam Cameron as Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Mrs Cameron: Yes, Mr Speaker, I am willing to take up office.

Mrs Pam Cameron appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Martin McGuinness to select and nominate.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Committee for Communities and Michelle Gildernew as the Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms Gildernew: Tá. I accept.

Ms Michelle Gildernew appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee for Health and nominate Gary Middleton as Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Middleton: I am willing to accept.

Mr Gary Middleton appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Alex Attwood to select and nominate.

Mr Attwood: On behalf of the SDLP, I select the Committee for Finance and Claire Hanna.

Ms Claire Hanna appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Martin McGuinness to select and nominate.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Committee for the Economy, and the vice Chair will be Alex Maskey. *[Interruption.]* It is what? Is it gone? Apologies. Can I have an adjournment for a few minutes, please?

Mr Speaker: A request has been made for an extension of the time limit: Standing Orders require Assembly approval for such a request. The Question is that the Assembly approve an extension of the time limit by — can I ask Mr McGuinness for a time?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry, five minutes.

Mr Speaker: For five minutes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly approves an extension of the time limit by 5 minutes.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease.

I call again on Mr Martin McGuinness to select and nominate.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and nominate Declan Kearney as Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Kearney: A Cheann Comhairle, tá mé toilteanach an post a ghlacadh. I am willing to accept the position.

Mr Declan Kearney appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee for Infrastructure and nominate William Irwin as the Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Irwin: Yes, Mr Speaker. I accept.

Mr William Irwin appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Mike Nesbitt to select and nominate.

Mr Nesbitt: I select the Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office and nominate Sandra Overend.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Mrs Overend: I am willing.

Mrs Sandra Overend appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes the appointment of the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Statutory Committees. I offer my congratulations to all who have been appointed.

Standing Committees: Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons

Mr Speaker: I am required to supervise the appointment of a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to each Standing Committee other than the Business Committee, in accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 51. I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula in Standing Order 51(2), to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his or her party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson.

Before we commence, I remind parties of the requirement of Standing Order 56(3) that neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior Minister appointed to the Department of Finance.

I call on Mrs Arlene Foster, as nominating officer of the party that has the highest figure under the formula laid down in Standing Orders, to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of her party and a Member of the Assembly to be the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee on Procedures and nominate Gordon Lyons as Chairperson.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Lyons: I am willing to accept.

Mr Gordon Lyons appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Speaker: I call on Mr Martin McGuinness to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mr McGuinness: I select Standards and Privileges and propose Cathal Boylan as Chair of that Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I accept.

Mr Cathal Boylan appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: I again call on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and nominate Christopher Stalford as Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Stalford: I am prepared to take up the office.

Mr Christopher Stalford appointed Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr Mike Nesbitt to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mr Nesbitt: I select the Public Accounts Committee and nominate Robin Swann as Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Swann: I am.

Mr Robin Swann appointed Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: I again call on Mr Martin McGuinness to select and nominate.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Audit Committee and Declan McAleer as its Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McAleer: I am.

Mr Declan McAleer appointed Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: I again call on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Committee on Standards and Privileges and nominate Adrian McQuillan as Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McQuillan: I am.

Mr Adrian McQuillan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr Alex Attwood to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mr Attwood: I choose the Deputy Chair of the Public Accounts Committee and nominate Daniel McCrossan.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McCrossan: I accept.

Mr Daniel McCrossan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: I again call on Mrs Arlene Foster to select and nominate.

Mrs Foster: I select the Deputy Chair of the Committee on Procedures and nominate Edwin Poots.

1.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Poots: I am.

Mr Edwin Poots appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr Martin McGuinness to select and nominate.

Mr McGuinness: I select the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and nominate Ms Michaela Boyle as its Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: The Member is unable to be in the Chamber today, but I have received confirmation from her that she is willing to accept the nomination.

Ms Michaela Boyle appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call on Mr David Ford to select and nominate.

Mr Ford: From the enormous list in front of me, I select the Audit Committee and nominate Trevor Lunn as its Deputy Chair.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Lunn: Yes; thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Trevor Lunn appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Committees.

Adjourned at 1.31 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 31 May 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received the resignation of Mr Declan Kearney as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The nominating officer of Sinn Féin, Mr Martin McGuinness, has nominated Ms Caoimhe Archibald to fill the vacancy, with effect from 27 May 2016.

I have also received the resignation of Mrs Sandra Overend as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office. The nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Mike Nesbitt, has nominated Mr Danny Kennedy to fill the vacancy, with effect from 27 May 2016.

I have also received the resignation of Mr Trevor Lunn as Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee. The nominating officer of the Alliance Party, Mr David Ford, has nominated Ms Kellie Armstrong to fill the vacancy, with effect from 27 May 2016.

Standing Order 20(1)

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 31 May 2016. — [Mr Swann.]

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions on Committee membership, the motion will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Gordon Lyons replace Mr Peter Weir as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr Clarke.]

Assembly Commission

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate. I remind Members that Standing Orders require that such a motion should be approved with cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79, the following shall be appointed to be members of the Assembly Commission:

The Speaker (ex officio);

Mr Jim Wells;

Mr Alex Maskey;

Mr Ross Hussey;

Mr Alex Attwood; and

Mr Stewart Dickson. — [Mr Swann.]

Statutory Committees: Membership

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 49(3), the membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in [NIA 1/16-21] be approved. — [Mr Swann.]

Standing Committees: Membership

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 52(3), the membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in [NIA 2/16-21] be approved. — [Mr Swann.]

Adjourned at 10.37 am.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 6 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1)

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 6 June 2016. — [Mr Clarke.]

Ministerial Statement

Waiting Times

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Health wishes to make a statement on waiting times.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly today on a hugely important matter for the health service: the excessive waiting times for treatment currently experienced by patients across the North. I attach such importance to this matter that it is the first area of my responsibilities that I have chosen to speak to the Assembly about since taking up office as Minister. It is, of course, one of a number of challenging issues, but it is probably the one that causes most concern to patients, and I am determined to turn that position round. That said, to do so will require the continuing support of my Executive colleagues.

The root causes of the problem here are representative of the wider challenges to the provision of world-class health and social care: increasing demand; financial constraints; and a slowness to bring about radical change and reform.

The reality is that the way we deliver services has led to a situation where our hospitals are struggling to meet the ever-increasing demand for elective care. The specific issues are the increasing complexity of conditions requiring treatment, our ageing population, greater specialisation in the workforce and spreading our resources too thinly across the region.

My energy will be fully directed at reducing waiting times and delivering the change needed to build a sustainable health service for this and future generations. The problems that we face are not unique to the North but are shared with health economies across Europe and beyond.

The work of the expert panel and the organisational reform of health and social care that was started by my Department earlier this year hold the prospect for us to become the pathfinder in finding new, innovative ways to deliver improvement. My approach to securing these improvements will require short-term and longer-term action.

I was proud to be a member of the Executive that, following the Fresh Start Agreement last year, committed £40 million to begin tackling excessive waiting times and invest in front-line services. While this was a short-term measure, it has resulted in over 80,000 patients benefiting directly as a result of the additional funding that was allocated in November 2015. Those patients were

previously on waiting lists for assessments, treatments, diagnostics and a range of other services — some for a very long time — and would not yet have been seen or treated had it not been for this investment. In particular, the number of patients waiting longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment, which had been steadily increasing for over a year, reduced sharply from December 2015 to March 2016.

Had the trend over the first nine months of 2015-16 continued, it is estimated that the position at the end of March 2016 would have been much worse, with around 189,000 outpatients waiting longer than nine weeks and around 39,000 patients waiting longer than 13 weeks for treatment. The additional activity reduced this forecast position by some 53,000 outpatients and some 6,000 patients waiting longer than 13 weeks for treatment.

I want to pay tribute to our staff in the health service who delivered this activity within a relatively short timescale. Our staff are the health service's greatest asset, and their dedication to delivering high-quality care to patients is the hallmark of the service that we all can recognise.

Through the recent injection of funding, we have clearly demonstrated that we can deliver tangible short-term improvements in waiting times. While I would not dispute the views of those who criticise such short-term action as failing to tackle the underlying issues that contribute to excessive waiting times, my policy will be to adopt a balanced approach to taking further short-term action combined with longer-term change.

My Department will therefore bid for additional resources in June monitoring. If we are successful with this bid, the Executive will be able to build on the progress that has been made over the past few months in tackling waiting times by ensuring that the current demand for elective care is met at broadly the current capacity levels in the health service. However, pursuing short-term initiatives alone will not be good enough for me. I am determined to maintain the momentum that was started by my predecessor Simon Hamilton to transform the way in which we deliver health and social care services. I want to get to a position where excessive waiting times will be in the past and sustainable high-quality services, underpinned by a stable budget, will be the reality and the future going forward.

Part of that transformation must be about primary and secondary care working better together. Integrated care partnerships (ICPs) have already helped to drive new forms of collaboration. Working through ICPs, general practitioners have been reviewing waiting lists in a small number of areas and, drawing on advice from experts in hospitals, have ensured that only those who need to be on a waiting list remain on a waiting list.

There are particular opportunities to undertake this work in specialties such as dermatology, gynaecology, urology, rheumatology and general surgery. A pilot that was undertaken in Belfast during 2015-16 contributed to patients reviewed being removed from the waiting list. My Department has therefore committed £800,000 to expand this work in 2016-17.

This approach means investing in skills and knowledge in primary care. Initiatives such as Project Echo, which uses videoconferencing technology to help transfer expertise from secondary specialists to generalists in primary care, will therefore play an important role.

Against the backdrop of the progress made in recent months, we are developing an elective-care plan to arrest waiting times over the medium to longer term. As well as maximising the number of patients who can be treated in the community, the plan will ensure that existing funded capacity in the health service is fully maximised and targets new recurrent investment to expand the health service's capacity to meet patient demand. However, I will require significant additional funding to deliver that.

I referred earlier to the root causes of the waiting-times problem: increasing demand, financial constraints and a slowness to bring about radical change and reform. While the elective-care plan that I referred to should make a significant impact on reducing current waiting times, providing that additional funding is made available by the Executive, these root causes will be tackled only by securing significant further additional investment to transform the way in which we deliver health and social care.

I will therefore discuss with my Executive colleagues at the earliest opportunity the additional funding for the elective care plan and the need for additional investment to transform the delivery of services. I will also update the Assembly on our approach to delivering the proposed investment.

I referred earlier to the work of the expert panel, led by Professor Bengoa, as holding the prospect for the North to become the pathfinder in finding new, innovative ways to deliver improvement by taking longer-term action to build a vibrant, successful, sustainable health service that delivers better outcomes for patients. Part of that success will be to achieve a stable long-term financial position for the health service, where it is no longer viewed as taking up ever increasing amounts of limited public expenditure in order to respond to short-term budget pressures. I believe that my proposal for significant transformational funding will be money well invested if we can use it to attain the prize of stable finances and sustainable services.

The demand for health services is growing and will continue to grow, driven by demography, an increase in chronic conditions, the emergence of new technologies and changing practice in healthcare. Currently in the North, 49% of people have a long-standing health condition, 60% of people are overweight, 37% are obese and 23% of the population are in receipt of disability living allowance. The population is getting older and, rightly, people have higher expectations for their health service. These factors are creating pressures across the system and are putting increasing demands on an already stretched system. Change is needed and is inevitable. Therefore, we need new ways of working in health and social care to deliver better health outcomes for our population, reformed organisations that positively promote innovation and enable change to happen quickly and better use of our limited resources to deliver the maximum benefit for patients.

I eagerly await the panel's report at the end of June. My Executive colleagues and I will give it full and detailed consideration, and the Department will publicly consult on our proposals to implement its recommendations.

The political summit, which the panel held on 17 February and was attended by the five main political parties in the Assembly, signalled a sea change in an attempt to build consensus and a willingness across the political spectrum

about the key issues that we need to tackle in health and social care and to develop a shared agenda to deliver improvement. I hope that this willingness to work together can be taken forward under the new mandate. I will be meeting Professor Bengoa and his colleagues next week for an update on their emerging findings and proposals and I am grateful to them for their endeavours and commitment to the task at hand.

The Health Minister in the South has said that he will establish a special committee to look at a 10-year plan for the health service there to provide a singular vision over the next 10 years. I believe that we share common issues in building sustainable health services across the island. The opportunity to share best practice and build upon the collaborative service developments that we have already started will, therefore, be part of my agenda to transform health and social care.

To conclude, tackling excessive waiting times is high on my agenda for delivering improvement in the health service and services that are safe and effective for the patients they serve. I assure the Assembly, patients and their families that long waiting times are completely unacceptable to me. However, I will need time, new investment and radical change in how we deliver services to create the conditions for a sustainable health service and the better outcomes that we all want to see.

I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Health Minister for her statement. We have called for this issue to be the Executive's number one priority and I am pleased that you are addressing it in your first statement. It is also timely, given our party motion tomorrow on this issue. I note the Minister's wish, on the bottom of page two of her statement, to attain stable finances and sustainable services. Does she agree that funding the health service through short-term monitoring rounds must become a thing of the past, and will she provide an update on the additional £30 million announced by her predecessor on 6 March? I note that that is not mentioned in the statement.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her comments and her question. Going forward, I want to be in a position where we put the health service on a footing that allows us to be sustainable and give the first-class service that our healthcare workers provide. The only way we are going to be able to, realistically, reach that potential and position is if we are serious about transforming healthcare. I think that, perhaps, Professor Bengoa's report is going to be key and critical in allowing us to chart our way forward. I welcome the fact that, previous to the election, there were a lot of soundings from all political parties that they want to show political leadership, that we need to remove the politics from health and that we need to work together. I look forward to that approach from everybody in the time ahead. I think that Professor Bengoa's report is going to allow us to chart the direction in getting to the position where we will have a sustainable health service. That is a vision that we all can clearly sign up to.

In terms of the additional funding allocated to address the waiting lists — initially it was anticipated that the funding would reach about 65,000 to 70,000 patients and allow them to receive their first appointment — I am delighted to say that we actually exceeded the target and reached 80,000 people. I think that it has been money well spent

in trying to get those people access to the health service. We are still working our way through all of that, and I will be working with the trusts. Obviously, when it comes to dealing with end of year finances, we can see properly and explain further how that money has been spent and how we have been able to make a difference. I think the fact that we have been able to reach 80,000 patients is quite significant.

12.15 pm

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for her first statement to the House and wish her well in her new role.

I will follow on from the previous question, and I understand that, as Chair, I get a little bit of latitude, Mr Speaker. The Minister talked about the summit that was held with Professor Bengoa and the expert panel. There was consensus around the room that we wanted politics to be taken out of health and for it to move forward. He is due to report in a few weeks' time. Does the Minister have any more information on the level of detail that will be in the report? I understand that we do not currently measure review appointment waiting times — they are measured in the rest of the UK — so I do not believe that we have a full picture of waiting times. Is the Minister willing to look into that?

Mrs O'Neill: I will take the questions in reverse order. I know that the Health Committee previously did some work on the referral-to-treatment target. It is a better way to measure performance, so we should work towards that position. We have to be able to deliver on it, so we need to do more work on transforming the health service to allow us to be able to implement it.

The board is working on a five-year plan on how we deal with elective surgery and waiting lists, and we should work towards that key measure. I look forward to talking to the Chair and the Committee more about that.

As for Professor Bengoa's report, there is collective agreement that the panel brings together significant expertise and an international perspective to look at how we deliver health services. As you are aware, the report and the panel's work is very much about how we can deliver services and what is best for patients and service users. As you said, he will hopefully report towards the end of June, and I will be able to share that with others. It will really help us to chart our way forward.

I intend to meet Professor Bengoa when he comes here next week. One suggestion is that he will also meet all the political parties, which will be key in order for everybody to be up to speed on where he is and where the panel has got to.

Everybody is aware of the terms of reference for Professor Bengoa's work. They are about setting out the principles to underpin the reconfiguration of the health service. The body of work has been well worth doing, and I look forward to meeting him next week and engaging with the Committee on how we move forward.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. It is very welcome that this is the first issue that she has brought to the Floor as Minister. She said that we need a health service that is innovative and sustainable. I hope that we take the

politics out of the issue because it is critical for many families across the North. The Minister is right: we need positive change. One change before the Department at the moment is the closure of the Health and Social Care Board. Will the Minister update us on that process?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Following public consultation earlier this year, work has commenced on the design of the new structures. Over the coming weeks, I will take some time to consider the proposals emerging from that work, and I will then make a decision about the way forward, based on what I believe to be the optimum model for efficient and effective planning, commissioning and performance management of HSC services to supply the delivery of better outcomes for all our people.

It is important that we take the time to get the new structures right because we do not want to rush into something and then find that they are not fit for purpose a year down the line. I want to take my time and make sure that I look at all the evidence. We will need legislative change to take that forward through the next 12 to 18 months, with implementation happening thereafter. There is an ongoing large body of work, and I look forward to sharing that with the Assembly in due course.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for her statement and wish her well in her work in the Department in the time ahead.

What assurances can the Minister give us that any additional resources secured in the June monitoring round will be used in an equitable manner across the full health network to include places such as the Downe Hospital in Downpatrick and the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen, which are ideally placed to alleviate pressures in the major centres?

Mrs O'Neill: When assessing patients, you decide the order based on clinical need. There is a medical consideration, so money spent will be based on that. I intend to use any additional funding that we get to make sure that we prioritise the patients who are most in need. That is the most equitable thing that we can do, based on the medical evidence and assessment of those professionals.

Ms Bradshaw: The Minister's statement refers to:

"maximising the number of patients who can be treated in the community".

What resources will she allocate in this financial year to build the capacity, infrastructure and human resources? To date, there has been very little evidence of that through Transforming Your Care. I want some reassurance that that money will flow down through there.

Mrs O'Neill: When we look at new and innovative ways to help patients, a lot more focus needs to be on community care and helping people in their own home. Whilst Transforming Your Care has made some positive changes, we have not gone far enough, and maybe the pace of change has not been quick enough. For me, the medium- to longer-term vision is that we will have more community service and use more areas such as the integrated care partnerships so that all the professionals work together to provide services for people at home. That is where we want to be, but we have a way to go to get there. There

are some really good examples that we can build on, but, for me, it has to be about shifting the focus from the acute end of the hospitals and making sure that we treat people before that so that they do not have to go to hospital.

Mr Clarke: Like others, I thank the Minister for her statement. It is timely given that many of us hear about waiting times. I also believe, as others do, that the issue should not be politicised. The Minister's statement said that the direction from December to March was that the times reduced. Can she identify any one thing that contributed to that? I welcome anything that decreases the number of people on waiting lists.

Mrs O'Neill: The fact that the Executive were able to provide the additional funding allowed us to focus that money towards trusts and allowed them to reach the 80,000 people we reached over that period. It shows that, whilst there is a capacity issue in the health service, we were able to address waiting lists. We have an awful lot further to go. The length of time that some people are waiting for treatment is ridiculous. We want to take that progress even further. Whilst there have been some positive outcomes, we need to build on that, and the way to build on that is by starting to deal with the structural issues in the health service. That will allow us to reconfigure how we deliver services and allow us to reach more patients.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam faoi chomhoibriú idir an dá rialtas ar an oileán seo. My question is about cooperation between the two Departments on the island, as the Minister's statement refers to. Can the Minister assure me that cooperation between her and Minister Harris, which is aimed at addressing a whole range of issues, including waiting times, will be a priority for her in the time ahead? Is there perhaps an early opportunity for the North/South Ministerial Council to meet in health sectoral format?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I absolutely agree: there are areas in which we can build on the cooperation that already exists. The recent announcement on children's cardiac services shows that we have been able to work with Belfast and Dublin on delivery. There is a lot more scope and potential for us to be able to look at new areas in which to work together, and I have requested a meeting with Minister Harris to see how we can chart our way forward with that. When you look at some of the cooperation, working together and work that has already been taken forward in the health service, you can clearly see the benefits. We are a small island with two healthcare systems, so it is important that we get economies of scale, work together and provide better services for all on this island.

Mr Storey: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement on what is a very pressing issue at the moment for many of our constituents. Her statement refers to bringing about:

"radical change and reform."

Will the Minister give an assurance that, when she is looking at that radical change and reform, local hospitals such as the Causeway, which has been under some pressure in the past but clearly has a very good track record on delivery, will play a crucial and central role in the elective care plan, so that an invaluable facility in my constituency will be utilised to the maximum in the delivery of health as we ensure improving health for all our

constituents? I believe that Professor Bengoa was very impressed when he recently visited the hospital.

Mrs O'Neill: When we talk about radical change, we are talking about change in how we deliver services. It is not about hospitals or closing hospitals. Professor Bengoa has not been involved in that body of work. He has been looking at how it is done now and how it can be done better. There are opportunities to use all our hospitals in different ways. There could be different specialisms.

So there are opportunities to use all our hospitals in different ways. There could be different specialisms in different hospitals. Accident and emergency services are provided at all the sites in whatever capacity they provide them, so it is really about restructuring and how we deliver services. It is not about closures. We should all embrace the work that Professor Bengoa is taking forward. To date, all parties have signed up to the principles and terms of reference, and I look forward to engaging a lot more about that.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her first statement in this role. I am glad to see that the crisis in our waiting times is the very first issue to be discussed in the Assembly. I look forward to further debate on this issue tomorrow. The delays across our hospitals are frightening; I am sure that you would agree. Does the Minister then agree that patients have been coming to harm as a result of the delays and will continue to come to harm until we address this fully?

Mrs O'Neill: When a person is referred from their GP to a hospital for their first appointment, they are still under the care of their GP, so they should not be at harm. If that GP assesses at any time from when they referred the person that they think that their condition is worse, it is their obligation to inform whoever they referred them to, for example a consultant in a trust.

I wanted to discuss waiting times today because it is a crucial issue and something that we need to address in the short, medium and longer term. I have set out my stall in terms of how I think we can do it in the longer term. In the immediate term, we have to just try to get people in, get them seen and assessed, and get their treatment and pathway set out.

Just to reiterate: people are under the care of their GP when first referred, so I do not think that it is fair to say that people are at harm.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. Does the Minister agree that there are real issues with missed appointments by the public, in many cases without any notice, and the high level of cancellations by hospital trusts of consultants, doctors etc, often at very short notice?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree that there is a problem with that. Obviously, we regret any cancellation of appointments where patients have been inconvenienced and may have to wait longer. For that reason, a target has been set to reduce the number of hospital-cancelled consultant-led appointments by 20% by March 2017. I acknowledge that that performance is not where it should be or needs to be, so it is an issue that I will be examining further with the HSC Board and trusts to make sure that they continue to focus on it. We cannot keep giving off and criticising the public if the hospital services are also doing it, so it is an

issue that we need to tackle. We have a target now, but I intend to discuss that further with trusts.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement. I also wish the Minister well in her new and challenging role. Has any assessment been done by her Department on delays in the provision of beds for treatments due to lack of carers in the community who could facilitate the efficient discharge of patients from hospital?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any departmental assessment. I can certainly look into that, but I agree that it is a factor in my constituency role when dealing with patients and people who cannot be discharged from hospital because there is no care package. That is a real issue. It is particularly an issue in rural areas, where it is difficult to recruit carers. There is large scope for work to be done around why you cannot recruit carers. These people are usually the lowest paid. Quite often, if they work for the independent sector, they do not get mileage costs, so there is a big issue that I want to focus on and give attention to because we do want people to be cared for at home; we want that to be more and more the emerging picture. The only way to do that is if we have proper workforce planning and we work to make sure that we can recruit carers. As I said, there are particular challenges in rural areas.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the fact that the Minister has recognised that waiting times in our health service are totally unacceptable. It is my understanding that despite additional funds, urgent heart consultations at the Ulster Hospital, for example, are running at up to six months, and autism assessments in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are almost two years. That is a crisis by any estimation. The Minister says that the root cause of this problem is slowness to deliver on radical reform. Can I ask the Minister, therefore, what specific radical reform she plans to deliver that her predecessor did not?

Mrs O'Neill: I referred to Professor Bengoa's report. There have been a number of reports over the last number of years: the Maurice Hayes report at the start of 2001, the Donaldson review, and Transforming Your Care. So, we have had a number of steps forward and all those brought some positive change. One of the things that the Donaldson report recognised was that the pace of change was not quick enough, so that is what we need to move forward with. I want to take the body of work that Professor Bengoa has been involved with and seriously transform our health service. Otherwise, we will be having this debate and this conversation time and time again. If we do not get to the situation where we have the health service on a sustainable footing, we cannot invest in new technologies and new drugs, and we cannot help patients more.

12.30 pm

I want to set out a vision where the endgame will be that we put more resources into preventative work to tackle health inequalities and the reasons why people get sick in the first place. The only way that we will get that is if we have real pace of change and real meaningful change that actually reconfigures how we deliver services. That is my priority in the time ahead, and that is the legacy that I want to leave in this Department.

Mr McGlone: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. Regarding treatments in what is referred to as the independent sector or, as we know it, the private sector,

has the Minister had any evaluation done of the number of cases where, upon arrival for treatment in that sector, persons have been told that their procedure cannot go ahead due to inappropriate or inadequate screening of the patient having been done on what is loosely described as the NHS side? That appears to be a recurring issue now too.

Mrs O'Neill: That issue has not been brought to my attention, but if the Member wants to write to me or drop me an email, I will be happy to examine it further. As I said, it has not been on my desk yet, but I am happy to look at it.

Mr Allister: Interestingly, the statement makes no mention of the use of the private sector in the health service. Is that because its use has been abandoned under the Minister or is it because the Minister has abandoned her ideological opposition to the use of the private sector?

Mrs O'Neill: I will never abandon my principles, I can assure you of that. I can tell you that I want to see a position where we do not need to use the independent sector. I want to be in a position where we create a health service that is on a sustainable footing that can deliver first-class services, and I think that the only way that we can do that is if we transform the whole healthcare system and how we deliver it. That is why I have set out the vision about how I want to move forward, and, as I said earlier, we are going to continually come back to this conversation around capacity issues in the health service, waiting lists and all of those things if we do not seriously transform the healthcare sector.

That having been said, I will not allow patients to be very much in need. For me, the use of the independent sector is a short-term measure to allow people to be treated and to receive the care that they need. Whenever independent sector provision is used in the health service, it is only because there has been a real body of work done around the capacity of the health service to deliver and on what the short-term capacity is. For me, the overriding concern is ensuring that patients receive their treatment in a timely manner. That, for me, is the key. Obviously, I want to get to the point where we have the capacity in the health service to deliver.

Opposition Business

Manufacturing Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose it and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

I call on Mr Stevie Aiken to move the motion. As this is Mr Aiken's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. However, if it becomes overly controversial, he may not be granted that privilege.

Mr Aiken: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for the Economy to commission a manufacturing strategy for Northern Ireland.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and, just for the record and so that my mother will not be upset about it, it is Mr Stephen Aiken. I do not think that I have been called Stevie for a very long time.

In moving the motion in this Assembly calling on the Minister for the Economy to commission a manufacturing strategy for Northern Ireland, the first thing that I would like to say is that this is a historic occasion, because we believe that this is the first official Opposition debate in this Chamber since 1972.

Overall, we welcome the Minister's appointment, and we, as the Opposition, will offer constructive and supportive scrutiny to help build an effective strategy for our manufacturing sector. What we want is to see how we can grow it from its present level over the next 10 years. As you are well aware, manufacturing generates annual sales approaching £20 billion, directly employs 85,000, supports production and the employment of over 214,000 in the wider supply chain and creates well-paid jobs and strong communities in every constituency across Northern Ireland. We will provide constructive support for the Minister, providing that policies are put in place to create a shift from a public-sector-led to a strong, stable and flexible private sector economy that has Northern Ireland manufacturing at its core.

It is good to see that a Department for the Economy has been created — a long-standing objective of our party — a Department that should be the driving force for Northern Ireland going forward. The need has never been greater, with our economy growing at a less than impressive gross value added (GVA) level over the years from 2010 to 2014 of 10.2%, when the UK average was 16%. Indeed, Northern Ireland has the lowest GVA growth of any UK region, and it is considerably less than the Republic of Ireland. If we look further back, to 2009, we find that, while the UK's GDP as a whole has increased by 13.9%, that of Northern Ireland has grown by only 3.1%, which, as I am sure the Minister would agree, is a very poor outcome.

What are we going to do about it? We cannot just rely on the current structure, which has not shown the innovation,

adaptability and agility that has been shown in other regions of the United Kingdom — for instance, in the Northern Powerhouse around Manchester — or even in the Republic of Ireland.

It is disappointing that, in the draft Programme for Government framework, which has three outcomes, 10 indicators and 11 measures all about the economy, there are no real specific ideas for building this new economy. It is also concerning, after we have fought hard to achieve the introduction of a lower rate of corporation tax at 12·5%, that this central idea is not even mentioned in outcome 1, where the draft Programme for Government talks about how we can prosper through a:

“strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy”.

We, the Opposition, as do Northern Ireland businesses, as represented by the CBI, Manufacturing Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and the Institute of Directors, Unite and other unions — above all by the companies themselves — need to see a proper, joined-up manufacturing strategy that puts backs towards our prosperity and future.

We should be setting targets. We should be making 20% of our GDP from manufacturing, rather than the current level of 14%. This should be a hard, measurable target. We should benchmark the success or failure of our manufacturing strategy against other UK regions, such as Scotland, which is, of course, where the Programme for Government framework is sourced from, Wales and the Northern Powerhouse and against the Republic of Ireland. Maybe this could form the basis of an annual health check on all our Departments that would allow the people of Northern Ireland to see how our Government are over- or underperforming.

We would also welcome from the Minister a robust championing and defence of a series of pro-manufacturing approaches that would be transformative of our economy, especially around taxation, keeping business rates low, energy costs, maintaining security of supply, extended enterprise zones, improving infrastructure and urgently addressing the shortage of skills that our innovative companies are facing. We suggest that we need a couple of specific measures, in particular, a coherent and stable tax structure built around the 12·5% rate of corporation tax and delivered on time. We should retain the 30% cap rate on business rates, for not just the short but the long term. We should also use enterprise zone facilities, which I know the First Minister was not happy with. We need those in areas where Northern Ireland is particularly challenged, and we need to grow in those in what we need to do.

We also need to do something about our rather paltry research and development. We currently put only about a third of the UK total of research and development into what we do as we go forward. We need to increase that to the average UK level, and what we are going to call for is a fund of approximately £1 billion over the next 20 years, which needs to be linked to business, universities and industry. However, we are very conscious of making unrealistic demands on an already taut budget. What we can do is closely examine how some of the money is spent on the underperforming quangos around them, of which there is a plethora. We need to divert funds from those and other areas so that we can support a proper Northern

Ireland regional development fund, and Europe could be critical in doing this and helping us as we go forward.

All of this needs to be backed up by some more practical things. We need to address the high cost of energy for our manufacturing and agribusiness companies. But we must also note that our energy sector requires considerable investment, with an aging grid that is not capable of dealing with the demands of low-carbon generation. It needs functioning North/South and east-west interconnectors to connect us to the growing all-island energy market and a regulator that delivers energy on a median all-island cost. We have some of the highest energy costs in Europe, but we need to be able to match others. Most of all, we need to match the energy costs in the Republic of Ireland, which are, in some places, for the major manufacturing companies, 16% to 17% less than ours. We must question how, in an all-island energy market, our Utility Regulation mechanism appears to deliver very little. There are some fundamental questions there that need to be asked.

We also need to address the skills shortage and investment in higher education and further education, but we need to do it by listening to what our businesses need as well as by promoting our previously mentioned research and development in what we are trying to do. We also need to deal with other business costs, such as sea and air transport, and ask why it is five times more expensive to cross the North Channel than it is to cross the English Channel. It is ridiculous to note that, over a period of 25 years, it would probably be cheaper to build a tunnel under the North Channel than it would be to continue with these high costs.

Equally, air passenger duty (APD) is a tax on business and should be addressed urgently. Infrastructure needs to be improved — roads infrastructure, in particular. Broadband has, in some parts of Northern Ireland, become a joke and needs to be sorted out. Again, we mentioned a smart grid, and if we are to have a much more flexible and innovative economy, we need to make sure that the fundamentals of that are available. We need proper road links to our major logistical hubs, and we need to do something about the other levels of infrastructure that we have.

Penultimately, we need to change the mindset: manufacturing is not in a sunset period. Our 3,820 manufacturers, at any scale, can drive our future. Achieving a 20% manufacturing sector and generating an additional 100,000 jobs is achievable, but only if we put it at the centre of making Northern Ireland work. For that, we need vision, strategy and willingness from us all. To make that happen — it is too important to be delivered just by our government Departments — we would welcome the Minister creating a fully inclusive Northern Ireland strategic manufacturing board, as happens in other areas of the United Kingdom and Europe, to bring together all of the key partners to make it work and to work with our stakeholders to rally to make Northern Ireland one of the best places for manufacturing jobs as we go forward.

Before I ask the Minister to respond to our calls for commissioning a proper manufacturing strategy for Northern Ireland, I think we need to address what is probably the biggest single issue affecting the future of business in Northern Ireland. We are currently planning to have a referendum in the United Kingdom on our future membership of the EU. Listening to the clarion calls from

the business community and from many of our business-led organisations, one of the most important things that we see at the moment is a lack of certainty — there is fear about the future; there are concerns about North/South and east-west trade in particular; and there are concerns about what our companies will face in the future. I think it is remarkable that if we look at the parties in the Chamber, the majority of them will support the United Kingdom remaining within the EU, and I would like the Minister to make a statement on behalf of the Government, which includes his party and another party, about that support. We should be going to the people of Northern Ireland and saying that we should remain in the EU because that is indeed the best place for us in the future and the best place for us to deliver a proper manufacturing strategy.

Mr Lyons: I beg to move

Leave out all after "Economy" and insert

"to include the development of the manufacturing sector in the Executive's new economic strategy."

First, I congratulate the Member for South Antrim on his maiden speech; I look forward to working with him on the Economy Committee and on these issues as we go forward. I also congratulate the Minister on his appointment. We are very pleased that he is in post, very pleased that we have the Department for the Economy, and we want to wish him well for the future. I also want to note that I think it is important that this debate has been on the issue of manufacturing.

I welcome that focus. It is important that we are bringing these issues to the fore, debating them, talking about them and sending the message that they are issues that we are concerned about and that need to be addressed.

12.45 pm

We have tabled an amendment to the motion. Although we welcome the focus on manufacturing, we are seeking the approval of the House to amend the motion. Before I come on to that, it would be useful for us to have a look at manufacturing in Northern Ireland and at the current state of play.

There is no doubt that there have been an awful lot of difficulties for manufacturing over the last number of years. That has had impact on our constituents. In my constituency, many people worked in Ballymena — and I am thinking of Michelin, JTI and the job losses that have taken place. It is important that we recognise that we are not just talking about figures; these are real people who have lost their jobs and find themselves in a very difficult situation. We should be doing all in our power to sustain the jobs that we have in Northern Ireland and create more.

There is no doubt that there are many challenges that the manufacturing sector is facing. However, it is not an insignificant sector or an insignificant part of our economy. As Mr Aiken, the Member for South Antrim, said, it is responsible for 85,000 jobs directly and supports over 100,000 more. It is responsible for £213 million in export sales and hundreds of millions of pounds of foreign direct investment. Manufacturing is also responsible for some of our best paid and most highly skilled jobs in Northern Ireland and, although there have been challenges and difficult times, we should welcome the fact that there has been growth in the sector over recent years.

Indeed, we have seen thousands of extra jobs added in the manufacturing sector since the downturn. As well as having growth, we are growing at a faster rate than the rest of the UK despite having a larger than average manufacturing sector in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom. So although the picture for manufacturing is challenging, it is not a bleak picture or one without hope.

We have tabled the amendment because we are committed, as a party, to creating more and better jobs in Northern Ireland. We welcome that we will have the opportunity to have another debate on the economy tomorrow and talk further about plans for an economic strategy. That will require work, not only in manufacturing but across the whole economy and whole sectors. As a result, we are focusing on a new and refocused economic strategy to deliver growth for the whole economy. Manufacturing should be at the centre of that, and we hope that it will be.

In the amendment, why are we asking for, instead of just a single manufacturing strategy, —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way on that point.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He is right to talk about a holistic approach. I heard the previous speaker talking about infrastructure. Does the Member realise that infrastructure has been heavily damaged in Northern Ireland by cuts from the Tory party, a party that was wedded to the UUP for many years? Does the Member, like me, want to know where the UUP stands on the European Union and whether they are in or out? At the minute, we do not really know where they stand.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyons: I look forward to Mr Swann winding up the debate. He will be able to answer those questions. Perhaps the Ulster Unionist Party is not united on the issue; perhaps, some people have seen the light and have realised that we would be better off out of the European Union. I will not speak for the Ulster Unionist Party —

Mr Swann: That makes a change. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyons: I will let Mr Swann answer that question, and no doubt the Chamber will be full when he makes his remarks so that we can get some clarity on the issue.

We want to see growth in the whole economy and in manufacturing. Growth in the whole economy will help manufacturing as well. That is why we want to see an economic strategy for all of Northern Ireland and across all sectors. Of course, there is overlap between different sectors and different businesses within our economy. Some of the issues that people raise are rates, infrastructure, skills and education, energy, competitiveness and investment. All those issues come together. Although not all businesses or companies have issues with all the problems they face, together we need to address them all. As my colleague Mr Frew said, perhaps we need a more holistic approach. The best way in which we can deliver for Northern Ireland on those issues is through one strategy.

Of course, the challenges that face manufacturing are not unique to manufacturing. That does not mean that we will have an absence — I hope that we will not — of help, targets or actions for manufacturing. You will all be

avid readers of the DUP manifesto for the 2016 Assembly election, which was endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland and in which we made it very clear that we want manufacturing to be put at the very heart of the economic strategy. It is also useful for us, as Back-Benchers and as opposition parties, to have that one strategy; we can hold the Government to account by saying, "Here's one single document. Here's what the Executive have said that they were going to do". It is useful to have that codified in one document.

I hope that I have been able to outline why we seek the support of the House for the amendment. As we move forward, there are steps that need to be taken. Mr Aiken rightly outlined some of the things that we want to happen. We hope that there will be a focus on issues such as skills. As we move forward, it is hugely important that we have our people trained, educated and with the right skills for the jobs that are coming along, especially in light of the devolution of corporation tax powers, which will be hugely important for Northern Ireland. There is the potential to create thousands of jobs. I know that not everybody agrees with what we have done about the devolution of corporation tax; I think that, a few years ago, the Ulster Unionist Party said that it was time to move on from the issue, and it was time for plan B. I am glad that we stuck to plan A and have the devolution of corporation tax. We not only have the power devolved but have set a date and a rate. That is very important.

We also need to focus on energy, which is a massive issue not only for those in manufacturing but for those in other businesses. We need to look at that to see how we can have cheaper energy than what we have at the minute and how we can provide help to industry and businesses. Infrastructure has been mentioned, as has the need for a proper infrastructure to be in place.

I hope that I have been able to outline to the House the reasons for our amendment. We look forward to working with other parties in the Assembly to bring forward an economic strategy that can deliver real tangible results for the people of Northern Ireland and create a more prosperous future for us all.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I am delighted, as Chairperson of the Economy Committee, to participate in the debate, which was tabled by the Deputy Chair. While I am speaking as the Chair of the Committee, Members will be aware that we have met only once, so we have not had the opportunity to discuss a potential manufacturing strategy for the North or what such a strategy should look like. However, speaking on behalf of the Committee, I assure the House that we will debate fully and will not be found wanting when it comes to listening to stakeholders, discussing among ourselves and providing ideas to the Minister for such a strategy to be brought forward. It might have been better if we had had some of that discussion before today's debate, but, that said, I am sure that today's contributions will feed into the Committee's discussion. We will proactively look at providing a pathway that not only supports our existing manufacturing industries but seeks to develop new industries.

I do not think that anyone here is naive enough to assume that we can develop a strategy for the North that ignores the realities of the global economy and the balances and links between our economy and that of the South, Britain

and the EU. However, we as Members, particularly those whose constituencies were affected, are aware of the announcements of large-scale job losses at the likes of Michelin, Gallaher's, Bombardier, Seagate and others, and, of course, everyone shares the view that we cannot afford to lose those types of skilled jobs.

I will advocate that the Committee take a measured view of the potential benefits of a dedicated manufacturing strategy for the North and what it might contain. Should there be consensus on such a strategy, the Committee will want to ensure that it is the right fit for us here and not simply imported from elsewhere. I suggest that the Committee will want to look at what disadvantages or additional cost burdens — Members who spoke previously mentioned some of those — we face that competitors in other regions do not and how those might be best offset through the work of a strategy and indeed the Executive. The Committee will have to consider whether our job promotion model facilitates the development of manufacturing jobs here. Additionally, we must consider whether jobs in manufacturing may be more secure in the long term than jobs in, for instance, high-tech or creative industries and whether we are promoting jobs strategically over a range of sectors.

At the Committee's first meeting last week, the issue of energy costs was raised, and, as I said, it has been mentioned by the Members who spoke previously here. Clearly, there is a particular concern for 20 or 30 of our largest manufacturers. We must also consider, as mentioned, how the proposed lowering of our corporation tax rate in 2018 will impact the situation for manufacturers. The development of a specific manufacturing strategy for the North may require a fundamental redesign of Invest NI. These are all questions that must be considered. The Committee would obviously be a key player in any process of developing such a strategy, and I know from listening to Committee members last Wednesday that we will not be backward about bringing ideas to the table.

It would be unwise to engage in a hastily developed strategy simply to respond to the large-scale job losses that we have had. However, quite clearly, as the amendment suggests, any such manufacturing strategy — listening to the contribution of the Member who moved the motion, I think that he would probably accept this — must be located firmly in an economic strategy that is located firmly in the broader Programme for Government and that that is aligned with a Budget that can deliver on such a strategy. I think that that is the logical way to go forward.

Speaking on my own behalf, a Cheann Comhairle, I want any strategy that promotes, supports and encourages new manufacturing industries to be one that is regionally balanced as well. The need for regional balance across the Six Counties is referred to in the Programme for Government framework document that has gone out. Clearly, developing such a strategy is not simply a matter for us here but, given the way in which the Programme for Government itself has been designed — it will be rolled out over the autumn — this is a matter on which we need engagement with all stakeholders. People in the manufacturing industries and the manufacturing trade unions, who are at the coalface of these industries, need to be part of developing such a strategy. It should be done only on the basis of feedback from across all those sectors and consideration of the bigger issues

facing manufacturing that discourage investment and job creation. It may be within our gift to try to assist in a greater spread of job creation across the manufacturing industries. Taking all those matters into account —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Murphy: — I believe that we can come up with a strategy that is located in the economic strategy and backed by a Budget through the Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: As this is Sinead Bradley's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that the speech is made without interruption. I remind the Member that that may be forfeited, of course, if she becomes ultra-controversial.

Mrs S Bradley: I will attempt not to, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much. As you said, it is my maiden speech to the House. I would like to direct my first comments to thanking the people of South Down, who have given me the privilege of being here and representing them. It is a great honour for me to add my name to the list of SDLP representatives who have served the people of South Down, namely, the late Eddie McGrady; my father, PJ Bradley; Eamonn O'Neill; Margaret Ritchie MP; and, in the last mandate, Karen McKeivitt and Seán Rogers. Like each of those former Members, I will endeavour to make sure that South Down is very well represented in the House, and I look forward to working with others for the betterment of the people of Northern Ireland.

1.00 pm

However, I share with you openly my hope that this chapter of politics in Northern Ireland will be remembered in South Down as the time when the Narrow Water bridge was finally delivered. Nothing short of that would bring satisfactory closure to the lifetime's political work that my father, P J Bradley, put into that project.

I move to the business in front of us. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the need to develop a manufacturing strategy for Northern Ireland. Many base factors are essential for a balanced growth of all sectors across our economy. Those include things that have already been mentioned, such as access to a healthy and skilled workforce, the development of reliable and competitive sources of energy, and infrastructure etc. No doubt there will be plenty of opportunities to discuss in detail many of those issues in an overarching economic agenda delivered for Northern Ireland.

This motion, however, presents us with an opportunity to pay particular focus on one sector in that economic offering: manufacturing. It is well documented that the manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland has suffered a number of blows during the past 12 months. Some Members have already mentioned the loss of more than 1,000 jobs from Bombardier, and there have been similar cuts with Michelin, JTI Gallaher and, lately, Seagate.

Manufacturing NI recently warned that more than 6,000 jobs could be lost across the sector over the next decade, due to advances in technology. Despite that, manufacturing continues to play a significant role in our overall economy. Many headline statistics can be found to illustrate just how significant it is. In my constituency, South Down, major employers such as Bradfor Limited,

MJM Group and B/E Aerospace are but a few of the key manufacturing businesses supporting the economy. In Northern Ireland, manufacturing represents 13% to 14% of GDP. The SDLP shares the manufacturing sector's belief that it is possible and necessary for the Executive to work with the sector to increase that contribution to 20% of GDP. Manufacturing NI says that this would be possible with, and I quote:

"the implementation of a manufacturing strategy, the establishment of a target on competitive energy prices, continued stability on rates and a raising of ambition".

The amendment sadly does not fill me with confidence that ambition has been raised. Make no mistake: this debate has the potential to represent a pivotal moment in the future direction of manufacturing in Northern Ireland. We see an opportunity to create a focused strategy that has the potential to navigate specific barriers to growth in the sector and help realise that desirable 20% of GDP. At a time when Europe openly seeks to reindustrialise, Members have yet to grasp the significance of needing a specific manufacturing strategy. I find it regrettable that, through my maiden speech, I have to try to convince others that a real need for a dedicated manufacturing strategy exists. I would have much preferred my contribution to have focused on the ambitions of that strategy.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Mrs S Bradley: The Northern Ireland Executive must formulate and implement a manufacturing strategy, for which the industry has been calling for more than a year.

Dr Farry: I congratulate Sinead Bradley on her maiden speech. I have no doubt that she will follow in the footsteps of her predecessors in giving a very passionate voice to the people of South Down. I also pass on my congratulations to Mr Aiken on his maiden speech, the Minister on his appointment and, obviously, you, Mr Speaker, on your appointment as well. *[Laughter.]* That is the protocol out of the way.

In any discussion on manufacturing, we must bear in mind that we meet with the referendum barely weeks ahead of us. That colours anything that is said in the Chamber about manufacturing.

It is clearly in the interest of Northern Ireland that we remain part of the European Union, particularly for the manufacturing sector, which already depends very much on exports and access to international markets for its current level of activity. If we are to follow through on the laudable objectives of increasing the share of our economy for manufacturing, it is only through exports that that will be realised. Being part of Europe is absolutely fundamental to the future of manufacturing here.

It is also worth taking a moment to think about exactly what we will be doing in terms of manufacturing. It is important that this does not become an issue of the precise architecture of how strategies fit together but is more about the commitments that people will be making to turn those into reality. I also pass on my congratulations to the Ulster Unionist Party on its new-found appreciation of the value of strategies. As someone who listened in the past mandate to them bemoaning yet another strategy and demanding action, I note that finally they have recognised that a strategy is useful for crystallising visions, aims and objectives and for setting out the action points that will be

taken and, crucially, the resourcing that will be set aside against those.

Indeed, while Mr Aiken read out a very important list of initiatives that could be taken to improve manufacturing, it is important that we are also mindful of the resources required to turn that into a reality. The only commitment that I heard to new resources was some minor tinkering with quangos. Even the abolition of quangos does not produce a huge amount of additional resource, because the functions of quangos still have to be addressed elsewhere in the system. It is important that, when we talk about the steps that are required, we put in place the resources to ensure that they come forward. If we are talking today about this historic moment of opposition and even constructive opposition, that is not just about being an Opposition with a nice smile; it is about having a clear alternative and ensuring that it is feasible and can be properly resourced.

I recognise that manufacturing in Northern Ireland is going through challenging times. There have been a lot of negative headlines and bad news stories in particular over the past 12 months. At the same time, it is important that we recognise that, while there is serious scope for growth, we have a healthy situation and employment in manufacturing is at a level exceeding the figures as far back as 2008. We have many strengths, and we are seeing an evolution of our manufacturing sector or sectors in a move to more high-value-added jobs. That involves some bad news at the same time as we are having good news about new jobs being created.

In terms of the architecture itself, I see the choice between the motion and the amendment as being a false binary choice. It is important that we recognise that manufacturing must be central to any new or refreshed economic strategy, but there may well be scope for doing additional and more detailed work outside the very particular confines of the economic strategy. That strategy will make references to other strategies — for example, the current skills strategy or the STEM strategy. There are a lot of particular issues around skills. When we look to manufacturing, we see a range of interventions in particular subsections of manufacturing, whether it is life sciences or IT. Indeed, Invest NI has a number of initiatives in that regard already.

It is also important that we recognise that manufacturing is very diverse. It ranges from things like life sciences through to plastics and heavy engineering. There is also an ongoing debate as to whether agrifood is part of manufacturing: some people count it as part of manufacturing, and some do not. Of course, we already have a separate strategy there, Going for Growth. It is important that we have that proper, rounded discussion with the business community and particularly those in manufacturing as to how best we can serve their interests and keep an open mind as to what the best set of structures will be in that regard. I regard this as being a false choice, because I believe that there is scope for us to do something that is particularly focused on manufacturing in the broadest sense.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Dr Farry: I accept that we have to recognise that there will be particular substrategies plus the overarching economic strategy.

Mr Storey: Regrettably, I cannot stand here today and say that this is my maiden speech, as I have been here since 2003. However, after all those years, we still have in Northern Ireland much that we need to be proud of. It disappoints me that, when I come to the House — I have said this repeatedly in previous debates — it seems as though we always want to concentrate on the negatives. Of course, we now have a new Opposition; well, one of four, five, six or seven. I am not sure how many leaders of the Opposition there are now.

It is time that the Assembly — I advise, if they would be so kind to take the advice, the official Opposition or whoever is in that corner to do this — actually talked up Northern Ireland. Let us remember that, in our manufacturing, we have 214,000 direct and supported jobs. That is one in four of all jobs in the economy. We have £9.9 billion total GVA contribution to GDP, which is around 30% of the economy. Productivity is at £55,700, which is 38% higher than the Northern Ireland average with an advanced manufacturing contribution of 27% more. Those are the figures from Manufacturing Northern Ireland. Yet, when we come to the House, we find it is all about what more we need to do. Not one Member who has spoken today has paid tribute to the manufacturing base that we have or to the 214,000 direct and supported jobs for how they have contributed to the well-being of Northern Ireland.

It is not perfect; there is a huge amount of work still to be done. Coming from North Antrim, I know all too well the impact of job losses. We made reference to that, and I thank Members for the references to the closure of JTI and Michelin and to the pressures that there are, even on our manufacturing companies, such as Wrightbus, as well as to the challenges they face on a day and daily basis to underwrite and secure the long-term future of those jobs. I pay tribute to companies such as Terex, which has recently come into Ballymoney in my constituency. It is a global organisation that needs to continue to be supported; indeed, I recently met with it. I agree with the issue that was raised by the Member and others about the cost of our energy. I have no doubt that my colleague the Minister — I pay tribute to him and wish him well in his new role — will make this an area of priority.

Let me come to an issue that was also raised by the Member. I am glad to be on the Economy Committee with him and look forward to working with him. I have no doubt that we will have our differences, and no doubt we will have our political spats; you would not expect anything else from politicians. However, he raised the coming referendum. I would like the Member to ask the companies in Northern Ireland that have been curtailed, restrained and in many respects set at a disadvantage because of our attachment to the European Union. The regulations are destroying and crippling the advantage that our companies could have in the way in which they provide their services. Indeed, I ask the Deputy Chair of the Committee and the proposer of the motion whether he could speak to his colleague Mr Swann and ask him his view of the issue, because, of course, we know, as has been alluded to, the Ulster Unionist Party, not for the first time on a number of issues, is divided on it. My party is very clear. If you heard my colleague Sammy Wilson on this morning, you would know that we should deal with facts, not fear. Let us deal with the reality of where we are. It is regrettable that our Chancellor came to Northern Ireland today and was about

bringing fear to the debate as opposed to bringing the facts to it.

Mr Farry makes a very valid point that it is a diverse environment in which manufacturing operates, and we need to ensure that in our terminology, our policy, our strategy and in everything we do we have covered all the areas appropriately so that we —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Storey: — continue to build on the success and make Northern Ireland the economic powerhouse that, I believe, it can become.

Mr T Buchanan: I support the amendment before the House. At the outset, I congratulate my colleague Simon Hamilton on his appointment as Minister for the Economy. I wish him every success in his new role, and it is one that I am confident he will use to lead this country forward to even greater success and prosperity. I wish him well.

Northern Ireland is no stranger to being a world leader on the manufacturing stage. This country has been built on a firm foundation of manufacturing, and this small but powerful nation has a rich history in manufacturing, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The foundation has stayed firm through the centuries, and Northern Ireland has thrived in spite of obstacles on a national and, more recently, international scale.

1.15 pm

It is fair to say that, in recent years, cuts to the manufacturing sector across Northern Ireland and a climate of instability led to some very challenging circumstances, at times, for the industry. However, I believe that it is now time and the opportunity is here within Northern Ireland for us to rise again to manufacturing excellence and show again our strength on a global scale. In Northern Ireland, we already have the right ingredients in place to ensure that this long-term vision for the future not only comes together but thrives on a global scale.

It is imperative that we as a Government come up with the long-term strategic policies that will empower Northern Ireland to believe in its own strength. Through the mix of all the ingredients, the manufacturing sector will have the tools to become more competitive, globally. It is only through close partnership with industry that we can create a highly skilled workforce that can deal with the dynamic nature of this rapidly changing sector.

However, that is only one strand of the partnership. There must be flexibility within government to bring leaders from across the manufacturing sector to share ideas to ensure that we move in the right direction. That type of collaboration between government, industry and education is the vehicle to steer us towards a more efficient and streamlined manufacturing sector as we move forward.

A vital ingredient in the future economic strategy, which includes manufacturing, is skills. If we are serious about improving the economic prosperity of our region, we need to build on the good work that was started in the former Department for Education and Learning. Investment in science, technology, engineering and maths is crucial in empowering our young people with the skills that we need to build up the manufacturing sector in our country. In conjunction with empowering our young people with

appropriate skills, research and development in industry is a fundamental force that will drive the economy forward. For manufacturing to be successful amongst many other sectors, research and development must be at the cutting edge of growth and preparation for the future. We already have two world-class universities with a wealth of knowledge, which is already informed by industry. Skills exchange and sharing between education and industry needs to be the hinge on which our strategy swings to improve and grow our sectors in Northern Ireland.

Foundation industries such as energy and investment by energy companies into long-term projects which meet manufacturing energy needs, are also essential. One of the big areas is broadband provision, which needs to be enhanced. There is very poor broadband provision in some areas of my West Tyrone constituency. That can have a devastating impact on companies, and it is a real factor for businesses that are trying to compete in the global market.

Even with such poor infrastructure, however, we have to say that manufacturing industry continues to strive. Precision engineering is a niche market in the west Tyrone area; it is thriving and growing. That is one example of where the skills and attitudes of businesses in the manufacturing industry can adapt and be —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr T Buchanan: — world leaders, despite the difficulties across the sector.

Manufacturing excellence does not necessarily equate to business success. As a Government, we need to be smart and to think more like a business. We must provide strong links within a global market and make it much easier for companies to access those markets and do all in their power to ensure that that happens. I support the amendment.

Mr McGlone: The SDLP supports the motion and its objective. The Minister for the Economy should take the lead in developing a manufacturing strategy, in collaboration with his Executive colleagues. The relevance and importance of that is that it needs to be joined up in a multifaceted way. Economic development is indeed heavily reliant not only on the skills base but on the infrastructural base, which includes roads, water and, as already referred to, the network grid and, crucially, broadband and all that goes with the attendant communications network that is so frequently used now by businesses to help develop and promote their companies.

The introduction of the current Executive's draft Programme for Government framework talks about finalising and agreeing the Programme for Government, the Budget, a refreshed economic strategy, a new investment strategy and a social strategy by the end of 2016. It does not talk about a manufacturing strategy. In fact, manufacturing is noticeable by its absence in the Executive's framework document whilst other sectors, such as tourism, get numerous mentions. This is a mistake. We have had reference to corporation tax, but key to its success or otherwise is of course stability. That stability includes our position within the EU. Earlier, Mr Storey referred to his colleague on 'The Nolan Show' this morning who referred to the likes of Sweden, Norway, France and Switzerland in the context of the preferred option for relationships within these islands and indeed with the EU.

It might be helpful if he could place those things in the proper context and factual record and bring the cogency of that argument up to date, rather than talking about how he wished things could be and not how they are.

However, getting back to the key element of the manufacturing strategy, the recently announced job losses at Seagate in Derry, Sirocco Engineering and Michelin, the closure of the JTI plant in Ballymena and the Bombardier statement of intent to reduce its workforce demonstrate the difficulties that the manufacturing sector is facing. Workers' representatives and employers in the manufacturing sector have consistently called for a specific manufacturing strategy to be put in place by the Executive. They may differ on some of the details but they are united in seeking the development of a comprehensive Executive strategy to support and grow the manufacturing sector.

Unite has previously joined with the manufacturing employers' group, Manufacturing NI — I am sure that many of us have already dealt with both groups and worked with them closely in the past — to call on the Northern Ireland Executive to commit to a manufacturing strategy. In November last year, they called for urgent action to protect the manufacturing base and help create the conditions to allow manufacturers to grow. In April this year, the general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Patricia King, called on the incoming Executive to put forward a comprehensive manufacturing strategy to tackle issues such as energy costs, skills development and support for investment, which have been referred to. In March this year, Manufacturing NI published a report by Oxford Economics on the economic contribution of manufacturing here and called on the Executive to raise ambitions and drive reindustrialisation of the economy. Just this week, Manufacturing NI and the Unite union once again joined together in support of the motion that we are debating today. I hope that serious support and deliberation will be given to it.

What is clear from the Oxford Economics report is that, despite the difficulties that I mentioned, the manufacturing sector outperforms every other part of the economy. It delivers 214,000 direct and supported jobs. That is a very positive message; it means one in four of all jobs in the economy. Eighty-five thousand people are directly employed in manufacturing. It is the largest single employment sector in my constituency of Mid Ulster. Manufacturing delivers a £9.9 billion total gross value added contribution to GDP, which is around 30% of the economy. Productivity, at 55,700, is 38% higher than Northern Ireland's average, with advanced manufacturing's contribution being 25% higher still than that. Manufacturing accounts for almost two thirds of all export sales, some £6 billion. Manufacturers invested £254 million —

Mr Speaker: The Member must conclude his remarks.

Mr McGlone: — in R&D in 2014 and the manufacturing sector attracted £900 million in foreign direct investment between 2010 and 2014. There is clearly room for improvement. I support the motion as it stands.

Mr Allister: Mr Speaker, I trust that you will rebuke the Member for North Belfast, the Chief Whip of Sinn Féin, for her flagrant breach of the protocols and courtesies of the House when she walked in front of the previous Member to speak and between you and him when he was speaking.

No economy can hope to succeed and grow without the engine house that is the manufacturing industry. The service industry and everything else have their place, but, without manufacturing providing the strong backbone that grows an economy, no economy will reach its potential. Manufacturing, therefore, is central to the growth of our economy or any economy.

It is good to hear sound bites about prosperity in the manufacturing sector. I am not putting the manufacturing sector down in any way, but I have to be mindful, representing North Antrim, of the context in my constituency of two dire blows in the devastating losses at JTI and Michelin. It would be nice if the Minister had something positive to tell us today about the replacement of those jobs in North Antrim. It would be a timely occasion in the House, not outside it, to do that. We live in hope in that regard.

I will address a couple of the major shackles on our manufacturing. It is my hope that, come 23 June, some of those shackles will be cut because we will be liberated from the restraints of being in the European Union. It is a fact that, although only 17% of manufacturing businesses in Northern Ireland export to the EU, every manufacturing business is subject to the same market restraints, regulations and Brussels restraints as apply across the market, as if they were all exporting when they are not. One of the consequences of leaving the EU would be to liberate instantly those businesses that have been subject to unnecessary EU regulation for 40 years, even though they never exported to the EU.

One of the follies of membership of the EU is that all businesses are subject to the regulations as if they exported, even though they do not. The greater bulk of our produce is sold either locally or to GB. In manufacturing export terms, only a quarter of our produce is exported to other EU countries, yet we are subject to the entirety of that burden and restraint.

For manufacturing, the second reason why I hope that the people of the United Kingdom have the good sense to leave the EU is that it will liberate us in terms of trade as a nation. The minority of our trade is with the EU. The growth in our trade is with the growth parts of the world outside the EU, yet, because we are in the EU, we are not permitted as a nation to make a single trade agreement with any of the countries with which our trade is growing. Our hands are tied behind our back as a consequence of growing our trade and because of our membership of the EU. Far from the scare stories, the scaremongering and the ludicrous things that the Prime Minister and people from the Chancellor down have been saying, 23 June presents a marvellous opportunity for manufacturing, industry and this society to liberate themselves from the dead hand of Brussels to free ourselves —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Allister: — from that moribund part of the world — the EU — and to follow the growth that is outside. If we do that, our manufacturing has a prosperous future rather than one hindered by the present regulations of Brussels.

1.30 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to apologise for walking past Patsy McGlone and ask Patsy to accept my apology for walking in front of him.

I do not think that there is any need to conduct a whole investigation into a protocol, if you would not mind just accepting my apologies. Thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: Apologies noted. I draw all Members' attention to the fact that, when a Member is on his or her feet, you ought not to walk in front of him or her. It is early days, but let us adhere to the procedure.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): I welcome the opportunity to respond to today's debate. I congratulate Members, including the mover of the motion, on their maiden speeches and thank Members for their kind words about my appointment. I am very glad that the first debate in the new Assembly is focused on the economy, and I think that it shows the centrality of my new Department in taking Northern Ireland forward.

There is something of a perception that Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector is in the doldrums. I understand that, and perhaps it is because of the demise of many of our traditional heavy industries over the last number of decades. Industries such as shipbuilding and textiles have either gone completely or are a shadow of their former selves. The decisions by JTI and Michelin, which were referred to several times today, to close their plants in Ballymena, along with the news of 1,000 job losses at Bombardier and, more recently, job losses at Seagate in Londonderry, are not only devastating to those who are directly affected but exacerbate the belief that manufacturing in Northern Ireland is in poor shape. That perception does not tally with careful analysis of the performance of the sector.

Whether it is jobs, sales, exports or output, our manufacturing sector is performing very well. Figures for 2015 show that employment in the sector is now at 80,000. This is the first time since 2008 that the sector has had 80,000 jobs. Sales by manufacturing firms in 2014 stood at £18.1 billion, which is an increase of 1.7% on the previous year. Manufacturing exports in 2015 were £6.3 billion, which is up £350 million on 2014. Manufacturing output was up 2.4% in the last year. Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector has been outperforming the rest of the UK, with output since 2009 up by 19% compared with 6.9% across the whole of the United Kingdom. If manufacturing were indeed in decline, none of those statistics would show the improvements that they do. I would not for a second suggest that the sector is not challenged, but it is not in the crisis that some suggest.

I, for one, am proud of the many achievements and successes of our manufacturing companies, including the fact that one in three of London's red buses are made at Wrightbus in Ballymena; that 40% of the world's mobile crushing and screening equipment is made in Northern Ireland; that over 30% of the world's airline seats are manufactured at B/E Aerospace in Kilkeel; that one in 10 cholesterol tests worldwide are made by Randox; and that a quarter of all computer read/write heads are made at the aforementioned Seagate.

I want to make it clear that, as Minister for the Economy, and as encouraged by Mr Storey in his contribution, I will always be a champion and a cheerleader for local industry. I will not stick my head in the sand and deny that there are difficulties, but neither will I talk down any sector and seek to suggest that a crisis exists when it does not. Manufacturing is and will remain a crucial and central part

of our local economy. It accounts for 11% of all Northern Ireland's jobs and contributes 16% to the total economic output. While there has been some bad news of job losses, there has also been good news in the manufacturing sector, with, for example, 110 jobs announced at CDE Global in Cookstown in March. It is encouraging that the Economic Policy Centre at Ulster University forecasts that employment growth in manufacturing will account for around 10% of the 40,000 additional jobs in the local economy over the period to 2025.

There are many who will call upon my Department to provide support for the manufacturing sector, so it might be useful if I sketch out some of the assistance given in recent years. In the last Programme for Government period, from 2011 to 2016, Invest NI provided £270 million of assistance to manufacturing businesses, which, in turn, unlocked £1.9 billion of total investment and created over 13,000 new jobs.

To compete in the global economy, it is vital that Northern Ireland has in place a strong and efficient route for the delivery of high-level professional and technical skills — a point made by my predecessor as skills Minister that will, I am sure, repeatedly be made. My Department is in the process of implementing major reforms initiated in the last term of Northern Ireland's professional and technical education and training landscape through a new system of apprenticeships and youth training.

Another way in which we have been supporting manufacturing is through the competence centre programme. This helps to facilitate and encourage knowledge exchange between industry and academia in collaborative programmes in connected health, sustainable energy, advanced engineering and agrifoods. This work will support the development and commercialisation of new technologies. Invest NI has committed £5 million of funding per centre over five years. Currently, 85 companies are participating across the four competence centres, and 43 collaborative projects have been initiated.

The Executive as a whole have continued to keep in place the policy of industrial derating, which provides businesses, including many manufacturing ones, with a 70% reduction in their rates bills. That policy has kept over £300 million in the pockets of local businesses in the last five years.

Business costs are an important aspect of Northern Ireland's competitiveness. Research has shown that, on balance, even when taking into account some areas where we have higher prices, we are a highly cost-competitive location compared with the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Overall, it has been estimated that business costs were typically about 84% of those in the whole of the UK and 95% of those in the Republic of Ireland, driven mainly by lower labour and property costs.

I am well aware that, for some of our larger companies, energy costs are a significant component of overall manufacturing costs, but we should remember that cost challenges for the sector do not relate solely to energy. I am grateful to the energy and manufacturing advisory group (EMAG) for its comprehensive report and recommendations on actions that might be taken to alleviate energy cost pressures on the sector. Energy markets are complex, and actions taken in one area can have unintended consequences elsewhere. The group's

report serves to illustrate those points with a diverse range of policy and operational recommendations. My Department and I are looking closely at the recommendations that have been put forward. It will be important to give careful consideration to the EMAG recommendations in the context of the wider strategic landscape and the Department's work to review and refocus the strategic energy framework.

The focus of the motion is the call for a manufacturing strategy. I am not convinced that a stand-alone manufacturing strategy is the right thing for Northern Ireland, and let me try to explain why. My Department is leading on the development of a refocused economic strategy that will accompany the final version of the Programme for Government. A key component of informing that refocus is a strong and robust evidence base. MATRIX, which is the Northern Ireland science industry panel, was created to provide advice and guidance on the high-tech business sectors and emerging market opportunities that we should exploit to make a major impact on economic growth in Northern Ireland. MATRIX has identified strategic subsectors in major global markets that we will look to further exploit. Those subsectors, which are mainly manufacturing-based, are in the broader global markets of telecoms and ICT; life and health sciences; agrifood; advanced materials; and advanced engineering. As a small region, Northern Ireland does not have the scale to compete in every aspect of those markets. That is why MATRIX drills down to identify areas of strength and opportunity. For example, in life and health sciences we will seek to exploit capability in key subsectors, such as precision medicine, clinical trials, diagnostics and health data analytics — all of which are, of course, areas with high-end manufacturing capabilities.

That level of attention to key subsectors has also ensured that we are well placed to know our technology strengths and market capabilities in the context of European smart specialisation. Indeed, it is widely considered that Northern Ireland has the most detailed understanding of its leading industries and, therefore, the key manufacturing subsectors of any UK region. That gives our economic policy in this area considerable focus, and we continue to build on this evidence base all the time.

MATRIX's work also reflects the fact that sectors are increasingly dependent on one another; in fact, some of the most important emerging opportunities are in spaces where sectors overlap. We must not forget, for example, that services and manufacturing have become increasingly intertwined and we now have many professionals, such as software engineers, designers, accountants and scientists, working in the manufacturing sector. It is appropriate to look at all industries collectively while considering a strategy to grow the private sector.

Our manufacturing base is, because of our strong history of manufacturing, still very diverse. There are activities ranging from aerospace, automotive, electronics, pharmaceuticals and chemicals to heavy plant machinery, agritech equipment and construction products, to name but a few. You will appreciate that there is not a one-size-fits-all support solution. What will work for the small firm that is cutting, welding and making farm trailers is very different from what will work for the company manufacturing sophisticated composite components for the aerospace sector. It is important that that diversity is recognised, and I

believe the best way that government can help is to create the environment that allows manufacturing companies to move forward with policies and support tailored in a way that maximises the benefit to the economy.

In essence, for those looking for a strategy, we already have one: it is called the economic strategy. It will be refreshed and refocused in line with the new PFG. I can assure the House that it will highlight the particular significance of manufacturing to the local economy and will set a clear direction for ensuring that the full gamut of appropriate policy instruments is in place to support the sector, namely a pipeline of talent to meet the skills needs of the sector now and in the future; investment in economic infrastructure; a support environment for innovation and knowledge exchange; business growth support measures; assistance with market development and exporting; and a regulatory environment that is good for business as well as protecting the interests of employees.

Before I close, I want to say that I am delighted that we now have a date and a rate for the devolution of corporation tax. A rate of 12.5%, effective from 2018, will provide a major stimulus for the economy and support for all sectors. I am confident that the ability to lower the rate of corporation tax will help to grow the entire private sector, including the manufacturing sector, as we seek to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy towards greater private-sector and value-added growth.

To summarise, while I recognise that manufacturing has experienced some recent setbacks, the sector remains at the very heart of business and industry in Northern Ireland. Our region's strong manufacturing heritage remains intact, with a higher percentage concentration of manufacturing businesses in Northern Ireland than in the UK as a whole. We can remain confident that it will continue to have a significant role to play in the Northern Ireland economy as we seek to meet the challenges of global competitiveness. The debate today has been informative, and I can support the amendment that calls for the development of the manufacturing sector to be fully considered and reflected in the Executive's refocused economic strategy.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the amendment, and I welcome the new Minister for the Economy, Simon Hamilton, to his post. I wish him well for his time in office, and I trust that he will remember the good people of North Down during that time.

I believe that the most productive way to go forward on this issue is, as the Minister has said, to include the development of manufacturing in the Executive's new economic strategy. That is why we tabled the amendment. Our manufacturing sector has been at the very backbone of our economy for many years. With our mixture of a very highly skilled and educated workforce and a rich industrial and enterprising heritage, we have a proud and able sector that we all want to see flourish in the future. While challenges continue to exist, we see our economy continuing to recover from the global recession, which naturally had an impact on our open economy. I am delighted that outcome number one in the draft Programme for Government is that we prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy. That puts the economy in its rightful place at number one, right at the heart of our priorities for this country in the future. The economy must continue to be the number one priority for our Executive and, indeed, for Invest NI.

Our manufacturing sector is vital in sustaining and growing our economy. We need to grow our private sector as we seek to rebalance our economy and make Northern Ireland the number one place to do business and to invest. Making the right conditions to improve our economic competitiveness and building on our export market are key to truly developing the sector. We must continue the preparatory work to get the conditions right on the ground for our new rate of corporation tax, and I welcome the statement today by the Minister on that. We must ensure that we maximise the potential that that lever gives us for our manufacturing sector.

It is vital that we equip, train and skill our workforce to ensure that we can compete for sustainable foreign direct investment and continue, as we must, to give robust support to Invest NI.

1.45 pm

As I wind on the debate, I will summarise some of the points made by the various Members who spoke. I think that we would all commend Stephen Aiken for his maiden speech. He wants to see a change away from the public to the private sector. He registered his concern and the need for stronger economic growth. He also wants to see a joined-up manufacturing strategy, with targets and benchmarking. It is important that there are targets and benchmarking in place to monitor how we are doing. He made the point about the need for an uplift in R&D, something that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment looked at in detail.

My colleague Gordon Lyons made the point — it is a very good one — that we need to continue to sustain the jobs that already exist in our Province by making sure that proper funding is in place to stop the leakages and losses that happen. However, he also recognised the continuing growth: we are growing faster than other parts of the UK.

Conor Murphy, the Chairman of the new Economy Committee, made various points about the need for the support of a manufacturing strategy. To be fair, he recognised the need to engage with the Committee and all stakeholders to come up with an inclusive strategy.

I think that we would all commend Sinead Bradley for her maiden speech as well. It was very impressive. We recognise the work of her father in the Chamber and respect the work that he did over the years. I am sure that she will work well with other Members for South Down, including my colleague, Jim Wells. She made points about the need for strong support for the south Down area and for the local GDP, which is so important, and about setting targets for competitive energy prices, which is also very important.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Dunne: Unfortunately, I have little time. Stephen Farry, the former Employment and Learning Minister, made very good points in relation to the need to upgrade our skills and recognised the different views on whether life sciences, engineering and the agrifood sector be included.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Robin Swann to conclude and wind on the debate. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr Swann: It is a pleasure to wind on the first Opposition debate of the new mandate in the Northern Ireland

Assembly. I congratulate and thank my party colleague Steve Aiken for bringing it forward.

Some of the Members from the left tried to portray the debate and the motion as talking Northern Ireland down. It is far from it, and I want to make that clear from the outset. Mr Aiken even said that this was not about manufacturing being in a sunset in Northern Ireland. The ambition and drive were summed up by Ms Bradley when she said that the debate was about raising ambition for the manufacturing industry in Northern Ireland.

The Minister quoted statistics, but I think, as Mr Aiken pointed out, 13% of our GDP comes from manufacturing at this time. We clearly should have a target of 20% of GDP from manufacturing in Northern Ireland. That is something that we should strive to attain, as is recognised by all the stakeholders in Northern Ireland and in the joint press release from Manufacturing NI and Unite the Union. Very rarely do we see joint press releases from employers and unions about good news. Unite the Union said about this motion:

“Only a dedicated strategy will bring the focus and oversight necessary to ensure real action to meet the challenges facing our producers.”

Manufacturing NI said:

“Employers and trade unions have a vital role to play in terms of developing and overseeing delivery of such a strategy — we stand ready to play that role.”

Both Manufacturing NI and Unite the Union asked every party in the Assembly to back this motion for a single manufacturing strategy for Northern Ireland. It is something that they have been calling for for the past year and a half to two years. I do not have clarity on why the DUP and Sinn Féin have had a difficulty with a stand-alone manufacturing strategy. The amendment wants to make it part of a “new economic strategy”. Mr Lyons stated that he hoped to see manufacturing at the centre of the strategy. By proposing a stand-alone manufacturing strategy, we want to ensure that manufacturing is given the place that it duly deserves in the Northern Ireland economy.

I want to move on to some of the statistics raised in the Chamber today by the Minister on the great successes we have in manufacturing and the current numbers employed: over 80,000 at this time. Let us not forget that those figures include the large number of people in my constituency who still work for JTI Gallagher and who have not lost their jobs yet. There are blows and job losses coming to manufacturing and employers that have not been included in those statistics.

This motion is not about talking down Northern Ireland manufacturing or portraying it as being in a state of crisis; it is about giving a reality check to our new Government to ensure that manufacturing is given its rightful place, and I hope that it is not buried in an economic strategy but is given its rightful place. I ask all Members in the House today, no matter what they have committed to do, to actually listen to the stakeholders out there. I think it was a point that Mr Murphy made, as Chair of the Committee for the Economy, when he said that the Committee wanted to listen to all the stakeholders. Two of the major stakeholders in manufacturing have spoken — Manufacturing NI and Unite the Union — and they have

made it clear that they want a stand-alone manufacturing strategy.

I will move on to some of the contributions and I want to come back to Mr Lyons. There were some sly comments made about the potential of my stance on Europe, but we should reflect on what Mr Dunne said in the Economy Committee the other week; he was concerned about what would happen in Northern Ireland when we left the European Union. Maybe the DUP needs to look among its own members rather than looking this way first. That may not be as clear —

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: I will gladly give way.

Mr Lyons: I can assure the Member that, as far as the Democratic Unionist Party is concerned, it is united on this issue —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Lyons: Perhaps the Member would like to outline his position on membership of the European Union.

Mr Swann: I would be happy if he asked Mr Dunne about his position, because we have it in the record —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Swann: My apologies, Chair, I was trying to address and allay fears.

I suppose one of the things that is different, possibly, about this party when compared to the rest of them is that, when our party executive passed its motion, which was actually taken by the executive of our party and was not made by a hierarchy that did not consult its members, that although, on balance, the Ulster Unionist Party feels that we are better within the European Union, members are allowed their own free thought.

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: I have given way to the Member once, but I want to progress because —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way? — [*Laughter.*]

Mr Swann: I will give way once.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Of course, he is trying to make as good a job as he can of explaining the Ulster Unionists' position. He must have found it extremely difficult when he was canvassing in the Assembly elections to get that point across, when he made it clear so many times that he was for voting to leave, while his party is for voting to remain.

Mr Swann: Can I ask the Member where I canvassed to leave? I ask the Member if he has any proof of that? When I was asked the question on the doorstep, I told the truth at all times, maybe unlike some of the other candidates that were canvassing in North Antrim.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: No, I have given way once; I will move on.

I will go back to the motion, because I know that the Business Committee and the Commission have taken

legal advice that Europe is not to be debated in the House, although some, no more so than myself, would like it to be.

Moving on to some of the other contributions, Mr Farry, the previous Employment and Learning Minister, seemed to cast aspersions this way that I used to be critical of strategies that came out of the Department for Employment and Learning —

Dr Farry: Your leader was.

Mr Swann: Maybe I should point out that we were not just critical of the strategies coming out. It was the 13 strategies that the Department held that had 233 recommendations and the 14 implementation plans that the Department held that had 197 recommendations. So a Department, which actually had 430 recommendations, that was done away with maybe gives some weight, credence and some acknowledgement that other parties in the House have seen the very good and valuable work that came forward. When it comes to those strategies, maybe the economic inactivity strategy, if it is fully implemented and fully funded, would be a supporting mechanism to the manufacturing strategy that we have put forward today.

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

I have made the case for why we see that a stand-alone manufacturing strategy should be brought forward as part of the Programme for Government. What concerns me is the talk that the Programme for Government is going out for consultation. The Chair of the Economy Committee said that stakeholders will be listened to, but when the Opposition tabled a motion asking that a manufacturing strategy be central to the Programme for Government, the main Government party tabled an amendment to demonstrate that that would not be the case and that it would be part of an economic strategy. So, as far as we are concerned, the Programme for Government consultation has finished and the programme has been decided. This place can be clear that a stand-alone manufacturing strategy will not be part of this Programme for Government because the amendment tabled by the DUP clearly demonstrates that.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 58; Noes 37.

AYES

Mr Anderson, Ms Archibald, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Fearon, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Lord Morrow, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Easton and Mr Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mrs S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Hanna, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Mullan, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Aiken and Mr Swann.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for the Economy to include the development of the manufacturing sector in the Executive's new economic strategy.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(3A)

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we move to the next item of business on the Order Paper, I have received notification from members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 6 June 2016 be extended to no later than 9.30 pm. — [Mr Swann.]

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As the motion has been carried, the House may sit until 9.30 pm this evening if necessary.

Executive Committee Business

Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours for this debate. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister will have 40 minutes between proposing and winding up. All other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the draft Programme for Government framework 2016-2021 as agreed by the Executive on 26 May 2016.

Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy — or Mrs Principal Deputy Speaker, I should say. I apologise.

As today is the first full plenary sitting of the new mandate, it is fitting that we should consider the draft Programme for Government framework, which was agreed by the Executive at their very first meeting. Today is a day of firsts, and it is a time of change. There are many new faces around the Chamber, and I take the opportunity to congratulate all the Members on their election. I look forward to working with everyone in a spirit of cooperation as, together, we take on the serious responsibilities, expectations and challenges that go with being a Member of the Assembly.

We now have a more streamlined structure, with nine Departments where there were previously 12, and provision for an official Opposition. It is time to move Northern Ireland forward with a completely new way of doing politics. It is time for a new, better and innovative approach. There will be no more working in silos; instead, our nine new Departments will work together to deliver the best possible outcomes for Northern Ireland.

Over the years we have faced many significant challenges. They have been wide-ranging and have encompassed many areas of life, including keeping pace with a rapidly changing global economy; improving the health of our citizens; giving our children the best possible start in life; and dealing, of course, with the hurt and pain caused by our past. If the solutions were easy, they would have been implemented long ago and we could all sit back and put our feet up, but the simple truth is that there are no easy solutions. That is why, when the parties to the Fresh Start Agreement met in autumn last year, we began to look at how we could do things better in the future, how we could make the breakthrough on the difficult issues, the solutions to which have eluded previous Administrations, and how we could meet the hopes and expectations of our people, who, too often, have felt let down by how our institutions have performed.

We agreed that a new approach should first identify desired societal outcomes and look at what should be done to achieve them. This outcomes-based approach is a widely recognised model that has been used with success in other jurisdictions, including parts of the United States, Finland and, nearer to home, Scotland. At its heart, an outcomes-based Programme for Government is designed, as the name suggests, to be focused on outcomes, not on inputs or processes. “Outcomes-focused” means being citizens-focused and evidence-based. It requires a

collective approach, looking to draw in all the contributions in government and, importantly, beyond government to make the biggest and best difference possible. It makes a real statement of shared purpose at political, administrative and societal level.

Previous Programmes for Government tended to focus on the things over which the Executive could exercise control, and, for that reason, commitments were typically expressed in terms of amounts of money to be invested or the number of projects to be run; in other words, they were based on inputs and outputs that could be measured but with only limited scope to assess actual need and impact or, importantly, whether they were making any real difference.

The new Programme for Government (PFG) will be different, and represents a first for Northern Ireland. We have listened to the contributions from the Carnegie UK Trust and its round table on well-being. We have been sensitive to the needs articulated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies. We listened to those who represent our younger and older generations when they asked us to address their needs. By choosing to focus on outcomes, we direct attention onto things that define whether we are progressing as a society. It points us towards actions that will reduce poverty, address inequality, boost the economy and enliven our cultural heartbeat.

2.15 pm

The new programme has a relevance that stretches far beyond this new Assembly term. In addition to merely fulfilling our statutory obligations, we will in future be able to target those things that make real improvements to our quality of life. A key feature of the new programme is its dependence on collaborative working between organisations and groups across the public, voluntary and private sectors. It is also a programme in which individuals and communities can play an active part. The Executive will, therefore, work collectively to deliver this programme and to drive work across departmental and sectoral boundaries. Individual Ministers will play their part by overseeing their Departments' contribution and ensuring that it is part of a joined-up effort where the focus is on the outcome and not simply on their Department. As I said, no more working in silos.

I will now turn briefly to the draft Programme for Government framework itself. The Executive have identified 14 strategic outcomes which, if achieved, will bring about the societal well-being they want to see. To put it another way, it is what our lives feel like when, for example, good health, good education, good houses, good communities and good jobs are put together. These outcomes touch on every aspect of our government. Just to give some flavour, and quoting from a few of them, they envisage us prospering:

“through a strong, competitive regionally balanced economy”,

enjoying “long, healthy ... lives”, and having:

“a safe community where we respect the law, and each other”,

where:

“we care for others and we help those in need ... We give our children ... the best start in life”,

and we create:

“a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.”

I was elected on the basis of my five-point plan for Northern Ireland. It was about creating more and better jobs, having a better health system and investing £1 billion over the next five years. It was about raising standards in our education system and ensuring that no child is left behind. It was about making sure we have a good infrastructure, both physical and digital, across Northern Ireland, and it was about creating sustainable budgets for families. I believe the outcomes in the Programme for Government framework will deliver on this plan.

The 42 indicators in the Programme for Government framework will support the outcomes and are clear statements for change. Each indicator is accompanied by a measure, mostly derived from existing statistics, which will show how we are performing and where, if required, we need to take corrective action. These include things such as increasing healthy life expectancy, reducing education inequalities, improving the supply of suitable housing, increasing the proportion of people working in good jobs, reducing unemployment, reducing poverty, increasing environmental sustainability and increasing reconciliation. Again, those provide just a flavour.

In the next eight weeks, we will provide opportunities for people to have their say on the Programme for Government framework. A public consultation process has already started, and I encourage everyone to respond and make their voice heard. Work has already commenced in Departments to identify key stakeholders and partners and to put together the plans that will detail the specific programmes, projects, actions and legislative proposals needed to progress against the outcomes. The results of the initial consultation on the PFG framework will be analysed and reported to the Executive, together with any recommended changes, before the end of the summer. A further public consultation on the detailed actions will then be undertaken alongside the Budget during the autumn. The aim is to achieve Executive approval and Assembly endorsement of the full Programme for Government by the end of 2016.

There will, of course, be challenges along the way, not least in coordinating the Programme for Government with the Budget process, recognising that budgetary constraints will continue to be an issue. The programme will also need to be conjoined with a refreshed economic strategy, a new investment strategy and a social policy strategy that will clearly set out how we will tackle poverty.

The Programme for Government framework agreed by the Executive provides a basis for transformational change in the things that really matter. It has all the ingredients to tackle our most intractable problems and make life better for all. I have said that this Executive will be one of delivery. I look forward to the development of the Programme for Government over the remainder of the year and to seeing its delivery over the course of this mandate. Most of all, I look forward to our Executive and, indeed, this Assembly working together to make a difference to do the things we could not do before and to move Northern Ireland forward.

I commend the Programme for Government framework, and I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Nesbitt: Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you very much, and I thank the First Minister for the introduction to this debate.

My colleague Steve Aiken made clear in opening the previous debate that this is an historic day. It is the first time in 44 years that the voice of official Opposition has been heard in this Building and in this Chamber. In opening the debate on manufacturing, Mr Aiken gave you a view of how positive we intend to be in bringing forward alternative ideas and strategies. What Steve was doing was not highlighting a sector in crisis; rather, he was highlighting a very important sector that could do better, and he was providing ways and suggestions for how that could be brought about.

Now we come to the point where we are not proposing something but are reacting to something else: a Programme for Government framework from our Executive. I will make it clear that what I would like the Ulster Unionists to be is constructive in their opposition. That means scrutiny. Let me put this on record: scrutiny is not synonymous with criticism. Scrutiny means simply taking a detailed look at what is being proposed, which in this case is a framework Programme for Government. Who knows, perhaps the Executive will produce something that is so good, so perfect, so well-fashioned and brilliantly communicated that we cannot say a word against it. If that is the case, be assured that, where praise is due, we will not be shy in offering it. But equally, when we believe criticism is the right way to go, we will be critical.

So, what do we think of the Programme for Government framework? We were not involved in any of the workshops or processes that led to the publication of this document, so our reference point has to be found elsewhere. It is in another document: the so-called Fresh Start document. Paragraph 61, which I will now read into the official record, of that says:

“After the Assembly meets following an election and before the FM-DFM are selected and the d’Hondt process runs, representatives of the parties who are entitled to take up places in the Executive and who confirm their intention to do so will meet to resolve the draft Programme for Government.”

That is the draft Programme for Government, not the draft Programme for Government framework.

Under “Next steps”, which is also in paragraph 61, it says:

“A Programme for Government framework adopting a more outcomes-based approach will be developed. Initial workshops will take place during the autumn with a view to having the framework prepared by the end of April 2016.”

How telling, Principal Deputy Speaker. It is clear the intention was always to have three iterations of the Programme for Government: first of all a framework; then a draft programme; then the solid-state Programme for Government. But it was also clear that this document — the framework — was to be prepared, finished and ready for parties thinking of entering government to start the work of a draft on 6 May, with the two weeks set aside for finishing that work and producing a draft Programme

for Government, not this framework. This framework is document 1 of three. We are supposed to be at the second stage today. Perhaps in his concluding remarks the deputy First Minister can make clear why they did not follow the process that they spelt out in the Fresh Start document, which he and the First Minister think is the foundation for a different and better way of doing government here on the Stormont estate, because it is —

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I will certainly give way to the First Minister.

Mrs Foster: I am very glad that the Member has raised this issue, because it seems to be his one big issue that he keeps mentioning time and again. The Member has to accept, given that he was not involved in the workshop processes, that the process developed during those workshops. That meant that, when he came in after the election, we were at the stage where we came in. So, the process evolved from the Fresh Start Agreement. Then we got to the position we were in after the election, and then he found himself in a position, after one meeting, of deciding that he was not going to become involved in the Programme for Government discussions. That is what happened. There is no mystery about the issue. During those workshops, it was very clear that this would be the process that would be developed, and that is how it happened.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the First Minister for that explanation. She has not explained why she thought that it would be possible to produce a draft Programme for Government before the First Minister and deputy First Minister were selected, but, as she says, we were not involved in the process.

We said that we would apply two tests, which would decide whether we were in or out of the Executive. Test one: was it a progressive Programme for Government? We found out at that first meeting that we would not be able to answer that because what was going to be produced at the end of the fortnight was this framework, not the draft Programme for Government. So, that was a fail. We also wanted to know whether Sinn Féin and the DUP really wanted the smaller parties around the table. It was quite clear that the answer to that was also no. So, we are very happy in our position, out of the Executive and taking up the position of official Opposition.

We have a framework going out to consultation, and we have 14 outcomes. I want to make a bet here. One of the outcomes is:

"We have high quality public services".

Another outcome is:

"We have more people working in better jobs".

Another is:

"We enjoy long, healthy, active lives".

I bet that, at the end of the consultation, nobody is going to suggest that we should have low-quality public services, that we should have fewer people working in better jobs or that we should enjoy shorter, less healthy and inactive lives. This is simply motherhood and apple pie.

I hear First Minister Foster say that this mandate has to be about delivery. Through you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I remind First Minister Foster and First Minister McGuinness that that is exactly what First Minister Peter Robinson said about the 2011 mandate. In his words, 2007 to 2011 was about survival and about going full term as an Assembly and an Executive, but 2011 through to 2016 had to be about delivery. It is clear from what these two First Ministers are saying that the Executive did not deliver between 2011 and 2016. So, while I can welcome a focus on delivery, I have to say this: we have heard it before; we will not be fooled again.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is Mr Christopher Stalford's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Stalford: I am delighted to speak in this debate on the Programme for Government framework — a document in which the Executive have outlined their priorities for moving Northern Ireland forward in the right direction. I believe that politics is about people. It is about doing what is best for people. It is about serving people and the communities that we come from. It is about using the tools at our disposal for the betterment of all the people. We in the Democratic Unionist Party are about the business of using those tools — the tools of government — to build a better future for the people of Northern Ireland. Others have elected to down tools. We heard some of that contribution earlier. Others have elected for the self-indulgence of opposition. In a democracy, I respect their right to do so, but I remind them that, at the end of the five years, there will not be one extra job nor one extra brick laid to develop the infrastructure of this country. There will not be one additional classroom assistant to their credit. It is the Government of Northern Ireland who are about the business of improving Northern Ireland.

2.30 pm

As this is a maiden speech, some customaries have to be abided by. First, I would like to place on record my thanks for the work that Mr Jimmy Spratt undertook as an Assembly Member in this place. He served his country not only as a MLA but as a policeman. The person whom I directly succeed is of course Mr Michael McGimpsey. He and I served together on Belfast City Council for nine years. He was a formidable opponent, but I can honestly say that I do not think that I ever had a cross word with him or doubted his commitment to the people he represented.

I am very proud to come from the constituency of South Belfast. It is the cultural and academic heart of Northern Ireland. Many of the leading institutions in our academic world, such as Queen's University of course, and in our cultural world, such as the Lyric Theatre and Grand Opera House, are based in my constituency. In many ways, this is a stereotype of what South Belfast is: the truth is that many people there do not conform to that stereotype. Many of the communities that I have been sent here to represent have not enjoyed the benefits of the recent economic recovery and growth. I think of communities like Taughmonagh, Sandy Row, Donegall Pass and Annadale, where I was born. Those people need to see the benefits of government working on their behalf in an outcome-driven way as has been outlined by the First Minister today.

The Programme for Government contains no fewer than 42 indicators of success and 42 different measures. I am glad that they exist, that they are down in black and white and that we can be judged at the end of the five-year term on how we deliver on those measures. The content of the document has been mentioned. I actually think that it is a good idea not to have a document such as this cast, like the laws of the Medes and the Persians, in stone and unchangeable. Many of the key stakeholders in the process whom I have spoken to have welcomed the fact that the Government are actually listening, are prepared to take their views onboard and will, hopefully, reflect the changes that they want to see in the final draft of the Programme for Government when it is produced. That is what sensible Governments do: they listen to experts in the field and key stakeholders and then draw their plans together. I think, therefore, that some of the language that has been used around the Programme for Government framework is unnecessarily negative.

I believe that, under the leadership of the Executive, we have a unique chance to build a better Northern Ireland, making it the very best part of the very best country in the world to live in. Some of the measures that have been set down have special resonance in my constituency. In particular, I think of the need to tackle health inequalities. One could get on a bus at the City Hall and get off in Sandy Row, where a person's average life expectancy is 10 years less than that of a person who lives at Finaghy crossroads. This is 2016, and that situation is entirely unacceptable to me as an elected representative for the people of South Belfast. The fact that there is a commitment in this document to tackling those issues is something that I think will be welcomed by my constituents.

I think of education. I am very privileged and fortunate to have passed the 11-plus and gone through Wellington College, Belfast. South Belfast has some of the finest schools in Northern Ireland. We must recognise the fact that too many young people from the working-class Protestant background that I come from have been failed by the system and left behind. I do not believe that that means that we should tear down that which works best.

I do not believe that we should destroy the grammar schools, but I do believe — I welcome the fact that it is in here — that there needs to be a concentrated focus on ending educational inequality. It cannot be right in this day and age that so many of our young people leave school without even the most basic educational attainment.

I am glad to support the motion. I am in politics to work for the people who sent me here, to secure the best outcomes for the constituency that I was born and reared in and to do my best, with all colleagues here, for the people of South Belfast.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak primarily as the Chair of the Economy Committee and then on an individual basis.

The Economy Committee was briefed last Wednesday by the Department's permanent secretary, and, of course, the Programme for Government was one of the key topics raised. There has not been sufficient time for the Committee to take a collective view on this or on the process for the draft Programme for Government, so I am not in a position to comment on the Committee's

position, but, as Chair, I can outline the approach that the Committee will take. There is huge responsibility on the Committee to ensure that the Economy Department's commitments and contributions to the Programme for Government reflect the pivotal nature of the role that the Department has to play in the step change that is necessary to build the levels of prosperity and economy that are required to give all the people whom we represent the lives that we would wish for them.

The Committee has already asked the Department to set out how the actions for which it is responsible in the draft framework, either directly, indirectly or in partnership with others, will contribute to the strategic vision that the programme represents. The Committee looks forward to engaging closely with the Economy Minister and his Department to ensure that the levers and drivers available to him are fully utilised to support a Programme for Government that will provide the prosperity that we need in the North. The Committee will also engage closely with all the stakeholder groups within the Department's remit to ensure that their voices are heard in the consultation on the draft Programme for Government. One of the strengths of the new approach to the Programme for Government is the consultation that is built into it.

The Committee is clear in its view that the new configuration of Departments must end the silos that existed previously, where officials worked in isolation, making the joined-up, cooperative, partnership government that we need so much harder to achieve. The Committee heard from the permanent secretary that the new culture in government would disrespect boundaries and overcome budget rivalry. Obviously, we intend to hold him, his Department and the Minister to account to ensure that that proposition, which has been long promised, is eventually achieved through this new approach to doing government. The Economy Committee is up for the challenge of doing all of that, and members will be watching to ensure that the promises of a strategic, cooperative approach are realised. We will also perform our scrutiny and policy development roles to the best of our ability to ensure that the draft Programme for Government emerges from the consultation as a robust and collaborative blueprint for improving the economy and the lives of our people.

I will speak now as a party member. As I said, one of the key strengths of this new way of doing the Programme for Government is the consultation process that is built in to it. Previously, consultation was seen by many stakeholders as a tick-box exercise that was a legal requirement in a consultation period, and it went through with minimal change. It appears that some of those who criticised the Programme for Government — I am keen to hear what others have to say — have offered no alternative except for those criticisms. In fairness to them, they were not involved in the origins of the process, but I wonder whether they simply want to go back to the old type Programme for Government, which was largely pre-cooked. It seems to be the expectation of the leader of the Opposition that we would get a largely pre-cooked Programme for Government that would go out for the normal statutory period of consultation and come back with minor amendments, as has been the case since 1998 under Executives that were led by the Member's party. We had a pre-cooked Programme for Government, minor amendments were put in place, and then there was

a Budget, which was almost a separate process that did not align itself to that. For me, the great strength of this is that you have broad draft heads, and the people who are involved in the development of that know the process. I could take the criticism of the leader of the Opposition in that he was not involved; I find it a little strange that others who were involved in the process now criticise something that they did not object to throughout its formation. Rather, there was a broad heads of agreement, if you like.

The leader of the Opposition described that type of objective as “motherhood and apple pie”. Having read some of the uncosted party manifestos presented in the run-up to the last election, I think that they would be a very strong judge of motherhood and apple pie. Nonetheless, this process allows those involved at grass-roots level — the people at the coalface of delivering the type of change that the Programme for Government wants to effect — to put the meat on the bones by coming forward with much greater assistance. In turn, we will align budgets to meet that expectation and the key delivery targets. For me, this is a new way of doing it. After five years, it may prove not to have been the best way, but I would like to hear from those who consider that it is not what they think would be best. Are they simply arguing to go back to the old process? Do they think that it was perfect, or do they have an alternative vision that they want to offer? I would be interested to hear that.

Another key point and very welcome development is, if you like, the balance in the document between economic well-being and societal well-being. The placing of societal well-being at the heart of the Executive and their Programme for Government is a very important step. We — particularly me, in my role as chair of the Economy Committee — want to see economic growth. We want balanced regional economic growth, better jobs created and better employment opportunities for all our people, particularly our young people. However, an equally important area of the Executive’s work that we want to see addressed is the societal well-being of the people who need our assistance. The vulnerable and those who depend on our services must also be at the heart of the Programme for Government.

With those two developments, we have an important new way of doing business. I look forward to hearing those who do not agree provide alternatives. Make no mistake about it: there is a programme to be done over the next five years. Others have left the responsibility for doing that largely to my party and the DUP, and we must go forward because the people who elected us to the positions that we are in expect us to deliver for them, for their interests and for the communities that we represent. That is the job of work that we have here.

Mr Attwood: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you and all Members who are here today, especially the new Members and, in particular, those making their maiden speech. They include Mr Stalford, who made a fine speech — I expected no less — but, if I may make one comment on that speech, it is this: he is, of course, right to assert that opposition that is not about creating and constructing something different is self-indulgent. I agree with the Member in that regard; indeed, there was a time when the DUP might have been very much in the character of that. From our point of view, however, opposition is not about destroying,

demolishing or degrading something; it is about creating and constructing something better in this place — a Government in Northern Ireland for all the people — and, at the same time, demanding the right to dissent because, as somebody said, there is much to dissent from. That includes the content of some of this document.

Perhaps today or later, we will hear more about the theme of borrowing from the experience of other jurisdictions, not least the model of the Scottish Government, to inform government in this jurisdiction. If the First Minister is completely genuine about what she says is a new, better, innovative approach, let us embrace all that is new, innovative and better from the Scottish system. Will we, on the far side of this Programme for Government, have a situation like the one in Scotland, in which people are seconded into government for particular Bills or particularly complex areas? In the next Government, will we have a process like the one in Scotland, whereby amendments to Bills are invited into government very early in the legislative period in order to ensure that the external world — NGOs, business and the private sector — has an input in shaping the character of that legislation?

Are we going to have civil servants in Northern Ireland being told to have an open door to the external world when it comes to the shaping of government policy and practice? That is the paradigm shift that we are looking for.

2.45 pm

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. It is not just about wanting an outcomes-based approach, which is a better approach, but will we have the paradigm shift that sees government shaped in the image of something very different from the past and more shaped in the image of what happens in Scotland, which has served its people so well?

Mrs Foster: First of all, I welcome the fact that the Member has, given the previous contribution from Mr Murphy, recognised that the outcomes-based approach is absolutely the way that we should be moving forward. The second thing is that this is exactly the sort of debate that we want to engender around doing things differently. Officials who are here today will be taking a very clear note of everything that Members say, and we can then discuss how to move things forward. I very much welcome your speech on what is happening in Scotland because I find it very interesting.

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

Mr Attwood: It has been very interesting for the last 10 years and longer, but have Ministers, parties and Governments embraced all that which is different in order to demonstrate a paradigm shift? We will wait and see.

Of course I welcome an outcomes-based approach to government, but let us recognise what this document is: it is a hybrid document that is part outcomes-based and part upfront commitments. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister had to put in the foreword commitments already entered into arising from their commitment to Fresh Start because they realised, too late in the day to form an inclusive Government, that a Programme for Government that was outcomes-based would say to

people that it lacked ambition and that is why you had to put in the upfront commitments arising from Fresh Start in relation to the past, in relation to institutional abuse, and not least in relation to multiple flagship projects across the North. It is a hybrid document that is, on the one hand, outcomes-based but, on the other, about upfront commitments to our people. Why? Because our people wanted upfront commitments; they wanted to hear a message of ambition and leadership and scale and volume. They did not want an outcomes-based approach alone; they wanted something greater. That was the very argument that the SDLP made in the abortive Programme for Government negotiations. We asked for ambition, not just in relation to the flagship projects and much besides but in relation to poverty, regional imbalance and childcare. This document is characterised by warm words on much of that and not much else besides.

Listen to what it says about poverty. It says that the commitment will be to reduce the level of poverty. We have a catastrophic situation arising with child poverty. By 2020, it could possibly, in real and absolute terms, be over 30% and approaching 35%. What is the point in making a commitment to reducing poverty if you do not at least say what the scale of that ambition is? Reducing poverty without even using the word "significant" might mean very little in the real world of the people in all our constituencies who are suffering because of disadvantage and discrimination and so on and so forth.

The situation is similar with regional imbalance. A commitment, which is a good one, was entered into over the lifetime of this Government on the roll-out of money for the A5. That is good, but remember the background to that. There was a commitment in the last Programme for Government for 2011 to 2015 to deal with regional imbalance. At the end of that, five years later, how was regional imbalance dealt with? By more warm commitments on what might happen in the future. The measure of this Programme for Government, which is outcomes-based, should have been upfront commitments so that people in the west know that it will not just be nine miles of the A5 that will be built but that it will be the 50 or 60 miles needed to conclusively deal with regional imbalance.

Finally, Mr, I mean Madam, Speaker — I will eventually get used to the right phrasing; I apologise for that — there is the issue of victims. The word "victims" is not mentioned at all in relation to outcomes, indicators or measures. Can you imagine saying to the victims of the conflict and the victims of institutional abuse that that word is not even mentioned? Not even mentioned.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Attwood: I hope that this Programme for Government process measures up because it is very clear that it needs to.

Mrs Long: I welcome the opportunity to be able to speak on the Programme for Government framework, which is now out for public consultation. I want to focus my remarks on the process issues, without prejudice to our party's view of the content of the Programme for Government, which my colleague Stephen Farry will address in terms of the outcomes and indicators that have been proposed in the document.

I want to start, perhaps unusually from an opposition position, by endorsing the process that has been adopted

by the Executive in developing the Programme for Government on this occasion. It is a process based on best practice and is, in our view, a more coherent and strategic means of planning for this mandate. Whilst others have sought to dismiss the outcomes framework as simply motherhood and apple pie, we recognise that a focus on outcomes rather than activity is actually a better place to start if we want to see the lives of those we represent measurably improved during this mandate.

It is possible to do much and achieve little. Activity and delivery are not the same thing. Deciding what actions you want to take before you have decided what you are trying to achieve, and then judging your performance solely by how many of those actions you are delivering, regardless of whether they are achieving real improvement for people, is a fruitless and pointless exercise. We therefore welcome the move from departmentally driven action-based planning towards a more strategic outcomes-based approach. Such an approach offers the opportunity for more cross-departmental and cross-sectoral working and better and more efficient use of resources, and, by focusing on outcomes, it puts measurable improvement for our constituents at the heart of the process. Whether that opportunity is fully realised by the current Executive is, of course, another matter entirely.

The UUP has criticised this programme for being too high level — as I take from Mr Attwood's remarks that he has also done — and lacking in detail. The same party — the UUP — argued for, and claimed as a great achievement, the inclusion of two weeks' negotiations, which would lead to an approved Programme for Government. I know that they spent barely two minutes in those negotiations, but I would love to know exactly how much detail one would expect to be able to extract from a Programme for Government in a two-week period, even had the outcomes framework been agreed in advance. If they expected a detailed action plan and budget for each Department to be delivered in 14 days, they are either completely delusional about how coalition negotiation works — and, indeed, how government itself functions — or are simply being utterly disingenuous and opportunistic in their criticism of this process.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I want to finish my point, and then I will.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you.

Mrs Long: Anyone with an ounce of wit would have known that, at the end of two weeks, the Programme for Government draft would be high level and general. It was clear that detailed action plans for each Department, and the budgets attached, would have to be developed through public consultation, which would take time and would, therefore, only be realistically available around the end of this year.

I am happy to give way.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she not accept that the Fresh Start Agreement says at paragraph 61 that, by the end of April, there would be this document — the framework — and, at the end of the two weeks' negotiations, there would be a draft Programme for Government — the thing you are saying could not be done? It is in the document.

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

Mrs Long: First of all, we did not endorse the Fresh Start Agreement, so that is an irrelevant question to ask me. Secondly, as I said, even had we had this framework agreed, you would still not have had anything other than a very high-level document in order to consult with the public at this point in time after two weeks.

I firmly believe that every party that agreed to an outcomes-led approach knew that that would be the case. No one should be ducking that fact now to play cheap politics with the process. As a party, Alliance did feed into the very early stages of that preparatory process in good faith and without prejudice to any outcome of the elections at the end of the last Executive.

Indeed, we proposed for inclusion through our advisers some of the outcomes that are listed on that programme framework, including, for example, the outcome that:

“We are a shared society that respects diversity”

Clearly, we were not involved in the more detailed development after the election that produced the various indicators and measures. The SDLP also participated in that process. Its special adviser attended the meetings where the process was agreed and had the opportunity to feed into that framework. At no point did they raise issues with the process of how the programme would be developed or with the reality that the consultation would be on a document that was always going to be high level prior to the election.

Therefore, as a party, we in Alliance are not getting to our feet to rubbish this process. Rather, we are going to focus our criticism and, indeed, our support on what is and is not included, on the quality and efficacy of the indicators and measures that have been proposed and, in due course, on the detailed action plans that will be developed to deliver the outcomes. The litmus test for the new Executive and for this programme is what difficult, radical and even unpopular actions they are willing to take to achieve the outcomes. That is where the rubber hits the road in this process. That will be when it will be clear whether this is merely aspirational language but lacking in any substance or whether it is backed up with genuine will and commitment to deliver real change. That is when we will know whether the parties will genuinely share power and resources between Departments rather than divide it up between them, as was too often characteristic of previous Executives.

As a party, we have major doubts about that commitment, and we are being honest about that. Having tested the leaders of this Executive in the discussions that we had prior to the formation of the Executive, we specifically looked to those areas that would be crucial to delivering a more joined-up approach. On such issues as the abuse of the petition of concern, which continues to block progress and reform; the required investment in skills to grow our economy; a commitment to integrated education, which has a transformative effect on reconciliation and community relations; urgent action on dealing with the past and its legacy, including specific actions to tackle paramilitarism; and addressing the financial and economic implications of living in a divided society, it was clear to us that genuine will and commitment to deliver real change was absent, as was meaningful cooperative working.

Furthermore, as Stephen Farry will set out in his remarks, the robustness of the indicators and measures is in some

cases poor, not least on key issues around community relations and cohesion, sharing and integration. Those measures must be verifiable, measurable, evidence-based and meaningful, and we question whether that is the case in quite a few. However, above all, they need to reflect ambition for this society, and they are, in many cases, very much lacking in that regard. None of that bodes particularly well for this programme or for this Government; however, most importantly, it does not bode well for the people who we represent. Therefore, I hope that, despite our reservations with the content of the document at this point, through consultation, the concerns that we have will be addressed and that we will see the delivery of progress and change, which the people of Northern Ireland, quite rightly, are not just eager but now impatient to see.

Mrs Cameron: I rise as a member of the new Committee for the Executive Office to speak on the draft Programme for Government, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on what is, effectively, the ambition that our Executive have for our society as a whole. Let us face it, the big issues are the day-to-day and bread-and-butter issues that affect each and every one of us on the ground. It is important that those are looked at with a view to making life better for us all as a society. I welcome the recognition by the Executive that a different approach is needed and that this Government needs to work across boundaries, organisations, groups and communities for the common good. Engagement with local government, the private sector and not forgetting the voluntary and community sectors, which do so much, is vital if we are to make the improvements necessary.

There is much work to be done now, with the Executive focusing on seeking views from this draft Programme for Government framework, which is setting the direction of travel for this establishment in this five-year term. I believe that the approach of focusing on outcomes and using indicators to demonstrate the changes desired and the measures to let us know that we are succeeding is a good starting point to deliver the changes that we would all like to see in Northern Ireland. The framework sets out the direction of travel to include providing the opportunity for people to have their say on the framework, engaging with the stakeholders about the actions needed to help to deliver on the indicators, the building of action plans, the coordination of the Programme for Government with the Budget process and, finally, the agreement of the Programme for Government along with the Budget and investment and social strategies by the end of 2016.

3.00 pm

There are 14 proposed outcomes and 42 indicators in this document. The very many issues listed as indicators include reduced crime, increased healthy life expectancy, improved quality of healthcare, improved support for adults with care needs, improved educational outcomes, reduced economic inactivity, reduced poverty, increased competitiveness of the economy, increased shared space, reduced reoffending, improved mental health and an improved supply of suitable housing. Those are just some of the indicators provided in the framework. All are of great importance in their own right, and I am sure that each of the 108 MLAs would acknowledge them as important to the vast majority of people who live in Northern Ireland.

I note that the consultation on the Programme for Government framework is open for eight weeks in total and that it closes on 22 July. I hope that interested parties, of which I am sure there are many, take the opportunity to make their voice heard. I also welcome the fact that an online survey is available, which should provide a simple and very quick way of responding to the framework.

I will leave my comments at that for now and look forward to the consultation responses and, indeed, the outworkings of this ambitious draft Programme for Government framework. I support the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: I start my remarks by putting the Programme for Government into context. We continue to be overruled by a Conservative Government that is wedded to austerity. I suspect that every party in this Chamber would want to have more ambitious spending plans than are available to the Executive currently. The Budget has been cut year on year over the last five years and will continue to be cut for at least the next three years. That is the context in which this Executive have to deliver their priority public services, and we have to deliver our public services.

Each Minister is faced with the huge challenge of prioritising spending in their Department where it will make the most impact and change. That is where the Programme for Government framework comes into its own. It sets out a vision for the future; it sets out a pathway that we can follow; and it is asking, in the most democratic of ways, civic society — the community, trade unionists and others — to become involved in the debate and help us shape our society for generations to come, in the context of the financial realities in which we are working. There are parties in the Chamber that will claim to be more opposed to austerity than others and that they will do all sorts of things in the next five years. But what they have to ensure is that we change our society and create better outcomes for future generations.

I listened intently to Mr Nesbitt's contribution. For five minutes we got a history lesson on his view of the Fresh Start Agreement and the events that led to him and his party walking out of the talks. The foreword to the 'Draft Programme for Government Framework' sets out why Mr Nesbitt and others walked out of the talks. It says, in the second paragraph, that:

"We believe a different approach is needed and so this new approach focuses on the impact on our people rather than the actions we take within Government." —

and this is the most difficult part for some of the parties that were in the Executive to sign up to —

"We recognise that for this to work effectively, we need a cohesive Executive working to deliver for all. We also need a system of Government that works across boundaries, organisations, groups and communities for the common good."

That is, for this to work, we need a cohesive Executive. Opposition within the Executive was no longer acceptable. From their point of view, in my opinion, the parties that have chosen to walk into opposition have done the right thing. I am a strong advocate of the Good Friday Agreement.

I am a strong advocate of power sharing. I am proud to have played my part in power sharing with my unionist

neighbours. That was an important step for this society and an important step for republicans and unionists to take, and I think that parties have an overriding obligation to live by that principle. I think that the parties that have walked away have done public service a great favour, although not because I believe they will form a wonderful Opposition. The Opposition cannot agree with the Opposition, and we have noted that here today. The Ulster Unionist Party cannot agree with the Alliance Party and vice versa, and the SDLP cannot agree with anyone. We have not heard from the other parties yet, but I suspect it will be a mixture of all that. However, we have a cohesive document in front of us from the Executive, setting out a pathway for the success of this society. It will not all be a bed of roses. I go back to my opening remarks: the Executive will be dealing with a very difficult financial climate. Priority decisions will have to be made, and, when people respond to the consultation on the Programme for Government, we, as a society, will have to make choices. We will have to make decisions on whether it is money for potholes or pupils or whether it is money for the health service or hedgerows, because, folks, there is not enough money to go round.

In the last few minutes of my contribution, I want to recite a wee story that was told to me by the principal of a school when I was Education Minister. He was facing significant financial difficulties at his school, while, on the roads around his school, they were erecting brand new, shiny lamp posts and putting up new lanterns. They all looked very well. The principal said to me, "John, the most important lights that we need to turn on in our society are in our pupils' heads, and the money spent on those lamp posts and lanterns would have been much better spent in my classrooms". I could not argue with that. Those are the sorts of decisions that we will have to make going forward. What are the most important places for our Executive to invest in? It has to be health, it has to be education and it has to be the economy. We have to ensure that we deliver those core public services, and other things may have to be relinquished because of that. Folks, if we are going to create a new beginning for new generations, let us ensure that our Programme for Government turns a light on in pupils' heads: street lighting can keep.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Phillip Logan, and as this will be his first opportunity to speak as a private Member I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Logan: I rise in the Chamber for my first time as, rightly said, a representative for the people of North Antrim. I am privileged to have been given this opportunity by them, and I fully intend to do my best in this place to be an effective voice and an effective representative of our people. I thank the people of North Antrim for electing me and giving me this opportunity, and I will work hard to repay that. I also thank my predecessor, David McIlveen, for the work that was done in the North Antrim constituency, and I will work hard and continue to build on the foundation that he laid down over the past five years.

I am a member of the Executive Office Committee, so I stand on that basis as well, and I welcome this Programme for Government framework. We have something here that is good. It is forward-thinking, and it is something that we need to deliver on. We, in the DUP, stood on a five-point plan, and we need to deliver on that. People

were very responsive to that; they trusted us on it and bought into that plan. I am delighted about that. I have a lot of confidence about the next five years that we have in government, and this Programme for Government sets it out very well. As Christopher rightly said, there are 42 key indicators in there as to where we need to be. Those can be measured very successfully, and the programme is laid out very well.

I would like to pick up on a few things from that. While I was on the campaign trail in North Antrim, I am sure you can imagine that, as I am from Ballymena, jobs were on people's lips. Ballymena and North Antrim have suffered some devastating blows over the last number of years, and I will continue to be a voice for those people and the job losses that we have suffered. The framework talks about jobs — it talks a lot about jobs — and one of the examples here is that we want to see more people working in better jobs. It is about ensuring that opportunities exist for people at all levels in our communities.

There is a mixture of people in the Chamber today. There are people who went through school and on to further education, and there are people who chose not to do that. I chose to leave school and go into the workplace. I did well and worked hard, which suited my course. My wife is slightly different: she went on to university and is a schoolteacher, so there is that difference. I want to make sure that there are opportunities for every person in education so that they can do as well as they can. I want people to be able to leave school and go on to further education, if that is what is right for them, or to go into the workplace. It is about ensuring that opportunities exist for people to leave school and go out to get skills or to go into the workplace and learn good skills that will equip them for life.

I am delighted that my colleague Simon Hamilton has been announced as the Economy Minister. That is a welcome change. The people of North Antrim will be delighted, because for us in North Antrim the issue is jobs and delivery.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Jenny Palmer. As this is Mrs Jenny Palmer's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mrs Palmer: I am extremely proud to have been elected to the Assembly to represent Lagan Valley. I grew up there, raised my children there and am a proud resident of the area.

I served for 11 years on Lisburn City Council and the new Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. In my time as a councillor, I chaired committees on environmental services and economic development. I worked as the chair of Peace III and the chair of Comet INTERREG to deliver EU funding to communities and to business. I have seen excellent progress in the Lisburn and greater Lagan Valley area over the last 18 years, but it has also been the site of a number of shameful failures under previous Governments. As the Ulster Unionist spokesperson for infrastructure and a member of the official Opposition, I will ensure that the Government are held to account in this mandate. While I hope that we will see significant progress over the next five years, I am increasingly concerned that infrastructure will be a series of vanity projects and undelivered strategies.

A significant cause of concern for me is the lack of meaningful targets in the Programme for Government. While the PFG promises to connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure — an ideal we can all agree on — there is scarce detail on how that will be achieved. The PFG is so vague that the Minister could deliver only negligible improvement and still technically deliver what was promised. I look forward with interest and no small degree of trepidation to seeing what the Minister intends to deliver.

As a spokesperson for the Opposition, it is my role not only to critique but to suggest what we should do instead. In that vein, allow me to suggest a few key projects that I hope the Minister and the Executive can commit to.

The success of the Balmoral show is an inspiration to the rest of the country. The recent announcement that it is to open for four days in 2017 is welcome and is a source of immeasurable pride to my constituency. However, the chaos surrounding the roads into the show is also a source of shame. Year after year, we read the miserable reports of traffic jams, parking bedlam and wasted opportunities due in no small part to the disgraceful lack of progress at the Maze site. Simply put, the infrastructure for that world-beating show and venue must be improved. Better planning of roads and targeted improvements, such as an M1/Balmoral link road, could solve the issue. Additionally, any Members who travel via Sprucefield will be aware of the extremely poor connections to Belfast that inevitably result in long delays and tailbacks.

With no progress on the Sprucefield bypass, the Knockmore link road is also important to the development of the area, and I am pleased that Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council has taken important steps to invest in its delivery with the Department and developers. Those projects are important if we ever want to spread the success of the economy beyond the greater Belfast area. Our poor road infrastructure is discouraging investment in general, but it hits the outer parts of the country particularly hard.

3.15 pm

It is highly unlikely that all phases of the A5 will be completed within the time frame, so the budget will not be spent. Over £100 million will be surplus. We must ensure that all small projects are identified to improve our road, rail and river network. They do not have to be multibillion-pound, decade-long quagmires. With smart, targeted funding, we can drastically improve travel times. I hope that the Minister can agree that progress will not be delayed simply due to a lack of interest or political will. It is also vital that this Government leverage the expertise and knowledge of civic society as a whole.

In the Fresh Start Agreement, the two parties in government promised to deliver a compact civic advisory panel. It is utterly imperative that the forum contains experts from the world of business and infrastructure. In addition to being an excellent venue to encourage new faces into politics, the forum must be well placed to suggest infrastructure improvements and critique ministerial decisions. It must not become a talking shop for yes-men. I hope that the Executive demonstrate courage in appointing true experts who can not only advise on major projects such as the York Street interchange and

the A5/A6 but, crucially, suggest smaller, more targeted improvements that will make a major impact.

One of the improvements must be the decentralisation of government administration away from Belfast. The worrying trend in Northern Ireland of offices such as the DVLA being relocated to Wales must be reversed. I want to see all Departments, particularly the Department for Infrastructure, leading the way in spreading the administration across Northern Ireland plc. Improving Internet connectivity is another key indicator in the PFG document, but, again, we need to see what concrete, costed commitment the Executive will make. We do not need to reinvent the wheel for that, but I argue that we need a sea change from the approach of the previous Executive. The Minister need look no further than my constituency to recognise in the Resurgam Trust in Lisburn the model of how the Department can foster community-led improvements to infrastructure and support the third sector in sustainable business. That project and others must be allowed to develop in a sustainable way, so I also call for an end to the unnecessary and nerve-wracking process of annual bidding and the introduction of service-level agreements to sustain community partnerships.

In conclusion, I want to work in this mandate to be a constructive member of the Opposition. I do not intend to be easy on the Minister or the Department, but I hope to be a source of alternative options rather than of a simple critique. I do not intend to be Mrs No, but, as certain members of the party to my left can tell you, I do not bow easily. The Minister can expect the same tenacity in my role here.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is Linda Dillon's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Ms Dillon (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As this is my maiden speech, I will begin by thanking the people of Mid Ulster for electing me. As some will know, I took over the seat that was left vacant by our deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, so I have big shoes to fill. I certainly hope that I will give the people of Mid Ulster the same kind of representation as he did. They were very proud of him — rightly so — for the representation that he gave in the Assembly.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I have noted that there are three indicators that will fall to DAERA: indicator 29, which is to increase environmental sustainability; indicator 36, which is to increase household waste recycling; and indicator 37, which is to improve air quality. However, during a very brief discussion with the DAERA permanent secretary and his team at the Committee last week, I raised the fact that there are no specific indicators for the agriculture sector or rural communities. DAERA officials responded by saying that the agrifood sector makes a very significant contribution to the economy and will be a key driver in the economic indicators contained in the framework. They also said that, at a high level, the important outcomes such as jobs, health and the economy will impact rural dwellers as much as the urban dweller.

The Committee was also told that DAERA will work with other Departments in a coordinated, integrated way on the impact of these high-level indicators on rural dwellers and that, since the introduction of the Rural Needs Act, they now have the statutory basis to do so. However, the Act will not apply to central government until 1 June 2017 and to local authorities until 1 June 2018, so I am looking forward to hearing from the Department on a semi-regular basis over the next few years about how that is to happen. This new framework must be for all our people, be they urban or rural dwellers.

The Programme for Government is focused on outcomes. As it states:

“these are things with which people can identify such as living longer and healthier lives or getting good jobs — which are designed to stay in place for a generation rather than a single Assembly term and define if we are progressing as a society”.

Each indicator also has a number of measures to see whether it is happening. These are largely derived from existing statistics. They will show how we are performing in relation to the outcomes and provide a basis to monitor progress and take appropriate corrective action. Some of the outcomes indicate that the measurement is available at NISRA at a geographical and urban/rural level. For example, indicator 16, which is about increasing the proportion of people in work, can be measured at urban and rural level. Ensuring that the opportunities for jobs and good-quality jobs are available to rural as well as urban dwellers is exactly what we want. However, some of the indicators cannot be measured at this level, such as indicator 21, which is about increasing the competitiveness of the economy. It appears that it cannot be measured at urban/rural level, yet agrifood is to be one of the key drivers for the economy and is one of the few industries that can be, and is, spread throughout all geographical parts.

While the new Committee did not get into this level of detail with officials at our first meeting, I expect that we will do so in the near future. I hope to explore all those measures and find out in detail how they will be used to ensure that the outcomes and benefits of the framework are there for the farmer and rural communities. That is all that I wish to say as Chairperson of the AERA Committee.

As Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture, the environment and rural affairs, I believe that there needs to be a focus on outcome 13, which is:

“We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure”.

It is vital to assist our businesses and communities. Rural broadband and telecommunications are causing inequalities for our rural dwellers and businesses as they face much higher costs for, very often, much poorer service provision. The proportion of premises with access to superfast broadband is 88% in urban areas and 37% in rural areas. That is a massive and unacceptable disparity. We are driving businesses into urban settings, which creates inequalities for rural dwellers in gaining employment. Therefore, the rural road network and access to good, affordable transport services are essential outcomes in the PFG.

In my previous role as chairperson of Mid-Ulster District Council, I witnessed at first hand the difficulties faced by businesses in rural areas in trying to access good broadband provision. It is a real challenge for us. I also witnessed the fact that our Ministers did not come forward to meet Mid-Ulster District Council. I hope that in this new and fresh start, with the Programme for Government as its basis, Ministers will be very open to meeting all 11 new super-councils because that is the grass roots and that is where our people are. Ministers need to take cognisance of what is happening in councils and of what councils are saying to them and what councils need.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I welcome the draft Programme for Government and, in particular, the focus on outcomes and monitoring delivery, which represents a new and innovative methodology. I know that, when we speak about this, it sometimes sounds very much like Civil Service or management speak. However, what this methodology does is focus on a number of key questions. First, what is it that your Government want to achieve for you and why? Secondly, how well are they doing it? That clarity is very welcome as a new approach.

The draft Programme for Government outlines some big issues facing the Northern Ireland Executive and, in fact, facing all of us in the Chamber: tackling poverty; reconciliation and social change; improving health and education; and growing our economy. These are indeed very significant issues. When I was thinking about the challenge facing the Northern Ireland Executive, what came into my mind was a quote from the late and great Muhammad Ali, who sadly passed away just a few days ago. That quote is:

"It isn't the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out, it's the pebble in your shoe."

I suppose that that could have relevance in people's personal lives and in communities, but I think it is also relevant when it comes to Governments and Departments. I want to echo the words of the First Minister about the high level of consensus that there seems to be about the challenges that face us in the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. Despite the billions of pounds and the consensus on what those issues are — the consensus about what those mountains are that we want to climb — we do not see the progress necessarily that we all want to see.

So what are those pebbles? To me, those pebbles are, and can be, the way we do business. Shut in the old ways, the silos, we are inefficient and ineffective. I know that it is often said, and it has been said in this Chamber before, that if we always do what we have always done, we will always get what we have always got. That is why I warmly welcome this new, innovative change within the current Programme for Government.

The new approach was first trialled and tested within our Delivering Social Change framework within the Northern Ireland Executive. I pay tribute to the National Children's Bureau, which put in a huge amount of effort and work in putting together that innovative approach. It was very clear, when we looked at that agenda, that it was not just a methodology that was suited to delivering social change; it was a methodology suited to delivering change right across government. That is why I welcome the mainstreaming of that right across the key issues of the Programme for Government.

How we deliver is critical; it is absolutely essential to achieving what we want to deliver. Therefore, I warmly welcome the new and innovative approach to making real and positive progress in agreeing our vision and in achieving our vision of building a better and brighter future for all in Northern Ireland.

Ms Hanna: Madam Speaker, congratulations to you in your new role and to all those Members who have made very good maiden speeches. I was brought back briefly to Belfast City Council during Christopher's maiden speech and he will know that, coming from that Chamber and having small children, that is the first and last time for a while that he will speak for seven minutes without being interrupted.

I am glad, too, to have the opportunity to speak on the Programme for Government, which will be the guiding framework for Northern Ireland for the next five years and which, obviously, all of us want to work. There has been a lot of prickliness from the Executive parties about our decision to go into opposition, but I think we can be clear that we all live here. We use these public services, we raise our families here and we want this to work as well. We can be very clear that we are not going to be wreckers, outside the process in opposition. We do not have a big bogeyman out the door, or a hand that we are going to overplay for years. We are not going to spend the next five years taking free kicks, like the opposition parties do in the South.

We campaigned, in the run-up to the election, on the basis that we would use the new Fresh Start-created 14-day window to get some of our ideas in there, and we stuck to that as far as possible. It became very clear, very quickly, that there was to be no partnership and next to no detail. I see that the Alliance Party has taken some issue with our criticism of the process. Let me clarify: we did not vote for Fresh Start, so we are not bound by the process, but the very task of amending the primary legislation to provide for 14 days instead of the previous window gave a very clear indication that that was supposed to be a serious and substantial negotiation window. In good faith, we told third-sector organisations to get their ideas in because this was going to be a substantial negotiation window. As my colleague Alex Attwood has outlined, this is not just an outcomes-based document. You will see in all the PSs that have been added, post the discussion document from last week, that it now suddenly mentions: North/South institutions, regional imbalance and investment, victims and historical abuse. These are the things that, in the two weeks after the election, we were saying needed to be there but were not.

The rash of private Member's Bills and no-day-named motions that have gone in in the opening days of the mandate show very clearly that even members of the parties in the Government know that a lot of these issues are not going to turn up in the programme. If the issues that we raised during the negotiation, and which the Executive have now tacked on, were sufficiently important, can they now help us understand why, when we asked for that detail, we were accused of prickliness and misunderstanding the process? We are not against the outcomes-based concept. Most people are not, and, in fact, we welcome it. It is just about the lack of detail coming on the back of such a poor record of delivery over the last couple of mandates.

3.30 pm

We also acknowledge that having a target does not always mean anything. The last Executive had a target, which they met, to produce a shared future strategy, and, right enough, a shared future did not magically appear because they were written down. Scotland also uses the framework, and it has worked well, but, with respect, this is not Scotland. That was a one-party Government that had made transparency and cross-cutting their political culture and which does not have the same silo mentality, political baggage and departmental fiefdoms that this Assembly has become known for.

We are certainly not against public consultation either, though you can understand that people are a little bit cynical. Less than six months ago, in Fresh Start, you reduced the statutory minimum consultation period from 12 weeks to eight weeks, and we have had no update since the Stormont House talks on the compact advisory panel that was to replace the Civic Forum model that was allowed to fall.

Of course, it is useful for coalface organisations to have their opportunity to shape and refine the Programme for Government, but there has to be something for them to respond to. No organisation is going to disagree with a single one of the fine aspirations in this document, but we do not know what methodology is going to be used to decide which of those ideas are going to be taken and whether that is going to bring any clarity, rather than just reflect the broad range of opinions that we know are out there. People are not sure whether this just an exercise in saying, "We asked your opinion, it is your Programme for Government" when there are any future problems.

It is also likely that, in a difficult funding climate, a lot of organisations are going to struggle to find the resources to put together a comprehensive response, but in the culture of this Executive, where much-needed social change money was siphoned off into the invite-only social investment fund, it is going to take a lot of courage for organisations to come out and say that, in fact, the emperor is not wearing any clothes and to point out the holes in your document.

In the last mandate, a lot of themes were not adequately progressed, and consultations and reports and workshops went into OFMDFM, the place where ideas went to die, and very little came out. The international strategy, the racial equality strategy and the sexual orientation strategy were all literally years late. Legislation passed as a result of the St Andrews Agreement in 2006 obliged the Executive to produce an anti-poverty strategy, but, last June, Justice Treacy found that you were in breach of that requirement, and still, there is nothing included in this document.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. In her contribution, she mentioned the social investment fund in a very critical way. Is she aware that, in our constituency, the social investment fund is creating the provision of an education and learning centre in Sandy Row and a day centre for children in Taughmonagh? Which of those projects does the Member think should be done away with?

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

Ms Hanna: Yes, the Member does remember it, because miraculously it was announced, after no movement for four years, 10 minutes before the election. Suddenly, we announced that a tiny portion of that money was going to those places. We know that there is need out there, but we think that that should have been open to all the organisations that have ideas and skills for solving problems, not for special pet projects that get a wee tap on the shoulder, telling them that they are eligible to apply for it.

Looking at the last Programme for Government, as I said, we see that targets do not always mean that you are going to do anything. I understand that almost half of the 82 pledges were not met, despite the free year that was tacked on by the Secretary of State. Commitments to reduce child poverty, as I said, were not met, and no strategy exists. At least you have not done what they did in London, where, when they were not meeting their targets, they changed the target halfway through. Hopefully, that will not happen. We missed the target to reduce serious crime; again, this document makes no mention of the elephant in the room of paramilitarism and organised crime. How, without agreeing to tackle that, are you going to move that forward?

You failed to develop the Maze prison site and Desertcreat and other major projects. On the environment, the Executive failed to meet their commitments to provide retrospective energy efficiency in public-sector housing. Indeed, while the housing target on building new build was met, we know that that has not met the need that is out there. On childcare, a section of society that is crying out for support, OFMDFM failed to implement a childcare strategy and handed back funds that any parents who are paying out possibly more than they are earning will absolutely wince at. If you want to talk about alternatives, we have produced very comprehensive proposals and you are more than welcome to use them.

We are with the Government on wanting a strong economy, a more equal society, longer lives, more fragrant flowers and tastier dinners. We are with you on all of those things. Previous contributors from Executive parties have asked us what our alternative is. What is your alternative? You have not produced any detail yet.

We have heard a lot, but we have 100 pages of rhetoric here. When we start to get some of the detail, we will give it a fair wind. The proposals that are good we will support, but there is nothing in here on how we prepare for corporation tax powers, nothing on how we enhance North/South cooperation, nothing on how we get more out of devolution and nothing on how we address the mess over selection —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Hanna: — for people. Issues of identity are also parked in the "too hard" pile. We look forward to seeing the detail.

Mr McElduff (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to follow on from the Member, who represented a party that was very much in the last Executive. Lots of Executive failings were listed, but the Member needs to be reminded that her party was very much part of the last Executive.

I want to speak mostly as Chair of the Education Committee. Obviously, given that Wednesday's meeting will be the second for our Committee, I am not in a position to articulate an agreed Committee position on the draft PFG. I welcome references in the draft Programme for Government to educational improvement, addressing the attainment gap, improving educational quality and, of course, early intervention designed to enhance life chances.

It is worth commenting on the things that were achieved in the last Executive Programme for Government. One of those was in the area of educational attainment and educational improvement. Very often in this society, that is measured by GCSE attainment, including in English and maths. There is a debate more generally about whether that is the best or most comprehensive way to assess the impact of an education system. I think everybody would agree that literacy and numeracy are key to educational progress and should always be used in some way to measure outcomes.

I emphasise that in the past decade we have seen a year-on-year improvement and percentage increase in the number of school leavers achieving five GCSEs at grades A* to C or their equivalent. In 2014-15, when the last available figures are from, the figure was 81.1%. When you include GCSE English and maths, you find the figure is 66%. That represents a significant improvement on, for example, the 2009-2010 figure of 59% and gives a measure of the progress that is being made.

I take the opportunity to congratulate schools, teachers, pupils and parents, as well as — I will probably come into my Sinn Féin MLA mode now — the Sinn Féin Education Ministers, who successively were the deputy First Minister, the Principal Deputy Speaker and Mr O'Dowd. Ministers are often faulted for perceived failings, but I congratulate them on the year-on-year improvements in the areas I have mentioned.

Moving back to Committee Chair mode, I think that Members will generally welcome an increased focus in the new PFG on addressing the attainment gap. This is to include considerable emphasis on pupils who are entitled to free school meals. It is worth noting that improvements have coincided with the inception of the signature programme and increases in levels of free school meal entitlement in post-primary schools. Those were excellent initiatives that yielded good outcomes in education.

Other education-related outcomes in the draft Programme for Government include increasing the number of schools assessed as providing good or better learning provision, which is, of course, a logical conclusion of the Every School a Good School policy, and the outcomes that deal with early intervention, giving children the best possible start in life. I have in mind a scheme that shows the disproportionately positive effect of interventions, the Sure Start programme. Over this period of time, it would be worth exploring whether even more children and families could benefit from Sure Start provision. That will be difficult, because there was a recent increase in that respect. However, it would be worth looking at that afresh to see whether we can bring more people into the Sure Start tent.

I want to praise the process as well. Some people are suggesting that all of it should be in here, now, in detail. I

think that this is a real exercise in participative democracy, and I will certainly encourage sectors and communities to engage thoroughly in the weeks and months ahead.

I heartily agree with my colleague, Linda Dillon. Linda referred to rural communities suffering from deprivation, not least in roads infrastructure. The condition of rural roads in many constituencies at this time is extremely bad. Poor broadband is blunting the effectiveness and competitiveness of rural businesses. In the recent past, a private satellite company was meant to fill the gaps for government in places where BT cannot reach. There has been a systematic failure across Tyrone, mid-Ulster and other places. People are angry at being without proper broadband for two and three weeks. It is dramatically affecting their businesses. There is a need for job creation in towns like Omagh and Strabane. I have, in my left hand, my priorities for the Assembly election. I will keep them close to hand, because they are measures that would improve the quality of life for people in the constituency of West Tyrone.

During the election campaign, I attended a Mencap hustings event and, more recently, a meeting with the western learning disability action group. Some things that need to find their way into the Programme for Government are absolute commitments for greater support and greater respite for families, ageing parents and carers of adults who have learning disabilities, not least in the Western Trust area, where underfunding of £8 million has been identified by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. These are big issues. I am sure that we will hear that from the sectors and communities when they engage in a formal sense with the draft Programme for Government framework.

It is not often that I disagree with John O'Dowd. John gave the context of Tory cuts.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McElduff: Yes. I absolutely agree with that context-setting, but I disagree with John in one respect: I want my street lights, and I want the lights to go on in the heads of the children.

Dr Farry: Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I was slightly alarmed at your cutting off Mr McElduff prematurely, because I wanted to hear a bit more about the split in Sinn Féin over this issue.

Before I get into detail, reference has been made to the social investment fund. At times, the opposition parties may well disagree on issues, and I will come to our approach to that shortly. To follow on from the comments made by Claire Hanna, I would say that it is worth referencing that nothing that has been done through the social investment fund could not have been achieved by Departments putting programmes in place on the ground. Sometimes, the issue seems to be who is getting the funding as opposed to the ability of Departments to spend that type of money.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Does the Member also accept that it is, maybe, a good opportunity to reflect on some inaccuracies in the previous Member's contribution about

the SIF? The SIF came before Delivering Social Change. The social investment fund was established under the steering group, so all the groups and projects had an opportunity to put in their proposals. Most importantly, the First Minister and deputy First Minister had no role in the selection of the projects: all of the projects were decided at local level through a local steering group.

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

Dr Farry: Thank you very much. Certainly, my view is that governance around decision-making in the social investment fund is poor and is more prone to risk than would be the case in the normal processes that are run through Departments. Indeed, if there are concerns about the lack of attention to certain issues, that can be rectified.

I turn now to the motion and the framework. In common with my colleague Naomi Long, I stress that we believe that the concept is essentially sound but is clearly still under development. We are keeping an open mind at this stage and are withholding our final judgement until we see the detail over the autumn.

Clearly, as a party, we are comfortable with the general direction of travel. Given that we participated in the early stages of the process, up to the point of the election being called, we have certainly given our implicit endorsement of the process.

However, at no stage have we formally endorsed the content. The development of the content was accelerated in the final few weeks before the election by the Civil Service and also in discussions between those parties who were joining the Executive in the past couple of weeks.

3.45 pm

That said, the concept makes considerable sense. It is better than an arbitrary list of action points and targets thrown in by Departments, which may or may not be realised. Instead, we have a series of high-level set objectives. By definition, this will come across as motherhood and apple pie at this stage: that is the nature of the process. The real test will come in due course with the targets that are set, how challenging those will be and the policies, programmes and resources that will be allocated to turning those targets into reality.

There is a logic in developing the most rational policies and practices that will get us to the targets that have been set out most efficiently with regard to resources. While I can understand Members' frustrations that certain actions are not mentioned at this stage, if the process is respected to its logical conclusion, the Executive should come forward with proposals that will get us to the outcome most effectively. At times, however, we may disagree about what those may be — I suspect that there will be disagreement in the Executive parties as to what those may be — but I believe that the theory remains sound.

From our experience of the Executive, not only of being in the Executive but of being in opposition under previous mandates, we are sceptical about how genuine the situation will be with the Executive's adopting the most logical approach to achieving the objectives. Far too often, other considerations enter into the equation, which sometimes reflect political realities. That is fine: we are a political Assembly. However, when that happens, it

portrays the true disingenuousness as to how those targets can be reached. The process can be compromised through too many political considerations coming from the different partners in government.

I have a concern about what has been said about health. There has been a lot of focus on the importance of setting objectives and following through in due course with policies to get that outcome, but the two parties in the Executive are both making a commitment to spending an additional £1 billion of revenue spending on health by 2021. That seems to run entirely counter to the approach that is being adopted. I am all for spending the right amount of money on health to achieve much better outcomes, but surely the most logical thing to do is to put in place the reform process and work out what we need to spend to achieve outcomes and to resource that transformation, rather than making an arbitrary commitment now that the round figure of an additional £1 billion will be spent by 2021. In particular, the realisation of that outcome in the absence of other efficiencies being found means that we are looking at very stringent cuts to other Departments if we are to achieve that £1 billion extra for health. That will undermine a lot of the draft framework's other worthy objectives. When I say "efficiencies", I mean more than simply tampering with the levels of rate exemptions, rate capping or abolishing a few quangos here and there. We are talking serious reform or, potentially, some form of revenue raising or addressing the cost of division.

I will spend the balance of my time focusing on some of the specifics that have been set out. Some of them are good and sound — for example, what we are doing on skills. I am pleased to see that there is recognition of gradation with skills, and we are not looking at a very flat indicator; that is positive. I am glad that economic inactivity is mentioned. The logic there is that we efficiently implement the existing strategy that was agreed by the previous Executive.

I have concerns about other areas. If we are talking about increasing reconciliation, the theme seems to be about people respecting different cultural traditions in society, which may be one aspect of reconciliation. However, reconciliation is also about building friendships and overcoming divisions. It is possible that you could achieve that type of outcome through people tolerating activities better in different parts of the community rather than a genuine coming together, so we need to be careful as to exactly how that will be achieved.

Also, we need to have some concern about how far we go in focusing on the regional imbalance in our economy. We need to transform the Northern Ireland economy overall, and we need to recognise that there are imbalances and try to address those, but, if we become a slave to that, we might end up overly micromanaging investment decisions and neglecting the ability of greater Belfast to drive our economy — not just the areas around greater Belfast but all of Northern Ireland.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Dr Farry: There are particular issues that we need to bottom through.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is Mr Doug Beattie's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I

remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. It is nice to stand up to get some blood flowing in my legs. I will start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Sam Gardiner MBE, a one-time Father of the House. His dedication to these institutions, to the people of Upper Bann and, indeed, to Lurgan is extremely well known. I wish him all the best for the future. He has handed that baton on to me, and I am very mindful that I am here to represent all the people of Upper Bann. I must take the opportunity to thank those people for putting their faith in me and voting me into the Assembly.

I believe that it is also important to show humility because, for all those who voted for me, there are many more who did not and did not give me a preference. I will represent them just as much as I will represent anybody else in my constituency, and I will use the core values and standards that have sustained me over my whole lifetime: integrity, respect for others, professionalism, selfless commitment, courage and, above all, loyalty. I am extremely proud to be opening a fully functioning MLA constituency office in Portadown once again.

If I may, I will take a moment out to thank all Members for their kind words of support on the passing of my beautiful grandson Cameron, who died at the age of 15 months, the day before the election. Your kind words have sustained me. It remains a difficult time for me and a difficult time for my family, but knowing that there are people like you who gave me those kind words has helped me and will help me in the long term, as it will help my family.

As I move on, I have to start by saying that I am disappointed by this whimsical document on crisp white paper with no real value, intellectual currency or, in fact, shifting responsibilities. It sets an agenda for the next five years but does not give a long-term vision for Northern Ireland in the next 20 or 30 years. In fact, there may even be some in government who do not want Northern Ireland to have that long-term future.

Let us drill down into the document a little. No, let us just scratch the surface for a moment. At its heart is the Fresh Start Agreement, and, at the heart of the Fresh Start Agreement is tackling paramilitarism. Yet, there is absolutely no mention of paramilitarism until page 29, and, even then, it is fleeting with no measurable outcomes and no indicators. Let me just take a line from outcome 7, if I may:

“A safe community is one where paramilitary groups and criminal gangs cannot exert influence”.

Where are the indicators to address that? In fact, the Executive — I have to say that the Ulster Unionist Party was part of the Executive and is not without blame — are sustaining paramilitarism in this country. Looking to the future, I can see us sustaining it for another five years. We have semi-autonomous paramilitary wings at Her Majesty's Prison in Maghaberry.

We allow that to happen. We sustain it. We give it credibility. We give it an identity. We are giving it structure. We are allowing them to direct terrorism, and, if anybody thinks that that is not true, you just have to look at the brutal murders of prison officer Ismay and prison officer Black. Where are the indicators to deal with that and to

stop the segregation and treat those people as they are: criminals to be dealt with as criminals?

Look at it from a more basic level and at the illegal paramilitary parades on our streets. Indeed, in my area of Upper Bann, in Lurgan, there were men, women and children dressed in paramilitary uniforms. I commend the Police Service of Northern Ireland for how it dealt with them during and after the parade, but the damage is already done because those paramilitary parades are influencing our children. Where is the indicator to deal with that? Before some of you people sitting here roll your eyes at me on this, let me remind you that paramilitarism affects far more of our outcomes, such as our international standing in outcome 10; an effective justice system in outcome 11; division and segregation in outcome 12; and effective and reliable public services in outcome 13. Those are all affected by paramilitarism, yet we have not, in this document, addressed it with any indicators whatsoever.

As a new MLA, I came in here expecting to see a Programme for Government that would handrail us to a brighter long-term future. I genuinely did, and I genuinely want that. What I got was an expensive doorstep holding closed the door to prosperity, social progress, cultural acceptance and the normalised society that our people deserve.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his maiden speech. I also want to put on record our deep commiseration — I am sure that I speak for all the House — on the loss of your beautiful grandchild. I am a mamó — a grandmother — myself, and the loss of a child is a dreadful thing. I just want to put on record our commiseration.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I note and welcome the draft Programme for Government with its 14 strategic outcomes and the indicators focused on societal outcomes. This is a collaborative approach, and it is very important to give people their say and a sense of ownership because it is their Programme for Government. I, along with others, will be encouraging people to have their say on this developing, rolling process by 22 July.

Speaking as the party's spokesperson on infrastructure, I welcome the fact that one of the strategic outcomes is dedicated to infrastructure. Indeed, as a representative from the west and the wider north-west, I welcome the fact that regional balance is also included as one of the strategic outcomes. Whilst those individually are very welcome, it is important to point out that very good infrastructure underpins all 14 outcomes and indeed underpins all the economic and social development that we have here.

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

I welcome the fact that the Programme for Government gives a commitment to deliver on the flagship projects announced in the Budget last August. Those have been identified in the new Programme for Government framework and include the Belfast transport hub, the stadia programme, the training facilities for emergency services and the new children's hospital. From a north-west perspective, I welcome the recommitment to the A5 and A6 in the programme. That is extremely important. It also recognises the importance of key strategic corridors

like the A8, A1, M1, A4, A26 and A22. That is extremely important.

4.00 pm

In the time ahead, it is important to recognise that these strategic corridors are extremely important, not just within the North but within the wider context of the island of Ireland. These roads do not stop at the border. Indeed, the A5 is connected to the N2 at Monaghan and the N14 at Donegal. The M1 becomes the A4, which leads on through the N16 on to Sligo and into the west. It is important that we continue to work with the Irish Government. One of the objectives of the Trans-European Network, which is under way, is to reduce these bottlenecks and linkages between different pieces of transport infrastructure. We will continue to play our part as a party with the 30 Members that we have in the Oireachtas in moving this ahead.

I welcome the fact that, in the document, in relation to transport and infrastructure, we see reference to the commitment to active travel and the bicycle strategy. Indeed, the Ulster canal is also mentioned. This is something that my colleague Seán Lynch is interested in and has been working at for a number of years. No doubt, we will keep this high on the agenda.

In conclusion, folks, I welcome this new PFG framework. As my colleague from West Tyrone Barry McElduff said earlier on, this is an example of participative democracy. It is a new approach, which will unfold and develop as the consultation takes place with stakeholders right across the different sectors. It sets out a direction of travel. I commend the draft Programme for Government and encourage everyone to have their say in the development of this process.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Members will be relieved to hear that I am not going to dwell on issues around process, our views on which have been accurately and eloquently proffered by my colleagues Alex Attwood and Claire Hanna.

Mr O'Dowd made a good contribution to today's debate. He spoke of the challenges facing the new Executive, the new Ministers and their new Departments. Certainly, there are huge challenges, but there are also huge opportunities to do things better and to make things better for people. This document, in our belief, does not grasp or even attempt to grasp those opportunities. Mr Stalford, in his maiden speech, said something along the lines that it is the business of government to improve the lives of people. He intimated that those of us who chose not to be in government, and those of us who did not have that choice, have no role to play in that. Well, we are making it our business in opposition to improve the performance of government.

We have seen — and people have felt and continue to feel — the failure by government to deliver on real issues. Nowhere has this failure been more pronounced than in my constituency. The fig leaf that has been used to cover at least one of these failures — for example, the expansion of Magee, and the economic and social benefits that that would undoubtedly bring — is that it was not in the Programme for Government. So please forgive our concerns at the lack of specifics in this document. We cannot argue with these desired outcomes — who could? — but we just want to ensure them. Last week,

many Members attended an event in the Long Gallery. It was hosted by Autism NI and sponsored by Mrs Cameron. Participants described their frustrations and concerns at the lack of delivery by several Departments, and the lack of care. It was entitled “Broken promises”. One would get the impression from this Programme for Government that the Executive are avoiding making promises just to avoid breaking more promises.

We need more detail. How are we going to reduce health inequality? How are we going to increase the supply of suitable housing, and how are we going to afford it? How will we improve the skills profile of the population, and, especially, how will we do so when we are voting through Budgets that reduce the skills budget? Plans to reduce poverty are admirable, but we have, as Ms Hanna said, seen strategies come and go. Some strategies we have just waited for, and are still waiting.

I would like to have seen, in particular, more detail in the document on how we intend to improve environmental sustainability. The reduction of greenhouse gas emissions will be extremely difficult in the context of trying to grow our economy, and I believe that this can only be achieved through the introduction of Northern Ireland-specific climate change legislation.

As my colleagues have outlined, it is our intention to work constructively inside the Chamber and outside it to help deliver all these outcomes and much more. We will continue to demand answers and demand actions to obtain tangible evidence that they are being delivered or on why they are not.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is my first time speaking in the new mandate, and we are down to sit to 9.00 pm. I am disappointed about that, because I think that we are still failing the staff in the Building. It is an archaic way of doing business. It is not family-friendly, and it is not rural-friendly. I know that the Business Office and others will be looking at this, and I think that, as we start the business of the new Assembly, we need to get things right from the start. For the past five years, we have talked about the need to attract more women into the Assembly, and we have talked about the need for family-friendly hours. We are starting a new session, and we have not done anything about it. That should be on the record as something that needs addressed.

On the other hand, I am glad to see that the Executive will be doing business differently. This is a progressive framework, and it will help us to tackle the age-old problem of departmental silo mentality. It puts well-being at the heart of government. Health is at the forefront of the document. It talks about public health strategies, tackling health inequalities, active travel, which is a health issue in itself, childcare and mental health. Of course, all of those issues sit in different Departments, and that is why we need an outcome-focused Programme for Government, not a department-focused Programme for Government. It is only apt that we commend Carnegie and those involved in the Roundtable on their work over the past three years. I attended many meetings, and I know that the current Minister for the Economy did the same, as did junior Minister Fearon and David McIlveen. They no doubt contributed to the new progressive framework that we have in front of us, and it is a good thing that the public will have their say. It is a good thing that stakeholders and the community will have their say in the document to

ensure that we get it right. The direction of travel from the Executive clearly is the correct one.

I am disappointed that the Opposition have not done their homework. I was expecting great things from the much talked-about Opposition, the Opposition who cannot decide how they will be an Opposition — the two main parties, anyway. Today was an opportunity to land a few blows on the new Executive. It was an opportunity to outline the detail of their alternative Programme for Government framework, but there is no alternative before us. I say to the Members to the left that there is an opportunity to feed in those views, and we want detailed proposals, not just “We don’t like this, and we don’t like that”. We need detailed proposals about what their alternative Programme for Government framework is. I hope that they will be a constructive Opposition, as they have outlined. All that I have heard today so far is complain, complain, complain. It was said over the election that they wanted to be a constructive Opposition, but we have yet to see that.

It is great that active travel has been included as one of the indicators. That represents the crossover between both health and transport and health and infrastructure. This needs to be looked at closely as part of the consultation. Coupling public transport with active transport could mean that a decrease in cycling and walking is masked by an increase in bus and train journeys. I will put that forward as part of our response. Active transport is much more important than that. We are in a very car-centric society, and there are a lot of car-centric civil servants. That should not be allowed to cloud aspects of the Programme for Government and its indicators.

There are issues, indicators and targets here that are very important to the rural community that I represent. Internet connectivity is one example. Travel times are an issue for rural commuters, as Declan McAleer outlined. Then there are big issues for the health of rural communities. Those are equally important.

I want to come back on a point that Claire Hanna made about the Scottish experience, because there are parallels with our situation. I remember how John Eldridge, whom I have met on a number of occasions, outlined how he knew that there would be departmental resistance to the new way of doing government. In effect, he brought it in overnight in consultation with Ministers. He knew that there would be institutional resistance from parts of the Civil Service. I have no doubt that there will be resistance from our local government structures as well. I encourage the other parties not just to dismiss this new way of doing government. It is bold and progressive. It is about doing things differently and focusing on health and other outcomes that are important to the communities that we represent. We are moving away from the old way of doing business, the silo mentality and the culture of fiefdoms in Departments. It is a big, big step, and I urge the Opposition not to try to make hay out of this but to respond to the consultation and to ensure that we take this step forward for the better of everybody in our communities.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Executive’s draft Programme for Government framework. I do so from a health perspective. Is it a draft framework or a vague wish list to buy some time for officials to draft yet another document that will probably only be ignored anyway? It makes me wonder what all the meetings in

the six months leading up to the election were really all about. The fact that the last Assembly existed without a Programme for Government for 2015-16 demonstrated exactly how little regard the document is actually given.

The amateurish and unprofessional measures accompanying the health indicators will give people very little confidence. It would have been better to leave them out, rather than rush them in before it went to the printers. Targets, despite what some officials in the Department and trusts might say, remain important as a means of monitoring and judging health performance. From the outset, I urge the Executive to avoid being taken down the path of believing that somehow health targets are a burden or are in any way unnecessary.

There are 42 indicators in the current draft PFG framework document, and only six relate to health. I want to make some brief comments on some of them shortly. Whilst no one could disagree with any of the six, what is more noticeable is what is not included. At a time when 376,382 people are waiting for a first outpatient appointment, diagnostic test or inpatient treatment, surely the most pressing target for the Department and the Executive collectively is to deliver timely and safe treatments for patients.

Our second key priority would be to remove the abhorrent variances in the quality of care provided across the five health trusts. Take the target that 100% of patients with suspected breast cancer be seen within 14 days.

Overall, in 2015-16, 99% were seen on time in the Western Health Trust, yet only 66% were seen in the South Eastern Trust and an appalling 43% in the Belfast Trust. In addition, rather than including bland indicators, such as increasing respect for each other, maybe the Executive should place a duty on its Ministers to respect their staff. Maybe then, scenes such as the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives threatening to take industrial action, partially as a result of sheer anger at the attitude of the then Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, could have been avoided.

4.15 pm

Why is there no indicator on committing to continually review services to ensure that they are able to adapt to an ageing population? When it comes to reducing health inequality, we cannot forget that people who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to die from heart disease and respiratory disease. Far too many of those deaths occur before the age of 65, and most are entirely preventable with only a few lifestyle changes. Smoking, an unhealthy diet, excessive alcohol consumption and little physical activity all greatly contribute to this inequality.

We delivered the creation of the Public Health Agency despite opposition from the DUP at the time, and we will firmly oppose any measure to dissolve it, especially now after the deeply flawed and poorly handled announcement on the abolition of the Health and Social Care Board. I would certainly like to see a commitment from the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the PHA to continue for the next six years.

When we look at indicator four, “Reduce preventable deaths”, we see that there needs to be a commitment to target each of the five big causes of early death: cancer, stroke and heart, respiratory and liver disease. We also need to look at our ratio of intensive care beds. There could

be little surprise that following the success of the cancer patient experience survey in England and Wales, the PHA and McMillan Cancer Support here funded a similar survey for Northern Ireland. The 2015 Northern Ireland Cancer Patient Experience Survey covered around 5,000 adult cancer patients in Northern Ireland with the primary diagnosis of cancer who had been inpatients or day-care patients and were receiving active treatment between 1 December 2013 and 31 May 2014. This is just one example of why indicator five, "Improve the quality of the healthcare experience", is crucial. However, it is essential that the trusts, when listening to patients, are open and responsive to the concerns that will inevitably be aired.

Finally, turning to indicator six, "Improve mental health", there is an ever-increasing body of evidence proving that our poor rates of mental health are directly related to our previous levels of violence. It is a legacy issue, with not only victims being affected but the children and grandchildren of victims. We cannot ignore the staggering fact that more people have lost their life through suicide since the Belfast Agreement than died during the entire Troubles. This is a core issue for the Ulster Unionist Party, and it is why, in February, we published a detailed policy paper dedicated to the issue containing 15 specific points, including ideas like a mental health champion, greater focus on prevention and tackling signals earlier and tackling the stigma sometimes associated with poor mental health. The paper has been positively welcomed by experts, and I will send a copy to the new Health Minister for consideration with this indicator in the PFG.

In conclusion, I encourage the Executive parties, when they eventually consider the targets they will set for themselves, to challenge and not merely agree with the Civil Service and to set reasonable, tangible targets. I encourage them to not just accept the low hurdles but to seek to drive forward real, lasting and important changes for our people. That is not an easy task with a Civil Service that, two decades on, is still struggling with the post-devolution era. I trust that the Executive will do what is right for Northern Ireland. We on the opposition Benches will constructively criticise where necessary —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Could the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Mrs Dobson: — and do what is right for Northern Ireland.

Mr Eastwood: I congratulate you on your first sitting as a Deputy Speaker.

There has been quite a bit of talk today about process: the process leading up to this, the process before the election and the process from here to December or whenever we will have a final draft of the Programme for Government. That is fine. It is all important, and we have to put it all on the record. However, I think that the public are more interested in what we will do.

We believe strongly in consultation and always have done. We always argue for good consultation processes. We have just been through the best consultation you could ever go through. All of us sat down and worked with experts, spoke to civic society and developed manifestos, argued over them, defended them and put them in front of the people. Then we went out. I consulted thousands of people about our manifesto, our ideas and about this place and how it works and does not work. We have been

through that. It is called an election; it is called democracy. We then had to try to form a Government.

The SDLP went into the process to honestly get the best possible draft Programme for Government, even if it was a broad one. That is why we met the Civil Service, and we are thankful for the openness with which we were met. We met the head of the Civil Service and the heads and key figures in many of the Departments. We argued, interrogated and tried to come up with the best possible solutions to some of the problems on the basis of the work that we had done in our manifesto. We then put forward papers with specific policies and ideas. Mr McKay wants us to come up with specific ideas: we have done that, and they are all published. That was our approach to the process. Unfortunately, that is not where we ended up.

There was one meeting that we did not get: a meeting with the Finance Department on the overall financial picture. That was the only meeting that we could not get. We might not have been looking forward to it, but we are all interested in finding out why that was. What is the financial picture? How bad is it? It is important that the public are given an early understanding of the financial picture. We could not get that in the process.

We wanted a draft Programme for Government. The language of this is interesting. Many Members, many from government Benches, have talked about the "draft Programme for Government". Of course, this is not a draft Programme for Government; it is a framework for a Programme for Government or whatever the language is. From our consultation with the public, our view is that people are not interested in personality clashes up here, who is speaking to whom and who gets on well with whom: what they are interested in is when we will get down to the business of delivering. They will not be satisfied that we will not even have a Programme for Government for another five or six months.

People want us to rush urgently towards reform, change, action and delivery. That is what the last mandate was supposed to be about. We were in government, and we hold our hands up for the part that we played. We tried our best with one Ministry. None of us could stand here and say that that was a mandate filled with delivery, opportunities taken and change delivered. That is not what happened. We should consult, but we should consult with something, not just a broad wish list. That is what our manifestos were supposed to be about: policies that we could deliver. We then had an election, and we all accept the result of that.

Society is crying out for action, not warm words. The framework does not understand or recognise the fact that we face crises on so many fronts. We face a crisis on emigration, with far too many of our young people leaving our shores to find work or a university place. We face a crisis in homelessness: in my city, thousands of people are on the housing waiting list.

We are facing a crisis in child poverty. In Derry, north Belfast, west Belfast, parts of east Belfast — right across the North — far too many of our children are living in levels of poverty that are far too high. We face a crisis in hospital and health waiting lists. We still face a staggering level of economic inactivity in many areas. Bizarrely, we face further cuts in our university sector.

We accept that this is the process now, and we will positively and constructively engage in it. We will put in papers, respond to the consultation and do our best to put forward alternatives where required. We will, however, need to see the needs of the people and areas that have been left behind for far too long being addressed. We need to see a commitment to increased opportunity for childcare for hard-pressed families. Our manifesto talked about moving from around 12 hours to 20 hours, with a view of going to 30 hours later. We want to see targeted economic investment in the areas that have been left behind. We want to see fairness at the heart of everything that this Government do. We want to see support for victims. We want to see the opportunity that arises out of the potential of North/South development — economically, in the health service, in education, in tourism and right across the different sectors — being realised once and for all. We need to see, once and for all, infrastructure going to the west, not more warm words about it. If we do not see —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Eastwood: If we do not see — I will make this point to finish — once and for all, after more than 50 years, investment in the university at Magee in Derry, we will not support the Programme for Government that, again, fails to do that.

Mrs Overend: I take this opportunity to congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your new role.

As the Ulster Unionist education spokesperson, I will critique the education policy in the draft Programme for Government framework. As the Ulster Unionist Party leader said, our position is to scrutinise and critique — not necessarily to oppose — the work of the Executive. We are happy to give support where it is deserved.

In the wake of an election in which the Northern Ireland electorate was encouraged to vote for the DUP to keep Sinn Féin out of the First Minister's post, I recall the plea for education to be taken out of the hands of Sinn Féin. After 18 years of education in the hands of Sinn Féin, Northern Ireland now has a DUP Education Minister, albeit that it seems that he is joined at the hip with Sinn Féin. Only the second ministerial visit by new Education Minister Weir was to an Irish language secondary school in Belfast — Coláiste Feirste — which received a £15.5 million extension from the Department's coffers.

The visit probably raises more questions than it answers. Unfortunately, the answers are not found in this draft Programme for Government framework, which begs this question: what are the Programme for Government priorities for education? Will the 2016-2021 mandate see further such investment? Will the people of Northern Ireland see a change in the Education Minister compared with the last Education Minister when it comes to future decisions on funding for new secondary schools? In particular, I refer to the supporting of the start-up of a secondary school with a first-year intake of only 14 pupils, just because it is an Irish-language school. Will the new Education Minister go against any ministerial advisory group recommendations and seek to follow a personal or joint DUP/Sinn Féin political agenda?

While the last Education Minister was proud of taking politically biased decisions and going against the ministerial advisory group's recommendations on a value-

for-money decision, I am not sure that we are moving into a new era in education. None of those questions is answered in the draft Programme for Government framework, and the actions of the Education Minister so far have not given me any confidence in the matter.

One key outcome in the draft Programme for Government refers to the Department of Education:

"We give our children and young people the best start in life".

Of course, who could disagree with that, but how do we achieve that outcome? We look at the indicators, and numbers 15 to 11 refer specifically to educational outcomes.

4.30 pm

Indicator 11, "Improve educational outcomes", will be measured by the increase in the percentage of school-leavers achieving at level 2 or above, including in English and maths, but the unanswered questions remain. Are GCSEs the only method of measurement? The Chairman of the Education Committee, who is not in his place now, referred to that earlier. Will they consider other qualifications? More than that, are our young people actually job-ready with these qualifications?

I nearly got excited when I read the heading "Reduce educational inequality", which is indicator 12. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you recall, in the last mandate, the Ulster Unionist Party's attempt to remove article 71 of the Fair Employment and Equal Treatment Order 1998, which is the exception for schools under fair employment law that allows them to discriminate in the employment of teachers on the basis of religion. I thought for one moment that the 'Programme for Government Framework' might pledge to remove this fair employment exception, especially since, as recorded in Hansard, all parties said that they supported such a move; but, no, that is not in the document. The aspiration to improve the educational outcome of those receiving free school meals is a commendable one, but there is no mention in the framework of looking at the free school meals measurement to assess whether it remains a fair measurement of deprivation. Certainly, there has been a lobby to do this.

Indicator 13, "Improve the quality of education", again is motherhood and apple pie stuff. Of course we all want that. We also want the Education and Training Inspectorate to be changed to be more effective and to work alongside schools in a better fashion to enable schools to make improvements. There were a number of key recommendations in a previous Education Committee's report that, so far, have not been implemented.

By increasing their qualifications, indicator 14 wants to:

"Improve the skills profile of the population".

However, there is no mention of the particular problem of persistent underachievement in parts of Northern Ireland. Numerous reports published over the past 10 to 15 years identify where this attainment gap exists. The research has clearly identified, in particular, that boys from a working-class Protestant background are doing significantly worse than girls from a middle-class Catholic background. I am surprised that such necessary targeted interventions

are not mentioned. Initiatives like the signature projects in numeracy and literacy proved successful but were cut in the previous mandate. Will these or similar make a comeback? We do not know this from the 'Draft Programme for Government Framework'.

Indicator 15, "Improve child development", aims to measure an age 3+ health review using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire in the red book formerly known as the personal child health record. In contrast to the other indicators, this is something new and, indeed, rather specific and focused. So, the argument used by the Ministers that this document is only at a high level and does not get into detail is lost in this case.

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am disappointed that we stand today with only a framework rather than a detailed Programme for Government as promised in the Fresh Start Agreement. Are you going to tell me that my time is nearly up, Mr Deputy Speaker? In regard to educational indicators and outcomes, it is very high level and without specific detail. Where is the aspiration to break down the barriers between the many and varied sectors that make up our education system?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Your time, in fact, is nearly up now.

Mrs Overend: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. There is no mention of breaking down the barriers and moving towards a single system so, while this framework is aspirational, it lacks the central and overall vision that is so badly needed for education.

Mr Allen: I would like to congratulate those Members who made their maiden speech today, and I look forward to working constructively with them in delivering a better Northern Ireland for all our constituents. I welcome the opportunity to speak as the Ulster Unionist Party's community spokesperson. During the previous mandate, I was not a Member of the House for very long. However, like many, I watched as we leapt from crisis to crisis whilst those who matter most — our constituents — suffered.

It is predicted that, by 2020, one in four children in Northern Ireland will be living in poverty. If this Executive do not address that, we will further fail our children.

In 2012, OFMDFM launched the Delivering Social Change framework, which stated:

"The framework has been established to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages and to improve children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities, thereby breaking the long term cycle of multi-generational problems."

However, according to the most recent poverty bulletin, 23% of children were in poverty in 2013-14. That is approximately 101,000 children, and it is an increase from 20% the previous year. Some 20% of working-age adults were in poverty in 2013-14; that is approximately 213,000 working-age adults. That is an increase from 18% the previous year. Some 21% of pensioners were in poverty in 2013-14; that is approximately 63,000 pensioners. That is an increase from 20% the previous year.

The last Executive failed to deliver on key poverty targets, even though they went through a full process of listening to individuals, the community and voluntary sector and

leading academics. Do the two parties of Government really expect the people of Northern Ireland to believe that this renewed listening, to the same stakeholders who will be telling them the same things, will create a policy portfolio that will address what should have been addressed over the last four years?

In 2013, homelessness charity Crisis carried out research that identified that Northern Ireland had higher rates of homelessness than any other region of the United Kingdom. Indeed, the latest statistics on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive website show that there are 39,338 individuals on the housing waiting list, of whom 22,097 are considered to be in housing stress, including 11,016 households deemed to be statutorily homeless. That is simply not acceptable.

The Department for Communities is very large and has a wide range of functions. In addition to the functions of DSD, it has taken on many of those of DCAL. I know that many people are concerned that arts and culture may receive less priority in the new Department, but I am determined that that should not be the case. Arts funding became a major issue in the last Assembly as budgets were cut and many groups faced severe difficulties. Prior to the election, the Ulster Unionist Party produced a policy document dedicated to the arts and, in our Assembly election manifesto, we committed ourselves to five points — not the only party that had a five-point plan. A key one was to lobby for the inclusion of the arts in the next PFG, outlining the Executive's acknowledgement of the importance of the arts and demonstrating our commitment to them.

Instead of entering this mandate with a clear strategy and a set of policies that are already addressing the growing demands for social housing, tackling poverty and delivering for communities, we enter a new mandate with fluffy promises to make it better and calling on those who have already been talking to us to say some more.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allen: I am just about to finish; you can come in in a minute.

I will give credit where credit is due, and I will play my part as a member of the official Opposition to ensure that those fluffy promises are turned into results that benefit those who need help the most.

That is me finished, folks; fire away.

Mr Stalford: Is the Member giving way?

Mr Allen: Yes.

A Member: I do not think he is giving way.

Mr Stalford: Fair enough.

Mr Agnew: This morning, when I woke up, I heard of the death of a constituent, which the police were investigating. In the last hour, I have heard that it was a member of the Assembly staff who died. I would like to put on record my condolences to the family and, if the initial suspicions of the police are true, I wish them every success in their investigation and in catching whoever was responsible for the death, if it has been untoward.

I welcome the outcomes-based approach of the draft Programme for Government framework. I think it is a

progressive way of providing a holistic and long-term vision for Northern Ireland. The test is not what is in the document; it will be in what is to come. Politics is not simply about what we want to achieve. Ask any person in the street, and they will want to see better educational achievement, better health outcomes and fewer preventable deaths. These are things that we can all subscribe to. The art of politics is in the how: how are we going to achieve these things? We are not there yet with this document, so it is right that this is a take-note debate because that is all we can do with the document. We can take note of it; the real substance will come in the actions plans and, I hope, a legislative timetable for what we should expect to come forward from this Executive on how they can deliver on these outcomes.

When he spoke, Mr Attwood talked about a hope of a paradigm shift and following the Scottish model of being open and being an interactive government that engages with the wider community. I hope for that too, but I have to say that I am not optimistic on that. My party was asked to meet the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in relation to the Justice portfolio. Quite reasonably, I thought, I asked to see a draft of the Programme for Government, and I was told no. If that is a sign of the type of engagement that we are going to see from this Government, I am afraid that the hope of a paradigm shift will not be lived up to.

The First Minister also spoke about a spirit of cooperation. Members will be well aware that that was high on my agenda in the last Assembly, having brought forward the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. I want to see us go beyond the legal requirement of government to work together for children and see a government that works together for the people of Northern Ireland as a whole. However, it appears that there is going to be no legislative requirement for that. In fact, in the last mandate, we could not secure a legal commitment to have cooperative governance. When John McCallister brought through his opposition Bill, his plan had been that the government would be a single entity. It concerns me that those now in power were resistant to that requirement. What I will be looking for today from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister is a commitment that we will not see a repeat of the embarrassment of Ministers suing other Ministers, which we saw repeatedly in the last Assembly, including from the now First Minister. This was not only a cost to public finances but a cost to the reputation of these institutions and our governance. We need to see cooperative governance and a Government that act as one and are responsible for all decisions, not just those of their particular party colleagues.

I welcome the commitment to equality in outcome 3 in the document. Again, the test will be in what actions are taken to achieve that equality. Equality is not simply ending discrimination, as is mentioned in the opening paragraphs of outcome 3. Equality has to be about more than that; it has to be about inclusion and rights protected within the law. In that, we have a challenge to the parties of government. Are we going to see Minister Givan bring forward the long-awaited sexual orientation strategy, which was promised in the last Programme for Government but not delivered? Are we going to finally see legislation for marriage equality brought through and passed in this Assembly? We have to respect the mandate of the DUP, whose manifesto said that it would not support such

provision. Equally, however, I call on the First Minister and her party to respect the mandate of those of us who were elected with the commitment that we would achieve marriage equality and that, when that proposal comes back to the Assembly, we will see no petition of concern and will see respect of that mandate. More importantly, I hope that we will see a signal that we can have inclusivity in Northern Ireland and that outcome 3, for a more equal society, is not just words but something we can achieve in reality.

4.45 pm

There is another commitment to increase environmental sustainability. I express my optimism, I suppose, about that being there, but I am disappointed that the only measure seems to be the measurement of greenhouse gases. That is absolutely fundamental, of course, but I cannot stand over a commitment to environmental sustainability that says that if you reduce greenhouse gases it is OK if you pollute our rivers. We need something more holistic. We need genuine sustainability.

I worry that all the talk about openness and well-being is undermined by the very opening purpose statement, which talks about:

"Improving wellbeing for all — by tackling disadvantage, and driving economic growth".

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Agnew: I hope we will not have, as we have seen in the past, an Executive agenda driven by economic growth over everything else.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As this is Mr Gerry Carroll's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind Members that it is established convention to allow him to speak unhindered without interruption.

Mr Carroll: Having read through the document at length over the weekend and having read through it again and again, I cannot help but think that it is not a draft Programme for Government at all but is, in fact, 114 pages of concentrated waffle that is designed to deflect from an already agreed programme of Thatcherite austerity. There are plenty of aspirations in the document, many of which I agree with and, no doubt, many Members would agree with. In the end, the devil is in the detail and actions speak louder than words.

Take the aspiration to reduce poverty, for example. That is an important and laudable aspiration, but what does it mean in practice? We know, for example, that benefit cuts will increase poverty. We know that job losses will increase poverty. We know that the bedroom tax, which is coming in in 2020, will increase poverty, and we know that all that is in the Fresh Start Agreement. How can we reconcile the reality of an austerity programme like the Fresh Start Agreement with an aspiration to reduce poverty? The truth is that the Executive cannot.

Again, there is an aspiration in the document to improve mental health. Of course, everyone in the Chamber would welcome that, but how can we square that with a situation where in the areas with the highest levels of suicide and most affected by issues associated with mental health, north and west Belfast, there is a disgraceful plan to close down mental health centres? What use is that aspiration to

the users of Everton and Whiterock mental health centres in Belfast?

What is more, how can any aspiration to reduce poverty or improve public services be reconciled with an economic plan taken straight from the Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan playbook to reduce tax on corporations and give big business handouts? The last 30 years of neo-liberalism have taught us that there is no such thing as trickle-down economics. It does not exist, and it does not work. In reality, the Fresh Start Agreement is a plan to send wealth upwards at the cost of hundreds of millions of pounds that will be paid by the taxpayer and the public sector.

There is an alternative to the right-wing economics advocated by the Executive. It is based not on cutting tax on corporations but on making the rich pay. It is an alternative that does not seek to set aside millions of pounds, as the Fresh Start Agreement indicates, to go after so-called benefit fraud; instead, it sets money aside to go after the real fraudsters, who avoid paying millions and billions of pounds in taxes. There are more multimillionaires per head of population in Belfast than in any other city here in the North or in Britain, except London and oil-rich Aberdeen. A socialist alternative says, "Make them pay".

Why not abolish the rates system and replace it with a progressive local income tax where the rich pay the most, or, at least, why not remove the cap on rates for the wealthiest? Why do we not stop wasting hundreds of millions of pounds on wasteful PFI schemes? Why do we not end the wasteful voluntary redundancy scheme where £700 million is being set aside to put people out of work?

Why do we not use £700 million to build homes and put people into work? It is not about a lack of money, it is about priorities. If it were about lack of money, the House would not have consistently afforded itself a pay rise while telling everyone else to take a pay freeze or pay cut.

The House has failed the vast majority of people here for too long. I am very doubtful that the Programme for Government represents anything different. Indeed, the introduction to the document says that its progress cannot be judged in a single Assembly term but, rather, in a generation's time.

I want to make it clear that we do not have a generation's time to wait in order for the House to get its act together. Public-sector workers and hard-working staff in places like the Royal Victoria Hospital do not have a generation's time to wait for the living wage. The LGBT community cannot wait a generation to see its right to equal marriage granted. Those in child poverty will not be children in a generation's time, and they cannot be expected to wait. Women who are being prosecuted because they want to control their own bodies cannot wait a generation. The Irish language community, the pioneers of *Bóthar Seoighe*, with the thousands of people following in their footsteps in schools like *Coláiste Feirste*, have waited long enough for their rights and I am sure that they will not be prepared to sit back and wait to see if Stormont sorts things out in a generation's time. And, of course, the thousands of people who want to see a future free from sectarianism and communal bickering cannot be expected to wait a generation when they already have had to wait for at least 20 years.

In closing, I remind the House, and anyone else who is watching, that what Stormont does, people and the workers can undo. Even if the Programme for Government goes through, which it likely will, that will not be the end of the matter, because the day of reckoning is yet to come, and it is coming soon for the austerity-mongers on both sides of the Chamber.

Mr Allister: This document can only be described, at best, as synthetic and shallow. It is not about producing a Programme for Government; it is a mere collection of platitudes. It is an all-things-to-all-men manifesto with no direction as to how it is going to deliver any of the platitudes. Of course, there is a very good reason for that, which is that this is a Government of irreconcilable differences.

It is no surprise then that they postpone the production of a Programme for Government. As has been pointed out, Fresh Start told us that this document was to be out in April 2016, and then there would be the draft Programme for Government. Of course, six months later, all of that is in reverse. The reason why it is in reverse is that this is a Government that are incapable of agreeing their vision. We know this through no better source than the First Minister, because she told us all, in her quest to be elected, that it was imperative that she be elected because Martin McGuinness, her partner, had a very different vision. She told her spring conference in Limavady that Sinn Féin would take Northern Ireland in the wrong direction. Now, the terrible twins, the DUP and Sinn Féin, are in the position of having to try to produce a Programme for Government, knowing as they do that they are pulling in opposite directions and that one wants to go socially, economically and in other ways in one direction while the other wants to go in the opposite direction. So, it is no surprise to me that we have this synthetic, shallow document which does not answer any of the questions.

This is a document with nothing on some of the key issues. We have the situation of education, where, for years, we have not even been able to regulate, within the ambit of government, the transfer of our children from primary to post-primary.

This document has no vision or way forward on that. It has nothing to say about cuts or the austerity to which the last Member referred. Nowhere does it set out any sense of fiscal probity or direction. Why? They are pulling in opposite directions, so it just goes silent on those issues.

The document has nothing to say about paramilitarism to any degree that matters. There may be no surprise there. If they want indicators in this new world where we will judge things by indicators and match them against indicators, what about the indicator of Sinn Féin no longer being inextricably linked to the IRA? Would that be a good indicator of whether paramilitarism is being dealt with? It was the First Minister who told us that Sinn Féin — her partner — is inextricably linked to the IRA. There is an indicator, if you want to take one, of whether any progress has been made on paramilitarism.

Try another. Try the indicator that Sinn Féin at last admits that there is an IRA. Would that be a good indicator to tell us whether this coming together to address issues such as paramilitarism is bearing any fruit, or is it just OK within the ambit of this woolly, meaningless document that, even in the face of a report on paramilitarism and the Chief

Constable reaffirming his assessment of last autumn, Sinn Féin can be part of this Government, pull in whatever direction it is meant to be that the framework suggests and still say, "IRA? What IRA? There is no IRA". The First Minister can tell us that there has to be because her partner — Sinn Féin — is inextricably linked to the IRA, which her partner says does not exist. Just let them think about how they will square that circle on paramilitarism. When you begin to think about that, you begin to see just how facile and meaningless the document is.

Finally, it is my hope that, in two and a half weeks' time, the document will require a major rewrite because it will become the responsibility of the devolved Assembly to play its part in extracting this part of the United Kingdom from the EU. We will then need to think about the policies by which we will retake our fishing industry, we will have a Department that will set the arrangements for fishing — there is not much shadow or thought of that in the document — and Departments will have to prepare a bonfire of EU regulations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Allister: There is not much sign of that because this is a document of meaningless platitudes.

Ms Bailey: Unlike many of my new colleagues in the Assembly, I will not take the opportunity today to make my maiden speech. I will do that another time. I will just make my comments brief.

Throughout the document, there is much mention of improving health, housing, respect, poverty, economic inequality and education. It mentions various targeted demographics, such as children, the disabled and youth. Identity and even paramilitaries are mentioned, as I have heard in the discussion in the Chamber several times. Those noble sentiments are all to be applauded, but, for me, the glaring omission from the document is women. Women are over half the population in Northern Ireland, yet they remain untargeted by commitments to improve the inequalities levied on them. Indicator 7, for example, states that we wish to "improve health in pregnancy", yet it is concerned only with a baby's birth weight; it does not address a pregnant woman's health outcomes. If we are to wait for wider society to fill in the blanks in the document, I call for wider society to take a very gendered view of what this Programme for Government should deliver over the next couple of years.

5.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I have watched, over the past several years, as consultation after consultation is responded to and those responses are ignored. I have seen strategies such as the childcare strategy being written and put forward after a lot of work, time, effort and money has been spent to produce them and then being shelved. I feel that this Programme for Government ignores the role of women in Northern Ireland and makes no commitment to us. Given the work undertaken in the previous mandate, particularly our previous Speaker's commitment to good works and the creation of a women's caucus in the Assembly, I hope that, in this mandate, we can begin to address gender inequality in Northern Ireland with the urgency that it deserves.

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have listened carefully to what has been an interesting and, not too many times, passionate debate. I am pleased by the support shown for the Executive's Programme for Government framework approach. As the First Minister said in her opening remarks, the approach and style of the next Programme for Government will be different. That is not to say that previous Administrations were wrong to do what they did or that their actions and strategies were misguided; much of the work started previously will continue and, I have no doubt, find a place under the new Programme for Government. However, the difference this time is that we will have a much clearer idea of what we want to achieve and be in a better position to tell what is working and what is not. We will also have a better picture of the things that we need to do — the things that will make a real difference — so that we can take the important actions for those whom we should be working with and supporting.

By adopting an outcomes-based approach to the Programme for Government, the Executive have made some significant statements of intent and ambition. It sets the bar at a high level and commits the Executive to taking on the most difficult challenges facing our society. If something can make a difference to our societal well-being, it will be taken on. Where evidence demonstrates that efforts are not making a difference, we will be quick to alter course and redirect resources to more meaningful effect.

The document that we are debating today has been agreed by the Executive, but it is just the beginning. It is a draft Programme for Government framework and, as the name suggests, a structure for carrying more detailed programmes, strategies, actions and plans. As an Executive, we are committed to improving public services, investing in our schools, hospitals and roads and protecting the most vulnerable, and that is against a backdrop of increasing pressure on public finances.

As an Executive, we need to be more creative and more joined-up if we are to deliver for all of the people. The new approach to developing a Programme for Government will allow the Executive to rise to those challenges. Over the next three months, the Executive will formulate the work programmes that they believe will deliver the outcomes contained in the framework. However, this will not be done in isolation. Ministers and their senior officials will want to use this period to take every opportunity to meet stakeholders and potential delivery partners from all sectors to discuss and agree on the roles that they might be able to play in achieving our common goal.

I turn to some of the comments that were made. I took a careful note of most of what Members said. Obviously, given the time, I will not be able to cover everything.

The discussion on the debate began with the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, who declared himself proud not to have been involved in the Programme for Government process. He was not because he left the Government last year. Instead of standing with the rest of us to face down those still involved in criminality in our society, he took the coward's way out and took his party out of the Executive. He went on to say that there were two tests that they applied to whether or not they would be in government on this occasion. Both tests have no credibility whatsoever, in my eyes.

In my view, the reason why the Ulster Unionist Party did not come into government was because of the election results. It had absolutely nothing to do with the Programme for Government. If the party had been returned with enough MLAs to have three, or even two, Members in the Executive as Ministers, it would have gone through the door and into the Executive like a rocket. The leader did not do that because the election did not turn out as he thought it would. That was the only reason why the Ulster Unionists did not come into the Executive.

He also said that, from 2011 to 2016, the Executive did not deliver, but he totally ignored the fact that many of the difficulties presented to the Executive were mostly of an economic nature in relation to the massive cuts inflicted on our Executive by a Tory-led Administration in London. That had a very dramatic effect on our Departments' ability to deliver, including the Department for Regional Development, which the Ulster Unionist Party held. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party went into the general election of 2010 supporting the Conservatives who took those decisions, and it is quite rich, in my opinion, to try to blame the Executive for the difficulties that were presented to us by the dramatic cut to our block grant.

Christopher Stalford went on to talk about a very important issue, which is how poverty affects communities. All of us recognise that we need to improve the health of everyone and ensure that people have the best opportunity to live longer, including people in Sandy Row and, indeed, many other areas. Healthy lives are an obvious outcome for inclusion in the Programme for Government. There will be increasing demands on our health system, and the implications for our public finances make this one of the biggest challenges facing the Executive.

As we all know, an international expert has been invited to study our health service and, no doubt, he will come forward with proposals that he hopes, and many of us will hope, that all the political parties can sign up to. Hopefully, that will be a dramatic opportunity for us to ensure that we are consistently in the business of improving our health service. That is a major issue.

Conor Murphy and Pam Cameron mentioned the issue of how outcomes can help communities, particularly people who are suffering marginalisation and disadvantage. That is very important. That outcome is about helping and caring for the most vulnerable in our society and ensuring that provision is adequate to meet their needs, but it is also about giving people the opportunity and means to help themselves.

Somebody said that there was no mention of victims in the context of what we are trying to do, but an important dimension to all this will be addressing the legacy of historical institutional abuse, the legacy of the past, the needs of victims and survivors and other issues associated with our past. All those will have to be tackled in the next term of this Administration.

Alex Attwood asked a number of questions about the approach for the Programme for Government framework. He described it as a hybrid document. The reality is that, since November 2015, the SDLP had representatives attending all the meetings that took place from the very beginning right through to the election. I think that most of the people who came were note takers, and I do not think that any of the representatives uttered a single

word during that conversation. We got that from the civil servants and from other political parties who attended the meetings. That clearly indicated something to me from a very early stage. I went so far as to ask for a meeting with the leader of the SDLP, well in advance of the election, to establish whether it was going to come into the Executive. He talked about how it would depend on the outcome of the discussions around the Programme for Government. We then had workshops, meetings and discussions, to which his party was invited, yet his party made little or no contribution to those discussions. It was then that the warning bells rang in my head that, in all probability, the SDLP would not come into the Executive. Why did it not come into the Executive? For the same reasons that the Ulster Unionist Party did not come into the Executive: it did not get the result that it had hoped for. The SDLP came back to the Assembly with 12 Members and decided, like the Ulster Unionist Party, in an act of desperation, that, in order to change its political fortunes, not the fortunes of the people of the North of Ireland, it would absent itself from the Executive and go into opposition. That is the reality. Of course, the SDLP has hooked its wagon to a political party that, even though it held the Department for Regional Development, was totally and absolutely opposed to the construction of the A5. That is clearly on the public record.

Alex Attwood also said that people in the community are not happy about the approach that is being adopted. He certainly does not speak for Celine McStravick, who is the director of the National Children's Bureau for the North. She said that the NCB is delighted that the Northern Ireland Executive have adopted an outcomes-based approach with their Programme for Government. She went on to say that that is an extremely significant change in how government will work and, if operated correctly, will ensure that Programme for Government policies deliver tangible results for the benefit of all. She went on to say that, for the first time, citizens will be at the centre of policymaking, Departments will have to work together to achieve policy objectives and there are important implications for the way the entire Civil Service will work. She said that, to that end, the NCB has been heavily involved in working with the Executive to help bring this shift in direction, which is delivering great results across the world, and that the NCB looks forward to aiding the Executive with their aim of effective delivery and to therefore secure improved outcomes for children, families and communities.

I thank Naomi Long for her support for the process. She took a very honourable approach on behalf of her party. She gave a very clear and correct explanation of her party's understanding of the process and what was clearly the disingenuous approach of the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP.

John O'Dowd gave us all a reality check, setting out the challenges facing our Departments for the next five years as a result of the austerity agenda pursued by the Tory Government in London. Is it not amazing to hear people talk about the lack of achievement from the Assembly and Executive in the last term? How many times did you hear the British Government mentioned during this debate by some of the most vehement critics of what we are trying to do? The Executive are described as right wing, anti-children, anti-education, anti-health and anti-everything when, in reality, the people who hold the purse strings

are the British Government. During the last term of the Assembly, the British Government cut ruthlessly into our block grant. There needs to be a reality check when people look at how we go forward, and not just in relation to a recognition of that issue. The words “motherhood and apple pie” have been used quite a number of times today, and I hope that, when people come forward with their ideas about how we improve life for our people, they will come forward with costed proposals on how we do it. It will be against the backdrop of recognising that we are still dealing with a ruthless Tory Administration in London that are still committed to austerity. It was important that John gave us that reality check.

5.15 pm

Phillip Logan, from North Antrim, mentioned the issue of jobs in Ballymena, and we all know that Ballymena, like many other areas, has been hit, but they have been hit very badly by job losses in recent times.

Jenny Palmer, from Lagan Valley, talked about infrastructure. She actually mentioned the words “vanity projects”. Implicit in all that was that we need more roads east of the Bann and not so many west of the Bann. I do not accept that. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party was in no way enthusiastic about the high-level North/South Ministerial Council project that was the construction of the A5. She made points in relation to the Balmoral show, which has been a huge success, and access routes to the show, all of which are legitimate remarks. Of course, many of the difficulties and problems around the Maze/Long Kesh site came from the fact that the Ulster Unionist Party lined up alongside the extremists within society who were opposed to the construction of the peace-building and conflict resolution centre on that site.

Linda Dillon, from Mid Ulster, talked about the need for environmental sustainability; how we deal with household waste; the need for good, high-quality jobs for rural dwellers; the importance of the agrifood industry as well as improving rural broadband to remove the inequalities that rural dwellers suffer from. She made a vital point, and that is the relationship of this Administration with the super-councils that are now 14 months old.

Emma Pengelly, from South Belfast, talked about the need to tackle poverty and growing our economy, and she quoted Muhammad Ali. All of us who grew up with Muhammad Ali not only believed he was a great boxer but absolutely believed that he was somebody who was totally in favour of equality, coming as he did from a community in the United States of America that had been treated despicably for a very long time. So, we remember him fondly today.

Claire Hanna talked about prickliness from the Government parties and talked about Fresh Start. She was proud that the SDLP was against Fresh Start, and not just against it but voted against it in the Executive. What would have been the consequences if we had voted against Fresh Start and if the DUP had not gone for Fresh Start? I will tell you what the consequences would have been: direct rule Ministers would have been in here the next day imposing their water charges, removing the right to free prescriptions, removing the free travel for older people, and God knows what else.

Ms Hanna: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr McGuinness: Yes.

Ms Hanna: The alternative to Fresh Start would have been to negotiate solutions to a lot of the issues that were ignored by Fresh Start. The Member critiques the lack of detail in our responses, yet the outcomes-based approach with no detail is fine for you. You critique us hitching our wagon to the Ulster Unionist Party, which, you claim, is anti-building roads. Have you any differences with the party you have hitched your own wagon to?

You criticise the process that we outlined to the electorate, which was that we would seek to negotiate a Programme for Government and, if it was not acceptable, we would go into opposition. You did that in the Republic; we did the same here. Can you outline, without recourse to the phrase “enemy of the peace process”, the difference between what you did in the South and what we have done here in choosing to use opposition to hold a failing Government to account?

Mr McGuinness: You raised an awful lot of issues during that concise contribution. The reality is, no matter how you dress it up, if there had been no Fresh Start Agreement — you were involved in the discussions that led up to it — direct rule Ministers would have been in here the following week, and you would not be sitting in the seat that you are in today. I would not and neither would the First Minister be in the positions that we are in today. Let us deal with the reality of what we had to deal with during the course of last year. If we had followed the SDLP position, there would have been no Assembly, there would have been no Executive, and the British Government would have had their fingers on the tiller here in the North. That is the reality.

In terms of how we move forward, we were criticised right, left and centre by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP during the last Administration. We were effectively dealing with a situation where both parties wanted to have one foot in the Government and the other foot out, one foot in the boat and one foot on the bank. We know where that takes you. It takes you absolutely nowhere.

During Colum Eastwood’s contribution, he correctly talked about the fact that, during the election, everybody in the House went out and talked to thousands of people and stakeholders about what they were offering up. Of course, that debate was had. There were television debates, and people had an opportunity to make judgements. They sent the DUP back into the House with 38 seats. They sent the Ulster Unionists back into the House with 16. They sent us back to the House with 28 seats, and they sent the SDLP back with 12. The people made their judgement, and they judged that they wanted us, with all of the difficulties, challenges and problems that we had during the last term, to take our society forward. I had always hoped that we could have done that and that the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionists would have been in that power-sharing Executive, which was the central theme of the Good Friday Agreement, but of course that did not happen.

Barry McElduff went on to talk about education, the importance of literacy and numeracy and the brilliant work that John O’Dowd did in raising the levels of literacy and numeracy in schools. He mentioned the fact that there was a dramatic increase in the number of young people leaving with five good GCSEs. I think that he deserves credit for that.

Stephen Farry talked about SIF. I remember, when SIF was first mooted, that Alex Attwood described it as a slush fund for paramilitaries. Whatever about the challenges with a new and innovative project, it was certainly no slush fund for paramilitaries. The reality is that it was an attempt to empower local communities, and, indeed, projects are now up and running in local communities that are having an impact on poverty and on people who have not had a job for a very long time and which are also providing much-needed amenities and facilities for local communities.

On how we go forward, we also had a contribution from Doug Beattie from Upper Bann. Obviously, all of us were very sad to hear of the tragedy in his family, and I think that there is not a person in the House who was not totally sympathetic to his family at that time. He raised the issue primarily of how we bear down on the activities of armed gangs and paramilitary groups that are still out there and are still hostile to the peace process and, clearly, would not like it to succeed. We have received the report from the three-person panel, and that will go to our Executive in the next while. That report deals with everything referenced in Doug Beattie's comments, and I think that people will await the outcome of that with considerable interest.

Declan McAleer talked about the situation in West Tyrone, and he made a very important point, which was articulated by others as well. He encouraged people in society and in the community to become involved in this consultation. That includes people who are involved in the community and voluntary sector, different stakeholders and ordinary people who have an interest in how we go forward. I renew that appeal. I think that it is very important that we see as much involvement as possible from the public in all of this.

Daithí McKay rightly talked about family-friendly hours, and he made the same point about the public and stakeholders having their say. He rightly challenged opposition parties to come forward with their costed proposals. That is where the "motherhood and apple pie" is in opposition land. It is out there because people think that they have the right to come in here and stand up and make all sorts of grandiose claims such as, "Why are we not doing this? Why are we not doing that? You have failed us on this. You have failed us on that". Let us hear and see the costed proposals, and let us see how that fits into the Budget that we as an Executive have to deal with as a result of the challenges that we face coming from London and the fact that they have the ability to cut our block grant.

Jo-Anne Dobson dwelt on a range of health issues. Of course, we have a new Health Minister who is working against the backdrop of what will be, hopefully, significant change as we go forward in this term, not least because of the challenges posed for all of us by the outcome of an international report on our health service.

I have already mentioned Colum Eastwood, who came after. The main point I made was in agreement with him. We all spoke to the public against the backdrop of the relentless criticism of the DUP and Sinn Féin from the UUP and the SDLP; yet the public, in its wisdom, decided to return us as the lead partners in this Executive.

I was quite shocked by the comments of Sandra Overend from Mid Ulster, which were terrible and very unfair to young people who are taught through the medium of Irish in Coláiste Feirste. For that to be her first point, in a criticism of the Education Minister's visit to the school, was

shameful and I think she should be embarrassed at that remark.

Andy Allen talked about fluffy promises. There is nothing fluffy about what we are trying to do, which is to give the public an opportunity to have their say rather than take a top-down approach. This has been successful in other places in ensuring that there is an opportunity for the public to have a meaningful input into the outcome of this Programme for Government.

Steven Agnew mentioned the death of a member of Assembly staff, which shocked us all: some of us have been sitting here for a couple of hours and had not heard about it. Whatever the circumstances, the First Minister and I, with everybody in the House, send our sympathy and condolences to the family as they deal with a very traumatic situation.

Steven went on to talk about equality. On this important issue, there will be times when the DUP and Sinn Féin will not agree, particularly in relation to issues such as marriage equality. These are things that we have to work through. We are all on a journey, and we all recognise that there is a duty on us to ensure that nobody in our society feels discriminated against.

Gerry Carroll made his point that it was 114 pages of concentrated waffle. He also said that the devil is in the detail. Of course it is, and it is unfair to use such terminology at this stage when we have yet to see the outcome of the public consultation, including the public in West Belfast and those in many other parts of the North who want to see us tackling poverty and standing up for the most marginalised, vulnerable and disabled in our society. I was taken aback by his information, which I have not got, that the bedroom tax will be here in 2020. We have made it absolutely clear that, under no circumstances, will our people, no matter what section of society they come from, have a bedroom tax imposed upon them.

Jim Allister made his contribution, and the less said about that the better.

Clare Bailey talked about the glaring omission being the position of women, although she paid tribute to Mitchel McLaughlin for the creation of the women's forum, which has been a very important development in our Assembly.

I said before the election, at the beginning of last month, that my priority was to bring forward and implement a Programme for Government that grows the economy, provides proper public services and promotes equality and inclusion. I also said that we need a Government that work coherently and collectively, and with equality and respect at the heart of how we do business. I am pleased to say that the Executive's draft Programme for Government framework does all that and more. It will enable us to prosper, live longer and healthier lives, have an equal society, live sustainably, be innovative and creative and be a place in which people can fulfil their potential. It will help us to have more and better jobs, build safe communities, care for others and provide help to those most in need. It will establish a basis for us to be a confident, welcoming and shared society that respects diversity, where we give our children the best start in life, and where we are all well connected by good infrastructure in a place where people want to live and work and that is attractive to visitors and investors. It will also allow the Executive to do things

differently, working in more joined-up ways and engaging with stakeholders and delivery partners from every sector.

5.30 pm

When the full document is finalised at the end of the year, I am committed to the fact that it will be not only a programme that affects us all but a programme to which everyone can subscribe and in which everyone can play a part.

I commend the draft Programme for Government framework and ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the draft Programme for Government framework 2016-2021 as agreed by the Executive on 26 May 2016.

Private Members' Business

Illegal Drugs

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. Other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Frew: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges with grave concern the impact and extent of drug-related incidents, crimes and fatalities in our communities; supports the ongoing work carried out by statutory services, the Public Health Agency and the voluntary and community sector; and calls on the Minister of Justice to work alongside the relevant bodies, to bring forward further measures to raise awareness, and to ensure that the criminal justice system is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets.

This is my first opportunity to congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker. I know that you will do a grand job and bring to it all the fairness of previous Speakers. I know you very well; you have been a good friend to me, and I know that you will lead the House in a fair manner.

I also congratulate the newly appointed Justice Minister. This is our first opportunity to debate and engage with each other. I am speaking here as an MLA for North Antrim, but I also happen to be the Chairperson of the Justice Committee. I assure the Minister that the Committee will fully scrutinise the work that she and her Department do, but the Committee is also there to give advice and support in the coming months and years. There will be very exciting times for us all as we go forward.

This is an important debate, which is why we brought it to the House so quickly in the new mandate. We realise at first hand the devastation that drugs have on our society, not only on the people who suffer addiction but on their families — mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, wives and husbands. Everyone in the wider family circle suffers when someone becomes addicted to drugs.

An amendment has been tabled, and we fully support it. We realise clearly that the issue requires a holistic approach, and one Minister alone cannot solve the problem of this crisis in society that hits families so hard. It has to be a holistic approach, so we will be clear and gracious in supporting the amendment.

As the main motion states, we want a criminal justice system that is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets.

We are not talking just about drug users. We realise that it is against the law and that you should not take drugs, but we also realise that people are addicted, that it becomes an illness, that it takes over your life and that it destroys the family from within. We are not necessarily talking about the drug mules or the drug carriers either, although

they are breaking the law and need to be served justice in the same way as anyone else. We really need to see a day when we tackle the ones at the very top: the people who are organised enough to bring shipments of drugs to these shores. Whether they are paramilitaries or are linked to organised crime — it is much the same — we need to tackle those people and get them off our streets. When we do, there will be no need for drug mules or carriers, which will help us all, especially the drug addicts trying to adjust their life and move away from drugs. Without that, it cannot happen.

We cannot do the same thing over and over again. Drugs are here, drugs are real, drugs are everywhere. I would bet that there is not an establishment in the country that has not had a trace of drugs on its premises at some time or other. I suggest that every note that you have in your wallet or purse has a trace of drugs. That is how endemic the issue is in our society, and it is important that we tackle it in a smart, tough way. It is important that the Minister gets to grips with some of the work that the Justice Committee did in the previous mandate on drugs courts and innovation in that area: the smarter use of courts, for example, and being cleverer when it comes to tackling the issue and making sure that people are removed from society. Also, we must ensure that people are not just thrown into prison, because you can rest assured that they will come out with a drug problem. That is something that we have to tackle in our prisons.

If we are simply saying today — we are not — that we should throw everybody into prison, it will cost every one of us a lot of money. Surveys show that it takes about £73,000 to keep someone in prison in Northern Ireland for a year. Some say that it is even more than that. According to the prison inspectors, the cost per occupied place is £16,000 more. We have to get smart and clever in how we tackle this. Even if we throw people into prison, drugs will still be here, people will still find addictions, people will still have to go through treatment, people will have to be tackled and families will have to be supported. That will all cost money.

How wide-ranging are drugs? Drug crime is not the only effect. I hazard a guess that violence against the person, theft, burglary, robbery, criminal damage, public disorder, miscellaneous crimes against society and even some motoring offences and some sexual offences are caused by drugs and their spectre. How do we become smarter? I make this appeal to the Minister: please, Minister, at the first opportunity you get, come down and visit the Railway Street addiction unit in Ballymena to see the work that is being done to help drug users by supporting them and trying to get them off the habit. It supports the families, the youngsters and the mothers and fathers in trying to move people away from addiction or at least help them in their suffering until they get to a point at which they can reduce their addiction. It is vital that places such as the Railway Street addiction unit are supported.

Minister, you are only just in post, but the previous Minister and the Department were prepared to reduce funding for that service only last year. Only after a massive campaign in the community, which fought hard to retain it, was there a promise of two further years of support. The DOJ runs that facility in partnership with the Health Minister, and that is why it is important that we have a joined-up approach. Two thirds of that funding should come from DOJ, but

there has been a reduced service since last year. I appeal to the Minister to look at the Railway Street addiction unit in Ballymena and consider moving it right across the Province. Those are the experts and the people who hand-hold the victims and the drug addicts. They are the people who support families when times are tough. We cannot do it; we do not have the time. GPs certainly do not have the time, although they could do more. This is a specialised unit that deals with people even walking in off the street. Think of the chaos that would be caused by that happening. They bring people in off the street, cater for their needs and help them with all sorts of issues and dramas that GPs, MLA constituency offices and Citizens Advice cannot cope with. They are medically trained in some respects. Even if it is something like needle exchange or if it is to keep a drug user safer in his practice, those are things that we need to strive to gain. If we make the drug user safer, we make his or her family safer. Those are very important points that I ask you, Minister, to take away and make sure that you not only restore the funding needed to run addiction services and units throughout the Province but enhance the funding for those specialisms and spread them out so that more people from across the Province can get help when they need it.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes.

Mr Beggs: I thought that there was supposed to be collective government decision-making. Will you advise me whether you, in approving the Budget, have provided sufficient funds so that the Minister of Justice can continue to fund that very worthwhile work, or, having appointed her, are you now starting to criticise her because she does not have enough funds to carry out her work? Is there collective responsibility or not?

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member: your time is almost up and you do not get an extra minute.

Mr Frew: OK, Mr Speaker —

Mr Speaker: Your time is up.

Before I call Ms Nichola Mallon to move the amendment, I remind the House that this is her first opportunity to speak in the Chamber. As is the convention of the Chamber, she is usually allowed to speak without interruption — that is, of course, as long as you follow the normal procedure of the Chamber. Otherwise, she may provoke some interruptions.

Ms Mallon: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "drug" and insert

"use and drug-related incidents, crimes and fatalities have on individuals, families and our community; supports the ongoing work carried out by statutory services, the Public Health Agency and the voluntary and community sector; and calls on the Executive to work collaboratively alongside the relevant bodies to bring forward further measures to raise awareness about the dangers of drug use, to increase investment in, awareness of, and access to, early intervention services for children and young people as well as adults, and to ensure that the criminal justice system is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets."

In moving the amendment, as you point out, Mr Speaker, I make my maiden speech to the House on what is certainly

an issue of grave concern to my constituents in North Belfast.

The well-documented prevalence and escalation of drug misuse through the consumption of illegal drugs and prescribed medicines is having a devastating impact on individuals, families and our community. It is a growing problem that my predecessor Alban Maginness — a gentleman who dedicated decades of his life to trying to improve the quality of life of the people of North Belfast — was acutely conscious of and committed to tackling. He witnessed in North Belfast the torment of individuals falling victim to drug addiction and the anguish and heartache felt by their families struggling to help to free them from the cruel and debilitating grip of addiction. It is a heartbreaking situation that, as a councillor in North Belfast over the past six years, I have also witnessed far too many times. I share Alban Maginness's passion and determination to do what I can in this new role to prevent other individuals of all ages and their families having to go through the painful battle with drug addiction and the mental anguish that goes hand in hand with it, which, in the worst cases, ends in a family mourning their loved one for ever. It is for that reason that my party colleague Colin McGrath and I tabled the amendment on behalf of the SDLP.

Before I move on to address the amendment specifically, I commend the DUP for bringing a motion on illegal drugs before us on the first day of business in the new Assembly. The priority that they have given to the issue in bringing it forward today demonstrates a commitment to tackling the growing epidemic on our streets. I assure them that, even though we sit on opposite sides of the House, this is a priority issue for the SDLP and a commitment that we share, as, I am sure, other parties in the House do.

5.45 pm

Certainly, as the motion points out, the Minister of Justice has a key role to play. The SDLP welcomes the increase in recent years in the number of drug seizure incidents and drug-related convictions. We also welcome the recent strengthening of legislation in respect of the supply of psychoactive drugs. We believe, however, that much more needs to be done by the PSNI and the Department of Justice, working with communities, if we are to seriously tackle the proliferation of drugs on our streets.

We also believe that this issue cannot be tackled by focusing on the supply side alone. If we are to be robust in tackling the scourge of illegal drugs — and the misuse of prescription drugs, for that matter — the job is not one solely for the Minister of Justice. It is a much wider job for the Executive, with critical input and collaboration between the Justice Minister and the Ministers of Education and Health in particular, who have an instrumental part to play in reducing demand by educating young people in particular against the dangers of drugs to prevent experimentation in the first instance and, critically, delivering increased provision and awareness of, and access to, early intervention and support services when the symptoms of drug-taking first present and when the chances of breaking the dangerous and harmful downward spiral that ends in addiction are highest. It is for these reasons that we are seeking to expand the responsibility and remit of the motion with our amendment, and I welcome the DUP's indication of support.

I want, at this point, to put on record my appreciation for the tremendous life-changing, and in many cases life-saving, work that is carried out by those working in addiction and mental health services in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors in North Belfast, but also in constituencies right across Northern Ireland. They are working under immense pressure with an increase in demand for their services, particularly in services required by children and young people, as referrals for the child and adolescent mental health service and drug and alcohol mental health services show. They are trying to respond to this increase in demand at a time when budgets are being put under pressure. They rightly should be praised for their commitment and dedication to helping some of the most vulnerable in our society, and they should be supported to expand their collaborative work and intensive intervention. That is what this amendment is calling for.

Those organisations will tell you, and all the evidence shows, that prevention and early intensive support in the community works. It is about the right medication and the right support at the right time. This is critical if we are to prevent the spiral of physical and mental harm and other harmful behaviours that can follow to fund a habit when someone becomes hooked on drugs.

While we may not have total precise figures, we do know that drug misuse brings with it an immense cost, not least to our health service, economy and justice system. The human cost of the months and years of a life spent battling an addiction and the mental vulnerability that accompanies such an addiction, the many families left broken by a battle with this cruel addiction, and the lives of all the loved ones lost as a result of drugs can never be truly or fully captured.

It is, however, possible to get a sharp and startling insight into the human cost and misery when you spend time listening to individuals and families who have come through this journey. It is perhaps most acute when you listen to those families who have painfully lost a loved one caught up in what is a growing epidemic. Though the individual sets of circumstances may vary, the one thing that I find unifying the affected individuals and families whom I have spoken to is their response when I ask them what more, in their opinion, can be done. Almost always, it is the same answer: ensure that more help is made available and accessible earlier, before the full grip of addiction takes its hold and mental health and well-being deteriorates to a level that is incredibly difficult to come back from, especially for a young person who, in their formative years, is only beginning to find themselves.

I acknowledge phase 2 of the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs and its key elements, one of which includes a focus on prevention and early intervention. However, families who have been affected and those families currently living with the horror of drug misuse, especially when it involves a child, feel desperately that much more needs to be done. It is in response to these testimonies that we have brought forward the amendment.

As I bring my contribution to a conclusion, I want to make reference to one of the many powerful testimonies shared with me over recent times. It is a message from Aaron Fox, who, while he had bravely and successfully battled his addiction, sadly lost his life, just a few short months ago, in a courageous battle with the resulting mental demons that proved just too much to bear. Aaron's story was relayed

to me by his devoted father and mother. A budding chef and talented artist, Aaron was determined to use his gifts, particularly through his recovery, to share his personal experiences with other young people to prevent and protect them from going through what he had. Powerfully, through his creative gifts, he wanted to show the true picture and the real torment that, in this instance, legal highs unleashed on a young person and their loved ones. Since his painful passing, and even through their grief, his parents are determined to carry on Aaron's message, warning other young people and campaigning to ensure that help is available as early as possible, to young people in particular, so that they do not become trapped by their addiction and, critically, suffer the mental anguish that ensues.

I felt that it was important today, with the consent of Aaron's parents, to pass on his message and the call from his parents for more help at an earlier stage. It is a call that is echoed in so many homes and by so many people who are in or have been through the nightmare of this experience. There is a duty on us all to listen to those families and to act. Therefore, I hope that the amendment secures the support of all parties in the House.

Ms Boyle: I support the motion and amendment. I take the opportunity to congratulate you, Mr Speaker, in your role and also to welcome the Minister and wish her well in her new role.

We are all aware of the dangers of the use of illegal drugs, the scourge on society that they represent and the severe consequences that can lead to the death of those using them. Many during the debate will talk about illegal drugs. However, we need to include discussion of alcohol, and the fact that we have so many young people who are drinking and taking drugs at a very early age. Alcohol use is legal, but it plays a strong role in relation to crime.

Driving while intoxicated and using drugs and drug- and alcohol-related domestic violence and rape: all these crimes have risen in frequency. We know that they can also cause death and injury. We also need to look at further investment into the solution, not just the problem. We have talked about early intervention and awareness: that is key. Indeed, those who are already sentenced and in prison for drug-related crime also need help. They need proper help in prison, not more drugs. We are all well aware that drugs are easily accessible in some prisons. Treatment saves money in the long term, so early intervention is key.

My district council area is Strabane and Derry City. Recently released PSNI figures state that the overall crime figures across the district have increased in the period from April 2015 to March 2016. Right across the North, the overall crime figure has risen from 103,000 to 105,000 in 2014-15. Whilst overall crime was up by less than 1%, burglary, robbery and theft offences saw significant decreases, but the point I want to make is that within the slight increase in overall crime, the number of drug possessions recorded in my district council area rose by 5-8%. That means that more people are being detected in possession of drugs. Increased arrests in this area have to be welcomed; however, tougher and tighter sentencing needs to be part of the solution and follow those arrests.

We need to do more collaborative working between the Department of Justice, the Probation Board and the statutory agencies to work better with communities to

address illegal drug use and, more importantly, provide assurances to the public that, if they have relevant information on who is responsible for bringing such illegal drugs into our areas, and they want to pass it to the proper authorities, they can come forward without any fear of reprisal.

The PSNI's community planning needs to be implemented in communities. The policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) should be the vehicle for moving this issue forward in our communities, but they are only one cog in the wheel. The PSNI, DOJ and everyone else need to be proactive in raising awareness. If there are effective agencies working together, this will promote positive outcomes for those in need and those who need to be safeguarded and protected from crime and illegal drugs.

The efficiency of the criminal justice system has room for improvement, and the community and voluntary organisations need to be working together to implement strategies that have been set out in the Justice Act 2015 to bring about greater powers to bring cases to the High Court, when those responsible for pushing drugs onto our streets are caught and there are more prosecutions going through the courts. The public needs to have confidence in our justice system. We are hearing from far too many families that the one place they depended on to get justice — the courtroom — was the very place that let them down.

In conclusion, the use of drugs and alcohol can negatively affect all aspects of a person's life. The impact on their family, friends and community, if not addressed, places an enormous financial burden on our Health and Justice Departments. The relationship between drugs and crime is indeed a complex one, and one question is whether drug use leads people into criminal activity or whether those who use drugs are already predisposed to such activity.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Ms Boyle: However, at the most intense levels, drug use and crime are directly and highly correlated, and serious drug use can bring out pre-existing criminal tendencies.

Mr Beattie: First, I would like to say that I fully support the DUP motion. It is a good and timely motion, and the SDLP's amendment gives it added teeth, so I also support that.

As I listened to other contributors — I will be reasonably brief because I cannot but agree with them all so far — I recognised that it is important that we focus on prevention as opposed to waiting until we get the drug addict and have to deal with that raw product. I also agreed with Nichola Mallon when she said that this cannot be just for the criminal justice system and the Justice Minister; this has to involve the Communities Minister, the Education Minister, the Health Minister and the Finance Minister. What we really need is a cross-ministry action plan to deal with the drugs issue. I hope that the Justice Minister can take that away and think about that for the future.

There is a problem with illegal drugs in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, which is the social messaging that is going out. It does not matter who we are — the slightly older, slightly fatter people standing in this Assembly. Under 18s and young men believe that it is socially acceptable to take drugs. Some of the messages that are going out tell them that it is socially acceptable to take drugs. Some people are told that cannabis is not habit-forming and that it is

not a gateway drug. Having worked, trained and lived with under-18-year-olds, I know how difficult it is to try to sell the very clear message that there should be zero tolerance for drugs.

I have seen first hand what drugs can do to a society. I have stood in the cannabis fields of Asia and watched it being cultivated and sold. I saw the people who grow it getting pennies while the people who refined it, cut it and exported it to us in the West got the real money. There has to be an international response to drugs. One of the reasons why I genuinely believe that it is better that we stay in the EU is that we can try to tackle the drugs trade before it reaches our shores. When it does reach our shores, it is important that the National Crime Agency takes hold of the issue and tries to prevent the drugs from getting onto our streets.

6.00 pm

But the bottom line is that the work of dealing with the drugs issue in Northern Ireland will lie with our communities, it will lie with our messaging, it will lie with our health service and our justice system and it will lie with the PSNI. It is up to us to ensure that we facilitate them in dealing with it.

Mr Lunn: Like everybody else, I think, I approve of the motion and the amendment. I prefer the wording of the amendment on just small details because, for a start, it refers to “community” and not “communities”. I am sure Mr Beattie made a slip of the tongue. This is a cross-community problem. Also, the amendment calls on the Executive rather than a single Minister to try to coordinate this. That is absolutely where it lies, because as others said, it involves a multi-agency approach — public health, Justice, Communities, social services and particularly perhaps Education and further education. There is no doubt that drug problems are far more prevalent in areas of low educational achievement and economic inactivity.

The other thing I will say is that the motion is listed as “Illegal Drugs”. I think others referred to the fact that it is a question not just of illegal drugs; a Centre for Social Justice study back in 2011 indicated that perhaps the greater part of the problem is, in fact, the misuse of prescription drugs. That is a job for Education and all agencies to become involved in to try to wean people away from this practice, which now appears to be socially acceptable in a way that certainly surprises our generation. It never should have got to this point.

The last two lines of the motion and the amendment refer to what I really want to talk about, which is that:

“the criminal justice system is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets.”

Does anybody here seriously doubt who is responsible for the supply and control of the trade in drugs on our streets? It is paramilitary groups. I call them criminal gangs. I fully appreciate that some of our ex-paramilitaries are now doing good work on the streets. I know some of them are doing that, but, in my opinion, most of them are not. They have just morphed from one type of inhumanity to another, and they are leeching off the backs of those sections of our population who are the most vulnerable and least able to handle the pressures that are coming on them in this

situation. Let us be frank: I am talking about the UDA, the UVF and the IRA, or what is left of them in different forms.

We need to stop treating criminals like upright citizens. It is as simple as that. We need to stop giving them credibility and credence in the way that some of us perhaps try to work with them and in the way that the PSNI perhaps approaches them. I have assurance from the Chief Constable that if a member of a paramilitary organisation comes to the attention of the police through that sort of activity, they will be dealt with in a firm and robust manner, to use the terms of the amendment and the motion.

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

I still think there is far too much cosying up between public agencies, politicians of all shades and people who used to be paramilitaries and who, in the opinion of some of us, are still just exactly that. They are supplying not only the drugs but the finance to enable youngsters to buy the drugs. They are then pursuing them at extortionate interest rates because they cannot pay for them, and, at the end of the day, what they will get out of that if they cannot pay is a beating or worse. By controlling the drugs trade, they are also setting themselves up as judge and jury and pretending to keep order by dealing with or perhaps eliminating drug dealers.

All they are really doing, however, is protecting their own interests and their own turf.

We talk about bringing a tougher justice system. I think that the criminal justice system, as it stands, is robust enough to deal with these situations, but we need the political will. We need to take away the credibility of these people to act in the way that they do. I hope that everybody will indicate a need for full political support for loosening paramilitary control, and the sooner the better. It is the only way. We have to tackle the root of this, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am glad to see you there. That is all that I have to say about it. It is a disgrace.

Lord Morrow: I commend those who have brought the motion to the House. As others said, it is a timely motion, and it is one, I am delighted to see, on which the House finds itself in agreement across the Benches. That is also the case with the amendment. Today, we will have the first response from the new Minister. I welcome her here in that capacity, and I wish her well in her new post. I think that I am doing more than others have done in the past, but I certainly wish her well. I have no doubt that she will equip herself well to the task that she will perform over the weeks, months and, hopefully, years ahead.

In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, there are swathes of cases coming before the courts that are in some way rooted in illegal drugs, but I fear that the message is still not getting through. I am also somewhat shocked when I hear people play down the use of cannabis. We hear people say, “It was only a bit of cannabis — nothing heavy”. Let me be absolutely clear: in my opinion, any illegal drug, including cannabis, is a step on the road to addiction. It is known, for good reason, as a gateway drug. Even taken on its own, it is no less toxic on mental health than any other substance. When it comes to illegal drugs, there is no such thing as “nothing heavy”. All have the potential and capacity to impact on the brain and other organs, with often catastrophic if not fatal consequences. The task at hand is to educate

people away from drugs in the first place, but, in my book, enforcement of the law is also important.

My constituency has had far too many drug-related deaths over recent years, and, it must be said, a greater number of those were young people. In 2014, I supported the former coroner John Leckey when he called for a change in the law to allow dealers who sell drugs to be charged with manslaughter if a person dies after consuming them. Speaking at an inquest, John Leckey said:

"To say I am not impressed is an understatement. Someone is dead here and there are 19 other people dead from taking these drugs. Anyone who has information has a duty to come forward. It's a disgrace and it's on their conscience."

He added:

"I acknowledge the difficulties for the police to link evidence, but I urge the PPS to consider manslaughter very much to the fore in these instances."

He said that anyone taking these pills is:

"playing Russian roulette with their life ... I hope this sends out a warning to young people ... No guarantee comes with the drugs and the risk of death is a high one."

The inquest in question was that of a teenager from Dungannon who died after taking a synthetic form of Ecstasy. She was just 18 years of age.

Despite the former coroner's concerned comments and amongst heartbreaking headlines, drugs continue to be a scourge in our society, and the attraction for them has not abated. The consequences continue to demonstrate the horror of illegal drugs. The myth that drug taking is an exciting game of chance must be dispelled. The cycle has to be broken and stronger efforts made to get the message home.

I draw the attention of the House to a tremendous facility in the Dungannon area: Breakthru. It has been working on this problem for over 20 years. During a meeting last year, I asked Breakthru to come up with an alternative disposal scheme that would drive home the dangers of drugs and alcohol abuse, with awareness for potential victims of drug- and alcohol-related crime. I am pleased to say that the initiative was embraced by Breakthru and will be launched very soon, with a pilot planned for the mid-Ulster area. The initiative offers a referral scheme for drug/alcohol abuse and antisocial behaviour as an alternative to prosecution. However, it is offered only once and must be fully completed. They have done a magnificent job and must continue to be supported by all relevant government agencies. I will not say anything more about it because this is their project, and I do not want to steal their thunder. However, I can confirm that the scheme links with the Department of Justice's business plan for 2015-16 and is designed to meet departmental priorities and targets. I am unashamedly proud to have Breakthru in Dungannon and commend it for the work that it is doing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Lord Morrow: I extend an invitation to the Minister to come to Breakthru in Dungannon. If you have never been to Dungannon, Minister, your education is not complete. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that you will do that one day.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate you on your elevation and the Minister on hers. It is bound to be quite a challenging Department to manage.

I support the motion and amendment. Of course, most of the issues have been covered. Illegal drugs are absolutely everywhere. They have been everywhere since I was a child. When we went to school, if you wanted drugs, you could get them. If it was that bad then, how bad is it now? I dread to think. Drugs are available in the workplace, on the streets, on street corners and, most concerning of all, in schools and playgrounds. They have many secondary impacts, such as violence on the streets. We have seen the violent gang crime in Dublin, which was all related to the illegal drug trade as well.

The statistics for 2015-16 are interesting: there were 4,445 cannabis seizures, 566 cocaine seizures, 128 ecstasy seizures and 138 opiates seizures. The vast majority of seizures relate to cannabis use and addiction. The number of cocaine seizures is, I think, quite low given that, according to figures in the PSNI report, around 34% of drug misuse relates to cocaine. The number of cannabis seizures is significant compared with the number for class A drugs.

I want to pay tribute to the many services in Dungannon, Ballymena and elsewhere. I, along with other constituency MLAs, have worked for many years with the Hope Centre. It has worked tirelessly and struggled year after year to scrape together funding to deal with those suffering from addictions and the families who are affected. Continuing funding for such groups is vital to addiction prevention. Many of us in Ballymena, North Antrim and beyond campaigned to keep the Railway Street addiction service open after the Department of Justice withdrew £360,000. That campaign was a great success. Of course, all those services are vital.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I really appreciate the manner way in which the House, with one exception, has conducted the debate. The Member is quite right about the work that is done by the community and voluntary sector, such as the good work that is done by the Hope Centre. You are talking about only hundreds of thousands of pounds — the same applies to Railway Street — to provide a service that can spend the money more effectively than any government agency. That is a good way to spend the budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKay: The Member makes a very good point. Sometimes, Departments are very quick to jump to defend their internal services but put much less value on external services on the ground in the community, even though they deliver best practice — sometimes better practice than the Department.

I think that Mr Beattie said that prevention was better than cure. We need to focus on prevention. That is key in this debate. Railway Street has been held up as a model of best practice in helping injecting drug users. The impact has been absolutely huge. Many of those who campaigned to keep the place open were addicts themselves, and they said that they would not be here were it not for the service provided.

6.15 pm

Drugs destroy lives, not only those who are addicted to the substances but their families. I agree with the Chairperson of the Justice Committee that you cannot just throw everyone with a drug addiction into prison. That simplistic approach has not worked. The various wars on drugs have not worked, and, at the end of the day, drug addiction is a health issue. Those who work in addictions and in support groups across the North all say that the worst addiction cases are those relating to legal substances, mainly alcohol. That is a fact that Michaela Boyle also referred to. We should not be focused on thinking that illegal substances are the worst and that legal ones are not so bad because alcohol is the worst substance that we have to deal with in our society.

The challenge for the Justice Minister, the Justice Committee and all of us as MLAs on policy and drugs is that we need some fresh thinking. According to the figures, drug seizures have doubled in the past 10 years, so whatever we are doing is not working correctly. Drug misuse is increasing, so we need to focus on prevention. We should have less of a focus on the criminalisation of those who abuse and are addicted to substances and more focus on those who are dealing and making money on the misery of many families. We need some fresh thinking. There is a lot of fresh thinking taking place across Europe in regard to the issue, and it is something that we really need to get to grips with in the new Assembly term.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish you well in your new role and wish the new Justice Minister well in her new role. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today. Drugs have a significant and widespread negative influence not only here in Northern Ireland but right across the globe. On top of this, drug abuse and the peddling of drugs in our communities continues to put major pressures on our health service and the PSNI. Many families have also been destroyed and left with grief that will never be resolved due to the scourge of drugs.

We must all recognise that drugs continue to blight our communities despite the best efforts of the police and the community at large to tackle drug problems. For instance, it has been documented that, between 2003 and 2012, there were 838 drug-related deaths in Northern Ireland. Notably, the number of drug seizures has increased year on year since 2006-07 to reach a 10-year high of approximately 5,600 such incidents in 2015-16.

Whilst it could be claimed that it is welcome news to see an increased quantity of drugs being taken off our streets, it has to be recognised that the drug problem has not gone away. In recent years, we have witnessed what is formally referred to as legal highs presenting an ever-growing challenge to our society. We saw the Psychoactive Substances Act come into force across the United Kingdom last month.

From a personal perspective, when I met the PSNI in my constituency in recent times, they informed me that such substances pose more difficulty than the more traditional form of drugs on our streets. Even though such substances could previously be obtained legally, they still possessed a dangerous and sometimes deadly effect. The police now have new powers to shut down head shops and UK-based online dealers. Additionally, there now exists a UK-wide blanket ban on the sale, supply,

importation and exportation of such drugs, with those who deal in such substances also facing up to seven years' imprisonment. Whilst legislation is not a silver bullet, the new measures can, hopefully, help to tackle the problems that psychoactive substances pose.

Tragically, in recent years, numerous people in my constituency of Upper Bann have lost their lives because of drugs, and many families have been devastated. I have met the PSNI locally on many occasions on which the scourge of drugs has been continually highlighted as a major challenge. Between the beginning of May 2015 to the end of April 2016, 391 drug-related incidents were reported to the PSNI in the Portadown, Banbridge, Gilford, Lurgan and Craigavon areas. Drug-related incidents are consuming a significant amount of police time, and I know that the PSNI in the area has done much work to fight the local drug problem.

I am also concerned by the fact that, in many cases, members of the public are aware of the individuals who deal in drugs in our communities, but are fearful of providing the police with such information due to fear of reprisals. On top of this, it is very worrying to note that drugs are being taken by a wide range of people, with some very young people getting caught up in drug-related activity. Unfortunately, the problems that I have outlined are replicated right across Northern Ireland and, regrettably, there are no quick-fix solutions to eradicate the scourge of drugs overnight.

Whilst it is important to recognise the ongoing work carried out by the statutory agencies, the Public Health Agency, and the voluntary and community sector to tackle the drug scourge, it is important to recognise that drugs continue to damage communities and devastate families. It is vital that the community as a whole unites together to fight this drug plague head on. In particular, the PSNI, local policing and community safety partnerships, schools, youth organisations and other community groups have a very important duty to challenge the problems that drugs pose.

Moving forward, it is vital that the PSNI's commitment to fighting the challenge of illegal drugs continues. As I have said, it should be a collaborative approach. I hope that this Chamber takes on board what everyone has said. The message must go out clearly from the Assembly that those who peddle drugs and inflict misery and pain on individuals and their families will not be tolerated.

Mr Beggs: First, I declare an interest as a committee member of the Carrickfergus Community Drugs and Alcohol Advisory Group, which was previously involved in counselling and drugs awareness and resilience training but is no longer operating due to funding issues.

I congratulate the Minister on her appointment and wish her well in her post, but I have noticed that those who have been involved in appointing her are already pressing her on the budget that they set her. I wonder whether that is a sign of what is to come. I hope not.

I, too, support the motion and the amendment, which I believe strengthens the motion. I thank the Assembly research services for the useful background brief on the issue. The motion has been given the very short title of "Illegal Drugs", but in the detail of the motion and the amendment, the words "legal" and "illegal" are not mentioned. In fact, many Members who have spoken referred to the difficulty with legally available drugs and the misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

To my mind, the issue covers legal and illegal drugs. There is the big issue of the misuse of legally prescribed medicines and, as I said, the misuse of alcohol, which, because of its availability and prevalence, is one of the biggest issues when addictions occur.

There are some interesting figures in 'Drug Prevalence in Northern Ireland Key Facts 2014-15', which surveyed people on the effects of taking drugs and alcohol in those 12 months and found that some 35% who took alcohol regretted something that they said or did — 7% of those taking drugs. Then you go into a whole range of issues and find that there are equal dangers in the misuse of alcohol and in using other drugs, including harm to individuals' health, harm to their friendships and social life, harm to home life or marriage and whether they got into a fight or were involved in an accident. We need to be clear that difficulties can arise more widely than just with illegal drugs.

The Department of Justice findings on the view of alcohol and drug-related issues emanating from the September 2015 Northern Ireland omnibus survey highlights an increasing level of concern about drugs-related issues in Northern Ireland. Of those surveyed on the level of drugs-related issues, some 13% felt that things were getting worse and 5.2% felt that they were getting better. There seems to be a particular problem in the Belfast Health Trust area, where 23.2% felt that things were getting worse. In my area, the Northern Health Trust, some 8.2% perceived a worsening in trends.

The omnibus survey highlighted some areas of concern.

In terms of the harms caused, almost 60% of people were concerned that antisocial behaviour resulted. Damage to individuals' health was cited, as was crime in the local area, which was cited by some 13%. There are also the issues of fear and violence in the local area and some other issues. This, clearly, is an area of concern.

Turning to the amendment, I believe that it better highlights the need to invest in preventative work as well as recognising the role of statutory services, the Public Health Agency and the community and voluntary sector. It talks of the need to increase awareness to create greater resilience and avoidance of addiction in the first place. That is key from my experience and is a vital area. Early intervention services for children and young people and adults is important so that the addiction does not occur and young people are better informed of the dangers of alcohol and other drug misuse. I commend Nichola Mallon for highlighting the adverse effect, particularly in the area of mental health and well-being. Frequently, drug misuse and mental health and well-being issues are related, and it is important that they are highlighted. Of course, for the real hard-nosed criminals who profit from this, it is vital to have a robust criminal justice system.

I would like also to highlight the importance of preventative work and praise the work of Preventing Addiction Larne (PAL) in my East Antrim constituency. They are a group of volunteers who have to fundraise and get little help from any statutory services. That is an area I invite the Minister to take a look at, given her interest in the community and voluntary sector in particular.

Mr Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, first and foremost, I congratulate the new Justice Minister on her appointment and you as the new Deputy Speaker.

Sadly, I speak in the debate shortly after a child's chocolate egg was found in Limavady with a packet of drugs hidden inside it. This is the reason each and every one of us should be concerned about the scourge of illegal drugs in our society. When depraved individuals consider it acceptable to hide drugs in children's sweets, it is obvious they have no regard or value for human life. On this occasion, it was a five-year-old who discovered the egg's contents. Thankfully, an older sibling took it to their father, who informed the police in Limavady. The possibility for a fatality here was immense. The sad thing is that this is only one of many drug finds, including a large cannabis find in a house in the centre of Limavady a few weeks ago. There are too many families who have lost loved ones to the scourge of drugs, so it is essential that robust action is undertaken, with the Court Service making an example of those who are apprehended for drug dealing. Another drug death is one too many.

I pay tribute to the many organisations that work to address the drug problems in Northern Ireland. They all deserve credit, but I am aware of the excellent work done by community and voluntary groups, and I commend them specifically for the work that they do. The police are very proactive, and we can all read or hear of the drug seizures that they make. Their problem is that every town, village and city has a drug problem, so it is difficult for them to track down the suppliers. Somehow they manage to achieve many successes, and those successes save lives. I would encourage the general public to report any suspicious activity to the police, so that, hopefully, some of the drug dealers can be apprehended and taken off our streets.

I assure the Minister that she will have my full support on the actions taken against the peddlers of death who are drug dealers. I can also assure her that I support an interdepartmental agency approach in raising awareness of drugs and ensuring that tough punishments are handed down.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He leads on a very important point with regards to departmental budgets and responses. I was going to make this point to Mr Beggs, the Member for East Antrim, but I ran out of time: there is always a tendency with Departments, no matter what Department it is, to keep money in-house and in the centre, when that £300,000 or £500,000 could be spent far better in far greater ways by the voluntary and community sector. They are the ones with the real specialism who have got to grips with the problems.

6.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Robinson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My colleague has made a very relevant point that I support fully. I am therefore happy to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): As we welcome the Justice Minister to the Chamber on her first appearance at the Dispatch Box, we wish her well.

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I wish to congratulate you on your elevation. I am really delighted for you, and I think that you will do a fantastic job.

I very much welcome the opportunity to respond to my first private Members' motion as Justice Minister of Northern Ireland on an issue that I know regrettably affects the lives of so many across this country: drug misuse. I congratulate the supporters of the motion for highlighting this important matter early in the new mandate because I think that, with the support of the Assembly, which it seems we have, the Executive have an opportunity to tackle the issue in an appropriate way towards best outcomes for our community and wider society.

Whilst I appreciate that this is a private Members' motion, I note that the Members who tabled the motion are members of the Justice Committee, including the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson. I am keen to ensure a good working relationship with the Committee to ensure proper scrutiny. In fact, I welcome all constructive criticism from all sides of the House because I want to make the right decisions not just for me but for the people of Northern Ireland. I think that I can do that with the input of my colleagues in the Chamber. That is why I also congratulate the authors of the amendment. The amendment takes the spirit of the original motion and provides a further considered perspective, strengthening the aim of this evening's debate.

We are all familiar with the impact on the health service of treating drug misuse, and, regrettably, we all know the recent figures that, tragically, over 100 people die each year of drug-related causes. I cannot begin to imagine the impact that that has on families, on the community and on the people who are in the grip of addiction. Mr Robinson alluded to a recent drugs find in my constituency and his, in Limavady. It is disgusting, and it is something that we need to address.

On the general drugs picture, the main illegal drug used in Northern Ireland is cannabis. I take Lord Morrow's point that cannabis should not be underestimated. The fact that it is the main illegal drug in Northern Ireland is in itself quite worrying. Thankfully, we have seen a drop in the use of drugs among 11-to-16-year-olds, yet the misuse of prescription drugs remains a challenge. That is something that we need to consider as well, and that was alluded to by Trevor Lunn and Roy Beggs. Others alluded to the new developments in the use of what we call "legal highs".

Michaela Boyle and Roy Beggs mentioned the relationship between the consumption of alcohol and drugs and how that relates to crime. It has been suggested that the consumption of alcohol and the use of illicit drugs is a contributing factor in a large percentage of crime. The misuse of drugs and alcohol is of increasing concern to the police and public alike, and I know that members of the previous Justice Committee received briefings showing the continuing drain that substance misuse places on the justice system.

Setting aside the complex issues around the misuse of and over-reliance on prescription drugs, which I know my Health colleagues are addressing, I want to take the opportunity to say at the outset that the only way to minimise the harm caused by illegal drugs is to simply not take these substances. However, it is not that simple; it is easier said than done. I appreciate the aspect of the amendment that suggests increased awareness around the dangers of drug use and early intervention for children and young people. However, we know that people will persist in taking drugs, so we must work together to tackle

the problem. My Department, the Department of Health, other Executive colleagues, the PSNI and a range of organisations need to work together both to intervene early to prevent drug misuse and to effectively tackle the drug misuse that is happening now.

Local communities also need to play their part in working with the PSNI to help to bring those who deal in this poison before the courts. This is not just my problem as Justice Minister; this is our problem in the Executive, in the Assembly, in the various agencies and in our community. We must work together to solve it.

I appreciate, therefore, the contributions from Nichola Mallon, Michaela Boyle, Doug Beattie and others who have suggested that this is something that we need to do together.

The motion tabled by Mr Frew, Mrs Cameron and Mr Douglas acknowledges the impact of illegal drug misuse in Northern Ireland and calls on my Department to:

"work alongside the relevant bodies, to bring forward further measures to raise awareness, and to ensure that the criminal justice system is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets."

The amendment tabled by Ms Mallon and Mr McGrath further emphasises the role of joint working, calling for:

"the Executive to work collaboratively alongside the relevant bodies to bring forward further measures to raise awareness about the dangers of drug use, to increase investment in, awareness of, and access to, early intervention services for children and young people as well as adults".

In the time allotted, I hope to outline how my Department has been working alongside relevant bodies, and I give my commitment to keep the issue of tackling drug and alcohol misuse front and centre in the criminal justice system. I hope to acknowledge the role of a wide range of bodies in addressing the issue and highlight the productive joint working that has taken place to date and will continue as we move forward on my watch. I also hope to show that, by some of the innovative thinking around problem-solving justice that has already started, ably supported by the Justice Committee, we are taking the theme of collaborative working to the next level.

The community safety strategy, which my Department leads on, recognises the fact that partnership working is essential if sustainable solutions are to be developed. The strand of the strategy that focuses on alcohol and drugs draws heavily on the 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs' (NSD), which is led by the Department of Health, and which is now in its second phase.

The overall aim of NSD phase 2 is:

'to reduce the level of alcohol and drug-related harm in Northern Ireland'.

It commits government to working in a joined-up, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral way to prevent and address harm related to alcohol and drugs. NSD phase 2 seeks to direct action across five pillars: prevention and early intervention; harm reduction; treatment and support; law and criminal justice; and monitoring, evaluation and research.

The Department of Justice continues to be a major contributor to the outcomes defined in the new strategic direction and chairs an alcohol and drug delivery group to take forward the law and criminal justice actions. Partners on this group include a range of Departments and criminal justice agencies. This is a good example of the benefits of collaborative working and what we are trying to achieve through the new outcomes-based Programme for Government, acknowledging the role that a range of organisations have to play in tackling the complex problem of drugs misuse.

The new strategic direction includes a number of key priority areas and key indicators for the justice system, which include alcohol and drug-related crime; drug and drink driving; the number of criminal gangs dismantled, disrupted or frustrated; and increasing public confidence that drug-related problems are being addressed.

Delivery of these indicators is embedded in the community safety strategy, and, in March this year, my Department gave an update to the Justice Committee on all eight strands of the strategy, including on alcohol and drugs. The level of drug arrests went up by 4.3%, from 2,831 in 2014-15 to 2,953 in 2015-16. In my constituency, the number of drug arrests has gone up by 5.6%. The number of drug seizures has increased year on year since 2009-2010, with the figure currently standing at 5,597, an increase of 9.7% on the 2014-15 figure of 5,104. The number of drug seizure incidents has increased year on year, and in 2015-16 reached the highest level seen in the past 10 years, at 5,597. The Organised Crime Task Force has made significant interventions against organised crime gangs, with 28 dismantled in 2015-16, 42 disrupted and 54 frustrated over the same period. Results show that over 72% of respondents have confidence in the work being done by the PSNI to tackle alcohol and drug-related issues in Northern Ireland and over 83% have confidence in the work being done by local policing and community safety partnerships. I will talk about their work later on.

The report to the Committee also highlighted some of the good work being taken forward by my Department, working in partnership with others, to underpin those results. Information about the health-led drug and alcohol monitoring information system (DAMIS), for example, was shared among key criminal justice networks, including the PCSPs, which were encouraged to work closely with the newly established drugs and alcohol coordination team (DACT) connection service in the planning and delivery of any alcohol- and drug-related actions, activities or projects over the next three years.

The amendment tabled by Ms Mallon and Mr McGrath calls for an increase in awareness of and access to services, including those that intervene early. The connection service will facilitate this via developing local events and initiatives; delivering targeted awareness-raising sessions; offering advice and support to local stakeholder networks and communities of interest; supporting a local drug and alcohol service providers network; and promoting and signposting to local support services.

Many Members talked about the influence of the community and voluntary sector in tackling this, and delivery would, in my opinion, rely heavily on community and voluntary sector partners. Some Members talked about the Hope Centre in Railway Street in Ballymena.

Lord Morrow said that I would have an education if I go to Dungannon: I must be the most educated person in recent weeks because I seem to have been there a lot. Others mentioned community and voluntary groups in their constituencies. Previous to my new position, I advocated for that, so I certainly see its value.

It is envisaged that the principal benefit of this type of engagement will be the continued development of more jointly planned, delivered and coordinated initiatives in the years ahead. From the criminal justice perspective, a range of actions is being taken forward to combat drug misuse and to intervene at a critical point to prevent individuals from being drawn further into drug taking.

All young people who are referred to the Youth Justice Agency, either to youth justice services or to Woodlands juvenile justice centre, are assessed to identify any drug- and alcohol-related issues directly linked to offending behaviour or whether there are issues that carry the risk of harm to self or others. Interventions that consider each individual are employed to tackle such problems, in addition to group work and referral to specialised services in the community.

With the introduction of youth engagement clinics, young people on the fringes of the criminal justice system are now captured in the cohort of young people with drug-related issues and can, therefore, be offered support and help at an earlier stage. The Probation Board has revised its substance programme in partnership with the Public Health Agency, and ASCERT has trained all its front-line staff in the use of screening and the delivery of brief intervention tools to address substance misuse among offenders under Probation Board supervision. In the prison environment, a real and concerted effort is being made to address substance misuse, based on a three-strand approach to restrict supply, reduce demand and assist recovery.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service, working with partners such as the PSNI, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and others, offers drug counselling services and has diverted significant resources to the problem. Programmes are in place in all three establishments to assist and support those individuals who decide to maintain a drug-free lifestyle.

Finally, over recent months, my Department has been working with the Home Office and a range of agencies in Northern Ireland, including councils, the PSNI, Forensic Science Northern Ireland, the courts and others to prepare for the commencement of the Psychoactive Substances Act, which came into effect a few weeks ago. Members, including Sydney Anderson, mentioned that psychoactive substances are otherwise known as legal highs.

My officials worked with Department of Health and Public Health Agency officials as well as the PSNI to develop a pack of material about the new legislation, what it will mean for those who sell the substances and on the harm caused by psychoactive substances. This was distributed across the justice system, including to PCSPs. Public Health Agency and health officials undertook a similar exercise with their networks. It is another example of the cross-Executive collaborative working that I have already seen much evidence of in my short time as Justice Minister.

I come back to our local initiatives. PCSPs continue to deliver a range of initiatives aimed at addressing drug and alcohol issues, including education and awareness programmes, which can include counselling elements for those requiring assistance with drug or alcohol dependency issues. PCSP action plans will continue to focus on working collaboratively with others who reach out to young people and develop activities and programmes that will encourage them to desist from taking illicit substances.

Some Members may be familiar with the Drug Dealers Don't Care media campaign that originally launched in February 2014. It is now in its third year, with plans being made for another campaign at the end of this year or in early 2017. This is a Northern Ireland-wide media campaign run in conjunction with Crimestoppers, PCSPs, the Policing Board and the PSNI.

The campaigns have had good levels of reported success, and they typically run for a number of weeks across Northern Ireland, utilising billboard, bus, radio and TV advertising, as well as social media, to deliver messages to target certain demographics.

6.45 pm

In my constituency, much good work is being done by the PCSP that covers the Coleraine area, including the delivery of the Drug Dealers Don't Care campaign, which I mentioned, and the delivery of a parental awareness campaign on the purchase of drugs online by local young people.

From the health perspective, the Public Health Agency funds one-stop shops for children and young people across Northern Ireland. They provide not only diversionary activities but education, information and support for children and young people affected by substance misuse. They also address broader issues, such as suicide and self-harm, mental health and well-being, sexual health, relationship issues, resilience and coping skills.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Minister to bring her remarks to a conclusion.

Ms Sugden: Sure, although I have a lot more to say.

I hope that I have shown Members the breadth and depth of work that is being done across my Department, in conjunction with others across the Executive, to tackle drugs misuse. I thank Members for their attention, for raising the issue and for adding a new perspective to something that I am confident my Department will take forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call Mr Colin McGrath to wind on the amendment. As this is Mr McGrath's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House of the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr McGrath: Thank you for calling me, Deputy Speaker, for this, my maiden speech.

It is an honour to serve one's constituents in a place such as this and to do so when winding up a debate about illegal drug use in our society — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. Please continue.

Mr McGrath: The matter of illegal drug use in our society and trying to protect our communities is both relevant and pertinent.

I hail, for those who do not know me, from Downpatrick, which is the county town of Down and the final resting place and true home of St Patrick. I say that because I know that no Armagh city representatives can interrupt me during my maiden speech, and so I will say it again: I am from Downpatrick, which is St Patrick's true homeland.

I arrive to this seat in the footsteps of some political greats. Mr Eddie McGrady was the quiet giant of Northern Irish politics: fair, determined and yet well liked on all sides of this House and others. He was a gentleman and a mentor, and he is sadly missed in politics and in our area. I also follow Margaret Ritchie into the seat. Margaret has assisted me in my political career. She has been a friendly guide. She helped to establish me, and she had such drive and determination that we always had to work the extra hour, walk the extra mile and rap the extra door before we got to rest. I pay full respect to Seán Rogers. Another quiet gentleman of Irish politics, he will be missed from the front line. He leaves a legacy of hard work, service and care for the community that he served. I pledge to maintain and deliver on the work that he started.

The area that I represent is a beautiful place, stretching as it does from the shores of Strangford lough, past where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea and the idyllic expanse of Carlingford lough. If there is one thing that is better than the scenery in our area, it is the people of South Down. They are wonderful, caring and friendly, and it is my pleasure to represent them in this place and do all I can for them in the constituency.

I move on to the issue at hand: the scourge of illegal drugs. We tabled an amendment because we felt that the motion did not go far enough. We were worried that it focused too much on punishment. Whilst a clear message must be sent to drug dealers, peddlers and those in the supply chain, the motion could have gone further and called for a joined-up and coordinated approach to help to prevent those who feel tempted to partake in drugs from doing so.

I am finishing my role as a youth worker, and I know only too well the impact that drugs can have on young people, be they involved in taking drugs or watching a family member do so. Young people can become consumed by the drug culture: the places they hang out, the people whom they meet and the activities that they do. Young people might have the freedom of a new wage packet or a university place and become users, maybe of soft drugs first before, as was mentioned, moving on to harder drugs. We have young people who recreationally use harder drugs and whose weekends are incomplete without a dabble. With 86% of those convicted of drug-related crimes being male and well over 26% of convictions coming from the 18-24 age bracket, we are specifically letting down young men if we approach this in a simply punitive manner.

There is never a happy ending to taking drugs. It impacts young people's lives and futures, and it can have a debilitating impact on them for the rest of their lives. We call for more information and assistance, for emergency help when needed, and for guidance and support should

people stray into drug-taking and want to put the brakes on. We have asked for an Executive-wide approach because, whilst the Department of Justice can lock people up, the Department of Education can teach people, and the Department of Health can help people when there is nobody else to support them. We must educate our children as well about themselves to help them to understand the reasons for the decisions that they take. With care and construction, an appropriate sharing of resources, and a suitably motivated and driven team of professionals, we could target that type of education to the places it is needed most and prevent the next generation of drug users.

Ms Hanna: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Sure.

Ms Hanna: Is there a role for local councils in the solution to the drug problem?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGrath: Thank you. Indeed there is. I think that it has been mentioned a few times today that policing and community safety partnerships can definitely utilise their experience on the ground in communities to identify problems and target the resources that can come from the centre. Nothing wipes out a supply chain more quickly than diminishing demand.

In conclusion, we have today something that we may not get a lot of in this mandate: agreement from all sides. I do not intend to go through bit by bit what people said. I think that we all know that we support the motion and the amendment. We are asking Northern Ireland to be tough when it has to be but caring when it needs to be and sensible enough to know the difference and to educate people about the risks to them and allow them to make truly informed decisions.

Mrs Cameron: I congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your new role. I also congratulate the Justice Minister on what will be a challenging but vital role in the Assembly.

It is apparent that no one in the House disagrees with the intent of the motion. That is not surprising, given the seemingly never-ending cycle of drug-related tragedies that afflict our communities daily. Before I make some points in relation to the overall strategy of the Department and the broader criminal justice family, I convey my sympathies to all the families that have been affected by drug-related issues. I hope that, by highlighting some issues in the debate, those families will be reassured that the Assembly is serious in its intentions to look at how awareness can be raised and how more support can be offered by way of intervention. I will approach the debate from that perspective, and I trust that members from other Committees will highlight some of their own areas of interest and expertise in relation to health and communities in particular.

I will look at a couple of issues that are worth observing in terms of the overall approach of government towards drug-related crime. I was interested to note some of the statistical research in the briefing pack provided for the debate; it seems to indicate that the majority of cases going through the court system relate to motoring offences. I suggest that, in terms of government spend on public awareness, spend since devolution on motoring-

related schemes such as speed awareness is probably higher than most other types of campaigns. Whilst I am somewhat reluctant to base my argument on statistics alone, the broad point that I am making is that perhaps it is time for the Government to look again at its priorities in awareness, given the continued volume of motoring-related incidents going through the courts.

A secondary point in relation to that area is that, in terms of motoring and the courts, there are some who might think that the ordinary motorist is already subject to enough forms of scrutiny and penalty opportunities, where even the most basic mistake by a driver leaves them facing immediate financial and possible criminal penalties. I make the point again because, in the briefing pack, the surveys indicate that the vast majority of people believe that the resources of the police and courts would be better spent on dealing with the antisocial behaviour and criminality often fuelled by drugs or the need to finance the supply of drugs rather than putting thousands of motorists through courts for what may be deemed minor offences in the overall scheme of things.

Of course, that is in no way to minimise motoring offences that are truly shocking in nature; no one would seek to minimise the impact of those. However, I want to make the broad point that the criminal justice system must continually examine its priorities to ensure that they are in line with what the public want to see in terms of proper social justice for those who find themselves victims of criminality. It is important that the public have confidence in the system. My fear is that the public, who are shown a zero-tolerance approach for minor parking or bus lane misdemeanours, are then told by the same criminal justice system that there is nothing to be done for the victims of theft or criminal damage to their property, which results in a greater sense of injustice and a further loss of confidence in the police.

I believe that that sense of injustice in communities is further highlighted by the obvious link between drug-related crime and paramilitarism. It is a further sense, if you like, of one rule for one and another rule for the thousands of decent, law-abiding citizens, while paramilitary organisations appear to rule communities without fear of interference from any aspect of the criminal justice system. Northern Ireland seems to be perhaps more gripped by paramilitarism and its never-ending criminal empires than ever. Every person in every community knows who the leaders, dealers and suppliers are. I accept that people are reluctant to name names, but that, in itself, cannot be an excuse for a lack of police action in tackling this scourge once and for all. The longer we accept this status quo, the more we condemn our young people to remain trapped in these unholy environments where drugs are a currency and criminality is a character reference.

I look forward to the Justice Committee being able to look into these areas in much more depth and to scrutinise the organisations and strategies that are responsible for ensuring that drugs and the misery that they cause can be given the highest possible priority.

I turn now to the comments from other Members in the debate. As one of the named proposers of the motion, I am pleased to see the united force behind the motion and, indeed, the amendment. I fully support the amendment

also. It is a good day when you see the Assembly agreeing across the board on such a vital subject.

Paul Frew, who proposed the motion, stated that it was an important debate. He talked about the devastation that drugs cause for society and families. He was supportive of the amendment and the holistic approach that it offers. He talked about drugs being illegal but also addictive and the need to tackle those at the top of drug-dealing, whether it is paramilitaries or not. He talked about drugs being endemic in our society and even in prison. He mentioned that £73,000 is the cost to keep someone in prison for a year and spoke of all the other crimes connected to drug crime. He invited the Minister to visit Railway Street addiction service and mentioned the Hope Centre in Ballymena, speaking of the valuable supportive work that it does and about the fight not to reduce the funding for this specialised unit.

Next, Nichola Mallon from the SDLP moved the amendment. She said that the issue was of grave concern to her constituents in North Belfast and that she had witnessed the difficulties that families were suffering, the painful battle and the anguish of drug addiction. She commended the DUP for tabling the motion on illegal drugs and said that the Minister had a key role to play and that more needed to be done by the PSNI and the Justice Department. She spoke of the misuse of prescription drugs and the need for Health and Education to have a greater role. She praised those in the statutory and community and voluntary sector and spoke of the referrals to CAMHS and the pressure there. She spoke of the immense human and financial cost of drug misuse and about mental health and well-being. She shared the testimonial of Aaron Fox — I hope I have got the name right — and the call from his parents to act on this subject.

Michaela Boyle from Sinn Féin spoke about the scourge on society of illegal drugs and young people abusing alcohol. She talked about the crime, domestic violence and rape that is associated with that abuse. She spoke about early intervention and of awareness being key and said that proper help in prisons was needed. She said that crime figures for the Strabane district council area had increased in 2014-15 and that there was a rise in recorded drug possessions. She welcomed the increase in arrests. She said that more collaborative working was needed and that the public needed confidence in the justice system, especially for those who felt let down by the courtroom.

7.00 pm

Mr Doug Beattie of the UUP was fully supportive of the motion and amendment. He spoke about the focus on prevention and the need to involve all Ministers in dealing with the issues. He said that the problem with illegal drugs is that taking them is today socially acceptable. He also spoke of his experience of the cannabis fields in Asia. He mentioned that he thought we would be better off in Europe to tackle the drugs issue.

Trevor Lunn of the Alliance Party supported the motion and amendment, though he preferred the wording of the amendment. He spoke about cross-departmental issues and in particular education. He mentioned that prescription drugs were a bigger part of the problem and referred to paramilitary groupings and criminal gangs and their responsibility for those illegal drugs.

Lord Morrow of the DUP commended those who tabled the motion and welcomed the agreement across the Benches. He wished the Justice Minister well in her role. He spoke about cases coming before the courts in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and the use of cannabis, which, he said, was a gateway to other drug usage. He talked about how drugs had the potential to impact negatively on the body and spoke of a pilot scheme called Breakthru in Dungannon, I think. He invited the Minister to visit that programme.

I move on to other contributors. Daithí McKay of Sinn Féin was supportive, as was Sydney Anderson of the DUP —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Mrs Cameron: — as well as Roy Beggs of the UUP and George Robinson. Just in finishing, I thank Members from across the Chamber for their support for this important motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges with grave concern the impact and extent of drug use and drug-related incidents, crimes and fatalities have on individuals, families and our community; supports the ongoing work carried out by statutory services, the Public Health Agency and the voluntary and community sector; and calls on the Executive to work collaboratively alongside the relevant bodies to bring forward further measures to raise awareness about the dangers of drug use, to increase investment in, awareness of, and access to, early intervention services for children and young people as well as adults, and to ensure that the criminal justice system is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets.

Woodburn Forest

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): 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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. *[Interruption.]* Order, please.

Mr McMullan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the application by InfraStrata to drill at Woodburn forest, County Antrim; recognises the concerns of residents in County Antrim over drilling proposals at the forest; and calls on the Executive to ensure that such applications are not approved until assurances are secured against any negative potential impacts on water supply, the environment, tourism and local communities.

Go raibh maith agat. The motion before us can go a long way in protecting our environment, water supply, tourism and communities. It is also a motion that will give the community the right to be consulted at all stages of an application and the right to express a view to all agencies involved. The granting of a drilling licence without a mandatory environmental impact assessment not only is a major flaw in our planning system but fails to protect the communities and the wider public. Members, let us not fool ourselves: activities such as gas and oil exploration are not without real and serious environmental risks and problems, such as water and soil pollution.

I ask Members to think how close to Woodburn reservoir this drilling operation is situated. It makes you wonder what people were thinking.

In the drilling process, highly toxic chemicals are combined with water to create a mixture that is pumped into the ground. This mixture comes back to the surface as a toxic mud, which carries contaminants such as radioactive materials. We also have air pollution from drilling, from gases such as benzene and methane. We will also have oil spills, waste management problems, noise, road damage and landscape impacts. Already they have cut away acres of trees and, according to the permitted development schedule, the council must give written consent for this to be done. I wonder whether that happened, because we have not seen anything from the councils at all.

Given all the risks, it is hard to believe that a drilling licence was granted at all without the need for an environmental impact assessment report. At present, a licence application needs only to be accompanied by an environmental awareness statement, which is no more than a brief statement demonstrating the applicant's awareness of environmental issues, regulatory requirements and sensitivities related to drilling, exploration, development and production. In other words, Members, nothing even resembling a full, independent assessment is required. Basically, it is only a nod of the head or a wink of the eye and you are through.

Under the EU directive 2001/42, a strategic environmental assessment is meant to be carried out before petroleum licences are granted. Unfortunately, our licensing policy here does not apply that much-needed directive. This assessment, if applicable here, would allow the full examination of effects on things such as biodiversity, pollution, human health, flora and fauna, soil, water and

air, to name but a few. As our planning policy stands at present, to hold a petroleum licence one has only to apply for permitted development rights (PDR) to carry out exploratory works. A full planning application is only necessary if the applicant is refused permitted development rights. One of the reasons for being refused is if your application needs a full environmental impact assessment. On this occasion at Woodburn, when InfraStrata submitted its drilling plans in 2013, the opportunity to put this application into the full planning process along with a full environmental impact assessment was gravely missed. I wonder how it was missed. Was it intentional that it was missed, or was it just missed?

When you look at the DOE's own stipulation for drilling in an area with an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) designation, you will see that, before any proposed exploration the company must consult with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and other relevant bodies.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr Dickson: I am fascinated by the Member's quite correct litany of concerns that he has about environmental pollution, but this is the Member who has a family member who has been involved with some fuel laundering processes, which are on the record, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order.

Mr Dickson: — as some of the most polluting activities in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I caution the Member. He well knows the rules under which he speaks. I advise him to be very careful.

Mr McMullan: The application clearly states that the licensee shall not carry out any work within or in close proximity to an ASSI without the prior written consent of the DOE. I wonder whether this happened, because if we really know this area, we will know that two of the reservoirs served by Woodburn's catchment area are in an ASSI. What were these people thinking of and what were those responsible for the paperwork for this programme thinking of? Why, you may ask, did DOE not insist on a full equality impact assessment? Basically, it is my belief that the then Minister, Minister Durkan, must have fallen asleep at the wheel. He wrote to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council telling it that it was responsible for removing the PDR, but why did his Department not take the lead? He also failed to respond to the 21-day deadline to be notified of the plans. That meant that the permitted development rights were granted by default. Where else would you hear of that? When the public quite rightly asked questions, the council went into committee and there was nothing coming out. Nobody was telling the public anything at all. That is something I was shocked to learn.

Failure to respond to the deadline to be notified of the plans meant that the permitted development rights were granted by default. When the Department was asked why that happened, it stated that it, DOE, had already received sufficient information from the company and the relevant agencies back in December 2013. That I am shocked to learn — that DOE took advice from the drilling company and not from its own report. As was seen in the papers, one of the heads of the Planning Service was quoted as asking the drilling company for advice on how to answer

some of the questions that were laid down to the service. We have DOE taking the advice of the drilling company, so did the rest of the relevant agencies do the same? Is this where we have come to — the advice and word of the person who is applying for the licence was taken without the relevant agencies doing their own reports? I think those questions need to be asked.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I remind the Member to address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr McMullan: Pardon me.

Today we have the chance to ensure that this debacle can never happen again. What can we do? The motion states that we call on:

“the Executive to ensure that such applications are not approved until assurances are secured against any negative potential impacts on water supply, the environment, tourism and local communities.”

How can we do that? Today I am calling on our new Minister, Minister Hazzard — I thank him for being here — to repeal the part of section 16 of the permitted development for minimum exploration that deals with oil and gas and to say that any future applications by anybody to do an exploratory drill or to have anything to do with exploration for oil or gas should go through the full planning legislation and that a full environmental impact assessment should go with it. That is the only way we can ensure that we have control of our own planning service and that the multinationals do not dictate terms or anything that goes on. We must take back control of our Planning Service. I hope we get support for the motion.

Mr Lyons: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I welcome you to your role and wish you well.

I listened carefully to Mr McMullan, a Member for East Antrim, and I also read with interest the motion before the House. It is one that I will not be able to support, for reasons that I will outline now. I certainly understand the concerns of some local residents — the genuinely held concerns that some people in that area have. However, I believe that those fears are unfounded. I hope that, in my remarks, I will be able to assuage the fears that some people have, but I am under no illusion that there are people who have their mind made up about this. I understand that and that no amount of fact, evidence or reason will convince them otherwise, but I hope I will be able to shed some light on what is taking place.

7.15 pm

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: No. I have a lot to get through and have only five minutes. Other Members will have a lot more collectively.

I also want to raise the last part of the motion that Mr McMullan has brought to the House. It calls on the Executive to:

“ensure that such applications are not approved until assurances are secured against any negative potential impacts on water supply, the environment, tourism and local communities.”

If those assurances had not already been provided, we would have cause for concern and worry, but that is not the case. Let me address that. One of the issues that has been raised is permitted development rights. Some people think that InfraStrata has been given a free run and the power to do whatever it wants without any consequences, but that is not the case. It is not a free-for-all. Let us go through what has taken place so far. It was required to get the consent to drill by DETI. That is what it is regulated under. That consent, given by DETI, states that DETI is satisfied with the technical, environmental and health and safety aspects of the proposed plans, so the former Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was pleased. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has taken steps and has implemented a water quality monitoring report that includes surface waters and groundwaters. The NIEA also regulates the movement of waste from the site. In addition, the NIEA is responsible for ensuring that Northern Ireland's water quality monitoring and risk assessments for drinking water meet the regulatory requirements. So what do we have, when we consider the exploratory conventional drilling that has been taking place at Woodburn? We know that the NIEA is content. We know that Northern Ireland Water is content. We know that —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: No. I already indicated that I will not give way.

We have heard that DOE, DRD and DETI are content. When we look at those in the round, we see that we have a number of Departments and public bodies that are tasked with ensuring that the environment and public water are protected.

I move now to the water supply. A number of concerns were raised. I am sorry that I have to say this again, but it is not fracking. That point has been raised again and again, and I have received correspondence saying that what is taking place is fracking and I should be opposed to it. This is conventional exploratory drilling. We know that no oil will be extracted; indeed, we know that the chemicals that are used in drilling — everyone knows that certain chemicals will need to be used — are used in this process all over the world. In fact, they have already been used at Larne lough. They are used for geothermal energy, and, in fact, they are also used for water extraction. We are asked in the motion —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I have already indicated that I am not giving way. I am running out of time. We have already indicated —

Mr Ford: You would get an extra minute.

Mr Lyons: You are right: I would get an extra minute. Sorry, go ahead.

Mr Beggs: The Member is certain that there are no risks, but does he appreciate that things sometimes go wrong and that, when things go wrong, there are risks? The question is this: why take on board additional risk in a water catchment area?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyons: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am glad that the Member has raised that issue. That is why the company has said that multiple layers of steel casing

and concrete will be used to help to protect the water supply in that way and why Northern Ireland Water, DETI and others are pleased with what is happening. I have a personal interest in this, by the way, as does the Member: we drink water that comes from the rivers that feed into those reservoirs.

We have a number of public bodies and government agencies — experts in the area — that have informed us that what is happening is in line with policy, is safe and poses no risk to the environment. Today, we are being asked to express concern and to ensure that applications such as this are not approved unless certain assurances are provided. I say it again: we would be right to express concern if those assurances were not there, but that is not where we find ourselves.

Finally, those who invest in Northern Ireland must be allowed to operate within the framework that has been established already. I want companies to come here and be able to operate within the law. That is what has happened in this case.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Lyons: I have not been convinced otherwise at this point. Therefore, I cannot support the motion.

Mr Beggs: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I, too, congratulate you on your appointment.

I support the motion. I have to say that I it was with incredulity that I learned of the proposal to drill a borehole at Woodburn inside the water catchment area. I could not believe that it would be a location where Northern Ireland Water, the company whose job it is to guarantee water quality for the people of Northern Ireland, would take on additional risks. As I said earlier, there are risks involved in drilling. Some are using the language that this is a “zero-waste site” and that nothing will ever escape, but there are “Events, dear boy, events”. Sometimes, events can overtake the best of plans. Again, I ask the question: why take on additional risks?

I want to highlight the fact that I drive a car. I have a wood-burning stove, but I have an oil-fired central heating system at home as well. I use oil, so I am not anti-oil and do not come at this from an anti-oil point of view. We have to try to conserve our limited energy supplies, but why on earth would you take on additional risk by locating such a site in a water catchment area?

I note that the record of the Northern Ireland Water board meeting of 24 July 2013 indicates that the board was assured that the contamination risk had been dealt with in the preconditions for Northern Ireland Water’s land being accessed for the project. Therefore, you write that into the conditions and nothing will ever go wrong. What surprised me about that minute was that there was no challenge from any of the Northern Ireland Water board members to ask, “What if something goes wrong?”. I have to say that I found myself in a similar situation when involved in discussions with some departmental officials. They just assumed that it was a zero-waste site and that everybody had been assured by somebody else — but what if something goes wrong? Why take on the additional risks?

The next thing highlighted to me was concern in the community that there could be fracking. This was moving to a different plane. I could not believe that anywhere in

Northern Ireland could be less appropriate for fracking than a water catchment area. You have the pumping of chemicals underground. You have the risk of heavy metals or other substances coming back to the surface. It was just ridiculous that that could be possible. I felt that it was important, so, in 2014, I engaged with the Department and Northern Ireland Water to seek at least an assurance that there would be no fracking and that it would ensure the highest level of mitigation if it leased the site. That was agreed. I am glad that no fracking has been written into the lease so that, if the company finds suitable fracking below, it will not come back. At least, I hope that it will not, and that is my understanding. It is already built into the lease, so it cannot decide to say, “We have developed this in good faith. You cannot stop us now unless you pay us x amount of money”. I hope that we have, at least, prevented that issue arising.

Many have referred to the catchment area. I have been to the area several times and met some of the neighbours. The issue that strikes me, which people are mixed up about, is that this is adjacent to Woodburn north but is actually in the catchment area of Woodburn south. There is confusion. There is a sluice that can direct water to and from the area, and I understand that mitigation can be built in there. I suggest that they should build in whatever mitigation they can come up with. We have been assured that there is a bund and that nothing can escape. What if we get exceptional rainfall and the bund fills? Northern Ireland has been fortunate to be dry recently.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I confess that my view is to be very cautious about undertaking a project like this. That said, given that the Government pay people from Northern Ireland Water, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and other statutory organisations such as DETI to provide advice to people like him who are charged to make the decision, why does he think that he is better qualified than those whom we pay to advise us?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: Sometimes, you need a bit of common sense. Why take on additional risks? Why did you come here if you accept what the officials say every time? Sometimes, you have to challenge them. Why take on additional risks?

There was a site in the Glenoe area, in my constituency. It had an aquifer, and neighbouring well water was diverted. There was lots of mud, and, I am told, the Glynn river ran red. Who knows what could have happened if something similar had happened at Woodburn? You should not just assume that officials get it right all the time. Another thing, when I read on about this and gained knowledge, is the number of chemicals involved, and, again, this is in a water catchment area. There was 100 kg of biocide. I think that it was 24 tons of barium sulphate, and there were 2,500 gallons of Halad-300L NS. Biocide T and Halad-300L NS are defined as hazardous biocides under the Groundwater Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009.

Why bring such issues into a water catchment area? Why bring risks upon yourself? So, because of that I want to avoid risks, and we ought to be very careful in the future and not do this ever again.

Ms Hanna: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is my first opportunity to congratulate you on your role which we know you will bring integrity and balance to.

The SDLP supports the motion. First and foremost, it is clear that there are substantial concerns about the proposals for exploratory drilling in Woodburn and that not enough is known about this kind of drilling and the potential impacts and effects on local communities. We certainly do not have enough information to declare it safe. We had been told that the well site would be fully watertight — a zero discharge zone — and lined with layers of cement and steel to prevent liquids escaping into the surrounding soil and the ground water.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hanna: I will.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware that already there has been flooding in the entrance lane? Mud was flowing onto the road and, ultimately, down the stream that, potentially, could have gone into the water supply. So, already, they have not been able to do things properly.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, I am aware of that, and I believe that InfraStrata has acknowledged some of those breaches, even if others have not accepted that they have had breaches. I believe that this has been compounded by the fact that there have not been baseline studies and surveys to allow us to effectively quantify any environmental damage. I understand that there are concerns as the company doing this exploratory work is not financially secure and would not necessarily be in a position to fund any clean-up, if such clean-up was possible, in the event of a substantial breach.

As a background to how we got to this point, we know that the DOE got an application from InfraStrata in August 2013 detailing its intentions at Woodburn to probe the subsurface geology and identify areas for potential oil and gas deposit. I understand that officials in the Environment Agency made a determination, based on the information available at that time, concluding that the development did not need an environmental statement and that, according to the information submitted, the proposed borehole was essentially a legally permitted development (PD) and that planning permission was not required.

Since that decision, further information has emerged about the detail and the potential risks of what was proposed. The work was initially described as minor and non-contentious exploration — I think that we can clearly say that it is not. InfraStrata was lately granted a licence to reinject petroleum and other fluids, and I thank the Member for outlining what some of those were, into the site, and therefore it no longer could fall into the category of permitted development.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

After local government reform, the DOE had no jurisdiction over the permitted development notification, which had become, at that point, a matter for Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. In September 2015, the then Environment Minister, Mark H Durkan, wrote to the council clarifying this. He advised that the means of removing the PD rights was for the council to carry out a further environmental impact assessment (EIA) screening exercise and consultation based on the new information

available. Unfortunately, we think that there was a missed opportunity that it did not take place. If the reforms to planning were to do anything, and even though they were not as comprehensive as we had initially designed them to be, they were designed to bring in community consultation and give the people closest to the impact of a decision a say through their local councillors.

A previous Member to speak has, I believe, continued with the campaign to try to pin the blame on the former DOE Minister and Department and, potentially, throw some anti-politics sentiment about why a decision might have been made. I do not think that that is the case. Once the details of what was being proposed emerged, I think that it is fair to say that there have been a number of missed opportunities to bring the development in. I have outlined the role that Mid and East Antrim Borough Council could have played in it; I understand that DETI granted the licence; DRD has influence over Northern Ireland Water, which has a demonstrable interest in protecting our water supply; and, indeed, the outgoing Agriculture Minister has responsibility for the Forest Service and could have potentially rejected permission to take the —

7.30 pm

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hanna: Yes, certainly.

Mr McMullan: Does the Member agree that this was granted under default because the 21-day term was not taken up, and we sat on our hands and let the application go through by default?

Ms Hanna: As I have just outlined, at the time, the information available did not say that it was exploring the sub-geometry or whatever it is. And I think after the fact, when the follow-up proposal — *[Interruption.]* Geometry, yes.

Ms Hanna: The follow-up proposal detailed some of the chemicals being used. As I have outlined, a number of Departments, including DARD, had the opportunity to pull the development back in. You can take the plank out of your own eye before you start to apportion blame here.

The discussion of this matter is frequently raised alongside fracking, and I accept Mr Lyons's point that it is not the same as fracking, but there are some parallels. On the latter issue, I commend Mark H Durkan for taking appropriate deployment of the precautionary principle during his term and refusing permission for that to take place in Northern Ireland until such time as it is proven safe, which is not the case at the moment. Although we are far off any confidence that this is safe, we are not blind or absolutist in our position on many things, including this. If we were given evidence that said that it was safe, we would reconsider the position. I wish that the same effort, determination and resource that are put into increasingly complicated and contrived extraction methods like this would be put into developing the renewable base here that has so much potential —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Ms Hanna: — to meet our energy security and to reduce, necessarily, the greenhouse gas emissions for this place. Onshore wind, for example, is cleaner, safer and less expensive than this sort of tactic, but it is being overlooked. We support the motion.

Mr Dickson: Mr Speaker, I will take this opportunity to congratulate you on your appointment. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important matter for many of my constituents and those who live in a much larger drinking water consumption area served by the Woodburn dams. Earlier this evening, I and some party colleagues met some people from Stop the Drill, particularly residents who live in the most immediate area around the drill site. They impressed us and persuaded us, if we needed any further persuasion, about the folly of this particular enterprise.

Equally, I find it very strange that Mr McMullan and Mr Kelly are co-signatories to a motion here tonight when they are effectively a party of Government, and they could, at the stroke of a pen, stop all this. It seems rather false that they do not take that course of action. In fact, the motion that is in front of us, which I intend to support, is —

Mr Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr Kelly: Does that stroke of a pen equally apply to the time of the previous Minister of the Environment, Mark Durkan? You seem to be attacking Sinn Féin now.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The reality is that, despite the words that Ms Hanna used to congratulate her Minister on his actions, he could have perhaps taken that decision as well, but things are much simpler now because there are just two parties in Government, and it is very easy. You do not have all the breadth of consultation that you needed to do in the past.

The reality is simply this: Mr Hazzard has the powers to introduce departmental legislation with regard to planning. That is what the motion calls for, so I look forward to hearing a major announcement from him tonight in respect of planning matters. Furthermore, through you, Mr Speaker, will the Minister instruct Northern Ireland Water to release documents to protesters who believe that documents are being hidden from them and from public view and from open and transparent government? He is a party of open and transparent government, so I am absolutely sure that he will do his level best to ensure that every document that is being requested is discovered and placed in the public domain.

The motion states that all the environmental factors must be considered before such a serious project is permitted again. Why should they not be considered while this project is continuing? Of course we want to protect future drilling opportunities, but we have a genuine opportunity tonight to stop this now. I have serious concerns, as others have, about the way in which the Agriculture Department has an environment portfolio and, indeed, that the leadership of that Department is in the hands of the DUP. Essentially, we have a government lock on the decision that faces the Assembly today, and I encourage the Members who have the power in the Chamber to stand up and do what is right and stop now the process and the potential pollution of water that supplies hundreds of thousands of houses in the greater Belfast area.

The motion should be calling for a strong and independent environmental protection agency rather than the mouse of an organisation that we have at the moment, which cannot even decide what day of the week it is. I wonder

whether the two parties of government will tell us tonight whether they will introduce an independent environmental protection agency to Northern Ireland.

We need to remember that it is an exploratory drilling process that is going on in Woodburn and that there is no guarantee that oil will be found, but should it be found, will the Minister give us a commitment tonight that that oil will stay in the ground? That is where the oil, if it is discovered, should remain. In the 21st century, we do not need 20th-century technology. We do not need additional oil in Northern Ireland. We do not need that type of exploration in Northern Ireland. We need to get smart and look for the appropriate alternatives that will deliver 21st-century energy needs for the whole of Northern Ireland. I have no desire to see east Antrim turned into the DUP's idea of a Northern Ireland Dallas, no matter how much it would suit the MP for East Antrim.

Mr Speaker: The next Member who I will call is Ms Caoimhe Archibald. This is the first opportunity that she has had to speak in the Chamber. Therefore, I remind the House that it is the convention that there is no interruption during the speech; that is, unless she becomes controversial in her remarks.

Ms Archibald: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In supporting today's motion, I would like to touch upon three areas: first, addressing the flaws in the system; secondly, so-called economic benefits; and, finally, some wider environmental considerations.

My party colleague detailed how flaws in the planning and licensing systems have led to the undesirable consequences that we now face. It is necessary that we correct those flaws to prevent a repeat situation arising. Therefore, I reiterate the call for a change to planning policy to require minimal exploration, including exploration for hydrocarbons, to undergo full planning permission. It should no longer be granted under permitted development rights.

I also call for the following changes to licensing policies. First, the application process for petroleum licences should include the need to carry out mandatory independent environmental assessment. Ideally, this would take the form of a strategic environmental assessment, the like of which is used in Britain for petroleum licensing. This would overcome any gaps allowing exploration to happen in ASSIs or other special areas. Secondly, the petroleum licensing system in the North places emphasis on maximising the successful and expeditious exploration and exploitation of the North's oil and gas resources. All decisions are made in pursuit of that policy. This must change to become a policy that is more precautionary and recognises the problems of global warming, carbon emissions and fossil fuel depletion and therefore places primacy on environmental and economic sustainability.

I will move on to so-called economic benefits. InfraStrata makes certain claims about the economic benefits of its activities. It said that the Larne/Lough Neagh basin has reserves that could provide the North's energy for 25 years, offsetting the need for international oil or gas imports; that any oil or gas discovered will provide income through tax revenues and royalties; and that there would be potential for job creation and other economic benefits. At best, the claims are vague and non-committal. In general, it is common for the oil and gas industry to quote such economic benefits. However,

in the case of Woodburn, and in any other case for that matter, it is unlikely these benefits would be realised. Rather, given that the industry is labour-intensive during the development phase and capital-intensive during the production phase, there is financial pressure to front-load drilling activity, resulting in boom/bust labour economics that none of us wants to see.

About 98% of potential jobs are associated with well development. They are short-term, low-skilled jobs, predominantly filled by a transient workforce experienced in the industry. Only 2% to 5% of jobs are associated with the production phase and would remain local and predictable. The transient workforce leads to low tax recovery. Also, the destruction and contamination of the natural landscape by heavy industry is irreversible, and any real or perceived environmental degradation will impact on tourism and reduce the demand for agricultural products and agrifoods from the island of Ireland. Any tax or revenue generated will go straight to Westminster and not stay in the North. I therefore contend that we should not be taken in by vague promises of cheaper home-produced fuel and lots of jobs and prosperity.

I would like to discuss some wider environmental considerations. Oil and gas exploration and extraction are taking us in the wrong strategic direction. Few people now dispute that global warming is a reality and is primarily caused by emission of greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide. If we continue our current emission levels, the global temperature will increase with dire consequences, including rising sea levels and more-extreme weather.

The world community accepts that we must reduce our use of carbon, with the G7 committed to ending the use of fossil fuels, and the UN climate change summit announcing a landmark goal of net zero human emissions. The North also recently signed the Under 2 memorandum of understanding to limit global warming to an agreed threshold of below 2°Celsius relative to pre-industrial levels.

Our strategic planning policy statement states that we must continue to work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025. Given all of this, I do not see any other way but to move towards a low-carbon society, where we reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and use of fossil fuels. That is the path that I and Sinn Féin want us to take. That path is not compatible with issuing licences for and encouraging investment in the oil and gas industry.

Instead, we should promote renewable energy technologies and create the legislative and political environment that encourages not only the proliferation of these technologies but community and public ownership of renewable energy generation.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Ms Archibald: Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Durkan: I also rise in support of the motion. I cannot understand why any party or person would have a problem in ensuring that any application is not approved without assurances being secured against any potential negative impacts on our environment, let alone on human health.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. I completely agree with what he has said: of course we want those assurances. The point that we have made, however, is that

those assurances have already been provided to us. You might disagree on the issue of whether we should be there, but you cannot deny that assurances have already been provided in those terms.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Durkan: I would not deny that assurances have been given. I would maybe question the adequacy of some of the assurances that have been given, in the light of recent revelations.

This precautionary approach is essential to ensure confidence in our planning system, and, indeed, confidence in our Government here. I very much welcome the fact that the motion calls on the Executive rather than on any individual Minister or Department. These projects do tend to be cross-cutting in nature. Indeed, the situation at Woodburn pervades four of the legacy Departments, as outlined by my colleague Claire Hanna, DETI, naturally enough, has responsibility for licensing; DRD has clear responsibility for water supply and ensuring the safety of it; DARD did have control of or responsibility for the forest; and, of course, DOE. As a former Environment Minister, I will attempt to clarify some of the misinformation that is out there and some of the misinformation that is in here.

What we are seeing at Woodburn forest was never subject to a planning application. It is what constitutes permitted development. People are shocked, and rightly so, that something of this scale and nature was not subject to the scrutiny of a full application, and I do have a great deal of sympathy with them.

Indeed, before leaving office, I commenced a review of permitted development with a call for evidence in relation to exploratory drilling, with the intention that something like this cannot happen again without the wider consultation and deeper scrutiny of a full application. I look forward to the new Minister concluding this piece of work and working with him on it.

7.45 pm

I have been inundated with angry tweets, emails and correspondence on this issue. I even got a letter from Mark Ruffalo, the Incredible Hulk actor. Believe me, you do not want to make him angry.

Mr Agnew: He turns green.

Mr Durkan: He clearly is green, all right.

Sadly, most of this has come too late, after responsibility for planning and jurisdiction for this matter had transferred to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, and I was unable to stop it with the stroke of a pen or a push of a button. Much has been made of the fact that DOE did not complete an EIA on time and that had this been done the situation would and could have been avoided. While missed deadlines make good headlines, this is not the case. Permitted development rights can be withdrawn at any stage, but, as I have outlined again and again, that power and responsibility now lies with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. Following a meeting with Friends of the Earth and some concerned residents, during which I learnt more about this application, I wrote to the council relaying and sharing these concerns.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Agnew: Before the Member moves on from the initial decision not to object to permitted development rights, can he explain the comments of his colleague Claire Hanna that somehow the Department did not know that this was going to be an exploratory drill? Under what basis was it permitted? What did the Department know?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I have to say that he is one of very few Members who have had an interest in this issue for some time. At the meeting that I had with Friends of the Earth and concerned residents, I learnt new information about the nature of what was being proposed and about the chemicals that may be used to assist in the carrying out of this exploratory drilling. I became more concerned and followed up with a letter to the council expressing those concerns.

Mr Lyons tried to establish that we are not talking about fracking here, but there is always the fear that fracking will follow. As Claire Hanna outlined, I, as Minister, did demonstrate a clear and a very strong approach to fracking and a precautionary approach to exploration, which saw legal proceedings taken against me. The SDLP is completely opposed to fracking. We now have enshrined in planning policy a presumption against fracking in the absence of evidence that it is not harmful to the environment or human health.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Durkan: I do recall an allegation from a former DOE Minister, Mr Lyons's predecessor in the House, that that was a breach of the ministerial code and that there might be further legal action on that.

Mr Agnew: We are here because one of the most invasive, destructive and dangerous processes has been allowed to take place without public consultation, without public scrutiny and, importantly, without public consent. There have been a lot of attempts to play the blame game here this evening. I think that we have to be honest. Every party that sat in the last Executive has to hold its hands up. I will maybe make an exception for the Alliance party, and I will say why in a minute.

There was an opportunity to scrutinise this decision. The failures of DOE have been pointed out, and it has been pointed out that DARD had responsibility and that DRD had responsibility. The whole Executive have responsibility, and that is what I was talking about today. It is the collective responsibility of being in government.

As Alex Attwood is often keen to say, it is not just being in government but being in power. Those parties in power had the power to act. Indeed, I sought to initiate a petition to have the decision recalled and reviewed by the Executive. That is why I make an exception for the Alliance Party, because it was the only other party prepared to sign.

I will give way to Mr Swann.

Mr Swann: I am just checking the Member's memory of who signed.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: Sorry, Robin Swann also signed, but his party collectively did not come on board. Mr Beggs also signed. Two Ulster Unionists signed. The Ulster Unionist Party did not approach me to sign the petition.

Ultimately, that is what the Government is for: to make, challenge and review decisions and to make sure that they act in the best interests of the people. I appreciate that Mr Durkan has been honest in the process. The DOE was asleep at the wheel when permitted development rights were granted. It should not take Friends of the Earth to tell the DOE how to do its job or what it has missed, or the Minister for that matter. This should have been examined closely at the time. It should have been stopped at that point, but, as was pointed out, there were many opportunities to stop this.

When I sat on the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, we were told quite openly by the Department of its open-door policy on petroleum licensing. The only condition to be met when seeking a licence — Mr Lyons used DETI scrutiny as an example of proper scrutiny — was evidence that the applicant could carry out what was required by the licence. DETI holds no regulation beyond that and certainly did not scrutinise the work that passed to the DOE.

Two things need to change —

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will not give way; the Member did not give way to me.

It is clear that permitted development rights are not appropriate for this type of development. We had to fight to get permitted development rights for solar panels on people's homes. We should not be drilling, particularly in a public forest in a water catchment area adjacent to a reservoir, without full environmental scrutiny and proper independent assurance that it is safe to do so.

I have heard a lot of talk about the supposedly watertight environment that InfraStrata is operating in. I was there on Friday, and I saw the pipe coming out of the site into the forest, presumably for water run-off. It is not exactly watertight. There were plenty of damp areas outside the site, and everybody knows that they are not because of the recent rain.

We need to change the open-door policy at the Department for the Economy. We need to get rid of permitted development rights for minerals exploration and to ensure maximum scrutiny when these types of applications come forward. We heard today about the Programme for Government and the new model of how we will do things. I welcomed elements of that, one of which was going out to the public and asking them. I have a petition signed by close to 65,000 people objecting to this. If there is to be a new model from this new Executive — a paradigm shift, as it was described earlier — we need our Executive to listen. We need to hear that the people do not want this. We need to stop the drill.

Mr Carroll: It is very important that the Assembly debates this issue, particularly given the massive environmental hazard that faces Woodburn reservoir. It is nothing short of a disgrace that the drill has been given the go-ahead just 300 metres from Woodburn reservoir. The potential risks to the water are obvious. Dangerous chemicals are used in the drilling, and the oil well itself sits in a reservoir catchment area. The reservoir supplies water to thousands of homes across Belfast, including my constituency of West Belfast.

It is absolute madness that this drill was given the go-ahead by politicians. Not only have we allowed InfraStrata to drill on unprotected land for fossil fuels that are ruining our environment but we are allowing them to run the risk of contaminating our water supply. It is simply unheard of for an oil well to be situated in the catchment area of a reservoir, and the fact that some politicians allowed this to go ahead shows how out of touch some of them really are.

We should be exploring ways to increase our renewable energy and setting an example to the rest of the world, not digging for oil beside a major reservoir and potentially contaminating our water supply. Indeed, the draft Programme for Government that we discussed earlier today refers to a commitment to reducing greenhouse emissions. Will the Executive intervene to halt the drilling at Woodburn? Shame on the politicians who let this drill go ahead, and shame on NI Water for putting the interest of corporate profits ahead of the safety and hygiene of our drinking water. I offer my support to the campaigners who have worked tirelessly over the last few weeks and months to highlight the issue. This drill must be stopped. We cannot risk our water, and we need to put the environment before the interest of big companies.

Mr Speaker: This is Mr Eamonn McCann's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. That is, of course, predicated on whether there is sufficient controversy in the speech to provoke an intervention.

Mr E McCann: There will be nothing controversial in anything I say, as always. *[Laughter.]* I was struck by what I heard when listening to some contributions. Bells kept ringing in my head, if you know what I mean. When Members were talking about what is happening at Woodburn, the phrases used and the problems described made me think of Mobouy Road, of Dalradian and of Prehen wood. If you want to know what all of those are, I can tell you that they are all examples of exactly the same thing as is taking place at Woodburn. Gerry Carroll and Steven Agnew were right: ideologically, economically and politically, what we are witnessing is a clash between the interests of business — of profit — on the one hand, and the interests of the people on the other. This is about rapacious capitalism despoiling our country and our countryside. That is what is happening here.

I mentioned Mobouy Road. Most of you have probably not heard of Mobouy Road, but, before the year is out, you will know all about it. At Mobouy Road, just outside Derry in the townland of Campsie, is an illegal dump that, at a conservative estimate — the previous Minister, Mark H, will, I think, confirm what I am saying — holds 1.2 million metric tons of waste that is illegally dumped. Members of the Assembly, you do not dump 1.2 million tons of waste out of sight, or, as we say around Derry, "unknownst". Loads of people knew that was going on — it is a wide area. The former Minister, Mark H Durkan, was good enough to accompany me and members of Friends of the Earth, the River Faughan Anglers, the Enagh Youth Forum and many others from around the area on a tour of what is there. I tell you this: you should go and see that dump. See the lagoons, as they are called, where water is gathered. See the bubbles coming up from below. These are not little bubbles like a fizz; these are huge bubbles —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to return to the debate on Woodburn forest.

Mr E McCann: Yes indeed. What I am saying — I think that it is necessary to say this because we are not dealing with the issue that arises if we concentrate on Woodburn only — is that this is not a one-off; it is part of a pattern. I cannot illustrate the pattern that the problem before us today is part of without saying that. I mentioned Mobouy and Prehen wood, where exactly the same thing happened. All that is left of Prehen wood is a little clump of pristine greenery along the banks of the Foyle, just outside Derry. It is being treated in exactly the same way as this area of Woodburn forest, which is another little forest. It is the last pristine piece of forest in what was once a forest running all the way from Derry to Strabane, and it is all cut down and destroyed.

We have this little place; it has red squirrels, it has buzzards, it has badgers. When I was a kid, it was known as the "Bluebell Wood", because you would collect an armful of bluebells. All the kids did that and took them over Craigavon Bridge home. The magical thing was that, when you came back the next week, they had returned; it was still carpeted with bluebells. That is under threat. That is something precious. You cannot put a price on that experience. People are entitled to beauty as well as bread, a house to live in and all the rest of it. We are destroying the beauty that has been bequeathed to us by nature.

8.00 pm

There is a housing development that begins at the edge of Prehen wood. The developers had the nerve to advertise it as "Prehen wood development". It literally abuts the forest, and it has been given planning permission.

The connection between those things is this — I could mention Dalradian and the gold mining, but I will not because I do not have time. I could bring you the correspondence between the Planning Service and the Prehen Historical and Environmental Society, which was treated like dirt. It was quite clear that the Planning Service was laughing at them. When the Information Commissioner twice intervened and told the Planning Service, "Give these people the information they are asking for. They are entitled to it", there was no result. There was just mulish reluctance even to comply with their own regulations and with the law. Exactly the same has happened at Woodburn.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr E McCann: In each of these instances, commercial interests have trumped the interests of the environment. That is the real context within which we have to understand these things. Whatever we do, regardless of super-councils and the rest of it —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr E McCann: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank the Members who tabled the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak on an important issue that has attracted significant concern and public interest. I have been very conscious of the concerns of residents in Antrim and further afield about the exploratory drilling at Woodburn forest.

The ongoing development at Woodburn involves InfraStrata carrying out an exploratory borehole at Woodburn forest to understand the subsurface geology and identify areas where there may be the potential for oil and gas deposits. Those drilling operations are not for the unconventional extraction of hydrocarbons.

At the outset, I assure Members that the work is restricted to exploration only and for a limited period. If commercial extraction were to take place in the future, it would be subject to the full planning application process, environmental assessments and assessment of all potential impacts, including the impacts on water supply, the environment, tourism and local communities.

Given the nature of this development and the issues raised, responsibility cuts across a number of Departments, including the Department for the Economy, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and my own Department for Infrastructure. As Minister with responsibility for planning, I aim to continue to improve our planning system and to make sure that it is effective and efficient and that it operates in the wider public interest. I am committed to ensuring that it delivers for local communities and the region as a whole and that the planning system addresses the present as well as the long-term future needs of our society.

The planning system should, where possible, facilitate development, but it must not compromise on environmental standards. Sustainable development is at the heart of our planning system, and it is clear that there will be many instances where it is necessary to balance competing social, economic and environmental interests. Whilst the planning process may not always be able to reconcile competing interests, transparency, fairness and accountable decision-making are fundamental to ensuring that all interests are taken into account.

Minerals are an important natural resource, and their exploitation makes an essential contribution to the North's prosperity and well-being. The minerals extraction industry provides employment, often in rural areas, and produces a wide range of products for a variety of purposes in construction, agriculture and industry. I want to facilitate sustainable minerals development and balance that with the need to protect the environment and ensure compliance with all environmental regulations. As a result, I have decided to propose a change to the current legislation, policy and procedures in relation to mineral exploration.

I propose to remove permitted development rights for oil and gas exploration. In the future, under my proposals, exploration for oil and gas will require the submission of a planning application and will be subject to the full rigours of the planning process, including environmental impact assessments (EIA) and public consultation. I intend to consult on the legislative change shortly.

As I have indicated, given the nature of the Woodburn development, responsibility cuts across a number of Departments. The work is being carried out under a licence awarded by the former Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which is now the Department for the Economy. The initial licence was granted for five years in March 2011, and a further five years was approved earlier this year. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs also has a range of responsibilities,

mainly through the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which is responsible for water quality and environmental protection. Its water management unit granted consent under the water order to regulate any potential impacts on surface water and groundwater and, as a result, has implemented a surface water and groundwater monitoring plan. NIEA is also responsible, through the Drinking Water Inspectorate, for ensuring that NI Water's drinking water supply meets regulatory requirements.

My Department's primary role is in relation to the associated planning and water responsibilities.

Mr Ford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hazzard: Sorry; I just want to get through this.

First, in relation to planning, the work at Woodburn is being carried out within the existing legislative framework for assessing proposals for mineral exploration referred to as permitted development (PD). Existing permitted development rights are provided for mineral exploration by class A of part 16 to the schedule to the Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015. That permits development on any land for a period not exceeding four months of the drilling of boreholes, the carrying out of seismic surveys or the making of other excavations for the purpose of mineral exploration.

A number of other conditions apply, including the storage of topsoil and restoration of the site. Under article 7 of the 2015 order, there is a requirement to notify the relevant district council of the proposed exploration, and the council may, within 21 days, issue a direction, if considered appropriate, that permitted development rights under article 3 shall not apply to the development, therefore requiring the submission of an application for planning permission. That remains an important safeguard. In addition, where an environmental impact assessment is applicable based on the details of the proposed development, PD rights cannot apply. It is important to emphasise that the temporary permitted development rights for minerals exploration do not allow the commercial extraction of minerals, including oil and gas. Such activity will be subject to the full planning application process as well as the relevant EIA, licensing and environmental permitting arrangements.

In April 2015, the vast majority of planning powers transferred to local government. Therefore, for over a year, the planning responsibilities at Woodburn have been a matter for Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. Up to that point, the former DOE had responsibility to consider permitted development notifications. In August 2013, InfraStrata submitted a permitted development notification to DOE detailing its intention to carry out an exploratory borehole in Woodburn forest. In addition to the provisions of the permitted development legislation, environmental impact assessment regulations require consideration. In the case of the InfraStrata proposals, an EIA determination was carried out, which concluded that the proposed development did not need to be accompanied by an environmental statement and, therefore, that planning permission would not be required. InfraStrata was advised of that in December 2013.

Following the transfer of planning powers in April 2015, the jurisdiction for the proposal moved to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. It is understood that the council sought legal opinion on the project and was similarly of the opinion

that the operations were indeed permitted development. Members should note that the council's procedures in respect of Woodburn are the subject of a legal challenge. In that regard, it is not appropriate for me to comment further on those matters.

If the company finds oil and gas deposits from its current exploratory work and wishes to extract them, it will need to apply for full planning permission to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, or to my Department if the amount extracted exceeds 500 tons per day in the case of petroleum or 500,000 cubic metres per day in the case of gas. If the proposal involves the extraction of unconventional hydrocarbons, the application will be regionally significant development and will be considered by my Department.

A number of issues have also been raised about the impact of the exploratory borehole on the water supply. NI Water owns the land at Woodburn forest and has entered into an exploration agreement with InfraStrata. That agreement allows for the construction of an access road and the drilling of an exploration well.

If InfraStrata wishes to move ahead with oil production, the agreement allows for InfraStrata to exercise an option for a long-term lease. However, that option is only exercisable if InfraStrata receives full planning permission for the production well and any associated infrastructure.

As previously referred to, there are other regulatory safeguards in place relating to pollution control, groundwater regulation and water abstraction practices. NI Water has in place drinking water safety plans for all its water treatment works and supply areas. Those plans identify the potential risks in the catchment and, where needed, put in place any appropriate mitigation measures and controls to protect drinking water quality. NI Water also works closely with NIEA to minimise any potential impacts on drinking water quality and monitors risks as part of the drinking water safety plan process.

Before entering into the agreement with InfraStrata, NI Water gave careful consideration to the protection of the water supply in the catchment area of the site. The exploration project at Woodburn has been designed as a zero discharge site. This was achieved through the development of a fully bunded site, lined with a specialised geosynthetic clay liner that prevents liquids on site from soaking into the ground below. In addition, NI Water has taken further precautions to allay concerns that the public may have and has put in place increased monitoring of raw water at all reservoirs in the catchment area and at the associated water treatment works. NI Water has also ensured that the portion of the Woodburn north river that is within the catchment area of the drill site is not currently flowing into any of its reservoirs. While NI Water is of the opinion that the project is well designed and well managed, this is a belt-and-braces approach to provide further reassurance to the public. NI Water is satisfied that the proposed work will have no detrimental impact on the impounding reservoirs or the public water supply.

Clearly, the ongoing work at Woodburn has generated significant public concern. However, one of the key restrictions to the permitted development for mineral exploration requires that development does not exceed a period of four months. I am advised that this time restriction will expire in a few weeks, in early July.

Permitted development legislation also includes conditions regarding reinstatement of the land, including that, within 28 days of the cessation of operations, the borehole shall be adequately sealed, any structures and waste material removed and the land restored.

Given the short remaining time frame for the Woodburn development to operate within the permitted development framework and the fact that jurisdiction for this matter is the responsibility of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, there are very limited opportunities for me to act in this case. However, the case has highlighted to me the need for change. I am very conscious of the need to ensure that permitted development rights are fit for today's purpose. That is why, today, I have proposed changes to permitted development rights. I look forward to working with the Assembly and the industry in taking those proposals forward.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I have asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report of the debate. If I have not addressed any points that have been raised by Members during the debate that fall within my remit, I will write to them in response.

Mr Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Comhghairdeas faoi do cheapachán, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate you on becoming the Speaker.

Oliver McMullan opened the debate and really summed up the difficulties right from the start. He asked why the previous Environment Minister had not insisted on a full environmental impact assessment and why there was a failure to respond within the 21-day deadline. He called for what, I think, most people agree to and what the Minister dealt with in the end: the repeal of section 16 of the permitted planning rights for mineral exploration and for all future applications to be put through a full planning application.

Gordon Lyons got up and said that he was happy with the assurances provided because they came from DETI and other agencies that he mentioned. The question that I would put back to the Member is this: if there is no difficulty with that and you think that there are no risks, what is the problem with full planning permission being used in these terms? When you think about it, if you, as a single parent, are building an extension to your house — as a single person, I beg your pardon; maybe you are a single parent — as a single person, you will have to ask for full planning permission. A single person has to do that, yet it does not have to be done here despite the number of people who are personally affected, many of whom are above us here. It affects something like 1,800 streets, including over 500 in Belfast.

8.15 pm

Roy Beggs took up the challenge from Gordon Lyons and said that there are risks, and he went through a long litany of those risks which, you will be glad to hear, I am not going to repeat. He articulated the risks, and I think that most MLAs agree with him.

Claire Hanna said that the original decision did not have all the facts and that, now that there was further information, she defended her colleague Mark H Durkan valiantly — I am not too sure whether she did it well — by blaming everyone else. However, she supported the motion.

Stewart Dickson said that this was a vital matter, but then he tried to launch a very vicious attack on the proposer of the motion, and I think that was quite despicable. He said that it was a simple matter of a "stroke of a pen". When we get on to the Minister, we will find out that it is not simply a matter of a stroke of a pen, but it can be done, and the Minister has outlined how it can be done.

Caoimhe Archibald said that the law should be corrected because it is flawed and that the licensing should be by a mandatory and, I think, very importantly, independent environmental impact assessment, so that there can be no question about the impact assessment. She also said that we were going in the wrong strategic direction, and I agree with her. What we should be doing is reducing our dependency on the use of fossil fuels, so that it is not just — as Eamonn McCann later mentioned — to do with Woodburn forest, but to do with the whole of the North and, indeed, if you think about it widely enough, the whole of humanity.

Mark H Durkan — who, it is important to say, also supports the motion — explained that it was not a matter of "the stroke of a pen", in his case or anybody else's, and that there were other Ministers involved and indeed councils. Some of that was disputed by Stephen Agnew, who got up afterwards. He said that it was a huge decision and that it was made without public consultation or public agreement. I think that it is very important to try to rectify that. He also said not to play politics with it but then blamed all the other parties; but then, all is fair in debate. He is also supporting the motion. He argued, as others have done, for a change in permitted development rights and that there must be full planning permission and maximum scrutiny.

Gerry Carroll spoke very briefly. He mentioned the fact that thousands of homes, including some in West Belfast, are affected. As I remember, it is over 1,800 streets. It was unheard of to have a drill site as close to a reservoir as we have in these circumstances. He supports the motion. I notice that he referred a number of times to "politicians"; I remind him that he has now entered that field himself. He will soon be referred to as a politician also. He also said, as Eamonn McCann did, that we should put the environment before big business. In that, I absolutely agree with him.

Eamonn McCann, with his usual passion, said that this is not new. He named only a small number of other examples, but there are clearly many. He said that this is capitalism versus the ordinary people and capitalism versus the environment. He also said that this is much more widespread and we will see that as we go on. He very eloquently said that you cannot put a price on nature or natural beauty. He demanded change.

Minister Hazzard — which, if he does not mind me saying so, is either a very appropriate or inappropriate name for the debate that we are involved in — went through a whole litany. He went through the history of this and what the difficulties are. He agreed with many of the Members who spoke about that.

Let me get back to the remark about the "stroke of a pen", which was made earlier. While it cannot be done by the stroke of a pen, it can be done, and the Minister made the point that he intends to do that. I am not even going to try to go through all the issues that he raised, but he put forward a plan. It will appear in Hansard; people and

demonstrators can read it there. I am very confident that we will end up dealing with this matter under this Minister, even though, as he pointed out, there are other Departments and agencies involved in what must be dealt with. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the application by InfraStrata to drill at Woodburn forest, County Antrim; recognises the concerns of residents in County Antrim over drilling proposals at the forest; and calls on the Executive to ensure that such applications are not approved until assurances are secured against any negative potential impacts on water supply, the environment, tourism and local communities.

Adjourned at 8.20 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Chairperson Appointment

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received the resignation of Mr Declan McAleer as Chairperson of the Audit Committee. The nominating officer for Sinn Féin, Mr Martin McGuinness, has nominated Mr John O'Dowd to fill the vacancy with effect from 6 June 2016.

Standing Order 20(1)

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 7 June 2016. — [Mr Swann.]

Opposition Business

Early Years Development and Preschool Childcare

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

Ms Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the experience of children in the early years of life has multiple impacts on development, health and educational achievement; believes that there should be a common, cross-departmental approach to funding, inspection, registration and access to child and family support services; calls on the Minister of Education to develop and bring forward an early education and care Act and a care and early childhood development strategy with resourced and supported training, qualifications and a professional development strategy for the entire early years workforce; and further calls on the Minister to bring forward proposals for the provision of free preschool childcare for children aged three and four years to a minimum of 20 hours per week to be in place in the 2016-17 financial year, and for an increase in provision to 30 hours per week from the 2017-18 financial year.

Childcare and the impact on childhood development, work-based equality and economic and social well-being are exactly the sort of subjects that the Assembly needs to tackle. We hope to see detail and progress on this in the next version of the Programme for Government.

We have taken on board feedback from policy experts and private providers of childcare and, looking at the departmental changes, tried to bring forward a comprehensive and viable set of proposals. We are focusing on the preschool year as expansion of that provision is probably the path of least resistance. We believe that it facilitates more people into work and would also be a strong start to expanding more comprehensive support for families into the private sector. The SDLP has been campaigning on the issue for quite some time, including the publication last September of our document, 'A Better Deal for Working Parents'. As an aside, those proposals were developed alongside Executive discussions on welfare reform. I bring that up because our proposals are inextricably linked with reform of work, more

work, better-paid work, better working conditions and a better calibre of work.

As a working mum of two preschool-aged children, I understand acutely the choices that parents face in finding quality and convenient childcare. Costs are by far the biggest barrier for people who want to return to work. I believe that the average is £164 a week, which is just shy of half the median income here, but £200 a week for a child is by no means unusual, and wages are not rising to match this cost. Many people are working until Wednesday or Thursday of the working week just to cover the cost of their childcare, and many people are back in the workplace just to keep their foothold in the labour market and their skills current.

The gender pay gap, which substantially decreases lifetime earnings for women, including their pension and National Insurance contributions, can in many cases be tracked back to the gaps that women in particular, who take on most of the caring duties, take to raise their children. To ensure that women are properly represented in public life and in the public and private sectors, we need to invest in childcare and ensure that women in particular do not have to make a choice between a fulfilling career and the knowledge that their children are being well looked after and developed during the working day.

As well as support and investment in this provision, families need choice and flexibility. Every family is different, and many use a mixture of public, private, voluntary and family support. Traditionally, of course, many parents stay at home to keep a home and a family, and, if that is their choice, that should absolutely be facilitated and celebrated.

Happily, there is now an acceptance that childcare is a privilege and a duty for mums and dads equally. There is also an understanding that people who work, even people who work full-time, will still develop perfectly warm relationships with their children. In fact, whether and how their mum in particular works outside the home can have a strong impact on the world view of girls and boys and their understanding of their place in the world and the options and aspirations available to them.

Many people want to work part-time and flexibly, and a lot more can be done to encourage that and incentivise employers to be family-friendly. Allowing parents to have fulfilling and stimulating work is key and has benefits far beyond the financial remuneration. Focused, structured learning through play in early years obviously has lifetime value — we will expand on that — but the patience, understanding and love that children receive at home are still the best guarantee that they will flourish. Allowing their parents to be stimulated and remunerated outside the home is key in that. The socialising effect of guided, structured play in early years has very obvious benefits in cognitive behaviour, reasoning and concentration, and there are obvious positives on that throughout their educational and working life.

There are, of course, economic impacts far beyond the household budget. Greater childcare provision can be a key catalyst in bolstering the economy and retaining a skilled workforce. In households where both parents want to continue to work, there is a multiplier effect, with a further worker being hired for childcare provision.

All those people pay tax, and, without childcare, those two or three workers are folded back into one, and labour productivity and the tax base shrink accordingly, so there are comprehensive and compelling reasons why it cannot just be left to the market but should be invested in from public funds. We need urgent action from the Executive and a revised strategy, legislation and funding to get the best start for children.

In response to an Assembly question last June, the then Education Minister, John O'Dowd, indicated that he would introduce an early years Bill before the end of the mandate. That did not happen, but we hope that it can be picked up by the incoming Minister. The Bill can be complemented by the incoming childcare strategy and functions, which we do not believe were effectively delivered on under OFMDFM.

A number of streams can be used to fund the proposals. The current spend on preschool childcare provision is £56 million a year, and the Department of Education has said that an increase to 30 hours a week would cost an extra £42 million. England is spending an extra billion pounds on childcare, and, if the Conservatives can look after working families, it should be in the ambition of the Assembly as well. There will be direct Barnett consequentials, and we believe that they should be spent specifically in this area of provision.

To get to the point of the 30 hours' free childcare that we would like to get to, the initial step would be to increase the minimum number of free preschool hours from 12·5 to 20 hours a week. As well as reducing the direct cost of childcare to families, it would remove a key barrier for those seeking work. For many families who get a nursery place — in my constituency, getting your first-choice nursery place is probably the exception, not the rule, and getting a full-time place is the same — there is very little paid work that a parent can do in the two and a half hours between drop-off and pickup. While I understand that the preschool year is not just about childcare, it definitely facilitates more people going into work. You can go out and do some meaningful and remunerated work in that time without having to buy into childcare.

We believe that the transformative effect and potential of the initiatives justify the investment. We recognise that capacity is a big issue for the physical infrastructure and staffing, and that we need to improve training and outcomes, which will increase the quality of provision.

Research by Save the Children has identified key factors that will influence how a child does educationally by the age of five. First, what their parents do at home is key. Poverty, and the stressful effect of family poverty, is the second element, and the third element is the quality of early years provision. The better educated the provider, the better the educational outcomes will be. To attract skilled and qualified staff, the sector must become better paid and better respected.

It is no coincidence that caring work is predominantly done by women and is lower paid across many sectors. That has to change. It is vital, intense work. I am sure that we all complain about the long days here, but anybody with small children will tell you that a day in this Building is probably a walk in the park, although I suspect that some of the conflict resolution strategies employed would be the same in both.

We have listened to the views of and feedback from the sector, including those providing childcare on a commercial basis, and we acknowledge that there needs to be support for them. One of the areas is a reform of the regulatory regime. It imposes unfeasible standards that do not drive outcomes but drain investment from innovation and any potential savings that could be passed on to parents. This is absolutely not about letting standards slip so that the facilities are not safe, but, at the moment, they are potentially inspected by more than one authority. We think that cutting out some of the duplication in the inspections will generate savings for the private provider and the public purse.

In conclusion, we think that childcare is a deeply sound financial investment, and I believe that all parties can agree on that when they look at the very obvious benefits. If we fund this now, put in place the proper strategy to address it and increase over the term of the mandate the benefits for families, we will see benefits for years to come. I commend the motion to the House.

10.45 am

Lord Morrow: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion, which is of some considerable importance, and I welcome the fact that it has come before the Assembly at a very early stage. I also welcome the Minister of Education. I think that this is his first time responding as Minister, but if it is not, it is the first time that I have had the opportunity to publicly welcome him. I look forward to him carrying out his duties, which I know he will bring great professionalism and expertise to, and I warmly welcome him here today.

On the motion before us, I listened carefully to what Carmel Hanna said, and I am a bit surprised that she now equates a day in the Assembly with “a walk in the park”. I suspect that that one will turn round and bite her some day. Those of us who stay here, including Members from all parties, sometimes from 10.00 am, after leaving home at 7.00 am, and stay until 10.00 pm or 11.00 pm do not see it quite as Carmel Hanna does when she calls it a “walk in the park”. Anyway, that is her definition of a day in the Assembly; it is certainly not mine.

Having said that, I do not believe that anyone in the Chamber today is against the fact that childcare is critical to the protection, development and nurturing of a child. I think that that is very important. It is good to see that the whole thing has now been collated and brought together under one Department; I think that that will pay dividends in the future. It is now under the remit of the Department of Education, as I already said. That is a very positive move, as it keeps the welfare of the child throughout their learning career under one Department. It also allows each section of education to flow smoothly into another, from preschool right through to primary school and on through to post-primary. As I said, I have full confidence in the Minister.

Research tells us, and those of us who are parents and grandparents know first-hand, that the early years are formative, and children are very impressionable and sensitive to their environment while they develop. It is therefore vital that their development be encouraged and supported to allow the best for them as they set out on their tentative first steps in life's journey.

Throughout my previous remarks, it will be noted that I have focused on the child's welfare, and that is the key to childcare. Childcare is an important factor for parents, and they are entirely correct in wanting to provide the best possible environment to ensure that their children develop socially and educationally. In order to show my commitment to the issue, I want to highlight my part in taking the matter forward.

In the short time that I was in the Department for Social Development, I discovered that there was going to be a gap in funding for childcare in women's centres, and I had some lobbying from Members, not least — I have to say this, although she is not with us anymore — Dolores Kelly, who pushed the issue considerably. However, Dolores is not here any more. The rationale for providing funding is to contribute to the reduction of child poverty as well as to allow parents to avail themselves of other opportunities and to contribute to their communities, thereby tackling disadvantage.

The fund that I put in place, or rather continued with for the gap year, as I call it, supports 14 women's centres in the delivery of 88,000 two-hour childcare slots each year at a total cost of some £880,000. I was pleased to be able to announce that. I believe that it will pay a good dividend in the communities in which the women's centres operate and provide that service. The fund was to close on 2 March 2016, but that has now been deferred until at least the same date in 2017 as a result of the action that I took. It is not known whether it will be a decision for the Minister for Communities or OFMDFM because we are waiting for the strategy to be developed. We have not had it, but I suspect that we will get it during this financial year, and I look forward to that.

I have some concerns about the free childcare provision for parents who might earn up to £100,000.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Lord Morrow: Oh yes. You want me to sit down; right; I will do so in a moment. I do have concerns, and I wonder whether Carmel Hanna is on the same page as me: does she feel that it is acceptable for parents who earn up to £100,000 to be provided with free childcare? I have no doubt that the SDLP will deal with that one.

Mr Speaker: As this is the first occasion on which Catherine Seeley has had the opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that the convention is that maiden speeches are completed without interruption — that is, unless the Member makes remarks that are likely to provoke an intervention.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise to the Member; I think that I called her “Carmel”. That was her wonderful mother. It is Claire.

Ms Seeley: I want to take this opportunity to say how honoured and humbled I am to be in the Chamber as a voice for the constituents of Upper Bann. As a former teacher, and as the party spokesperson on childcare, children and young people, it gives me great pleasure to speak on today's motion. I begin by paying tribute to the many community groups, schools and individuals in my constituency of Upper Bann who work tirelessly to give our children the best start in life, particularly those in rural and most socially deprived areas. Upper Bann is blessed with

proactive and empowered groups from Scotch Street to Tannaghmore and Loughshore to Taghnevan.

I also take this opportunity to commend the previous Minister of Education, my constituency colleague Mr John O'Dowd, whom we owe huge gratitude to for his unprecedented level of investment in early years education. I hope that our new Minister of Education places similar emphasis on early education, given the benefits to the child and to wider society.

I must say that I am somewhat disappointed with this motion. Its focus on three- to four-year-olds ignores and disregards the negative impacts that even younger children face. Research clearly demonstrates how early language ability, particularly at two years, makes a strong contribution to emotional and behavioural functioning. Good early language skills, especially for children growing up in poverty, underpin educational achievement. There are proven links between speech, language and communication difficulties as a risk factor and predictor to neglect, abuse, school exclusion and early school departure. Currently, 7% of our children — two in every classroom — have speech, language and communication needs. That increases to 50% of children from our most socially deprived communities. This threat to the development of expressive and receptive language skills impacts massively on interpersonal relationships, environments and services. Interventions should therefore take place as early as possible, particularly when the child has been identified as vulnerable. We must shift the focus from crisis intervention to prevention and early intervention. Such an effective approach to early years education and intervention will contribute strongly to promoting and upholding children's rights as identified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Sadly, not every child who needs it enjoys early intervention. A postcode lottery currently dictates levels of intervention. Many harder-to-reach children, particularly vulnerable two-year-olds, remain under the radar, with intervention coming so late that its impact is significantly weakened. We must redirect resources to ensure that intervention happens as early as possible for those who need it the most.

During a first Holy Communion service that I attended at the weekend involving my nephew and his P4 St Patrick's Aghacommon class, children were described as the mums and dads of tomorrow and the builders of tomorrow's society — two very poignant points. Early intervention provides us with a key opportunity to shape the North's future. It is a strong platform for future success, creating smarter, safer, healthier and wealthier societies, and is crucial if we are to break the cycles of poverty and inequality, but this will require a renewed level of ambition. Children should be valued and provided for at the centre and heart of service delivery. We must first address the needs of those children whose lives, opportunities and ambitions are threatened by poverty, poor health, poor attainment and unemployment. We must prove flexible and be responsive to the needs of our children, irrespective of age, race, religion, gender or, indeed, postcode.

In the long term, we must increase spend on early care and childhood development to bring the North into line with international OECD standards. Finally, we must make

efforts to strengthen support for parents, particularly those parents living in poverty.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mrs Rosemary Barton, as this is the first opportunity Mrs Barton has had to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption — that is, unless the Member makes remarks that are likely to provoke an intervention.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech today. It is my privilege to represent the area in which I was born, grew up and was educated. I am truly humbled to be here, and it is with honour and respect that I will endeavour to serve the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the most scenic area, I believe, of Northern Ireland. I come to Stormont with a background in education and as a post-primary teacher in mathematics. Thank you, also, to all the staff here in Stormont, who have been most helpful, warm and welcoming in my first days.

I want to take the opportunity to pay my respects to my predecessors Mr Tom Elliott MP, Mr Neil Somerville and Mr Alastair Patterson. Mr Tom Elliott, who, I am sure, many of you know, was an extremely capable MLA who had a never-ending supply of energy when it came to helping and supporting his constituents. His attention to detail on the Committees on which he served is well-documented. However, I believe he will be most-remembered for his calm, affable and reassuring manner when dealing with issues in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Mr Neil Somerville, his successor, had a background in tourism, and he was eventually succeeded by Mr Alastair Patterson in January 2016. Alastair was an extremely hard-working member of the Environment Committee and will be remembered for the quick and efficient manner in which he conducted business.

In moving on to the motion, I welcome it and congratulate the SDLP on the work it has done on this important area of public policy. I wish to elaborate on the benefits of interdepartmental cooperation. Research over the years has shown how necessary this collaboration is, and health and education must develop in tandem. Poor health impacts on educational achievement, while a lack of educational achievement has a greater impact on our preschool children and their development.

There is increasing recognition that the first few years of a child's life lay the foundations for cognitive functioning and behavioural and social tendencies, together with their physical health. Therefore, it is imperative that there is a cross-departmental approach to the development of early education and childhood care through intervention programmes and family support services. Only this morning on the radio we heard the Ulster Teachers' Union general secretary talk about the removal of finance from preschool provision in special needs.

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair)

The cost of childcare provision is prohibitive. Many parents struggle to pay household bills and mortgages, even though both are working full time. According to the Northern Ireland childcare cost survey 2015, published last November by the Employers for Childcare Charitable Group, 46% of parents, including 52% of mothers,

reduced their hours or left work due to childcare costs, in comparison with 32% of fathers. This shows that mothers still bear the brunt of the caring responsibilities. Free preschool childcare for three- and four-year-olds must be provided by a professional workforce.

11.00 am

Last year, the former OFMDFM only spent one third of its £12 million intended for investment in childcare, leaving £8.6 million unspent, even though the cost of full-time places in childcare had risen —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring her remarks to a close? Thank you.

Mrs Barton: — to £164 —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Barton: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: Can I ask the Member — you will allow her extra time to speak, I presume, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker — about the importance of awareness of financial assistance for parents?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. I am giving a little bit of leeway because it is the maiden speech.

Mrs Barton: Last year, as I said, the former OFMDFM only spent £12 million of its intended investment in childcare, leaving £8.6 million unspent even though the cost of full-time childcare places has risen. The motion before us calls for professional development for the entire early years workforce. In that regard, I would like to highlight the work of Save the Children in highlighting the importance of expertise in language development and skills to help parents with their children's development.

In supporting this very reasonable motion —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close, please.

Mrs Barton: — I appeal to the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education to get their act together to make sure that adequate resources are targeted.

Mr Lyttle: I am delighted to have his opportunity early in the mandate to speak on such an important issue as early education and childcare. I gave a commitment to the people of East Belfast that I would work to ensure that this Assembly mandate would be more open, more engaged and more relevant to the issues that affect the people in my constituency. I believe that early years education and childcare is of extreme relevance to families, our society and our economy. I commend the proposer of the motion for bringing it forward.

We know that quality childcare and early years education is absolutely vital to the development of our children and to allow families to access the training and employment opportunities that they need to provide a good quality of life for their family and to obtain the skills and ability to contribute to our economy. It is also absolutely vital to ensure educational attainment for everyone in our community; to ensure equality of opportunity; to tackle poverty; to ensure that we meet the additional needs of children in our community, especially those with a disability; and to deliver on children's rights.

It is disappointing, therefore, that we continue to see families in our community struggle to access and afford childcare. As has been mentioned, the Employers for Childcare 2015 cost of childcare survey, which I was privileged to sponsor the launch of here at the Assembly, found that the average mortgage payment for families in our community is around £139 a week, yet the average full-time childcare place is as much as £164 a week. That is unsustainable, and it is therefore totally unacceptable that the DUP/Sinn Féin Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister could spend only £4 million of a £12 million childcare budget for 2011 to 2015 and that it has yet to publish a full childcare strategy.

We also know that families are struggling to access their first choice of preschool early years education place in our community, and our current system provides for, by and large, two and a half hours a day. That is 12 and a half hours a week of free preschool early years education, and there is no statutory childcare provision for free. The best systems in the world have around six hours a day, which is around 30 hours a week, of integrated preschool education and childcare provision. Therefore, it seems that the OFMDFM Bright Start childcare framework and, indeed, the Executive's early education and childcare provision is wholly inadequate in comparison with that best-practice approach.

I, therefore, on behalf of the Alliance Party, support the motion. I welcome the recognition it gives to the centrality of early years education and childcare to development, health and educational achievement and the call it makes for improved provision of funding, inspection, regulation and access to those services. I support the call for legislation on the matter from the Minister and for improved training for our dedicated workforce in this area.

The motion calls for preschool, I presume, early years education and childcare provision in the preschool year of 20 hours per week in this financial year, rising to 30 hours per week. The Alliance Party in principle supports that increase, but we make an additional call on the Minister, if he is in any way minded not to deliver that particular call as a matter of urgency, to at the very least introduce an urgent, open and independent review of early years education and childcare and urgently scope the cost and viability of introducing that more comprehensive and integrated model. I also hope that he will set out the childcare budget for us today, and perhaps he would be able to deliver where OFMDFM was unable to, despite persistent calls for a full public awareness campaign on the financial assistance that is already available to families in our community by way of, for example, childcare vouchers, which many families are still unaware of.

I think it is an Executive disgrace that much of the work in this important area of provision has been left to the independent sector. The community and voluntary sector and social enterprises like Employers for Childcare, which delivers a family benefit advice service —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Would the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Lyttle: I think it is high time that our —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Swann: The Member mentioned the voluntary and community sector. Does he agree that it is picking up the slack that the statutory sector is not picking up at the minute?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Ms Carla Lockhart. As this is her first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Ms Lockhart: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. Right at the outset, I thank those around the Chamber and the Building for their very warm wishes from my taking up this role in the devolved Assembly. I thank my DUP colleagues for their advice and help along the way. It is an enormous privilege and honour to represent and serve the good people of Upper Bann. I thank from the bottom of my heart the many thousands of people who saw fit to put their trust in me to be their voice right at the very heart of this Government.

I pay tribute to my predecessor Stephen Moutray, who I worked for and alongside for many years. Stephen served the people of Upper Bann for 10 years, and I know that he laid a great, firm foundation for me to build upon. I take this opportunity to wish him well in his business venture. Like Stephen, I want to be a strong advocate for Upper Bann in the House, and I want to work alongside my colleague Sydney Anderson in doing that.

As a young female business graduate, I do not want to be a token female. I do not want to be remembered for what I wear, the way my hair is or what my shoes are like. I want to be remembered for the energy, passion, drive and new way of thinking that I bring to the Assembly in trying to make Northern Ireland a stronger, more vibrant place for its residents. I want to make Upper Bann a great place to live, work and do business. I want to see our children and young people find the right pathway in life so that they can succeed and integrate into our evolving society. I want them to find jobs locally and have access to a world-class healthcare system, and I want our infrastructure to improve for our residents so that they feel safe no matter where they go within the constituency.

I would describe Upper Bann as an economic driver for Northern Ireland. It is the largest manufacturing base outside Belfast, it has a growing agrifood sector and is making strides in the life sciences industry. The cultural, tourism, musical and sporting offer that Upper Bann presents is outstanding and is one that I am immensely proud to represent.

Upper Bann has had its difficulties in days gone by and has suffered at the hands of terrorism. I do not want to see our history being rewritten and I will continue working with the many victims of terrorism who live in my constituency. I want to look towards a bright new future for Northern Ireland and I want to be part of Arlene Foster's team in delivering that bright and prosperous future. I assure the people of Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge that I will be a very plain-talking, hard-working, conscientious and compassionate MLA who wants to represent all the people of Upper Bann throughout my tenure in the Assembly.

That leads me nicely to the motion on the much needed and essential childcare provision for my constituents. Education and child development are areas that I take

particular interest in, and anyone who knows me will know that I am committed to fight for better provision, particularly in special needs education and post-19 provision, for the people of Upper Bann. The motion brings a focus to childcare that I welcome.

In my constituency of Upper Bann, families are still the lynchpin and the firm foundation on which our society is built. Childcare provision in society is undoubtedly a key priority, because we all know that society is changing. Work patterns are changing. There are mums, dads, grannies, grandas and carers, and there is a desire for lifelong working and to go back into education. It is important that those of us in government form an achievable, tailored and sustainable childcare provision that meets the needs of this changing everyday family life.

I have had one Education Committee meeting so far, so I cannot claim to know everything about education, but what I do know —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Lockhart: — is my own family history with my sister. Her needs are different to those of a single dad. Grannies are maybe left to care —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Can I ask her —

Ms Lockhart: I look forward to working with the Minister as he seeks to bring forward the childcare strategy for this area.

Mr McElduff (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): As I indicated in the House yesterday, our Committee has been reconstituted only recently, therefore, I will not be in a position to articulate an agreed Committee position at this stage. I will restrict myself to a few more general remarks.

The Committee has had one meeting so far, and we have already spent quite a lot of time, and intend to spend a lot more, considering early years issues. Whether it is about special school or preschool provision, the early years pathway or mainstream preschool places, this is a subject that will undoubtedly exercise our Committee and we will, of course, engage with stakeholders and with a number of our constituents.

There are around 24,000 children attending mainstream preschool provision in the North. This seems to represent engagement by about 95% of all parents and reflects the provision of places to 99.9% of parents who engage with the preschool process to the very end. The Education Authority (EA) advises that there are roughly 15,000 places in part-time provision and 9,000 in full-time provision. There has been a significant variation in the availability of full-time early years provision. For example, recently available figures show that 78% of early years provision in Belfast in 2013-14 appeared to be full-time whereas in some rural areas, most — 90% in one case — appeared to be part-time. The Department's approach up to now was to expand good quality part-time settings. I think that this was based on evidence-based established research that argues that there is no measurable educational advantage when comparing full-time to part-time preschool places.

The motion proposes several things which, I think, would also resonate with the Children's Services Co-operation Act and, indeed, with aspects of the Department's Learning to Learn strategy.

The motion also proposes a significant increase for free preschool provision for 60% of children this year and a further increase for all children the following year, 2017-18.

11.15 am

Many Members will find merit in most aspects of the motion. The Committee would want me to seek clarification from those who tabled the motion, and perhaps from the Minister, on the impact of the proposals on the quality of preschool provision, particularly in the non-statutory sector, given the rapid and substantial increase suggested. I mention the non-statutory sector because an Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) report in the last mandate suggested that greater support was needed for that sector to improve early identification of and intervention in special educational needs.

I also ask that, in the winding-up speech, the relevant Member — the Minister might also do this in his response — details the anticipated impact that the proposals might have on the extension of the foundation year to preschools to ensure better linkages between preschools and primary schools.

From a party political point of view, I am satisfied that my colleague Catherine Seeley, MLA for Upper Bann and our party's spokesperson on childcare, children and young people, has dealt adequately with our party's position.

From a constituency point of view, I extend early notice to the Minister that it might be good practice on his part, at some point during his stewardship of the Department, to visit a rural exemplar of childcare provision in Eskragh in County Tyrone. I like to mention Eskragh here quite often; it is very important to a whole lot of people. Genuinely, Eskragh childcare centre is an exemplar of rural provision. From a Committee point of view, I will recommend that we take a look at that as well. Certainly, it would be good practice on the part of the Minister to look at his diary and put Eskragh in there somewhere.

Mr Logan: I also congratulate the Minister on his appointment. He will, no doubt, do a fantastic job.

I support the motion; it is a good motion. I recognise and do not need to be told that the experience of children in early years plays a key role in their development and their health and educational achievement. The early years provision is beneficial to both the child and the parent. The child is at a crucial time for learning, language development, social skills development and learning through play.

It is also right that parents have the opportunity and the option to go to work and be economically active. Going to the workplace has many benefits other than financial ones; it helps in many different aspects for parents. It helps parents to build confidence and skills, and it has social advantages for them. Childcare should not be an obstacle for those parents. In the Programme for Government framework, outcome 14 clearly gives a commitment to providing high-quality preschool education, and that is welcome. We also need to look at better ways of supporting single parents with childcare.

I am speaking as a member of the Education Committee, and it should be our desire and end goal to provide the best possible opportunities for our young people. Those opportunities need to be sustainable and affordable, and we need to look at these things through a long-term lens. I am aware that this is an SDLP motion, and we are well aware that it had a well-costed manifesto. Claire has pointed out some of the costs involved with implementing what the motion calls for. I am interested in where she envisages that money coming from. Apart from the money side, has any consideration been given to the facilities that house these places? Some small facilities run morning and afternoon classes to facilitate as many children as possible. Without investment, those facilities would have to drop their numbers.

Mr Swann: I declare an interest as I have a three-year-old son who has a preschool place at Kells and Connor Pre-School. That facility not only is an exemplar but was graded "outstanding" in a recent ETI inspection.

I pay tribute to Sarah Woods and her staff for the service that they deliver, providing preschool care and places in a small rural village. There are many examples like Kells and Connor and Eskragh all around Northern Ireland, where small voluntary and community providers have been put under severe pressure in the last year. In my constituency of North Antrim, I have had cause to help out Mother Goose in Ballycastle, Ballee in Ballymena, High Kirk preschool in Ballymena and the Country playgroup just outside Kells, all of which were hit with a reduction in places. All were oversubscribed because of the quality provision that they were providing, and all had one thing in common: their rural or edge-of-town provision made it difficult for parents to access other choices. That is why I seek further guidance from the Minister on the press release that was issued by his Department on his behalf. It states:

"Overall, 99.9% of children whose parents applied for a pre-school place ... have been offered a funded pre-school place."

I have been here quite a while and know that maybe the wording of that press release hides unanswered questions. I would like the Minister to clarify how many of the 99.9% were offered their first choice or even their second choice, rather than just being offered a place somewhere on the scheme? When parents apply for a preschool place, one of the things that is emphasised on the sheet is parental choice, but I have dealt with many families since the end of April, and I still get queries from some whose child is not yet placed. Where does parental choice fall into the provision? How important is it that that is taken into consideration, especially in rural provision? At the end of the last mandate, we passed the Rural Needs Bill, which put an emphasis on Departments and the Education Authority to put in place measures to ensure that rural needs were supported. I am concerned that the press release does not give the full picture of what is out there at the minute. A number of MLAs will know that this is a seasonal problem that we all face.

When moving the motion, Ms Hanna referred to the average cost of childcare being £164 a week. The average in my constituency is £172 a week. It is even harder in a large rural constituency to find affordable childcare places. That is why the motion is timely and well balanced. I am

glad that it is getting support from most of the parties in the House so far. My party colleague — I congratulate her on her maiden speech — referred to the special educational needs support currently available through preschools. We have heard that departmental officials are being brought before the Committee again because of misleading the Committee. That is a very serious charge. If proved accurate, not only have the Committee and the House been failed but children with special educational needs and their parents have been failed.

I think that Ms Lockhart referred briefly to special educational needs provision at post-19. One of the standards that was held up to us throughout that inquiry was school and preschool places. There was excellent provision for young children with special educational needs, but there is a real fear among parents at the minute that that provision is slowly being eroded and done away with.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: I will.

Mr Poots: Does the Member recognise that the first educators of children are the parents and that good work is being done by not just the Department of Education but the Department of Health, which has the family nurse partnership programme to reach out to parents who are really struggling? Also, through the strategic investment fund (SIF), parenting classes and programmes are offered through some of our schools, particularly in Lisburn. I encourage Members to take a look at what is happening there.

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

Mr Swann: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I agree with the Member in that preschool places build on the foundations that the family has provided for training blocks and all the rest. Preschool is a good identifier of young children with special educational needs. Many parents miss the warning signs and indicators, whereas the professionals, be they in the voluntary and community sector or the statutory sector, are trained to pick up on those and provide support.

I want to get back to something that Mr Lyttle was coming to when his time was up: the contribution of our voluntary and community sector. The one thing that all the groups in my own constituency that were finding it hard to get additional places and additional funding and places extended, which I mentioned earlier, have in common is that they all come from the voluntary and community sector. They do not come from the statutory sector where the places —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his comments to a close?

Mr Swann: — seem to be being moved to.

Ms Mallon: Naturally, I support the motion. One of the greatest challenges facing us in the Assembly is to empower people out of poverty and to create a society not where your life expectancy, educational level, employment, income and quality of life are dictated by your postcode but where there is equality of opportunity for everyone to realise their full potential. If that is the type of society that

all of us in the House desire, we must prioritise and invest in the catalyst for change that is early years.

I will take a moment to look at the facts. In 2002-03, the child absolute income poverty rate was 25%. Fast-forward to 2013-14, and it had risen to 26%. The Child Poverty Act set a target of achieving a two-thirds reduction in the number of children living in absolute income poverty from 135,000 in 1998-99 to 46,000 by 2011. In short, it has failed. The truth is that, in 2013-14, the number of our children living in absolute poverty was more than twice that target figure. A staggering 112,000 children here were living in poverty. According to Save the Children, based on current trends, 38% of children here will be living in poverty by 2020.

Every child deserves to grow up free from the threat of poverty and with better life chances and opportunities than the generation that went before them. My party colleague Claire Hanna, in proposing the motion, outlined a number of early years actions that, as evidence gathered by experts locally and internationally shows, play a key role in giving a child the best start in their early development and, as a result, a better start in life. I intend to focus on the aspect in our motion of free childcare provision for children aged three and four. Specifically, I want to draw attention to the connection between child poverty and childcare.

As Employers for Childcare have documented, childcare impacts on the rate of child poverty in three ways. First, the lack of available childcare is a barrier to employment for parents. Secondly, the high cost of childcare places pressure on families' income. Thirdly, childcare is very important for early intervention, particularly regarding the development needs of children. I will examine those connections in turn.

The employment and economic benefits are self-evident. Greater childcare provision can act as a catalyst in bolstering the economy, retaining a skilled workforce and bettering the lives of families in Northern Ireland. In short, both parents continue to work and a third childcare worker is added to the labour force, all of whom pay taxes. No one can refute the fact that the high cost of childcare places significant pressure on families' income. This was well documented in a 2015 Northern Ireland childcare cost survey, which has been referred to by a number of Members.

I move to the third connection between childcare and poverty: the advantages to the development of the child. That was recognised and very aptly summed up by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) in its childcare study in 2015. Children who are unable to access good-quality childcare miss out on the chance to enhance cognitive skills such as language development, logic, reasoning and concentration, thereby reducing their academic potential with consequent effects on employability in later life. The benefits to the child, their family and the economy from the provision of subsidised preschool places is well evidenced.

Within the limited time constraints that I have to make my contribution, it is not possible to respond to all the issues that have been raised. No doubt Alex Attwood will do that when winding up. However, turning to the question of finance that has been raised, many of the proposals in the earlier part of the SDLP's motion are cost-neutral.

In respect of free places, financing could be sourced from the childcare fund, which has merged with the social change central fund.

11.30 am

Critically, during the Programme for Government negotiations, we pressed the head of the Civil Service and departmental officials again and again about the availability of financing for free preschool places within the Barnett consequential following the extension of 30 hours' free places for two years in England. I hope that the Minister can bring some clarity to that query.

Mr Agnew: I take this opportunity to congratulate my North Down colleague Peter Weir on his elevation to the post of Education Minister. I look forward to five years of blaming him for every failing in our education system. I am delighted to welcome him to the post.

The motion conflates two connected but to some extent separate issues: early years provision and childcare. Most of the debate has focused on childcare, which I will come to at the end, but I want to speak a bit about early years provision.

As has been rehearsed in the Assembly a number of times but is worth repeating, intervention and investment in the early years of a child's life is the single most effective thing we can do to tackle disadvantage in our society and ensure that every child has equal opportunities. We rightly put a lot of focus on education; it is extremely important in a child's development. However, the reality is that, if a child starts school behind their peers, the likelihood is that that child will never catch up and will always remain behind. So it is important, in calling on the Education Minister to take action on these issues, that we emphasise that he must do so in conjunction with the Minister of Health in particular. Any early years education and care Act must be cross-departmental. The Minister has good experience of that. I know that, in consideration of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, he proposed amendments to ensure cross-departmental working. I am sure that he will practise what he preached when he was Chair of the Education Committee.

One of the key issues in early years provision that has been touched upon today is speech and language development. Early detection of speech and language difficulties and, importantly, providing the services to help a child overcome those difficulties is key. It is a startling statistic that approximately one third of our prison population has speech and language difficulties. The victims of a lack of provision in early years become the perpetrators in adulthood. We have to break that link and ensure that we do not condemn children to those difficulties in later life. We have got a lot better at early detection; we now need the services that should follow. Giving a parent a diagnosis increases stress and worry. Yes, it informs them and it is important, but I know that, if the services do not follow, a lot of those parents can feel somewhat abandoned.

The issue of childcare is obviously key, both socially and economically, and I welcome the call for the increase to 30 hours of free provision. It was in the Green Party manifesto. However, the Minister will have choices to make, even if he is to commit to investing more in childcare. As well as the increase in the number of hours, there is some evidence to suggest that it might be more

helpful, or at least also helpful, to increase the number of weeks in which there is provision. As a parent, I have to nip out this afternoon to pick up my child from school because the after-school club is not on today and our childcare provider cannot pick him up until the usual time. There is the difficulty that school holidays can bring. I am in the fortunate position where both of us work and we have the money to afford private childcare as well as the publicly funded, but for many parents who cannot, that will be a significant barrier to work.

So, I would like to ask the proposers whether they see the 30 hours as a priority, or one of a number of priorities, because there are also the issues of extension to two-year-olds and investing in the skills and valuing the workforce, because it should not be, as it sometimes is —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Agnew: — a case of, "Well, you haven't done well academically; you could consider childcare". We need to value childcare providers.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McCann, I think it only fair to inform you that, given time constraints, we will not be able to give you an extra minute if you choose to take an intervention.

Mr E McCann: OK; the implicit advice is not to take an intervention, I suppose. Let me say, first, that I support the motion, of course, and I commend Claire Hanna and her party for bringing the issue forward at such an early stage of the mandate. I hope the fact that it has been given this priority in coming to the Floor indicates that it will, as so many have said, be given appropriate priority by being brought forward in a Bill and having these matters put into effect.

All experience and evidence show that the two main factors determining educational attainment over a lifetime are poverty and childcare and early years learning. That point has been made, but the point that I would like to make is that those things are very closely connected. We have been talking about private provision, state provision and the generally prohibitive cost of childcare, but, put simply, the simple fact is this: the better off you are, the more chance you have of getting early years schooling for your children. It is common sense. That has been true for a very, very long time. That is still happening today, the same as it happened in previous years. It happens at a time — at the end of a period, I hope — when the state provision of childcare is under threat. It is under threat across the water, and I believe it is under threat here too, because money's too tight to mention when it comes to many of these issues. I have no doubt that we are going to hear, in the course of the year, that many of the aspirations contained in the motion are absolutely admirable, but they are simply not affordable. I am concerned that this aspiration, even if it is a commitment, would come into the pattern of the Programme for Government, which is a series of aspirations and supposed mechanisms for attaining those aspirations. The Programme for Government is not set up to state a time-limited series of measures that will bring this about. That is not the type of structure that we have got so far from the Programme for Government.

I am keeping a good eye on the clock, but let me say this, in the time available: this is a woman's issue, primarily. For all that we say that things have changed and that

there is more equality now and so forth, all experience and investigation shows, overwhelmingly, that it is women and women's work opportunities that suffer when there is not adequate provision. As I said, we are supposed to be in an equal society, but everybody in the House will know that women do most of the child rearing and most of the housework. It is not unusual to hear a man boasting of the fact that he hoovered the stairs, for once in his life, and, when it comes to childcare, there are still many men who say it is not their business. There are many men who have never changed a nappy and seem to be boastful about that. The fact that we have to mention that is an absolute shame and disgrace, and it illustrates that some of the assumptions behind the distribution of childcare and everything to do with children operate to the detriment of women in society.

This will be my last point, if I can get it in. The absence of childcare affects the oldest in society, in many instances, because the people in the family who replace the childcare tend to be grannies and some grandas. So, at the time of their life when people ought to be able to say, "I've certainly done my stint at child rearing; I can now relax and get on with the rest of my life", they find, heavens above, that it is all starting over again.

They do it, no doubt, with affection and love for the children. Nevertheless, they should not have to do it. Very simply, the point that I am making is that, when we talk about the effects, and they are very strong, on the potential development of children, we should keep in mind that those effects stretch from earliest years right through to the oldest years of our citizens.

I hope therefore that we are going to see, in as short a time as possible, a Bill that will bring this about so that we can then discuss priorities, spending priorities and all the rest of it. This, however, should have the highest priority.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I welcome today's debate, particularly the tone of it. In following the Member who represents the largest all-male party in the Assembly, I say that it is very good that he has chosen to widen his field by addressing the motion's gender issues.

I also commend the three Members who were making their maiden speech for their contributions. When I visited Omagh for two events last week, I indicated to the Chair of the Education Committee that Omagh is perhaps a little bit too widely drawn for him and that Eskragh has now come on to the horizon. I suspect that it may not be the last time that the Chair of the Committee gives a particular invitation to specific parts of West Tyrone.

I agree with the thrust of the motion, which is really about the importance of childcare. To widen the issue a little bit, and to use the words of Catherine Seeley, it is also about the importance of early intervention with children to ensure that we have the best education results.

For many children, high-quality childcare provides a stimulating developmental experience: one that builds confidence, social skills, eagerness to learn and willingness to engage positively with others. That has been a consistent finding of evaluative research focusing on childcare and other early years interventions. It is something that there is a large consensus around.

We are all familiar with the existing and emerging research evidence that shows that 90% or more of brain

development happens before the age of five. There may be some who observe the Chamber at times who feel that it stops at the age of five. Nevertheless, early years experiences, particularly in preschool years, are critical to the development of skills such as language and communication, issues that a number of contributors raised. It is the time in a child's life when stimulation is vital. High-quality childcare can provide that. It can provide our youngest citizens with exactly the right type of cognitive and social development that they need in order to thrive. It can set a child on the right path for a lifetime of achievement and personal well-being.

With childcare, the focus is always going to be on children, but childcare is also a key issue for parents. I know that high-quality childcare provision can support parents, not just in their employment goals but critically as their child's first and ongoing educator. Many parents have advised us that, without childcare services that are accessible, reliable and, above all, affordable, they would simply not be in a position to work, would not be able to work as much as they need to, could not work at the level that they are best suited to or could not train or study for work.

I am sure that everyone is familiar with the Executive's draft childcare strategy that was launched a number of years ago in the first phase and with the draft version that was issued for consultation last year by OFMDFM. You will know that the strategy has two aims. First, it aims to give all our children the best start in life, preparing them for lifelong well-being and achievement. Secondly, it aims to enable all parents, but especially mothers, to join the workforce, or to train or study so that, in time, they can join the workforce. I believe that those two aims fit well together. They fit well together because each, in its own way, has the potential to deliver positive social change: one in the short term and the other in the long term.

Let us talk about parents. If, through having better and more affordable childcare, more parents are able to work, clearly that is for society's good. As for children, if, through having quality childcare facilities, we are able to nurture their ability to learn and socialise, we will counter at least some of the ill effects of disadvantage and deprivation: ill effects that create barriers to learning that, in turn, can lead to educational underachievement. It is therefore highly appropriate that, in the reorganisation of Departments, childcare policy now sits firmly in the Department of Education. Childcare's new departmental home presents an opportunity to align childcare services with wider early years initiatives, thereby improving children's access to a wider range of high-quality early experiences which will lay important foundations for learning.

11.45 am

Turning to the motion, I recognise that many parents can find the price of childcare a barrier to taking up employment. The research and consultation undertaken to inform the development of the childcare strategy has brought it home to us that there are many parents — indeed, we had widespread consultation — who are simply priced out of the childcare market. We also know that many parents who can technically afford the childcare services they need still struggle greatly to pay for them. In Northern Ireland, childcare can sometimes cost a family as much as a quarter of its income, which is much higher

than almost any other OECD country with the exception of, I think, Switzerland. We are aware that some families report that their childcare costs more than their mortgage payments or that the cost of childcare cancels out an entire second salary. That is something we have been trying to address through the first phase of our childcare strategy. As many of you know, making childcare services more affordable is one of its objectives.

The first phase of that strategy was launched some three years ago. Since then, it has supported more than 3,000 low-cost childcare places — childcare places priced significantly below the regional average. In parallel, the strategy has successfully promoted childcare vouchers and other types of financial assistance. Chris Lyttle made reference to the promotion of that. All childcare settings that are assisted under the school-age childcare grant scheme must promote financial assistance with the cost of childcare. To that end, the strategy is working closely with Employers for Childcare. There is also a key challenge in some of the childcare schemes that are promoted through HMRC, and we will be working with them to try to promote that more.

It is my intention to bring a full, final strategy to the Executive in the forthcoming months, having taken full account of the current context of many consultation responses, the new opportunities that now exist to align childcare and early years initiatives and the Programme for Government.

I will turn to a few aspects of the motion in a moment. I want to deal with a few of the points that have arisen in the debate. It may not have been appropriate for my colleague Lord Morrow, when he mentioned Ms Hanna, to call her Carmel. As mistakes go, in a situation where we are dealing with childcare, to mistake a daughter for her mother is one of the better ones that could be made in the House. Ms Hanna talked about an early years Bill. At a previous stage, an early years Bill had been considered by the Department. As I understand it — this is where I think things would need to change — that was not to deal in any way with childcare entitlement; it was to deal with other aspects of it. As we move forward and particularly as we progress the childcare strategy, I will give consideration to what underpinning needs to happen with legislation.

Mention has been made of the Barnett consequentials. Those, indeed, have already been granted, but they are unhypothecated in their nature. I will come back to the particular scheme in England at a later stage. Mention has been made by a number of speakers, Claire Hanna first of all, of inspection. Inspection is handled in part by the ETI, which will inspect the quality of education provision, but largely the onus also lies with the Department of Health, which will lead on minimum standards, and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), which will inspect childcare in non-statutory preschools.

As indicated when I was Chair of the Education Committee, and also, I understand, from Mr Agnew's Bill, we will try to make sure that we have a much more joined-up approach, particularly to health and education. I think the key test of that will not necessarily be simply whatever cooperation happens between Ministers or, indeed, at the top level, but in ensuring that practitioners on the ground are delivering.

Mention has been made of the Executive childcare fund. Of the original £12 million, there is no underspend and, so far, £8.5 million has been allocated to cover the costs of projects supporting childcare through the Bright Start school-age childcare grant and childcare for children with a disability.

Mr Swann asked a specific question about the admissions process. We should highlight that it is important to realise that parents are not asked for a choice; they are asked for a preference. He mentioned a press release that indicated that we have had a record low number of parents who have not been able, after the two stages, to find a place. It is down to, I think, 16 places, and that number is reducing. He asked very specifically about the number of preschool admissions that were placed in the first preference setting. For 2016-17, 87% of the applications were placed in their first preference setting.

I do not have the figure for second preferences, but I am sure that we can get it for him. However, where he does realise the point —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: To be honest, I have a number of other items that I want to try to get through, and I want to be fair to everybody. The issue of balance of supply is worked through with the preschool education advisory groups that come through the EA. We have now reached the point where, broadly speaking, we have coverage across Northern Ireland to ensure that there are enough places. The issue is that, at times, there is a disjoint between locations and the level of demand. That will require a longer-term solution, but we are looking to see where there are particular pressures and what might be described as "hotspots" to see what we can do with flexibility to try to deal with that issue.

Nichola Mallon talked about the childcare strategy. That has provided over 3,000 low-cost childcare places and has been very specifically targeted at children living in low-income households and areas. Good, at least, is being done there.

I will turn to a couple of aspects of the motion. It calls for the safeguarding of funding for childcare. I can give the assurance that we will safeguard that, even by the simple fact that it has moved from OFMDFM to DE. Despite the many pressures in my Department, I will not be looking to raid the childcare fund for any other purpose. From that point of view, we will ensure that it is protected. I will also give a very strong assurance that we will be producing a carefully considered, policy-driven childcare strategy that is responsive to the consultation. We hope to bring that to the Executive very soon. The policy will be well thought through, which will ensure that it is properly reflected upon. One thing that I will not do is simply make policy commitments on the hoof. While I do not rule out some of the things that have been put in place with regard to the exact timings, and there is very clearly, for instance, a need to upskill the workforce on that side of it, I will not give commitments ahead of the strategy, because I think it would be inappropriate to do so.

I will highlight some of the issues that we will have to face with regard to 20 hours and 30 hours provision, just to highlight them. On the issue of 20 hours a week, there is a distinction between preschool education and childcare. I assume that when we are talking about 20 hours and

30 hours, it is a wrap-around of the two and that we are not simply talking about 20 hours in addition to preschool provision. Mr Attwood may clarify that at a later stage. We are in a position where offers of childcare places for 2016 have already been made and accepted. I am not sure how easy, or indeed preferable, it would be, even if, suddenly, this was doable, for us to simply ask parents to readjust the arrangements they have made for 2016-17. Additionally, we are in the position where, at present, 39% of preschool places for children aged between three and four are at 20 hours or above. So, we have already met the target, if you like, for nearly 40%. The remainder are, largely speaking, for around 12.5 hours provision. The direct indication of in-year cost would be £15 million. There may be a good argument that this would be money well spent, but, again, it is important that Members indicate, if they are seeking another £15 million, whether that will simply be from an almost inexhaustible supply of money that will be sought from the Executive or whether the proposers are looking to make cuts in the Education budget to be able to provide it, because that is the direct implication.

The implications go beyond this and towards capacity building, which will need to take place immediately if we are to meet that provision in 2016-17. There are also capital issues involved. As indicated, a number of available facilities are run on a split-level basis, both morning and afternoon. So, there would need to be a significant capital involvement. I take Mr Agnew's remarks very much on board when he talks about the weeks that are being provided, because the £15 million is on the basis of providing 20 hours a week for 38 weeks. In England, one of the things that they have looked at, in their revision, at least, is whether provision could be spread over a longer time period; but if 20 hours a week were to be provided for 52 weeks a year then, given the fact that there is no provision during 14 weeks of the year, that £15 million would probably be double or maybe more. Again, those choices have to be made. I am simply highlighting them.

As mentioned by Ms Hanna, if we were to move to 30 hours provision a week, then the estimate, purely on the basis of it being for 38 weeks, would be £42 million. Again, if we move to 52 weeks, we might double or treble that figure. Both Ms Hanna and Ms Mallon mentioned the English scheme in their initial remarks. It should be remembered that the English scheme is not universal. We provide universal care. In England, people get 15 hours, and they get an additional 15 hours if they meet certain qualifying bits, which includes two parents working. If we were to replicate the English scheme, two parents who between them earned £160,000 or £170,000 would be provided with additional childcare facilities via the state, but a single parent who was doing part-time work would not qualify.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Weir: From that point of view, there are caveats. I am not opposing the motion or seeking to divide. We need to have a very important debate. I look forward to bringing forward the childcare strategy in the coming months.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Alex Attwood to make a winding-up speech. You have 10 minutes.

A Member: You do not have to use it all, though.

Mr Attwood: I might not. First, I publicly congratulate the Minister on his appointment. If you were to go round the Chamber, I do not know whether everyone would say it publicly but many would say privately that the Minister has intelligence and a degree of independence. We hope that, despite some of the things he said in his reply to the debate, he will deploy those skills in his term in office and demonstrate — as, to be fair, his predecessor did — that he knows the difference between being in government and being in power. When you look at the profile of our Ministers over the various mandates, it is very clear who knew the difference between being in government and being in power and who measured up to both requirements.

I also congratulate all the new MLAs who made speeches: Ms Seeley, Mrs Barton and Ms Lockhart. I include in that Ms Lockhart's comment that the motion "brings a focus" — to use her words — to the childcare issue.

Lord Morrow said that we now have one Department that captures issues for young people and children in one place. That creates a new space and a huge opportunity to shape issues for children and childcare in a way that we have not done before. The measure of this Minister and this Department will be whether, to borrow a phrase from yesterday, there is a paradigm shift for all the reasons that Members outlined. Will there be a paradigm shift, or will we just have the further ad hoc management of childcare issues that has been the practice to date? Will we have something that is much more coherent and cohesive so that all our children, whom we cherish, have the opportunities that they are entitled to and ensure that, as Mr Agnew indicated, every £1 invested in childcare can avoid the £17 that is invested later in remedial interventions? That economic fact, independent of the much bigger reasons why we should address the issue, should concentrate minds on the overall issue.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way and wholeheartedly agree with his analysis that a paradigm shift is needed in how Departments approach the issue. Does he share my concern that the Minister's insistence on dealing with early education and childcare separately, rather than the way in which the experts say that we need to integrate early education and care, causes concern as to whether that paradigm shift will occur and there will be a commitment to the increased hours that are needed?

Mr Attwood: To be fair, the Minister is only in office, so, in his response, there was a sense of the Civil Service rather than the political. We should give the Minister the opportunity for the political to prevail and for the Civil Service approach, which is characterised by the default position — there was a sense of this in the Minister's reply — and "Why can't we do?" rather than "We must do" seemed to be the approach that was reflected in the Minister's words. I will come back to that.

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

A number of years ago, a principal in west Belfast told me that children at the age of four were coming into her school who did not know what a pencil was.

I have two children in primary school, and many Members have or have had children in primary school. The horror of the fact that a principal said children aged four were coming to school not knowing what a pencil

was demonstrates why we need a paradigm shift. Such a shift happened in the 1980s in New Zealand, where it was recognised that, in order to deal with all the issues of children, young people and adults, you had to invest in the nought-to-six category. In a couple of weeks' time, at a conference in Enniskillen run by Early Years, one of the architects of that strategy — maybe it has already happened —

12.00 noon

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Weir: I attended part of that conference, as did some of the Members for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and it was last weekend.

Mr Attwood: I stand corrected.

The conference brought one of the architects of the New Zealand strategy to Northern Ireland so that he could explain what the paradigm shift was and what investing in children from birth to six years old meant to their lives. Given what Nichola Mallon and Eamonn McCann said about the relationship between poverty and childcare, if we are to deal with growing child poverty — as I said yesterday, one independent study suggests that, by 2020, absolute and real child poverty in Northern Ireland will be over 30% and touching upon 35% — we need to learn from the New Zealand experience, which was that breaking the linkage between poverty and child development requires investing in childcare. That requires a paradigm shift that was not reflected in some of what the Minister said.

The motion has five elements: there are proposals for legal intervention, strategy, regulation, development of the childcare workforce and money. Given that the Minister was not able to touch upon all those issues, I ask that he come back to the Committee and the Chamber with a comprehensive answer in respect of each and all of the five elements.

It was Minister O'Dowd who said previously that there would be an early years education and learning Bill. I do not find it satisfactory, Minister, that your reply to that proposal was that that would not deal with childcare provision. It was not meant to deal with childcare provision; it was meant to put into statute a model of funding, supervision and coordination for the delivery of all education and care services for the voluntary, community and statutory sectors. The intention of that Bill is different from the one that you indicated.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that. The position regarding any legislation is that I will want to consider the Childcare Act in England, for instance, which took two years to prepare. The point is that we want to make sure that whatever is there is fit for purpose. If it is to be underpinned by legislation, it will not happen immediately.

Mr Attwood: If there is a working model of the Bill in your Department, work it up and bring it to the Floor so that we can create certainty.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way to the Member.

Mr O'Dowd: Maybe I will bring some clarity to the situation. I was working on a "year early" Bill that referred to children who may not be ready to start formal education; it was not an "early years" Bill. There is a distinct difference between the two. The Bill was to deal with the exceptional circumstances of a child who is not ready to start formal education by giving parents permission to delay starting their formal education for a year.

Mr Attwood: That is the case: that was the name of the Bill. However, the intention of the Bill was to provide the statutory basis that I outlined to the House.

I look forward to hearing the Executive's childcare strategy and to enhancing that strategy in order to integrate into it, in the fullness of time, the other elements of education policy that touch upon the lives of children and young people. Now that we have a Department that has a more comprehensive and expansive mandate, we need a more comprehensive and expansive childcare strategy. At the same time, take the opportunity, as was done in DOE, to develop better regulation, if necessary through a Bill, in order to ensure that all who provide childcare have a much more coherent system of dealing with the regulation of their units in terms of the nature, role, remit and responsibilities of the providers of childcare services, and so on and so forth.

In conclusion, I want to deal briefly with the issue of money, as Phillip Logan mentioned it. As we know, the Programme for Government that went through yesterday is light on detail yet the SDLP was criticised for this motion, which is expansive on detail. Ms Seeley might want to explain that inconsistency some time in the future. Nonetheless, as part of the Programme for Government, there was a commitment on flagship capital projects, roads, the children's hospital, and other capital developments. The question to the Minister and the Executive is this: should childcare and its proper management and funding not be a defining flagship project for this Government in this mandate? If we can, rightly, commit upfront to funding for various capital projects over the next five years —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Attwood: — should we not also have a commitment to funding childcare as a flagship project over the next five years, not least if the money that we are talking about is £40 million?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the experience of children in the early years of life has multiple impacts on development, health and educational achievement; believes that there should be a common, cross-departmental approach to funding, inspection, registration and access to child and family support services; calls on the Minister of Education to develop and bring forward an early education and care Act and a care and early childhood development strategy with resourced and supported training, qualifications and a professional development strategy for the entire early years workforce; and further calls on the Minister to bring forward proposals for the provision of free

preschool childcare for children aged three and four years to a minimum of 20 hours per week to be in place in the 2016-17 financial year, and for an increase in provision to 30 hours per week from the 2017-18 financial year.

Private Members' Business

Economic Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Lyons: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to focus on creating more and better jobs in Northern Ireland and to bring forward an updated economic strategy alongside the new Programme for Government 2016-2021.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to take this opportunity to welcome you to your new role and to wish you well in it.

I am delighted to bring the motion to the House. It is the first private Member's motion that I have brought to the Chamber, and it is important to note that it is on the issue of creating more and better jobs for people in Northern Ireland. You will all be aware of our five-point plan that we went to the electorate with during the election campaign. Of course, we received a very large endorsement from the electorate and received a mandate, and I am very pleased to bring this issue to the Floor of the Assembly today.

Jobs are incredibly important. Jobs are of huge importance for the future prosperity of Northern Ireland. Of course, jobs are important as well to the local economy and to the different areas that we represent. High employment is good for the economy overall, but jobs are obviously hugely important to individuals as well. They are important for their own economic prosperity but also very important for their general health and, indeed, their mental health. Studies have shown that unemployment means that you are more prone to poor general health and poor mental health, so it is important that we focus on this issue and give it the time and attention that it deserves. That is why we have brought the motion to the House today. I know that we discussed this issue in part yesterday, but it does us no harm to talk about it again and to focus specifically on jobs and then on the wider economic strategy.

I stand here this afternoon very pleased with and very proud of the record of the Executive in the last mandate. You only have to look at some of the targets that were set five years ago to see how they have been achieved. We can say that there has been real success. When you set out with a plan to create 25,000 jobs and you create 40,000 jobs, you cannot call that a failure. When you say that you want to attract £1 billion of investment and you attract £3 billion of investment, you cannot call that a failure. When you say that you want to get £300 million of investment in research and development yet manage to get £585 million, you cannot call that a failure.

Look at the salaries in some of these jobs, and how much higher so many of them are in comparison to the Northern Ireland average; that is something we should welcome. If you want to look at the most important figure of all, leaving all those things to the side if you wish, take

the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland. It has gone down from 60,000 in 2011 to under 40,000 today. That is something we should be pleased with and proud of, but we need to keep working; we do not rest. I am particularly pleased that, in my constituency, unemployment has fallen by a third over the last five years. As I said yesterday, these are not just numbers. These are real people who have benefited as a result of the actions that the last Executive took and that, I hope, this Executive will also take.

One of the major successes of the last number of years has been the devolution of corporation tax powers. That will be hugely beneficial to our economy, as long as we are bringing in the skills that are necessary for our young people in particular. We have had successes but we cannot rest. We need to keep progressing, and that is why we are calling today for the Minister and the Executive to bring forward an updated economic strategy.

I will spend just a little bit of time outlining some of the things that I would like to see in that strategy. The first thing, which I hope everybody in the House wants to see, is a rebalancing of the economy. We know that we are heavily dependent on the public sector in Northern Ireland. We want to change that. We want to grow our private sector. We want to see more people employed in the private sector and more people with jobs and higher incomes.

As I have already said, we need to focus on the skills of our people and ensuring that our people have the skills that are necessary in order for them to succeed in the workforce. We are in a new economy compared with where we were even 20 years ago, never mind 50 years ago, so we need to ensure that our people have the skills and talents to succeed. I am well aware, and other Members will be well aware, of how jobs can now be so easily exported to other parts of the world, especially those jobs that we perhaps depended upon in the past. So it is important that we have the best-skilled and best-trained people.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Will the Member agree with me that one of the great achievements of the last Executive — an Executive whose legacy we heard being disrespected and challenged yesterday in the House — was the decision to freeze university tuition fees, thereby helping to contribute to stopping the brain drain of talent out of Northern Ireland and keeping our most talented young people here to contribute to our economy?

Mr Lyons: Absolutely; I completely agree with my colleague from South Belfast. That is going to be key in the future — that we ensure that we keep people here. I think we all want to see that. We want to see our young people —

Mr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I am sorry, I cannot give way. I do not think I am getting any extra time, but hopefully we will be able to hear from the Member later on.

So we want to see competitiveness, as well as increasing the skills of our workforce. We want to give support as well, I hope, in this economic strategy to some of our smaller businesses, giving them the help that they need to grow and to become larger businesses.

I will briefly mention the importance of infrastructure. We were fortunate in the last mandate to see in East Antrim the construction of two roads: the A8 to Larne and the A2

to Carrickfergus, both from Belfast. Local employers have said that that has been hugely beneficial to them and that there is added potential there, which we hope to exploit.

Can I ask the Minister to look into the issue of broadband? I know that Members from across the House will also want to make sure that that issue is addressed. This is not for just homes. For example, there is a business park in my constituency that would love access to higher-speed broadband. We hope that there will be measures within the economic strategy that will address that issue.

I turn to the amendment in the name of Mr Eastwood. We certainly will not be opposing the amendment. In many ways, it is perhaps just another way of saying what we have already said in so far as the Member talks in the amendment about:

“high-value, highly skilled and highly paid jobs”.

I would like to think that that is somewhere much the same as “more and better jobs”, which we have outlined in our original motion. We certainly do not disagree with that at all. We share that goal, and we want to see that happen. In government, our party will certainly be working to ensure that that happens through our economic strategy.

12.15 pm

The Member mentions at the end of his amendment the need for a regionally balanced economy, and I certainly share that aspiration. We want to see that happen, and we do not want to see all the jobs concentrated in one place. I hope that the Member will understand that we need a degree of realism in all of this as well. We cannot have a perfectly balanced spread of jobs, and, naturally, some jobs will go to certain places. I think that we had a debate in the Chamber in the last mandate, and some Members were bemoaning the lack of jobs in north and west Belfast compared with south and east Belfast. I think that one of the reasons why there are so many jobs in east and south instead of north and west is because of, for example, the harbour estate in east Belfast and the fact that the city centre takes in south Belfast. There will be disparities, but I do think that it is right that we take measures, where we can, to ensure that there are jobs that can be spread out in different parts of the country. We have to understand that, when investors come, especially those with foreign direct investment, they are looking for specific things. We cannot always just push them towards a corner if that area does not have what is needed for jobs to grow and if it does not have the things that they are looking for.

I hope that Members will not think that there is a conspiracy going on here. I hope that Members do not use the word “discrimination” when it comes to the current distribution of jobs. From my point of view, I would rather, obviously, that constituents of mine have jobs in their constituency. However, I would rather that some of my constituents have to travel to Belfast for a job —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Lyons: — than not have a job at all. I hope that we have placed on record the importance of creating more and better jobs. I understand where the Members in the SDLP are coming from with their amendment, and, on that basis, we will be happy to accept it.

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "creating" and insert

"high-value, highly skilled and highly paid jobs in Northern Ireland and to bring forward an updated economic strategy alongside the new Programme for Government 2016-2021, which focuses on achieving a regionally balanced economy."

I thank the party opposite for its support for our amendment. We could table lots of amendments and lots of motions, and we could write lots of draft frameworks and all sorts of things, but what we want to see from now on is change and action. I am not going to use the word "discrimination". I do not think that I have to, because we have had decades upon decades of a lack of investment west of the Bann, and I think that we now see the results of that. It is good that we should have more and better jobs; of course it is. We need more and better jobs. I am not talking here about directing investors by saying that they have to set up in Derry, Strabane or Enniskillen. What we are saying is this: let us ensure that those investors do have the things that they require in the areas that have been left behind. Let us ensure that mistakes such as the act of discrimination from more than 50 years ago, denying the city of Derry a proper functioning university to ensure that we could attract that type of investment, are not compounded and compounded and compounded by us not doing something about it.

In coming at this, we are glad that we have found some common ground. This is a good way for us to begin this new era of opposition. What we want to see now is more than just motions; we want to see actions. I have to be honest and say that, yesterday evening, we were treated to an analysis of the election results. We know who won the election. We know how many seats we have, and we know how many seats Sinn Féin, the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party have. We can all read, and we were all there for the counts. Let me be very clear: it will be a fundamental mistake for people in this House to think that that election was an election that said that everything is fine over here and, "Don't worry about us. You have our support".

Let us look at the election. Sinn Féin did not win in Foyle; they lost a seat in West Belfast and they lost a seat in Fermanagh. One of the many stories of the election was an enormous amount of frustration and anger in places like my own city, parts of Fermanagh and west Belfast, where people say they are fed up with government just existing. Government now needs to, once and for all, tackle the inequalities that have been fostered in the last few decades. I am fed up with looking at the faces of sad parents who have spent years educating and supporting their children and, basically, raising them for export. I do not know how many Christmases I have had to go to airports to pick people up and to leave them off because they cannot find, in my city, the quality of life and employment that they would like.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way, and whilst I do not accept all of the fundamentals of his critique, I do accept some. Bearing that in mind, and how desperately bad he tells us the situation is, was it not a catastrophic mistake on his part that, when he had the opportunity to put his shoulder to the wheel and play his

part in the Government of Northern Ireland and fix the problems he has identified, he shirked that opportunity?

Mr Eastwood: I did not shirk any opportunity. Throughout the election we said to people that if we could — by the way, nobody from your party or any other contradicted me when I said this — we would spend two weeks negotiating a draft Programme for Government; not a whole detailed Programme for Government, but a draft programme with some actions that we could sell to the people. If we could not achieve the change that we needed to see in that Programme for Government, then of course we would go into opposition and hold the Government to account in a constructive way. That is what we did; we are not shirking any responsibility. We are being very responsible, in fact, in giving up the opportunity to be in the Government so that we can hold it to account from outside, and we look forward to that developing. This is the beginning of a harmonious relationship that we can develop in the coming years.

What do we need to do to change the lot of people in my constituency to ensure that they are not being raised for export, to try and keep them here to contribute to the economy? We need to invest in the fundamentals. It is great that two great infrastructure projects have gone to east Antrim. We noticed that it had happened, but the areas west of the Bann, like my city, like Strabane, like all parts of the west that have been left behind, have not had big infrastructure projects. They now need to see tarmac on the road as early as possible — not for a few miles, but all of the miles.

We talk about corporation tax; we are big supporters of the devolution of corporation tax. It has been our party policy for about 30 years. We support the harmonisation of tax powers across this island. Look at the speed of the recovery across the border. Why has that happened? It is because there is an open economy and because they have invested massively in higher and further education, as well as reducing corporation tax. We have promised a reduction of corporation tax whilst, at the same time, cutting our investment in student places. Yes, of course, as Mr Stalford pointed out, we froze tuition fees. In fact, they have gone up by more than the rate of inflation, and we now have an opportunity to reverse that. However, we have a bigger opportunity to invest in places, because the first thing on an investor's score card for an area is not tax, it is skills.

I know that we have been starved of the opportunity to drag investors to my own city, because why would you go there when we do not have a university and about 10,000 people doing the right type of course? Why would you go if we are looking at 3,500 undergraduate places? We need to invest in our economy up front to allow cities like mine to get on with creating an economy, keeping our people here and attracting people to come and set up businesses and live here. That is what we want to see; that is what we think is important. That is the benchmark on which we will judge the economic strategy and the Programme for Government.

I cannot end before making the point that on 23 June we will be faced with a very real and difficult choice. If people in the Assembly believe that we can, on the one hand, leave the European Union and, on the other, turn around our economy, they are living in cloud cuckoo land. Investors who want to come here want to come because of the access to the market of 500 million people. It is not

1·8 million, not even 60 million: it is 500 million people. The connections with our partners in the South and the cross-border opportunities that we have will be all lost if we vote for a Brexit.

I know the DUP are against us remaining in the EU, but they are not really that against it, because they are not making that much of a big deal of it. They let Sammy out of the traps every now and again to talk about how dangerous it will be, but there is not a big Front Bench campaign coming from the DUP, because I think they know. They go to America as well, they talk to investors and they talk to higher and further education institutions. They know the benefits of remaining within the European Union. We know them as well. If we are serious about turning around our economy in Derry, Strabane, Fermanagh or Belfast, the idea that we can cut corporation tax on one hand, cut student places on the other and leave the European Union if we had a third hand, is bizarre and wrong. It would be absolutely stupid and reckless, and I hope that we do not do it.

We are getting very close to the point of reducing corporation tax. I ask the Economy Minister — I welcome him to his position — to address this if he can at this early stage: what scoping work has been done to work out how we are going to fund the reduction in corporation tax without affecting front-line services? I hope the Minister is in a position to answer that question.

I welcome him to his position. I welcome that, once and for all, we have all the important parts of the economy under one roof. I think that was a good reform of our institutions. It also rings very loud and clear to me and everyone out there that this Assembly and Executive have now recognised that we cannot build an economy unless we invest in further and higher education. I hope this Minister and this Executive recognise the failure of closing down courses and cutting university places whilst trying to invest in the economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I welcome the debate, although, as the Chair of the Economy Committee, I find myself in a somewhat invidious position. We have been debating for about two days matters relating to the Committee's remit, yet the Committee has not had an opportunity to debate those issues itself. Nonetheless, I congratulate the members of the Committee who have been out of the traps very early in getting some of these economic debates secured in the Assembly. No doubt, when the Committee goes on to consider and deliberate on the matters that are being debated today and in the manufacturing strategy debate and, indeed, the Programme for Government debate yesterday, the debates that we have had in the Chamber over the last two days will inform that.

I am sure the Committee will want to ensure that the views expressed not just by members of the Economy Committee but broadly speaking and those of a wide spectrum of stakeholders are taken into account when we are working on a draft economic strategy to complement the draft Programme for Government. No doubt, given the nature and intention of the Programme for Government process, that presumes that there will be the widest possible input from stakeholders.

Of course, it is logical to assume that the economic strategy will be a part of the Programme for Government strategy. I am not quite sure why people thought yesterday that it was necessary to have a manufacturing strategy outside the Programme for Government strategy and the economic strategy. Nonetheless, consistency is perhaps not something that is in large measure in this institution. Members will expect, as will I, as Committee Chair and, I am sure, Committee members, the Minister to engage as widely as possible when forming a strategy, not least with the Committee itself.

I will repeat what I said yesterday during the manufacturing strategy debate. We cannot simply develop a strategy that ignores the realities of the global economy and the balances and links between our economy, the economy in the South, the economy in Britain and the economy in Europe. I share the points made by the last speaker about the upcoming referendum and the very close link that we have with the European Union and the economic ties that we have there.

An updated economic strategy may also require a review of the current job promotion model that we use. Again, that is likely to be a priority for the Committee. Such a strategy, as other Members alluded to, has to take into consideration the potential reduction in corporation tax.

12.30 pm

The previous economic strategy published in March 2012 stated:

"The Strategy is being launched at a time of sustained uncertainty in the global economy and we recognise the impact this continues to have on businesses and individuals".

Unfortunately, this context has not changed that much; we still live in a time of global economic uncertainty, and we cannot ignore the impact of that on the North. Again, as in 2012, we need to use all the economic levers and drivers at our disposal, and we must invest in innovation, R&D, skills and diversification in our economy.

The Economy Committee will continue to take briefings from the arm's-length bodies and the Department, and I am sure that we will challenge very strongly to make sure that the Department contributes to the Programme for Government, meets the outcomes already outlined in the draft Programme for Government framework and develops them in a way that grows, in a balanced, regional way, a very prosperous economy, bearing in mind the global economic circumstances we face.

Speaking on behalf of my party, I have no difficulty with the amendment proposed by the SDLP. In essence, everything in the amendment is already contained in the Programme for Government framework. I listened to the leader of the SDLP outlining the reasons why, after two weeks of intense negotiations, it decided to abandon its opportunity to be in the Executive, where it could have had an input into all this, and walk away from Programme for Government negotiations. However, at the first opportunity to amend a motion in relation to one of the central planks — the economic strategy — it has simply come forward with amendments that already exist in the Programme or Government. Outcome 1 is about prospering through a strong, competitive regionally balanced economy; it states:

"This outcome is about increasing the productivity and success of local business in a sustainable and responsible way, ensuring that growth is balanced on a regional basis."

That will ensure:

"growth benefits people in all parts of the region."

It is already in there. Indicators for better-paid jobs are there. The amendment, which is in contradiction of the position that was adopted yesterday, says that the economic strategy should sit alongside the new Programme for Government. Surprisingly, the manufacturing strategy should not. I do not understand the logic of that.

If that is the type of constructive opposition that we are to expect, it is certainly opposition without substance. They have simply said, "We don't want to be part of the Programme for Government negotiations because there's no substance in them, but we'll bring forward amendments and debates. That's our contribution to trying to create a better economy and societal change in terms of protecting the vulnerable; simply by producing some meaningless amendments in the debate. That's our contribution to constructive opposition". That may be so, but it is opposition without any degree of substance.

Mr Aiken: I pass on my regards to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your elevation.

I am sorry that Mr Lyons has left the Chamber because I was going to praise him. One of the strange things with constructive opposition is that we are able to praise areas that have been done well. One of the most interesting things is the growth, particularly in the economy, of companies in the rest of Northern Ireland over the last couple of years. That has been a particularly strong thing. We should also give praise where it is due, such as to the innovative, adaptive and agile companies that have done so much, against the tide of some of the poor business decisions that have been going on in Northern Ireland, and have made a success of themselves.

There is one particular area that I would like to focus on. Echoing the words of our fellow leaders of the Opposition, I want to talk about the issues particularly around the idea of skilled jobs. I am not playing Northern Ireland down; this is not a Northern Ireland put-down issue. We need to face some of the realities on the state of our ability to produce highly skilled and highly paid jobs in Northern Ireland. The provision of a skilled workforce and support for greater funding for research and development were issues that we, as an Opposition, wanted to see in a strategy for manufacturing. We wished to see it as a separate strategy because we wanted to see it being the driving force of the future of the Northern Ireland economy and not being frittered away in some form of the Civil Service "at ease" or losing it in what else is going on in the government process as well. One of my major concerns is the considerable underinvestment in our higher and further education sectors. I am an ex-CEO of a major Irish university, and it is an issue that our universities, our business sectors, our unions and I are very acutely aware of. Indeed, to quote the noted academic and commentator Deirdre Heenan of Ulster University:

"Almost uniquely in the developed world, Northern Ireland is disinvesting in higher education".

We do have a brain drain. Mr Stalford was very clear in saying that we seem to have stopped the brain drain, but we have not, and the figures show that to be the case. Indeed, with the level of funding for students in Northern Ireland being £1,000 less than everywhere else in the United Kingdom, we should be looking at it as a matter of disquiet or even disgrace that our Government have stood over a steady reduction in the potential to upskill our workforce while our competitors in Manchester, which sits —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: If you do not mind.

In the university standings, Manchester is at 56, Edinburgh is at 24, Glasgow is at 76, and Dublin is at 160, and those universities have taken the opportunity to invest in wealth-creating centres. Indeed, from looking at the recent record, you would presume that our universities are seen as a burden rather than an asset.

It is also noteworthy that our universities are dropping down and not rising up the global rankings. Northern Ireland no longer has a university in the global top 100. We barely scrape into the top 200. This is a significant problem not just for our reputation but for our competitiveness and attractiveness as a centre for FDI and innovation. However, I am not doing Northern Ireland's university sector down. It is noteworthy that, when collaboration between our universities and industry works, it works well, but there is just not enough of it. There appears to be a marked reluctance to boost this cooperative and mutually beneficial approach.

The state of modern apprenticeships is also a concern that should be raised higher up our national risk register — that is, if we even have a national risk register, which we should have. There are shortages in skilled workers in the building sector, so, even if we did need to build a lot of social housing, we would not have the workers to do it. They are already being employed on HS2 and major works in the Northern Powerhouse. That, as well as a shortage of skilled technicians working in the farm and agribusiness sectors, is an impediment to achieving an effective economic strategy. We also need to send the message that the apprenticeship route is not some form of second-class educational approach. Apprenticeships should be valued as much as the degree route. As an Assembly, we should be promoting that view and investing in further education colleges. We are also conscious of the costs of potential additional expenditure. However, we need to ask this question: can we afford not to do this? Can we afford not to invest in our higher education sector as well?

I want to talk about issues of regional investment or lack thereof. I will not revisit the opportunity lost by not rebuilding the new Ulster University campus in Londonderry, where it should have been. However, as a transformational point, higher education can make a significant change

Finally, in the few seconds that I have left, I point out that this will all be moot if we do not vote to remain in the EU. Come the end of this month —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: I am just about to finish.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Aiken: — we could be in a position where all this is moot and all our plans for future economic development would no longer be successful.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your appointment.

We will support the motion and the amendment. On the motion, the Executive have already stated on several occasions that a new economic strategy would be developed in conjunction with the Programme for Government, a new Budget, a social strategy and an investment strategy. The amendment provides additional emphasis on the critical aspect of skills. I will, however, shortly make a few qualifications about regional balance.

The Alliance Party shares the aim and ambition of making Northern Ireland the most innovative and dynamic regional economy in Europe, but, to do this, we can no longer rely on what made us prosperous in the past. We must invest in the skills infrastructure and harness the creativity needed to ensure that our economy is fit for the 21st century. Improving our level of productivity is an essential part of any new economic approach. Alliance believes that, despite the challenges facing the economy, Northern Ireland has the resources to emerge from this period of austerity stronger and more competitive. We have an enterprising and resilient business base, a youthful and well-educated population, a strong manufacturing base, excellent research and innovation attributes, a world-class telecommunications network, strong international links and unique natural and cultural resources. Our strengths obviously outweigh our weaknesses. However, despite some good developments on the economic front over the past five years, there have been missed opportunities, and Northern Ireland has not been transformed in line with its full potential.

As others have said, any discussion of our future economic prospects has to reflect the current uncertainty posed by the EU referendum and the implications that would flow from a vote to leave. The single market provides us with massive trading opportunities and the scope to grow our exports. Access to markets is the biggest issue for investors looking at Northern Ireland. If we left, there would be a real danger that investments would go elsewhere. The vast majority of economic experts strongly recommend a "Remain" vote, as does the Alliance Party and all the parties here except for the DUP. I cannot help thinking about and reflecting on what Mr Eastwood said, and I think that he is right: the DUP secretly knows that the population of Northern Ireland will make the decision for it. The DUP can take its stand, but it knows what the result will be.

We support the development of a robust interdepartmental economic strategy that should focus on job protection and creation in the short term, as well as set out a clear long-term strategy for increasing productivity and competitiveness and build on our key strengths. A central element of that strategy must be a plan to invest in the key economic drivers, such as skills and infrastructure. That imperative is particularly acute in the context of a lower rate of corporation tax. However, that, in isolation, cannot and will not be a silver bullet. The lessons from elsewhere are clear: it will work only in the context of supporting investments. Indeed, there needs to be a lead-in time. We have become increasingly concerned at the absence

of a proper plan around the lower rate of corporation tax — the clock is ticking. Mr Murphy spent half of his speech berating the Opposition, but I would like to know whether Sinn Féin is totally committed to the principle of a reduction in corporation tax.

Following on from yesterday's debate, I think that we should also ensure that there is a strong manufacturing focus in a refreshed economic strategy. One of the critical areas of intervention needs to be skills. Over the past five years, we have seen the development of a wider range of policies and programmes to develop skills, including higher-level skills, to make them more relevant to the economy and bring people closer to the labour market. However, that work has been limited by a lack of resources and, more recently, budget cuts. Investment needs to be scaled up, and we estimate, as has been said before, that we need a step up through which an additional £85 million each year would be spent on skills by 2019-2020. In particular, that would allow us to address the current funding gap in higher education, continue to freeze tuition fees for local students and expand our provision of high-level skills.

It is also important to qualify the point on regional disparities. We have a responsibility to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has economic opportunities and there is economic and social vibrancy in all parts of the Province, including Londonderry, but we need to be careful to balance the overall size of the Northern Ireland economy and its internal distribution.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Lunn: Yes, indeed. If we overmanage the latter, we risk compromising the former. I will leave it at that.

Mr T Buchanan: It is the desire of every Government to increase and strengthen their economy, which is the backbone of every society. Due to the many factors that drive it forward, it is essential that improving the economy is at the very heart of the Programme for Government. If Northern Ireland is to be successful on a global scale and punch well above its weight on the world stage, it is imperative that we as a Government focus on the creation of more and better jobs and job opportunities in Northern Ireland.

It is no longer an option to stand back and watch our educated young people leave our shores with the age-old complaint that there are no jobs back home for them. When we ask our young people where they want to work, their answer is usually the same: they love Northern Ireland and want to remain within our shores, but there are simply not the job opportunities or the right type of job to keep them here. I acknowledge the tremendous work that the Executive did over the last five years. We heard the mover of the motion quote the figures for the jobs created and the new employment opportunities, but more needs to be done. We cannot take our eye off the ball. The foundation has, I believe, been well laid, and we must continue to build on it. The children and young people in our schools, colleges and universities today are the workforce of tomorrow. It is the responsibility of everyone in the House, along with the Executive, to make the tough choices to ensure that their future is secure here in Northern Ireland and they have the opportunities to forge successful a career in their chosen field of work at home.

12.45 pm

A successful economy does not come in isolation but is built on partnership between government, industry and education. Working in partnership will not only deliver a highly skilled workforce capable of meeting real business needs but will underpin economic growth by opening the new opportunities that are required. However, it is no secret that, in many places and in many areas of employment, employers bemoan the skills gap among our young people. We are all well aware of that. I mentioned this yesterday, and I come back to it again: throughout the last Assembly term, the Committee for Employment and Learning looked at the skills gap and worked on those issues. That is not to say that our young people have no skills; however, they do not have the right skills to meet the job opportunities that arise. That is the issue that we need to address. We do not want to come to the Chamber to put our young people down; that is not what we are doing. Our young people are well skilled, but they are not skilled in the right way to meet the opportunities that arise in the job sector. That is something that we need to look at with our universities and employers to ensure that our young people are skilled in the fields that meet the job opportunities that will arise when they come to Northern Ireland.

Another issue that we need to look at is improving our infrastructure, which is a big issue. There needs to be an improvement of the roads infrastructure in my constituency of West Tyrone. In the last Assembly term, there were efforts to bring forward the improvement of the A5. It is still sitting there, not as a fault of the Executive but due to other issues. We need to look at the roads infrastructure. Broadband, which is another huge issue in West Tyrone, was also mentioned. We have excellent broadband cover and facilities in Omagh, but, when we move out into the rural areas, where we have small businesses and the farming industry that need broadband cover, it is not there. That is something else that I ask the Minister to look at.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. We have talked a lot about broadband and road infrastructure, which are important, but does the Member agree that another part of our infrastructure is aviation and the links that we have with London; for example, the importance of good transport links and being able to move people and freight? Does he agree that the lack of a decision on aviation capacity in the south-east hurts not only the rest of the UK but Northern Ireland, which is dependent on air links?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr T Buchanan: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my colleague. The transport network and infrastructure is another issue that I have in my notes. Again, that needs to be looked at. I ask the Minister to take that and all the issues on board as we seek to move forward. A lot of work needs to be done in this term of government. We need to be radical in our thinking and open up long-term thinking in the House —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr T Buchanan: — and the Executive. It is our opportunity to work together to bring forward good for Northern Ireland and to sell Northern Ireland on the world stage and say, "Here's what we have on offer. Come and be one of us".

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Alex Maskey.

Mr Maskey: It is OK, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Ceart go leor.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I welcome the motion and add my voice to the very strong case for the updating and bringing forward of a revised economic strategy. In many ways, my wonderful constituency of Belfast South is a manifestation of what we want to achieve. We have the highest level of third-level-educated residents. We have relatively high wages; relatively low unemployment; fantastic businesses, including start-ups; and fabulous universities and schools. We have excellent commercial and retail centres, such as the Lisburn Road, Stranmillis Road, Ormeau Road, Finaghy and many others.

Just a few months ago, I was hugely humbled to be asked by the South Belfast Partnership Board to be the South Belfast economic champion. What is clear through that work and my actions on the ground is that, despite the headline figures, challenges remain. South Belfast, like so much of Northern Ireland, can be a game of two halves. We have much educational excellence, but we also have levels of low educational attainment and underachievement. We have excellent retail areas, but we have challenges in relation to rates, parking and tough trading environments. We have great schools and universities, but with a need for resources and support if they are fully to play the role that they want to play in growing our economy. Achieving our objective of growing the economy will require two things to come together. Yes, absolutely, we need good and high-value jobs, but we also need a workforce with the necessary skills and tools to be able to access those jobs. We need to be able to create jobs, but also for those jobs to grow and expand.

I have just come from a meeting of the all-party group on tackling educational underachievement and promoting educational excellence for all. This is a critical part of building our economy. In that group, and right across the parties, there is a very wide consensus on what we want to achieve. We want every child to succeed, but we need to have a hard conversation about what success is in that context. To me, success is a young person with the necessary tools and skills to be able to get a reasonable job with a reasonable wage. Creating the jobs will be part of the economic strategy, but we need to give young people the necessary tools and skills to be able to access them.

Growing our economy will require a wide range of initiatives and actions — a highly skilled workforce; increasing educational achievement; the supply of quality jobs; attracting investment — but it will also require support for our local, indigenous businesses to allow them to grow, providing the conditions for business start-up and, critically, encouraging those entrepreneurs who will take the risk and create the jobs that we want and need to see. It is only through all those initiatives working together that we will build the vibrant, innovative, entrepreneurial and dynamic Northern Ireland that we all want to see.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): This is Mr Chambers's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, so I remind the House that, as it is his maiden speech, it is the convention that it be made without interruption.

Mr Chambers: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a privilege and an honour to have this opportunity today to make my first

contribution to the proceedings of the House. I hope that it will be the first of many opportunities.

I am extremely grateful to the people of North Down, who voted for me to represent them in the Assembly. I pledge to represent all the citizens of North Down with the vigour and commitment that they would expect from me. I was born and reared just a short distance from this iconic building, in the shadows of the gantries of the Harland and Wolff shipyard. Indeed, my father worked there for some time, along with thousands of others, building some of the finest ships in the world. I am proud of my east Belfast early-year roots. In 1973, however, I moved to Bangor, and, having lived there since then, my family and I are very proud to call North Down our home. I have been a local government representative in North Down for nearly 25 years, and I am very proud of some of our achievements in local government over that period. I know that there are others currently serving in the Chamber who will share that pride in things such as the Aurora leisure centre, the restoration of the Walled Garden in Bangor and the public realm work that has been carried out, including the upgrading of play parks, community halls and, indeed, our new community hub, which is due to open soon on Hamilton Road in Bangor, and the leisure facilities in Holywood.

North Down has the reputation of being the gold coast, but it also has areas of deprivation. One of my challenges will be to try to make North Down a gold coast for every one of its residents. The redevelopment of Queen's Parade will need all the support and encouragement that the Assembly can offer. Hopefully our new Education Minister will be able to find the money to finally enable urgent rebuilds of a number of school campuses that are not entirely fit for purpose. I know that Minister Weir has been heavily involved over the years in lobbying with the rest of us to make the dream come true for Priory Integrated College in Holywood, St Columbanus' College in Bangor, and Bangor Central Integrated Primary School. Perhaps Invest Northern Ireland will look beyond the gold coast reputation and send some much-needed manufacturing jobs in our direction.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the contribution to North Down and this House made by our former MLA, Mr Leslie Cree MBE. I wish Leslie, now retired from public life, and his family every happiness for the future. Knowing Leslie, I will not be surprised if he finds some voluntary public service work to keep himself busy.

In Bangor, we are very fortunate to have a first-class further education facility, the South Eastern Regional College (SERC), which is managed and staffed by a highly motivated group of tutors. This college has risen to the challenge in the past of tailoring courses to suit upcoming opportunities like those presented when the Aurora leisure complex was opened. Going forward, we cannot afford to starve places of further education like SERC of funding if we expect them to step up and provide the training required to fill future skill set requirements. Lack of funding in this area will be an impediment to the growth of our economy. We must be prepared in this House to speculate to accumulate for our people.

Workplace apprenticeships are also vital to prepare our workforce for future opportunities. Everything must be done to give employers incentives to provide and facilitate apprenticeships. We must also look hard at our infrastructure. Our road and rail network requires

detailed planning and financial resources. Our broadband network, which we have talked about, has many black spots in Bangor. There are some huge challenges to be confronted in an economic strategy, and my party has no hesitation in supporting the motion and the amendment. I am disappointed that an Opposition motion to create a manufacturing strategy was rejected by the House yesterday, as I think it would have complemented this motion.

Over recent days, I have heard much comment from Executive spokespeople about the complaining and whingeing coming from those in opposition. Today, the word "disrespect" was even mentioned.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Chambers: I get the feeling that there is such an obsession with opposition that we are actually seeing the birth of an opposition to the Opposition. We need to be aware that every healthy democracy has an opposition to scrutinise and critique the performance of government. My party will not be found wanting in pursuit of our opposition duties. However, in conclusion, what we will not be doing is apologising —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Would the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Chambers: — for carrying out our duties as part of an official opposition.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm today. Therefore, I propose by leave of the Assembly to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. We will return to the debate on the economic strategy, when the next contributor will be Mr Daniel McCrossan.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair) —

Mr McCrossan: Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, I take this opportunity to congratulate you on your new role. I support the amendment to this very important motion, not only as an MLA for West Tyrone but as the SDLP spokesperson for infrastructure.

In the North of this island, the east-west divide remains as stark as ever. Nearly 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement and peace, there has been a failure to address the serious skills and infrastructure deficits that have squandered long-term strategies and crucial business regeneration west of the Bann. Information that was obtained by 'The Detail' last year shows this stark underinvestment in deprived communities across Northern Ireland, but particularly in the west and rural areas. This is something that we have known for some time, but the figures are absolutely overwhelming. In the last three and a half years, over 80% of funding that was offered by Invest NI for indigenous businesses was made to those in the east. This comes despite the well-documented, historic underinvestment in communities west of the Bann, where villages and towns teeter on the brink of instability. West Tyrone has received only 2.1% of the overall financial assistance that is available by Invest NI, so it is no surprise that this inequality is haunting my local community and has done for decades.

Regional inequality is evident if we look at Ards and North Down, for example, which has the highest rates of employment and economic activity at 73.8% and 76.2% respectively. This is in stark contrast to my area of Strabane, which held the lowest level of employment at 56.6% and of economic activity at 66.5%. It comes as no surprise that my town of Strabane in the constituency of West Tyrone consistently tops the UK deprivation charts year on year, and that is having dramatic repercussions for people. Strabane is falling foul of chronic unemployment and decades of underinvestment. I see this each and every day across my constituency. There is multigenerational neglect, with people stuck in a cycle of poverty, left with little hope and no aspiration. Young people are leaving in their droves to find greater economic opportunities elsewhere, simply and sadly because they see no future here, certainly not west of the Bann. This may be a difficult pill for this House to swallow, but one that we must collectively deal with and fast.

Those are the ones that got away. Each week, I hear about the awfulness that is faced by some young people across my constituency — their depression, anxiety and frustration, which sometimes leads to high levels of addiction and alcohol and drug abuse and, sometimes, given the reality, suicide. This awfulness could have been avoided had there been meaningful work and had they been given some hope and aspiration for a better future here at home, close to their families and in their own communities. This underscores the failure of successive Ministers to spread the wealth-generating potential of the North across all those who live here.

In this mandate, regional imbalance is supposed to be a key priority for the new Programme for Government framework, but if the last Programme for Government is anything to go by, with almost half of the targets not

delivered, I do not have much confidence that the new one will deliver positive change.

The new framework does not have any specific targets, measurables or increments on how it will change the economic fortunes of the people across my constituency and others that have suffered from decades of neglect. We were even told last year that Ministers here were taking responsibility for the generational neglect of the north-west and the west. The ministerial subgroup on economic inactivity for the north-west has met only twice since then, the second time with 24 hours' notice.

It is not just job opportunities that are lacking in West Tyrone. One of the big disappointments in many rural areas is that we still lack a proper road infrastructure, and that directly contributes to regional imbalance. Motorways, such as the A5 and A6, will allow all businesses from all over the North greater access to markets, boost travel efficiencies and allow skill bases greater movement. For all that was promised, what we are left with is a £100 million allocation from the Stormont House Agreement and a flurry of activity on a very small section of road.

Only £13.1 million was given to the A5 this year, and with two consultation processes already, I hope it is not another empty promise of proper investment. I sincerely hope that the money does not end up within another monitoring round.

A necessary skills base remains absolutely vital to the development of a competitive and healthy economy while allowing people to personally prosper. New skills open new opportunities and grant people the tools they need to succeed. Businesses rely on skilled workforces to allow them not only to make —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McCrossan: — a profit but to expand and grow in a new region.

I will finish on this point. Economically, there needs to be a targeted approach from the Assembly on the areas of most need, which are in infrastructure and jobs, and the leadership needs to come from here.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): I welcome the debate and the opportunity to respond to the motion and the amendment. The motion calls for the Executive:

“to focus on creating more and better jobs in Northern Ireland and to bring forward an updated economic strategy alongside the new Programme for Government”.

An ambition to create more and better jobs for all our people is one that I am sure everyone in the Assembly will support. Refocusing the current economic strategy will afford the opportunity to ensure it is aligned with the outcomes set in the new Programme for Government framework and takes account of changes within our economy. I assure Members that my Department has already commenced that work.

Members may be aware that the Executive's economic strategy was published back in March 2012, with a long-term vision up to 2030 of:

“An economy characterised by a sustainable and growing private sector, where a greater number of

firms compete in global markets and there is growing employment and prosperity for all."

The economic strategy was designed as a living document to be reviewed and adjusted on an ongoing basis to ensure that, as a region, we can respond to and exploit national and international market opportunities and meet the challenges created within a global economy. That said, I believe that the long-term vision articulated in 2012 remains very much valid today.

The aim of the economic strategy is to improve the economic competitiveness of the economy through a focus on export-led economic growth. The strategy further recognises that regional disparities exist and that we need to ensure balanced growth across Northern Ireland. It also recognises the importance of cities as drivers of economic growth. Belfast and Londonderry are key population and economic centres and, as such, will be catalysts for growth across Northern Ireland.

Creating jobs alone can be only part of any solution to achieving balanced regional growth. As Mr Murphy pointed out, it is key and central and is in the draft Programme for Government framework.

Mr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will, yes.

Mr Aiken: I welcome the 2012-2030 document, as it was. One of the key underpinnings of that document, which was a brief protecting the business community at the time, was the continued membership of the United Kingdom within the European Union. Would the Minister care to comment on whether the potential change of Northern Ireland and the UK leaving the European Union would have a significant impact on any future economic strategy?

Mr Hamilton: The Member perhaps recalls it better than I do. If he does, he gets a mark for that. I am not sure whether it had that as an underpinning of the economy in Northern Ireland, although it was a fact and continues to be a fact, and we will see after 23 June whether that remains the case.

I understand the points that are made by many within the business community about the concerns they have of the potential of leaving the European Union. Business wants certainty, and there would of course be a degree of uncertainty if Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, were to leave the European Union. Equally, I listened to many of the same business organisations say they are looking for a range of interventions, and, indeed, yesterday and again today, some Members asked the Executive to make a range of interventions, and I am sure they will continue to do so at Question Time and in other economic debates that we will have in this place. However, many of those interventions are hampered due to the fact that we are members of the European Union and because of state aid rules in particular. So on things like energy and rates, which the Member mentioned yesterday, if we wanted to offer or afford further relief in industrial derating, that is prohibited by state aid rules. There are a range of areas, and some sectors, such as the fishing industry, for example, which has a base in my constituency, believe that their business, markets and opportunities have been thwarted by being part of the European Union.

I do not accept either that an economy the size of the United Kingdom's, being the fourth or fifth largest in the world by whichever barometer you wish to use, would not be able to survive outside the European Union. Yes, there would be change, and I understand the concerns that some have about that, but I think that it is a lack of ambition to believe that an economy the size of the United Kingdom's, of which Northern Ireland is an integral part, could not do well, thrive and survive outside the European Union.

I congratulate the Member on his inventiveness in introducing that at this point, but I was going to address some of the points that Mr McCrossan and his party leader raised about regional imbalance and lack of growth. I understand the points made by Mr McCrossan and, indeed, Mr Eastwood. Sometimes there can be a perception, a feeling, or, in their argument, a reality that there is an imbalance in growth. Yesterday, I was talking to one of our largest inward investors in recent years, a company called Allstate, which, of course, has a presence not just in Belfast but in Londonderry and in the Member's home town of Strabane. I am sure that he, like all Members in the House, would like to see more companies like that investing in his constituency, but I think he should acknowledge, as I am sure he does, that that is a very welcome investment in Strabane. We would like to see that investment by Allstate and companies like it increase not just in Strabane but in all parts of Northern Ireland.

I want to address specifically the point about regional imbalance. We have to accept and acknowledge that the bulk of our population resides in the east of Northern Ireland, particularly in and around greater Belfast. If you look at figures for Invest Northern Ireland support in the 2011-12 to 2015-16 period, you will see that, in the east of Northern Ireland, 282 jobs per 10,000 of the population were supported, while in the west of Northern Ireland, 301 jobs per 10,000 of the population were supported. So, if you take it on a per capita basis and look at not just where the pounds are going but where they are going in respect of where people are, you will see that there is a higher figure in the west of Northern Ireland. If you look at the figures for 2015-16 specifically, you will see that, in the east, there were 28 jobs per 10,000, while in the west, there were 55 jobs per 10,000. Over the last five years as a whole, 64% of the 42,500 jobs supported by Invest Northern Ireland were outside Belfast. So, the perception that all the jobs, or the majority of them, are going to Belfast does not bear scrutiny when you look at the facts.

I accept that creating jobs alone can be only one part of any solution to achieving balanced regional growth. It will therefore be important to continue with investment in the key drivers of economic growth: innovation; research and development; and skills. We know from research that businesses that are innovative and invest more in R&D are more likely to be successful in global markets, employ more people and pay higher salaries; in other words, they provide more and better jobs.

Before dealing specifically with the refocus of the economic strategy, it might be helpful if I briefly outline some of the progress made on it to date. At the time of the development of the economic strategy in 2011, the local economy was faced with many challenges. In line with many other regions and nations, the economy had been adversely impacted by the global economic recession that

had partially reversed some of the positive trends that we had been experiencing up to that time.

Since the publication of the strategy in March 2012, our economic recovery is now well established on a number of fronts. That is most evident by improvements in our labour market statistics. In April, there was a further fall of 600 people claiming unemployment benefits, bringing the total to almost 24,000 fewer since the strategy was launched. In the local economy, we have seen over 38,000 additional jobs, and our employment rate has increased to 69%, up almost two percentage points over that period. Economic inactivity also stands at its lowest point since it has been measured, although there is still some distance for us to go to bring it in line with the UK average.

In the modern workplace, qualifications and ongoing training are becoming more and more important in enhancing people's ability to access better employment opportunities. We have been providing opportunities for people to move up the skills ladder, with almost 300,000 qualifications achieved through higher education, further education and ongoing training over the last Programme for Government period.

In 2013, Northern Ireland's private sector output growth was above the UK average. While that slipped in 2014, it still remains above the level of private sector growth here when the economic strategy was launched.

The most recent data reflects a more positive position across all our main sectors. The services and manufacturing sectors have shown growth in output and jobs, whilst the construction sector — our most impacted sector during the downturn — has posted impressive growth since 2012, albeit still remaining below its previous peak reached in 2007.

The vision set out in the economic strategy in 2012 was long term and reflected the reality that a major rebalancing of the local economy, with a larger, stronger private sector, would take some time.

Positive progress has been made and is reflected across a range of indicators. However, I am clear, as are the Executive as a whole, that much more remains to be done if we are to develop a strong, vibrant, sustainable economy that can provide opportunity and prosperity for all.

2.15 pm

I turn now to the refocusing of the Northern Ireland economic strategy. I have stated that the strategy was designed as a living document, and, when it was drawn up, it was done in anticipation of a positive decision to reduce the rate of corporation tax. The powers to lower the rate of corporation tax to 12.5% from April 2018 have been secured, and this provides a major policy stimulus for making a significant impact on the Northern Ireland economy. I view corporation tax as a key economic lever that can help us to achieve long-term economic goals and ultimately help to secure greater economic growth and more and better jobs for our people. The refocus of the economic strategy will afford an opportunity to ensure that existing policies and strategies are revised and that any necessary new ones are developed to ensure that we can maximise the potential economic benefits of a lower rate of corporation tax.

The addition of reduced corporation tax to our existing investment proposition of talent and value added has the potential to make Northern Ireland the most attractive location in western Europe for new foreign direct investment. The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre has reported that the reduction in the corporation tax rate could lead to an increase in investments from businesses involved in areas such as manufacturing or large-scale research and development, creating in excess of 30,000 new jobs by 2033. Invest NI will continue to focus on attracting high-value FDI jobs, and the agency is working with my Department on detailed research aimed at informing and developing specific, targeted propositions for those sectors to which Northern Ireland continues to offer excellent investment opportunities.

In the strategy, we acknowledge that corporation tax is an important lever to transform our economy but will not in itself be sufficient to make the total transformation that we need. We must continue with efforts to improve other areas in the economy, which will ensure that we can maximise the potential gains from corporation tax, creating the conditions for local private sector growth and economic competitiveness. To achieve this, we must work to strengthen our performance in each of the five key rebalancing themes set out in the economic strategy. We will specifically seek to strengthen innovation and R&D capabilities to support investments; ensure that the supply of skills meets the demands of our economy; deliver business growth across the region; compete globally for high-value investors through targeted promotion and support; and ensure that the appropriate economic infrastructure is in place to meet the needs of new investors. The economic strategy represents an integrated approach to developing and growing our economy. The refocused strategy will continue to encourage and be based on collaboration. To be successful, we have to ensure that we have an effective partnership involving the public, private and voluntary and community sectors.

The motion calls for the Executive to focus on creating more and better jobs in Northern Ireland. To do so, it will be important that the refocused economic strategy aligns with the new outcomes-based Programme for Government. The new approach to the next Programme for Government is out for consultation. This Fresh Start commitment is a marked change from previous Programmes for Government and will require greater collaboration and working together, not just within and across our departmental boundaries but between the public, voluntary and private sectors. This is not only a real challenge but a great potential opportunity.

New thinking and new working methods will be required to deliver progress working together, not just in the Executive but with all partners, including local government, our arm's-length bodies and, importantly, the private sector. This approach to the PFG is completely aligned with the refocus of the economic strategy. No one Department will be able to deliver progress on its own, so collaboration will be essential. This will transform the way we work.

The outcome to which the motion specifically refers is to have more people working in better jobs. I see this as increasing the number of people working in jobs that are sustainable, well paid and offer opportunity for development and advancement. It is also about ensuring that employment opportunities exist at all levels for our

people and encouraging our talented people to remain here for employment and progression up the skills ladder. We must also attract the best talent to Northern Ireland, including attracting back those who have moved abroad, by creating high-value job opportunities.

In supporting the motion, I want to ensure that there is clear alignment between a refocused economic strategy and the outcomes set out in the Programme for Government. Having more people working in better jobs will be about attracting high-quality employers and encouraging growth of indigenous businesses to offer good, sustainable employment opportunities. We will need to ensure that our workforce has the right high-quality skills to meet the demands of employers now and into the future. This will mean that we must work to improve the skills profile of our workforce and the prospects of the future workforce by improving educational outcomes.

The refocus of the economic strategy will give us the opportunity to explore in more detail the issues identified by the next Programme for Government, outline how their delivery can contribute to growing the Northern Ireland economy and, ultimately, deliver more and better jobs for our people.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Glaoim ar Sinéad Bradley. I call Sinéad Bradley to wind.

Mrs S Bradley: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your elevation. I also congratulate the Minister and look forward to working with you both.

A common thread across the debate has been the need for the development of infrastructure — road and digital — alongside the development of skills. Many also expressed concern that an exit from Europe would have serious detrimental consequences for the Northern Ireland economy.

Gordon Lyons said that he had no particular objection to the amendment and recognised the need for a distribution of jobs on a regional basis. Despite this, he stated that foreign direct investors may wish to locate in more developed areas, where their requirements are not compromised in any way.

Colum Eastwood referred to decades of lack of investment west of the Bann and the need to address and tackle the inequalities that exist. Only when that is done, he believes, will foreign direct investors be drawn to such areas, which are in need of high-value jobs, and the export of our young people can finally stop. Mr Eastwood highlighted the lack of tarmac and the need for a large infrastructure commitment west of the Bann. He described as “stupid and reckless” any promotion of the “Leave” Europe campaign with regard to our Northern Ireland economy. He closed by asking the Minister what scoping work had been done to fund the reduction in corporation tax.

Conor Murphy shared the concerns raised by Colum Eastwood about Europe. He mirrored the view of his Government colleague Gordon Lyons when he said that he had no objection, in principle, to the amendment. However, he did not recognise any added value in being specific about high-value or high-skilled and highly paid jobs, as they were, in his interpretation of the draft Programme for Government framework, sufficiently indicated. Mr Murphy also expressed some confusion over the

economic strategy sitting alongside the new Programme for Government, given the calls yesterday for a specific manufacturing strategy. He did, however, say that issues had been brought to the Floor without the opportunity for discussion at Committee. Perhaps the sequence of events rolling forward will help to give clarity to such Members, and Mr Murphy will then be less unaware of the arguments made in support of a specific manufacturing strategy.

Peter Aiken answered Mr Murphy and explained again the need for that manufacturing strategy. He then moved on to the business in front of us and expressed concern at the underinvestment in the higher and further education sector and how that is now reflected in poor world rankings. He called also for a national risk register.

Trevor Lunn said that he supported the motion and amendment. He highlighted the need for updated skills and investment in infrastructure. He warned that a supportive plan needed to be put in place around the reduction of corporation tax.

Tom Buchanan referred to the skills gap. He described a mismatch, in that the skills being developed are not always right for the jobs that are there. He also referred to the need for improved broadband infrastructure.

Emma Little Pengelly cited many of the challenges to growth, such as rates, car parking etc. She highlighted the fact that people require the tools and the skills to become economically active.

Alan Chambers delivered a very measured and considered maiden speech — congratulations on that, Alan. He referred to the need for more investment in the “gold coast” of North Down, and for funding in SERC and other places of education.

Daniel McCrossan referred to the regional imbalance, particularly in Strabane and West Tyrone, describing it as “multigenerational neglect”. Unfortunately, he expressed his lack of confidence in the framework document that we now rely on to develop the Northern Ireland economy.

The Minister addressed many of the issues raised and looked directly at the issue of regional imbalance.

He did try to make a distinction between perception and what might be considered reality.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs S Bradley: Yes, surely. He did recognise the need for growth in the industry. I would like to close by saying that it may be an opportune moment to suggest —

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

Mrs S Bradley: — the need for a ministerial subgroup to address further —

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

Mrs S Bradley: — problems that exist.

Mr Dunne: I too welcome the opportunity to speak, and I call on the Executive to focus on creating more and better jobs and to bring forward an updated economic strategy alongside the Programme for Government.

As I said yesterday, I was delighted that the number one outcome in the draft Programme for Government is that we prosper through a strong, competitive and regionally balanced economy. This puts the economy as the top priority for our Executive. Creating more and better jobs is crucial as we seek to move this country forward and build a better Northern Ireland. Just as Northern Ireland is proudly taking to the field in France in the coming days, we take inspiration from our football team in how we can take on and compete with the world's best. May I take this opportunity to wish the Northern Ireland team well as they put this country on the world stage? They are a real inspiration and are true ambassadors for this proud country. I am sure that you would fully endorse that, Principal Deputy Speaker.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I would appreciate it if the Member would stick to the subject in question.

Mr Dunne: It is very much the subject, as part of tourism, which I move on to. Tourism continues to grow, and I believe that we can see even greater growth here. Tourism is an exciting avenue that we must continue to embrace and develop. The success of world-famous events being hosted locally such as the Irish Open, the Circuit of Ireland rally, the North West 200 and the Giro events highlight how we can attract spectators and competitors to our shores and put on first-class events showcasing the very best of what we have to offer as well as creating jobs and stimulating our economy and tourism sector. One has only to visit the Titanic Quarter on a Saturday afternoon to realise the success of our story with the numbers of tourists and holidaymakers. This can be further linked in with spreading visitors to neighbouring areas like north Down, including the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra, which is a real jewel in our crown and should be further promoted.

The introduction of corporation tax at 12.5% in 2018 will be a vital lever available to us, and Invest NI needs the right support and resources to prepare for this new tool. Promoting Northern Ireland around the world through trade missions is a very valuable way of selling this country and attracting foreign direct investment and also of broadening the horizons of our existing businesses. Having spoken to a number of small local businesses that have been working with Invest NI on trade missions, they really value those trips, which have allowed them to grow their export base, develop their business and, ultimately, create jobs.

Developing our apprenticeships is also vital, building on the work between our universities, our colleges and our schools and developing the STEM subjects. Research and development is another key ingredient to growing our economy and creating jobs. Our thriving agrifood sector, in this year of food and drink, is another example of a vital sector with even more potential.

We also need to get the right infrastructure in place, as has been mentioned several times today, to invest in our roads and transport networks and to ensure that we are connected to the rest of the world through broadband and better mobile coverage, particularly in rural areas. Despite the challenges to our economy, we must redouble our efforts to improve our economic competitiveness, grow our private sector, rebalance our economy, and, ultimately, get more and more people out of unemployment queues and into real and lasting jobs.

I think that we have had a very useful debate. I will now summarise some of the points that have been made, many with enthusiasm.

2.30 pm

Conor Murphy, who spoke as the Chair of the Economy Committee, made the point that we need to focus the Programme for Government on job creation and said that, as Chair, he would work with members of the Committee to develop a strategy on the economy.

Steve Aiken — it is Steve Aiken, I understand —

Mr Aiken: So it is.

Mr Dunne: Good. He recognised the value of our universities and colleges and the need to upgrade skills, especially amongst our young people.

Mr Lunn also recognised the need for a skills upgrade and had some concerns about the future as a strong base for manufacturing and our access to markets. He also recognised the need to support further investment opportunities with the introduction of the new rate of corporation tax and the benefits that will flow from that.

Mr Buchanan made the point on the need for upgrading skills and the gaps that there are within our young people in the workforce. He talked about today's young people in their schools and colleges being the workforce of tomorrow.

Mr Lyons recognised the good work of the Executive in meeting targets — in fact, exceeding targets — through Invest NI in the previous mandate.

Mr Eastwood mentioned the need for more jobs in Londonderry — I believe he said “Londonderry”; I just cannot remember. I remind him that 70% of manufacturing is done outside Belfast.

Emma Little Pengelly made the point about south Belfast. It sounded very much like north Down that she was talking about, but she mentioned the educational excellence and the mix of underachievement; the need for a growing economy; the need for high-value jobs; and addressing educational underachievement.

Alan Chambers made his maiden speech, and made it well. He recognised the needs of the north Down area — as a representative, I fully endorse that. He recognised the need for more workspace and the need to develop apprenticeships.

Mr McCrossan was, I think, the most negative of all. It would be difficult to attract new investors or new visitors to an area having such a negative record put forward.

We have had a very useful debate, and a lot of good points have been made. I hope that we will move forward on it.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to focus on creating high-value, highly skilled and highly paid jobs in Northern Ireland and to bring forward an updated economic strategy alongside the new Programme for Government 2016-2021, which focuses on achieving a regionally balanced economy.

Hospital Waiting Times: Continuing Crisis

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have ten minutes to propose and ten minutes to wind up. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Dobson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the continuing crisis in hospital waiting times, with 376,382 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, diagnostic test or inpatient treatment as of 31 March 2016; further notes that, whilst there has been some limited improvement over recent months, the situation remains considerably worse than 12 months previously; expresses deep concern that the number of outpatients waiting longer than the maximum permitted time increased from 15,000 to 100,000, over 500%, during the duration of the last Assembly term; accepts that targets are set in the interests of quality and safety of patient care and that, with every delay, there is a risk of ailments progressing and patients coming to harm; and calls on the Minister of Health to detail what action she proposes to take to address this unprecedented crisis.

Whilst I am glad we are debating health matters so early in the new Assembly mandate, I take no comfort from the subject matter. Given its seriousness, this is the second time within nine months that I have brought forward a motion on this issue. Just like the debate my party led last September, the overall intention of today's is not to make party political points nor is it to apportion blame. Instead, it is to reiterate to the new Minister, who I wish well with what is undoubtedly the hardest job in the Executive, the sheer scale of the crisis affecting our local patients.

No one in the Assembly will disagree that there is a crisis engulfing our local health service. The most obvious sign of that is, as the motion states, the fact that over 376,000 people were waiting, as of the last official publication of waiting times. That is over 20% — over one in five — of our population. Whilst I welcome the slight decrease in the sheer numbers of people waiting over the maximum permitted times over recent months, the improvements were made only following last-minute funding allocations not through any degree of political leadership or anyone taking control of the wider causes.

On that point, I ask the Minister again specifically about the status of the £30 million announced by Simon Hamilton on 6 March. Whilst the Executive had agreed to allocate £40 million, virtually no record exists of the subsequent allocation. Can the Minister confirm that that money was received and that it is being spent? Nevertheless, the overall crisis is unprecedented; it is far worse than any since the restoration of devolution over 15 years ago. It has even taken the breath away of health experts in other parts of the British Isles.

Whilst I am not asking the new Minister to comment on this — it would not be fair to do so as it was before her time — it is worth remembering the words of Nigel Edwards, the chief executive of the Nuffield Trust, towards the end of last year. He said that heads would roll in England if hospital waiting list figures were on the same scale as those in Northern Ireland. This is not a blip, and it is not a

minor issue; it is the single biggest issue that the Assembly is facing.

So I was pleased yesterday morning to learn that the Minister decided to make a last-minute statement on the issue — whether that was related to the timing of today's motion is immaterial — but I was disappointed by the tame tone of it. In my opinion, it did not generally recognise the severity of the problem. When she was asked by my colleague Robbie Butler whether she accepted that delays meant that patients were coming to harm, I was surprised to hear the Minister assert so definitively that they are not; that they are all under the protection of their GP. Well, if a GP suspects cancer and refers the patient for an urgent scan but that scan is badly delayed, does the Minister still think that the patient is being protected from coming to harm? Of course not. That is a simple example, but it is one that is heartbreakingly too common at present. I am sure that I am not alone in the Chamber in having a considerable number of such cases passing through my constituency office.

In addition, yesterday's comments go against what the experts are saying and what the Minister's own board said last year. Let me quote directly from the 2015-16 draft commissioning plan. It said that spiralling waiting times could lead to severely delayed diagnoses of life-threatening illnesses, with suspected bowel cancer patients particularly at risk. It stated that such delays for assessment and treatment were very significant and that it was possible that, in some cases, increased waiting times for assessment may result in a delayed diagnosis of a serious or life-threatening condition, with a reduced likelihood of a successful outcome. Perhaps, the Minister should reflect in future before making such conclusive statements.

Of course, it is not just cancer patients that avoidable delays are especially detrimental to. The waiting times for cardiology and orthopaedics mean that there are patients finding themselves in increasingly perilous situations whilst all the time having to endure the unimaginable pain and distress of waiting. I do not intend to go over how we found ourselves in the situation where our hospitals are clearly teetering above collapse, as the staff working in them regularly tell me, although I will make one comment: the previous Health Minister and those around him tried to build the narrative that the problems in our hospitals were a direct result of the previous debacle on welfare reform. Let me be clear, especially for the benefit of new Members: they were not. In the year when our waiting lists really got out of control, the fine for failing to implement welfare reform was £87 million. The overall black hole in the Executive's finances was £212 million in that same year. The penalties certainly did not help the waiting times, but they did not cause them either. Short-term funding announcements simply do not work; they especially do not work when trying to run a health service from year to year. Emergency monitoring round allocations worked for only so long before even they proved to be inadequate. All the time, genuine measures such as shifting more care into the community and advancing the broad agenda of TYC appear to have fallen by the wayside.

It can often be forgotten that the issue of waiting times running into month after month is not just an issue that affects our hospitals — far from it. Little in the health service can happen in isolation without impacting on

another service. As well as heaping worry onto families, increasing waiting times have been increasing pressures on our GP surgeries. Primary care is a gateway to our health service. However, the continued management of pain and symptoms for those who have been left waiting for a long time for an appointment is heaping further pressure onto an already over-pressurised primary care system. If the patients are feeling the pressure of being left in an endless queue, so, too, are our health professionals at all levels. That has been very much in the media today. This is a major challenge for the new Minister, and one on which, if it has not done so already, the Royal College of General Practitioners will want to have its say. I know that it has an important message to deliver: addressing the major challenges facing the entire primary care system will benefit the entire health service.

I know from speaking to GPs that they face the daily challenges of repeat prescriptions, increased complexities of patient conditions and the effect of the deep-seated worry that comes with an ill patient being left waiting. We desperately need to move to a sustainable model to allow our health service to plan for the future. My party allows the findings and recommendations of Professor Bengoa and his team. However, I and my party are firm in our belief that decisions about the future of our health service must be made on the grounds of what is best for patient outcomes and well-being rather than focusing inflexibly on buildings and organisation charts. Too much time has been given to the flawed assumption that, if hospital sites close, it would free up endless resources elsewhere. It will not; the savings would be negligible given that the single biggest cost is medical staff salaries and that the consensus is that we need more staff, not fewer. It is the same for the abolition of the Health and Social Care Board: whilst, on paper, it looks like streamlining, moving staff from one administrative body to another will ultimately do little to improve patient outcomes. We need genuine reforms, not ploys. I look forward to working proactively with the new Minister.

Ms Seeley: I begin by thanking the Minister for her attendance here yesterday. It is encouraging that, this early on, she is presenting herself in front of us to deal with these ever-important issues. I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to our front-line staff, many of whom I met out on the canvass trail, who are at their wit's end given the increasing pressures on them in the NHS. I am delighted that, in her statement yesterday, the Minister detailed many of the existing pressures that we are all very aware of, including increasing demand, financial constraints and, most importantly, a slowness to bring about radical change and reform to our health service. I concur wholeheartedly with her sentiment that our biggest problem is the way in which we currently deliver services.

An overhaul is required, and I look forward to Professor Bengoa's report.

2.45 pm

I believe partnership will prove crucial, be that partnership with the Education Department here in the North to address pressures on our health service that could have been prevented through increased awareness or, indeed, partnership with our counterparts in the South so that we share best practice and build on collaborative service developments. I ask the Minister to assure the

Chamber that that will happen and that she will consider the development of a unit in the Health Department, like that in Scotland, to deal specifically with waiting times. I also seek assurances from the Minister that she will treat mental health issues and the waiting times in that service with equal concern.

I wish the Minister well in her role and look forward to the response in the coming weeks to the current crisis. I am confident that her intervention, along with the backing of the Executive, will prove fruitful.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion proposed by Jo-Anne Dobson and pledge the SDLP's desire and determination to play a constructive role in dealing with what has been and can only be described as a crisis. I take the opportunity to wish the new Minister well. This is one of many major challenges facing her, but I also believe that there are many huge opportunities that she has.

I am not one who usually dwells too much on statistics. All too often, the focus is on numbers, and we can lose sight of the fact that each of the statistics is a person. In this case, it is a person waiting for treatment, a person in pain or a person whose life may be put on hold as they wait for confirmation that they will be seen, treated and, hopefully, cured. Today, however, we cannot ignore the statistics. They are totally scandalous. Almost 400,000 people are waiting for a first outpatient appointment, diagnostic test or inpatient treatment. That is four times the population of the Derry urban area.

This is not a problem that has developed overnight, and it will not be solved tomorrow. We need to examine the factors impacting on waiting times, and we need to address them all strategically. There are many contributory causes, and, clearly, the funding constraints facing the Health Department and, indeed, all Departments are a major one. Those pressures are obviously compounded by the huge and ever-increasing demand, a demand that is clearly already outstripping capacity. We should rightly celebrate the fact that people here are living longer — that is, I suppose, evidence that our healthcare system is working in some way or other — but, with that ageing population and the increase in chronic conditions, more pressure is placed on our hospitals, which are bursting at the seams, our Ambulance Service and, as we heard today, our general practitioners.

We cannot look at the waiting list issue as a hospital-only problem. All areas of our system are inextricably linked. We must look at what is being spent where and ensure that strategic long-term planning and investment are forthcoming if the issue is ever to be tackled meaningfully. We all want to see patients get fixed quickly, but we cannot continue with this quick fix approach of lurching from one monitoring round to another in the hope of getting funding to, in some cases, throw at the private sector or the independent sector to pick up the slack. While I, like everyone here, I am sure, have people close to me who are delighted and relieved when they get a letter telling them that their procedure will be carried out, albeit privately, this system is not sustainable and is not satisfactory. We should be investing in our health service, not eroding it, and private companies should not profit from people's suffering. Urgent action is needed in staff recruitment and retention. Nowhere is it required more than in the Western Trust area, where last year £13 million

was spent on locum doctors. That is almost as much as in three other trust areas combined.

Transforming Your Care was heralded as the road map to better healthcare, and while, at the time of its publication, the SDLP agreed with the destination set out in that road map, we also emphasised the need to ensure that we had the fuel to get there. As it is, we have barely got off the forecourt. The implementation of the plan needs investment. Rather than investing to save, the Department seems to have been just cutting to save. The failure thus far to implement TYC sees patients stuck in hospitals due to lack of care packages and, essentially, bed-blocking and exacerbating the waiting list crisis.

While much has been made and will be made of the financial cost of tackling extensive waiting lists, what about the costs of not doing so? Many people, while waiting so long for treatment — Mrs Dobson touched on this — develop further health issues, such as mental health issues. They can gain weight due to the impact on their everyday activities and abilities, and there can be further complications. There are also financial implications for those who are out of work as a result of their condition and those who might have no option —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Durkan: — but to claim benefits or at least try to claim benefits while out of work.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next Member to speak will be Paula Bradshaw. As this is her first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Ms Bradshaw: It is appropriate that I make my maiden speech on waiting lists, a subject raised probably more often than any other on the doorsteps.

In the past, as a city councillor, I worked on many cases with my predecessor Anna Lo, as we tried our best to get that crucial operation or vital diagnosis. Anna, of course, rightly earned a reputation as someone who cared deeply about every case. She recognised naturally that the people bringing cases to her were not just numbers on a page. It was that human touch, more than anything else, that enabled her to break the mould. Anna was also keen to work across all divides, which is why she was so beloved in South Belfast. She attracted support from every corner of the constituency, and hers are certainly big shoes to fill — not literally, admittedly.

I am also proud to know every corner of the constituency, having spent the last two decades working at the grass roots. In my opinion, South Belfast is the most cosmopolitan part of Northern Ireland, and to have this opportunity to represent it and the people in it during the forthcoming period, with exciting developments awaited from Great Victoria Street to Carryduff, is a real privilege.

On the subject of waiting lists, I commend and support the motion at the outset and thank the proposers for bringing it to the Floor. We should not forget the narrative behind this. Someone waiting for a potential diagnosis of a neurological condition, for example, is being left with the worry and concern about that for the entire duration of the wait. If that person has multiple sclerosis (MS), dementia or Parkinson's disease, to name but a few, they

will spend all that time without vital medication, support or even expert information, and their general health will also certainly deteriorate because of the uncertainty. Families and circles of friends are, of course, badly affected too. That is the narrative that we are talking about: not numbers on a page but real lives being lived. It is truly horrifying that anyone would have to wait for a year and a half in such a situation.

It is worth emphasising that the problem, which is worse here than anywhere else in the UK by any reasonable comparison, is the product of an unreformed health service. We have seen money being thrown at the problem in recent months, and yet there has been only a slight improvement. Let us be clear: we do not have endless amounts of money to throw at it. Reform is necessary. Certainly, we need to do all we can to help those on waiting lists now, but we should also be reforming now, to make sure that by the end of this decade no one will face a wait of anything like the length currently being experienced by so many.

It would be interesting to hear from the Health Minister the details of how much of the money allocated to the problem by her predecessor was in fact spent directly dealing with waiting lists. Further, I was concerned to hear in the Health Minister's statement yesterday that she feels that her ability to tackle the issue seems to depend on successful bids in the June monitoring round. The fact is that there will be very few successful bids in the forthcoming monitoring round, a consequence of the previous Executive's inability to make tough financial decisions, even when the case was clear.

That, of course, speaks to the general failure, which we can predict, of the Executive to get serious about general public sector reform and, not least, tackling and reducing the cost of division.

The appalling situation with waiting lists is a direct consequence of inaction on reform. The Minister now has her opportunity to make her mark, and she may rely on us in the Alliance Party to be constructive, if she pursues reform in the manner long known to be necessary. She is about to receive a report and recommendations from the expert panel that will tell her exactly what her predecessor heard from Donaldson, who told him what one of his predecessors had heard from Compton. So it goes on. We have had enough reviews, reports, commissions and panels. How many of them do we need to tell us the same thing before we embark firmly on the reform process?

On these Benches, we will not oppose for opposition's sake, but we are absolutely opposed to waste, inaction and undue delay. Too many people have waited too long for action on reform to make our health service fit for purpose for the thousands of patients currently waiting for vital treatment.

Mr Clarke: At the outset, I apologise for the Committee Chairperson, who has hopefully left the Building by this stage. She is sick this afternoon. She was down to speak. Hopefully, she does not need an appointment with a GP or a hospital. However, she is sick, and I report her apology.

I do not want to underestimate the motion in the name of Jo-Anne Dobson. It is crucial, and, as the Member who has just spoken said, it has been a topical issue for many of us on the doors and, even before we got to the doors, in our constituency offices. As was said yesterday, we should

not politicise the issue because it affects everyone in the community, regardless of community background or where you come from.

The Member who has just spoken referred to the challenges in those reports. It is valid to say that the reports have been completed and things have to be done. It is worth noting that, every time a report comes out, some political parties come at it from an angle of opposing aspects of it. It was encouraging to hear the Member who has just spoken say that it is a case of reform and that we need to reform these things. However, people need to realise that, when we reform things, it brings about change and some of the changes are things that most Members have opposed when Ministers have tried to bring about change.

I do not underestimate the importance of what Ms Dobson said. I fully support and recognise what she said: as stated in the motion, something is required. There is a bit of blue-sky thinking, and we have to tackle this. I do not envy the Minister her task in relation to this. This will come about only if we are all brave when courageous decisions have to be made. We have to support the Minister in those decisions, should that be through Transforming Your Care or other things that have been mooted in the reports.

Whilst we have to be critical of the health service, we have to commend those who work in it in challenging and difficult times. Some Members have mentioned getting more staff. I would have been critical about getting more staff until I met the chief executive of the Northern Trust recently, who said that the trust had had recruitment campaigns for more staff but people did not apply. Maybe that means that the chief executive or the trust have to look at different ways to recruit individuals. It is unfair, however, to assume that the Northern Trust is not recruiting, given that it went out to competition and people did not apply.

Unfortunately, I have needed the health service a considerable number of times over the past number of years. Among the things that I have seen are difficulties with GP appointments and with Dalriada D-Doc sending people to A&E. All those things add more pressure on the health service. We all have a responsibility to bear, not just as politicians but as members of the public, in how we access the health service and whether we are doing so in the correct manner. Do we need to use these people on every occasion? We have an excellent pharmacy in my village of Randalstown, and it can treat people with minor ailments. We are all familiar with A&E departments. I have been in an A&E department when there has been a crisis. When staff come out and tell folk, "We're under severe pressure tonight. Can you go away and come back tomorrow?", I am amazed at the number of people who can step up and walk out of A&E.

That says to me that some of those people should not have been there in the first instance.

3.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I have no issue with the motion as worded. I took encouragement from the Minister's statement to the House yesterday. I took encouragement from her suggestion that there was a decrease in waiting times from December to March. I wish the Minister well, but I cannot offer her any advice. As the Member who spoke previously said, there

have been various reports, but, as I said earlier, people caused previous Ministers problems with the outcomes of those reports and are suggesting different ways of doing things.

I wish the Minister well on this. It needs to be tackled, but it is not just something for the Minister but something for all the parties to get together on, in order to depoliticise the matter of health and address the particular issue.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. This is an important issue, and we in Sinn Féin are more than happy to support the motion. Waiting times for hospital appointments, tests and admissions for inpatient elective care have been persistent problems for successive Health Ministers that they have sought to resolve, and I welcome the Minister's statement yesterday, in which she described excessive waiting times as "completely unacceptable". I also welcome the announcement that she is actively engaged in seeking additional funding as the first step in beginning to tackle the problem. I do not see how anybody can take issue with that approach. The Minister was also right to link excessive waiting lists to the operational ways in which we deliver health services and to the need for change.

To date, interim solutions have been sought by allocating additional funding to tackle what has been characterised as the "backlog". As well as interim solutions, however, we need long-term solutions, and I know that the Minister has her eye on that longer view. I am also interested in hearing from the Minister what proposals and solutions she has received from the Opposition parties about dealing with waiting times. As the Member who spoke previously said, we need more from MLAs than just statements and platitudes here in the Chamber. We need action, and we need it from all parties' offices. We need to see proposals. We need to see that constructive opposition, in order to provide a solution that is in the best interests of all the people whom we represent, not just platitudes in front of the cameras.

A recent audit report put the cost to the health service of missed appointments at more than £11 million a year, and the hospital cancellation rate is significantly higher here than it is in Wales or Scotland. Far too many of those cancellations were down to clinicians rather than patients. Indeed, recent research from health think tank the King's Fund identified the importance of whole-system analysis and sustained action over time as a way of achieving sustainable reductions in waiting times. Its analysis puts great emphasis on the importance of clinical ownership and involvement as being vital to improving outcomes. As somebody said already, our staff in the health service — those on the front line — are our greatest asset. I have every confidence in them working with the Minister to deliver the best possible outcomes for their patients. That will not be easy over the next five years. It will be extremely difficult in the context of the cuts to public services that we have faced for the past five years and will certainly face for some time into the future from the Tory Administration in London. We should never forget that fact, because that is why the health service is facing the difficulties that it is facing now: cuts are coming year on year from the Administration that was originally supported by some of the parties in the Assembly.

We need short-term investment to deal with the waiting times, but we need a holistic, long-term solution, and that

requires backing from politicians here, from senior civil servants and from clinicians. It also requires a mature and constructive conversation between all stakeholders. I therefore urge parties to follow through on what they are saying today. Let us see the constructive opposition. Let us see the proposals coming forward, not only platitudes here in the Chamber. Let us see some papers coming from the Opposition parties to the Minister so that we can all find a solution to this great difficulty that we have with waiting times and ensure that we secure the best outcome for all those whom we represent.

Mr Nesbitt: I am happy to support the motion and to commend my colleague and health spokesperson, Jo-Anne Dobson, for the very constructive approach that she has taken in introducing the motion and in pledging to work collaboratively with the Minister on this issue. I wish the Minister well in what is, perhaps, the single most challenging portfolio in the Executive. Certainly, to judge from my own canvass on the doorsteps, health issues were number one, and I have yet to meet anybody else who was out canvassing in April and May who felt that anything other than health was the most frequently mentioned issue. It was number one on the doorsteps but, regrettably, not for d'Hondt. It was the last Department to be picked, and I believe that the Ulster Unionist Party was the only party ever to take it as a first choice, when Reg Empey plumped for Health in 2007, but there we go.

I ask the Minister to look holistically at these issues, and particularly at emergency departments. The previous contributor asked why people end up there, and it is important that we build our understanding of who sends them there and what their motivations are for sending them down that particular pathway. Of course, we also need to focus not just on people entering the emergency department but on how they exit, because there is, obviously, an issue with flow.

I will take the opportunity to lobby the Minister on a couple of issues. I have no doubt that she will be lobbied, if she has not been already, by the Downe Hospital to say that there is a facility in Downpatrick that could do a lot more in outpatient delivery. That could be one way of easing pressure on waiting lists, as well as using the ward facilities at the hospital for people who no longer need to be in an acute bed but are not yet ready to make it all the way back home, so a sort of step-down facility is available in Downpatrick.

It should be no surprise to the Minister that I am going to take the opportunity to ask her to focus during her term on mental health. We have, quite frankly, perhaps the most appalling per capita rates on planet Earth. It is clearly partly a legacy issue, and there is a triple win there if the Executive deal with mental health as it deserves to be dealt with. We will tackle the legacy issue. We will say to people who are trapped on benefits and do not want to be on them that we will help them into a more fulfilling lifestyle. If we make those people economically active, we rebalance the economy. So, it is a triple win, and it is high time that it was given the priority and the resources needed.

Let me make this pledge to the Minister on resources to tackle waiting times for mental health: I would be happy, as would this party, to support a common approach to London for additional ring-fenced funding on this issue, because it is a legacy issue. If the Prime Minister is prepared to put £150 million into dealing with the past in terms of truth and

justice, surely the mental health legacy issue is deserving of at least that funding from London. It is not covered by the block grant; there are no Barnett consequentials, so he need not worry about what he would need to do for Scotland, Wales or any region of England. The Labour Party has already committed to the concept that mental health is the one area where Northern Ireland can argue for additional, ring-fenced, hypothecated funding. Ivan Lewis, as shadow Secretary of State, made that clear with the publication of the Heenan-Anderson Commission report into long-term poverty in Northern Ireland. I know that his successor, Vernon Coaker, will support an approach for additional funding for mental health issues in Northern Ireland.

Mental health is an issue on which the Executive and the Assembly can take positive action that can convince the people of Northern Ireland that it is worth having devolved institutions here on the Stormont estate. People know that I feel passionately about it, so passionately that not only have I asked Jo-Anne Dobson to stay as our health spokesperson, but I have asked Robbie Butler, who will make the winding-up speech in the debate, to become the Ulster Unionist spokesperson specifically on mental health. I look forward to hearing from him in a few minutes when, no doubt, he will explain why he is so passionate about this issue.

Mr McGrath: I rise today, hopefully in quieter circumstances, to support the motion because I care deeply about the health service of Northern Ireland in general and in my own area of south Down in particular. I worry about the excessive waiting times and the impact that they are having upon people who must wait. It appears that, in some instances, the sick are getting sicker as they have to wait excessive time for treatment. It is therefore timely that this motion is being heard so early in this Assembly mandate.

I met senior officials from the Department of Health just two weeks ago. I kid you not: in response to my suggestion that the health service is not working and is failing people, they seemed insulted that I should say such a thing. They told me that the service was not broken, that they did not need any extra money and that essentially all was rosy in the garden. I think that, Minister, you will have your job cut out convincing senior officials that there is actually a problem, never mind getting them to address it.

The issues span the full length of the service. Some of them have been mentioned. They include long queues at accident and emergency; waiting times for elective operations; excessive waiting times for ambulances, especially in rural communities; inequality when it comes to GP appointment waiting times; long waiting times for appointments with consultants; and so on. The health service, which our own officials — public employees — tell us is in great shape, is certainly anything but.

We have a cycle of problems in emergency care. The ambulance takes too long to arrive. Then you have to wait in a queue outside the emergency department. You eventually get inside, only to have to wait on a bed, which could be a trolley in a corridor, before you eventually get seen by a doctor. Then you have to wait to get up onto the ward. When you want to be discharged, you have to wait until your home care package is in place. If it is not, you have to remain in hospital, not for vital and much-needed healthcare but merely because nobody is available

to care for you when you get back into the community. Bed-blocking is prevalent in the community and is costing tens of thousands of pounds. More importantly, it is denying early medical intervention to those who need it. At discharge, you have to wait a lifetime to get your medicine, and it can take forever for the ambulance to bring you back home again. It is not a pretty picture. Even if the health service officials do not accept that, I certainly do.

I do not think that it is the problem of an individual person. We have a cocktail of problems. We have a population that is growing older and presenting more often with more complex needs. Our staff find the other side of the world much more attractive to work in than here. We have the cutbacks to our budget through the Tory cuts agenda, which is implemented by our Executive. The problems are manifold.

My constituency has local problems, too. As has been mentioned, we have the £65 million Downe Hospital, which was built and opened only a few years ago, yet, time and time again, the trust has removed services from that hospital: 24-hour accident and emergency cover was removed; coronary care has been removed; most of the non-elective surgery is gone. Again, it goes on and on. The hospital has never really had a chance to get opened. As an enhanced local hospital, it could be fantastic support as part of a network of hospitals providing specific care and easing the pressures on our level-1 hospitals.

We are, from time to time, regularly told that it is the safe delivery of services that counts, not the buildings. To me, that is Civil Service speak for, "We could not be bothered to come up with a more imaginative reason". It is the catch-all excuse that is used for cuts to services. I would say to Members that they should be aware when they actually hear it that it may not be the actual reason. I cannot help but think that solutions must be found. The population, as significant contributors through their taxes and national insurance payments, deserve to have the well-paid officials at the top remove their heads from the sand and start solving the problems.

We await the results of the review by Professor Bengoa. I was part of the political panel that met him earlier this year. Whilst he did not say anything that we could disagree with —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr McGrath: — I hope that he does say something that will actually sort the problems out and that it does not become just another expensive method of kicking the can down the road. I support the motion and would like to see resolutions to the problems highlighted quickly in the interests of patients.

3.15 pm

Mr Aiken: I support the motion proposed by our health spokesperson, Jo-Anne Dobson. I want to welcome the Minister and wish her all the best in what must be one of the most difficult appointments in Northern Ireland.

I have a few small points. First, can we look at comparing our waiting lists of 376,000 and 20% of the population? Can we have a statement on how that compares with the rest of the regions in the United Kingdom, particularly Scotland, Wales and the devolved regions in England, where the National Health Service is doing so well? Can we also have a look at what is happening in the Republic of

Ireland? In that way, we would be able to put some context into these horrendous figures and see where we are.

In relation to waiting lists and the key role of the trusts, can we have, and I noticed the Minister mentioned it yesterday, early sight on the thinking of the future of the trusts and any restructuring? As she is probably aware, or should be very aware, there is an enormous issue of morale going on within the National Health Service at the moment and between the trusts. Any comments are likely to add to their uncertainty and may affect the efficiency of the National Health Service and where we go.

Finally, a point —

Mrs Palmer: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: Yes.

Mrs Palmer: Does the Member agree that urgent action is required to reduce the waiting times for patients requiring spinal surgery and referrals, and that even urgent cases are still waiting from October 2015 to see orthopedic consultants?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Aiken: I would indeed agree with the Member. I think that anything we can do to reduce waiting lists and improve the flow of patients through the hospital system should be organised as quickly as possible.

I also ask the Minister to pass on my personal thanks to the staff of Antrim Area Hospital who, despite ever-increasing waiting lists, reduced resources and the rest, have actually been very successful in improving the health of my constituents, particularly in South Antrim. I would also like the Minister to pass on my personal thanks to the Northern Health Trust and Antrim Area Hospital for the recent help given to my family.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Health, Mrs Michelle O'Neill to respond. The Minister has up to 15 minutes.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion and the comments that have been made so far.

Yesterday, I made a statement to the House, as my first piece of business, on the issue of waiting lists. This is a priority for me as Minister for Health and an issue that we need to tackle as quickly as possible. Excessive waiting times are totally unacceptable and, after listening to Members contributions today and in yesterday's debate, I think that everybody understands the reason why we are in the position that we are in and identifies with the fact that there has been an increase in demand for services. We need to address those challenges by investing a lot more in preventing illness and promoting healthy lifestyles. That will require a much-needed focus on reducing health inequalities so that, no matter where you live, you will have the same chance of a long and healthy life. We have to promote healthy lifestyles further to avoid pressure on services. Furthermore, we need new developments, and medical technologies and drugs are also increasing in demand and raising costs, which means that we must use the limited resources that we have in a wise manner.

I welcome the tone of the debate so far, and Members are suggesting that they want to work with me constructively in order to tackle this major issue, and I hope that will be

the case. I am open to listening to suggestions. I listened to some commentary today about the short-term issues and that it is not good enough to just throw money, in monitoring rounds, at the issue. We have to deal with the immediate issue of actually getting patients seen. In order to do that, I will not apologise for bidding into the monitoring process to achieve additional funding. The fact that the Executive gave additional funding to the Department of Health towards the end of last year meant that 80,000 patients actually received treatment. That, for me, is something that we should not shy away from, and I will not apologise for bidding for additional funding — I have to deal with the here and now.

I have a vision for the health service that we shift the focus from acute care and move to the point where we invest heavily in preventative measures and in tackling the root causes of why people get sick in the first place. Catherine Seeley pointed out that I need to work more with other Departments, and I am certainly up for that. I think that there are many challenges in relation to poverty, isolation and all those other things that we need to tackle, and I want to tackle those constructively with other Departments. If we are able to tackle those things and stop people from needing and depending on the health service further down the line, only then are we actually going to make a difference. We are continually going to have this conversation around waiting lists and challenges in the health service, of which there are many. I am two weeks in post and I have identified many areas where we need to reform, make things better and reconfigure services. When I look to the future, I look at what we can do in the short term. That is about trying to deal with the massive and unacceptable lists. When I look to the future, I have to look at where we want to be and how I can chart my way forward.

I really look forward to Professor Bengoa's report because that will be key. I agree that there have been a number of reports. Let us now use Professor Bengoa as a step forward. I will use that to develop my vision. I will put that vision to this Assembly, and I hope that all parties can support that vision. I do not think that we are all speaking with a forked tongue here. I believe that people are genuinely interested in trying to work together and deal with the many challenges in the health service.

If anybody has ideas, I want you to come forward and talk to me. I am a Minister who is open to discussing those issues.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: If you let me just get through a bit and then I will let you come in towards the end.

As I said, the way that we deliver services has to be transformed, and I intend to focus my efforts on making that transformation. I listened today to some contributions from Members, and we are all guilty of looking after our own constituencies and talking about the services in our areas. It is not about buildings; it is about how we provide services to people. I would much prefer to offer people the best possible service that we can offer. That is where we need to focus our attention.

I want to focus my efforts on reshaping our health and social care sector to make sure that we are as effective as we can be. There must be a firmer grip on the strategic direction of healthcare delivery in the North to ensure the best possible healthcare for all our patients.

As I said yesterday, the work of Professor Bengoa is critical. I will speak to him when he comes next week, but he is also offering to speak to all the parties, and I know that other parties have taken that opportunity in the past and I encourage you to do so again. Hopefully, he will produce his final report towards the end of June, and I will be keen to come back to talk to the Assembly about how we move forward with that.

There are also areas for strong cooperation with my colleagues in the South. We will need to build a strong partnership. We have seen where all-island working in the past has been able to deliver for healthcare services, particularly in relation to children's services in Dublin and Belfast. We need to build a lot more on that, find efficiencies where we can and work together to make sure that we provide a first-class health service for all the people on this island.

Mr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I said that I would give way to Jo-Anne Dobson first. I will let you in towards the end.

We all have to rise to the challenge and make the changes that are necessary to ensure that we get a health service that continues to deliver for those in greatest need. The message is very simple: we cannot stand still. We must evolve to survive.

Like others, I recognise the hard work, professionalism and skill of those staff in the health and social care sector. I said that I would engage with front-line staff from day one, and I am glad to have been out on the ground meeting staff. They are the people who are best placed to tell us about the challenges that they encounter every day as they go about trying to look after people and give the best possible care. I very much look forward to continuing to work with staff to chart our way forward. Whilst I have a vision and I want to get political leadership and have other parties signed up to that vision, we need to have our healthcare workers and staff signed up to that vision and believing in it because they are providing the service. That will be my job of work over the time ahead.

Members referred to the fact that this is not a blip. It is certainly not a blip: we can see that. I referred to the fact that June monitoring is not the solution, but it is the solution in the short term, and 80,000 patients have benefited as a result of that. Over the next number of weeks, I will be in discussions in relation to June monitoring and making further bids to allow me to do that. The recent investment means that, for those waiting for their first outpatient appointment, the greatest reduction has been in those waiting for more than 52 weeks, which is down by just under 25% since December. Those waiting for more than 18 weeks is down by 18% and those waiting over nine weeks is down by just under 18%. That is to be commended, but there is a lot more to do and a long way to go.

Looking to the future, I think that the investment is not enough. The issue is not just with money. Money will help us to be able to get some people seen immediately, but it is not just the issue in the longer term. I want to invest in transforming the health service. I want to invest in health inequalities. I want to work with other Departments to be able to head off the issues before they become acute.

Looking to the future, I will continue to hold trusts to account and work with the Health and Social Care Board.

You will remember from yesterday that I pointed out the fact that the board has been tasked with creating the five-year plan for elective care. I intend to make sure that I take full control of that and take the lead in holding trusts to account on the work that they are doing, making sure that they are doing everything possible for elective care.

I fully understand why the motion has been brought to the House. It is for the same reason as I chose to make a statement yesterday: the current situation with waiting lists is not acceptable to me. Waiting lists are still far too long, but it is clear that the recent investments directed towards waiting lists are making a difference. It will take time and significant non-recurrent and recurrent investment to bring waiting lists back to an acceptable level whilst trying to increase capacity to meet demand.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: The reality is that we do not have the capacity in the health service at this time to deliver for people in the manner in which we wish to. I want to get to the point where we are not using the private healthcare sector, because I believe that is money that we could invest in increasing capacity in the health service. Whenever we look towards having a health service that is free at the point of delivery and free for all, we need to seriously address the root causes of why people get sick. Only when we get to that stage will we truly have a health service that is on a sustainable footing.

I will give way to Jo-Anne Dobson very quickly.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I want to raise a point I raised yesterday, again in my speech and now for a third time. Minister, this is specifically about the status of the £30 million announced by Simon Hamilton on 6 March. Whilst the Executive previously agreed to allocate £40 million, virtually no record exists of the subsequent allocation. Can the Minister confirm that that money was received and is in the process of being spent?

Mrs O'Neill: As I pointed out in my statement yesterday, tackling excessive waiting times is obviously high on my agenda for improvements. The additional £30 million that was committed by my predecessor was obviously an important step in allowing us to reach the 80,000 people whom I referred to. It will support up to 25,000 additional assessments and some 12,000 additional treatments across a wide range of specialities, including orthopaedics, gastroenterology, neurology and ENT. Importantly, it will see a £10 million investment in diagnostic services, building capacity to support up to 50,000 additional tests to help meet increasing demands, as well as supporting seven-day services. Trusts have also been asked to put in place arrangements to continue to undertake additional in-house activity during the first quarter of 2016-17.

Again, I go back to the point that, on its own, that investment is not enough. The money will allow us to get treatment to those people as early as we can, but it is not enough. This is not simply a money issue. I am asking the Assembly to support me in transforming the health service and to be constructive. As I said, I listened to the contributions to the debate, and, although they were by and large constructive, sometimes a bit of political point-scoring slipped in. I ask Members to rise above that to help me to help people and to transform the health service, because that is certainly the job I am committed to in the time ahead.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Robbie Butler to conclude and wind up the debate, for which he has 10 minutes, I point out that this is Mr Butler's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. Therefore, the normal convention of the House will apply, which is that a private Member's maiden speech is not interrupted. However, if you make remarks that are deemed to be very controversial, you may, in fact, lose the protection of the House on that. I call Mr Butler.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Just before I begin my maiden speech, I would just like to make the House aware of some breaking news that a man and two children have been struck by lightning in Lisburn and taken to hospital. I am sure that, as a group, we wish them well in their recovery.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Butler: Mr Speaker, I look forward to the day when I do not have a piece of paper in my hand to deliver a speech in the House, but you will forgive me for my nerves. It is a privilege to address you all in the House as an MLA. I also think it is important that the first topic I am speaking on is the greatest challenge facing the Executive at present: the very serious crisis in our local health service.

As a former councillor in Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, I acknowledge that I have limited knowledge of the procedures of the House. However, I have spent over 20 years as an employee and manager in the public service. Training and experience in that capacity have taught me that working together for the common good can be achieved only by recognising respect for all. As a Christian, I believe there is no place for hatred or bitterness towards those who express opposing views; indeed, I suggest that angry and aggressive positions adopted in that regard suggest an inability in people to defend their position and are an attempt to appeal to an audience.

3.30 pm

I am here to represent all the people of Lagan Valley — I was born in Lagan Valley and continue to live there — and I will give my best to do so. I am a proud member of the Ulster Unionist Party, which has a rich heritage in Lagan Valley. The party enjoyed a return to form there with me and my running mate Jenny Palmer enjoying electoral assurance from the voters. I would like to thank the electorate of Lagan Valley for their unequivocal support and their vote of confidence, and I would like to put on record my commitment to the role of scrutinising and holding the Executive to account for their actions, inactions and performance in this mandate. Our collective duty is to work tirelessly, represent the concerns of the community and remember that we work for them and not for ourselves.

Northern Ireland is a country that we should all be proud of. We could remember that 42 United States presidents had their roots in Ulster. We have produced leaders in sport: in golf, rugby and boxing, to name but a few. As mentioned earlier, the national football team is preparing for the Euros in France, and I wish them great success. If we consider the achievement of our country's football team, perhaps we, as a House, can draw on their process for working together to make this country great again.

I hope we can all agree that health is an issue that is far too important to get caught up in political wrangling. The

376,000 people referenced in today's motion deserve better. I was delighted and honoured to be given the role of spokesperson on mental health for the Ulster Unionist Party. My party recently produced a policy paper on mental health, and no one can deny the shameful statistics that have been published on this country's atrocious rates of suffering due to poor mental health and well-being. The legacy of the Troubles, terrorism and associated criminality contribute heavily in this regard, and, coupled with poor government strategy and direction, that is leading to the social inequalities and social deprivation that blight our society.

There are problems with our waiting times that do not simply apply to physical ailments. For instance, regionally, at the end of March 2016, the number of patients waiting longer than nine weeks to access adult mental health services had increased compared with the position at the end of March 2015. At the end of March 2016, 338 patients were waiting longer than nine weeks, which was an increase of 201 compared with the previous year.

My various roles whilst working in the Fire and Rescue Service taught me that, although intervention is a vital component to ease the suffering and save the lives of those affected by trauma, the most effective strategy must be prevention. It is to that end that I would like to see a process developed that delivers an infant mental health framework that identifies and addresses issues at children's earliest stages, coupled with a compulsory educational element for schoolchildren that looks at social and emotional learning and will complement the development of our children into healthier and happier adults. I give my personal and party commitment to raise the profile of mental health and well-being with the Minister and the Health Department and to seek parity of funding that will ensure that those who suffer are afforded the care required to help them live their life to their full potential.

The need for timely access to professional medical assistance is fact and cannot be a point for debate in the House. Sadly, my constituency of Lagan Valley has suffered over the last two mandates with the removal of the 24-hour accident and emergency facility, which was replaced by almost office-hour access. Patients are unarguably being put at greater risk through lengthy waiting times that contribute to poor health and increased recovery times. Sadly, earlier this year, in Lagan Valley alone, 2,944 people were waiting longer than 18 weeks for their first consultant-led appointment. That is 2,944 people whose physical and mental health suffer, not due to their own actions but because they cannot gain access to a specialist or a consultant within the prescribed 18-week time frame. I look forward to working with my party colleague Jo-Anne Dobson and, indeed, all members of the Health Committee, who I know share a common vision to see a healthier community with a greater sense of well-being for others.

I listened attentively to what was being said, and it was probably one of the best sessions that I have sat in on. I believe that there may indeed be a collective will in the House to see increased health and well-being for all the people of this community.

My colleague Jo-Anne Dobson opened the debate and pointed out a number of well-documented statistics. Perhaps the most startling of those is that over 20% of the population is on extended waiting lists. I do not think that there was a Member who disagreed with that. However,

she was disappointed by the Minister's response to my question yesterday. Jo-Anne pointed out that there were increased pressures on carers, professionals and the healthcare system, and she called for genuine reform.

Catherine Seeley praised the Minister and front-line staff. She called for an overhaul of the health service and welcomed Professor Bengoa's report. She looked forward to possible cross-departmental strategies, which I like the sound of, given my call for education as an essential component.

Mark Durkan supported the motion and stated that statistics cannot be ignored because they are not statistics but people. He said that the statistics were scandalous and that demand was fast outstripping capacity. Mr Durkan ended by saying that investment, not profit, was the way forward.

Paula Bradshaw gave her maiden speech, and I congratulate her on that. You did not seem to have the nerves that I had, Paula. She paid tribute to Anna Lo, the former MLA for South Belfast, and commended and supported the motion. She spoke about the psychological burden of the lengthy wait that people were forced to endure.

Trevor Clarke said that it was an issue that had been topical on the doorsteps throughout the canvass. He reminded us that reform requires change, which I think we would all accept. Trevor had no issue with the motion. He encouraged the Minister by saying that he looked forward to working with her and hoped that health would be depoliticised.

My leader, Mike Nesbitt, said that the number one issue had to be health. That was the number one issue on the doorsteps pre-election. Regrettably, it was the last Department to be selected in the d'Hondt process, which we all noted. That was disappointing, given that it was the number one issue for the electorate. I was glad to note that he raised the profile of mental health. I have already stated that I am privileged and proud to take on that mantle. I hope that other Members will take on board the importance of mental health and where we need to put it within the Health Committee.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Butler: I cannot really talk about the Minister because I do not have much time to finish the winding-up speech, but I thank her and look forward to working with her.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the continuing crisis in hospital waiting times, with 376,382 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, diagnostic test or inpatient treatment as of 31 March 2016; further notes that, whilst there has been some limited improvement over recent months, the situation remains considerably worse than 12 months previously; expresses deep concern that the number of outpatients waiting longer than the maximum permitted time increased from 15,000 to 100,000, over 500%, during the duration of the last Assembly term; accepts that targets are set in the interests of quality and safety of patient care and that, with every delay, there is a risk of ailments progressing and patients coming to harm; and calls

on the Minister of Health to detail what action she proposes to take to address this unprecedented crisis.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

Tourism: East Antrim

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic has 15 minutes, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Lyons: I am pleased to have been able to secure this Adjournment debate. Tourism in East Antrim has huge potential, but I do not think that that potential has been exploited to the extent that it could. Mr Speaker, you and the Minister will be glad to hear that I do not intend just to say wonderful things about my constituency or take you on a tour around East Antrim, although I am sure that I will be able to fit that in at some stage. However, we do have some real asks for tourism and real actions that we would like to see to ensure that the tourism industry in East Antrim can thrive.

Tourism in East Antrim has long had much to offer. Carrickfergus Castle has been around longer than any of us, and the Antrim coast road has been there even longer. East Antrim has been able to offer an awful lot to visitors to that part of the world. However, things have changed recently. I hope that all Members will be aware of the Gobbins cliff path, which opened last August and is again open to visitors after a brief closure. This has completely changed the potential for tourism in East Antrim. A key part of our tourism offer now has the potential to bring in even more tourists.

Many years ago, I worked on the north coast at the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge and at the Giant's Causeway. Back then, busloads of folk came up from Dublin for the day. They went to the causeway or to the rope bridge and then headed back to Dublin. They spent very little money up here. There was no overnight stay; they were shipped in and shipped out. I want that to change, and it has begun to change as Titanic Belfast brings more people up to Northern Ireland and keeps them here for longer. Instead of tourists coming up to Belfast and heading straight up to the north coast, I want them to go via Carrickfergus, via the Gobbins, via Larne and via the Antrim coast road. I want tourists to spend more time here, especially in East Antrim, and I want them to stay in local accommodation so that we can increase what we can do in tourism.

I believe that we now have the tourism product and a lot to offer. We have the castle, which I am very glad is now in the control of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. I hope that changes can be made to its opening times and to what is offered there so that it can attract more visitors.

From the castle, tourists can go up the coast to the beautiful town of Whitehead. They can then go to the Gobbins and, on the way back from there, get an ice cream from The Rinkha. Mr Speaker, if you have never been there and had an ice cream, I encourage you, and other Members, to do so. I know that the Minister is very keen on ice cream from The Rinkha.

Mr Kennedy: Do you have an interest to declare?

Mr Lyons: For the record, I have received no free ice cream from The Rinkha or anything else that I might have to declare — I thank the Member for that.

Tourists can then make their way on up through Larne and further up the Antrim coast road. Perhaps, in a few years' time, they will even be able to stop off at Magheramorne. Not only is 'Game of Thrones' being filmed there but there are great plans for a diving centre and a cycling centre. I have no doubt that Mr McMullan will want to mention Cushendall and more of what is up there in the glens, which is a beautiful part of the world and has much to offer tourists.

I say to the Minister today that we very much believe that we have the product to offer to tourists who want to come to Northern Ireland, but we now also have the infrastructure. As I already mentioned in the Chamber today, we were very pleased that, during the last mandate, we were able to secure the construction of the A8 and A2. Mr Kennedy might like to say as something about that, but we are very pleased that the Finance Minister and the Minister for Regional Development worked together and put those projects in place. It now means that there is ease of access to East Antrim, via both Larne and Carrickfergus, from Belfast. That has been very positive. We have the product and the infrastructure — we just need the tourists to be able to come. A lot of that comes down to marketing, and that is where we ask the Minister to come in and help out.

First, we ask for the Minister and his Department to work very closely with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council over the coming months.

We would appreciate the Minister, or some of his officials, meeting the council as it develops its tourism strategy and seeking to get a strategy in place from a council level that will help as it promotes mid- and east Antrim to people in Northern Ireland, and indeed, the world.

3.45 pm

I would also like the Minister to speak to Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland about what steps can be taken to promote the fantastic attractions and the tourism product that we have to offer. There are various signature projects across Northern Ireland: the Giant's Causeway, the Mourne, St Patrick and Titanic Belfast. We believe that we have something really special to offer in East Antrim, specifically, the Gobbins. When it was first opened in 1902, there were more visitors to it each year than to the Giant's Causeway. Due to the limitations on site, and because of the nature of the bridges and the tunnels, it is hard to get huge numbers down there. However, there is still huge potential to increase the number of visitors to make it a real hub for tourism. I ask the Minister to consider whether the area could become another signature project and ask Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland what further steps can be taken to show the world what we have to offer. We have wonderful scenery — the Gobbins and the castle — some fantastic restaurants and great food and drink on offer, and we ask for that to be given consideration.

I invite the Minister to East Antrim. I know that he is a regular visitor, especially during the summer months, but I would like to invite him so that he can see The Gobbins for himself. When he speaks to other people in the industry, he will be able to give a first-hand account of what is offered. We look forward to him visiting us.

Finally, we understand that tourism is not isolated; we do not think of our tourism strategy in terms of specific areas, as much as I would like the Minister to emphasise the

importance of East Antrim as part of the overall Northern Ireland product. We need to take steps to help tourism more widely in Northern Ireland, which will also benefit East Antrim, and there are a number of issues that we need to discuss.

The first, perhaps, is connectivity; we need to be better connected with the rest of the world, and we are really pleased with some of the movement that has taken place on that so far. We have more flights from more destinations coming directly to Northern Ireland, and that is extremely helpful as we seek to make it as easy as possible for people to come here. We ask that the Minister continue to raise that issue to ensure that more people come to Northern Ireland.

Earlier, I spoke in the Chamber about the importance of links with the south-east of England, and with Heathrow in particular. We have made it clear as a party that we want to see Heathrow expanded as, we believe, we need to have access into that hub airport so that more people can visit us. We have again, as a party, raised the need for UK-wide action on air passenger duty, which is very restrictive and actually dissuades people from travelling here, and we want to see people move as freely as possible.

There is also the issue of tourism VAT, and we ask the Minister to raise this with his counterparts in Westminster; it is an issue that needs to be dealt with at that level. It is really a tax on tourists; a tax on holidays; a tax on those who would come here; and a tax on accommodation providers. We would like to see some action taken on that.

With regard to Tourism Ireland — we have raised this point before — it is responsible for marketing Northern Ireland outside the island of Ireland, and we want to ensure that Northern Ireland gets its fair share of coverage and promotion, because we have so much to offer.

Berkeley Deane Wise started a resurgence of interest in tourism in East Antrim when he opened The Gobbins at Cliff Path a hundred years ago. That is what we want to see happening again. We have already outlined, and I have no doubt that other Members will outline, what we have to offer. We want to see that resurgence happening again. We want to see more people coming to East Antrim so that we can improve our local economy, as well as show people in the world what we have to offer.

Sometimes people say that tourism is the poor relation in terms of jobs compared with other sectors in our economy, but tourism sustains many jobs across Northern Ireland. It is not just about those who are directly involved, such as those working in tourist attractions such as the Gobbins; shops, restaurants and other businesses along the way all benefit from more people being in East Antrim and in other places and from people spending more money. We should never look at tourism as some kind of poor relation. We should see tourism as a sector and an industry that has huge potential and that can really deliver more prosperity and more opportunities for our people.

I extend the offer once more to the Minister to come along to see what East Antrim has to offer. If he does that, he will be well positioned to go out and sell it to the rest of the world.

Mr McMullan: Ireland is one of the most popular tourist destinations, and one of the must-see parts of any holiday is the Antrim coast road and glens. Other sites include

Carrickfergus Castle, the Gobbins in Larne, Glenarm village, Cranny Falls in Carnlough, Glenariff forest park, the picturesque village of Cushendun and my own village of Cushendall, which is one of the most recognised places to call to and has one of the biggest festivals in Ireland with the Heart of the Glens festival.

Despite that immense beauty, those attractions are still not being promoted on an all-Ireland basis. The previous Member gave a very good overview, but not once did he mention the tourist product in the South of Ireland, which is vital to our economy and to tourism here. Our tourist sector has the potential to attract increased investment — for instance, through the rural development programme — which will help to generate increased revenue and, ultimately, lead to an increase in jobs.

Our landscape and natural features are already on the world stage after events like the Giro d'Italia bike race, where the Antrim coast road was seen across the world. Who could ever forget that iconic scene of the horses racing across the beach in Carnlough following the cyclists? We never capitalised on that, which is our failure. If that had happened anywhere else, the scene would be used and used and used, but we did not use it. 'Game of Thrones' is now being filmed in Larne, Glenariff, the Antrim coast road, Carnlough, Glenarm and the caves in Cushendun. Those destinations are just a few of the tourist sites, but they must be marketed and marketed properly.

Tourism NI, along with the two councils — Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council — must put a programme together. It is not that long ago that I contacted one of the two councils that I mentioned, and they still had not put their tourism strategy together, nor their tourism staff. Councils should have all of that in place, because tourism is our biggest earner. Putting all these programmes together must come with budgets. We must generate and increase visitor spend. If councils put their policies together, they must put their budgets together, because this cannot be landed on the Minister's office or the tourist organisations alone; we must do our bit as well.

Two of the biggest attractions not yet promoted here are the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East. Those two trails have proven highly successful, but they are yet to be promoted here. Why? Because both of them stop at the border. Ireland's Ancient East has been remarkably successful; it promotes all the main sites to see on the east coast of Ireland. It comes the whole way up the east coast but stops.

We are part of that east coast of Ireland. Why can we not get that over the border? I ask the Minister to look at that. The Wild Atlantic Way should be connected to the Causeway coast and glens, right through the Giant's Causeway and round the island of Ireland.

The Member mentioned the A8. That A8 now connects the whole island of Ireland; it can now bring the visitor from as far away as Cork and Kerry right up to here on our motorways, right to our doorstep. We have the port of Larne sitting on our doorstep. We have all those things, but we do not seem to be able to get them out there and manage them.

Why should everything stop at the border? Let us try to bring the visitor to our east coast. It is the same with the Wild Atlantic Way; that must be brought in, too. Members,

we must promote our domestic product as well as the international product. To be successful, the Assembly, along with the councils and tourist organisations, must work together to ensure that we maximise the tourist experience for the benefit of all the providers in East Antrim. Those providers are relying on us to get the product right; we must maximise the product that we have so that we attract more visitors to the area. The more visitors, the more spend, the more jobs, so we must involve the whole island of Ireland. We cannot be secular and look from here to England or anywhere else, because England is going to the South of Ireland as much as it is coming here. We must open up as an all-Ireland product. The potential is there if we just have the nerve —

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. I believe that the Republic of Ireland is key as well. I am quite happy for people visiting the Republic of Ireland to come up to Northern Ireland; that is great. However, the problem with Tourism Ireland is that, sometimes, we feel that — like you have just said with the Wild Atlantic Way — people are going to the South but are not coming up to Northern Ireland. That is what we need to work on to make sure that we are getting the visitors up here as well, or, sometimes, instead of down there; that is OK with me, too.

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Member an extra 30 seconds.

Mr McMullan: Thank you.

I thank the Member for the intervention. I agree with you. Take my village of Cushendall. From nothing, we started up what is now recognised as one of the biggest festivals in Ireland. It goes for a full week. That was done by local people getting together and recognising that there was a product. People are now taking their holidays to coincide with the festival. That can be done anywhere if the will is there to do it.

Mr Beggs: Tourism is of growing significance to the Northern Ireland economy. When there was instability, tourists did not want to come here. Thankfully, that has changed; we now need to try to maximise the opportunities that arise with the growing number of tourists coming here. The Titanic centre in Belfast and the new Giant's Causeway centre have proven to be very successful, but one of the difficulties with them has been that they have tended to be day-tripping locations for people coming from the Republic or perhaps coming off a cruise ship. We need to get people to stay overnight and look at other opportunities that are here. I certainly believe that East Antrim, which is located on the famous, spectacular Antrim coastline, is well-placed to try to make use of the potential that exists and build on those two successful centres.

The East Antrim landscape is beautiful, and we have a fantastic history, particularly with Carrickfergus Castle. Of course, Carrick, at one stage, was the capital of Northern Ireland, and so much of its history is there to be seen. The council has provided a very useful museum. The castle, which was built in 1177 by John de Courcy, is a feature that offers greater opportunity for tourism. The Department, the Executive — there can be different Departments involved — and the local council all need to see how better we can utilise such a facility to maximise the opportunities, so that it can become more flexible and so that the showing available can better demonstrate the history and become an even better attraction.

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

4.00 pm

It is fascinating that it was seized by the Scots, the Irish and the French and even played a small part in the American war of independence, with John Paul Jones having a skirmish off the coast — quite remarkable. It was, of course, the site where King William III landed when he came to Ireland. He went on up to stay at the White House in Newtownabbey. It is part of the Williamite trail on to the Battle of the Boyne. There are opportunities there for tourism. Indeed, this Saturday is the annual celebration of the landing of King William III in Carrickfergus. Any tourist who goes along to that will have a fabulous day. Period costumes, horses, bands — what a spectacle. If you were on holiday in any other part of the world and came across an event such as that you would find it unbelievable that it is all being provided free. That is wonderful for tourists who visit.

We then have the picturesque town of Whitehead with the Victorian tea rooms. That is the location of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which provides steam journeys for rail enthusiasts. Of course, as others said, there is the Gobbins cliff path, which is quite a spectacular walk in the natural environment. It is receiving great reviews from those who have walked it and has proven very popular. There are many other fantastic facilities available, vistas that, in the past, people were not really as aware of as they should have been. Visitors who see them cannot help but be impressed. I think of Portmuck, Brown's Bay, the Woodburn dams in Carrick and, of course, Glenoe waterfall and Ballygally.

Moving on down the coast, we have Glenariff Forest Park, where there are similarly wonderful walks. There is the new glamping facility, where £1 million has been spent to provide camping as you have never known it. Again, that is a wonderful facility. In the village of Glenarm, we have the Dalriada Festival each summer, which is growing and is very popular. There are the glens and the beauty down in Carnlough, Cushendall, Cushendun and Waterfoot, where people escape from the hustle and bustle of modern Belfast and go into a wonderful environment with friendly folk. As others said, 'Game of Thrones' is providing opportunities, given the many sites that have been used in East Antrim. There are great opportunities, but I think the Department with responsibility for tourism needs to work closely with other Departments and councils to make the most of them and promote the East Antrim area.

Mr Dickson: There may be many things in East Antrim that separate its elected representatives, but one thing that will certainly unite us this evening will unite us is extolling the virtues of East Antrim as a tourist destination. It does not matter which party or which part of East Antrim you come from. I hope that the Minister will be delighted to hear a united voice when it comes to extolling those virtues, but, equally, there are things that we would like the Minister to do. As other Members made reference to, there are other things we think need to be done to enhance the tourist uptake in East Antrim to make us the number one go-to place for a tourist who visits Northern Ireland. 'National Geographic' magazine has cited the Antrim coast road as one of the must-see places in the world. I think if we are on that list, we have definitely got some things right in East Antrim.

The role of councils is vital. They have been charged with a very heavy burden in developing tourism. Reference has been made to whether they are up to speed or not up to speed in delivering that, but they have now had a full year in operational mode. We should probably recognise that, strictly speaking, the constituency of East Antrim also includes Antrim and Newtownabbey Council with the spectacular Loughshore park and the facilities that it provides and the areas all the way to the coast and glens. So, we actually have three councils, one with not so much responsibility perhaps but two with very clear and very large responsibilities. Whatever their level of responsibility, I hope that the Minister ensures that we have a great deal of cooperation between those councils in delivering for us. So, I think that cooperation between the councils is vital, and I am sure that the Minister's Department wants to oversee that, not just in respect of East Antrim but in respect of tourist facilities and activities across Northern Ireland.

I thank my colleague Mr Lyons for bringing the debate and for reminding us about the virtues of 'The Rinka' ice cream. My wife and I enjoyed ice cream there on Friday evening. We should not forget that Mid and East Antrim not only has 'The Rinka' for ice cream, but is the manufacturer of some of the best ice cream in Northern Ireland because Maud's has its production facilities in Carrickfergus and plenty of retail outlets across the area as well.

I have been in places such as Carnlough. Indeed, one morning not that long ago in Carnlough, I spoke to a couple of bus drivers who had brought visitors to that village very early in the morning. I asked them where they had come from and where they had set off from; and they had actually left Dublin at 7.00 am. They were in Carnlough by 10.30 am. They were looking for a cup of tea and facilities at that time and were heading on to the Giant's Causeway. It caused me to think, Minister, about how we could ensure that those folk perhaps had better spent that bed-night somewhere in East Antrim, rather than taking the stretch from Dublin to there in one go. I do not want to decry the amazing tourist opportunities that there are on the whole island of Ireland, but, of course, we want to be very selfish and ensure that we get the maximum spend from tourists as they come to us in East Antrim.

I need to be careful about what I say with regard to this, but it is important for us to note the benefits that membership of the European Union has had for us in developing the tourism take in East Antrim. We have benefited from substantial grant aid, whether for the Gobbins, the A2 and the A8 road schemes or the refurbishment of the train from Dublin to Belfast. All those have been benefits of our European membership. Perhaps I have just got as far as I might get in extolling the benefits of EU membership for us in the tourism take.

While I am on the subject of the train, I will suggest that one of the things that the Minister might want to take up with his colleagues is connection times between the Dublin train and those that go from Belfast into East Antrim as far as Larne. It is very frustrating for business commuters, and I am sure it must be equally frustrating for tourists, to arrive and discover that there is no connecting train service and there may be a substantial period of time to wait.

The bottom line is this: like all tourism products, unless you keep refreshing them and putting them in front of a world market, you are not going to be able to attract new

and more visitors. I hope that that is what the Minister will tell us about this evening: how much he is enthused by wanting to market not only Northern Ireland but particularly the tourism advantages of East Antrim.

Finally, I have one other negative point about tourism; it is our archaic, outdated licensing laws. That is another aspect that we need to look at in this mandate of the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): It is worth reminding the House that there are, of course, other ice cream providers.

Mr Hilditch: I thank Mr Lyons for securing this Adjournment debate on tourism in East Antrim. I also welcome the Minister and thank him for giving up his time this afternoon.

Probably not that long ago, we had the opportunity of a very similar Adjournment debate in the last mandate. It is good that we can continue the theme from the outset of the new mandate. We can put down markers for the next five years. Make no mistake: politicians will need to work together, at central and local government levels, to create the environment that will allow private sector partners to deliver a product that can go a long way to boost the economy in East Antrim.

Some may think that today's Adjournment debate is slightly premature, but it links perfectly with the last debate, just over a year ago, when the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister said that the new super-council of Mid and East Antrim must continue to work alongside Invest NI to drive economic development in the area. That first stage is about to come to fruition, with the finalisation of the tourism strategy in the coming weeks. It is a real opportunity to showcase and maximise the attraction of the likes of the Causeway coastal route, the Gobbins path, Carnfunnock and Carrickfergus Castle, to name but a few attractions.

I believe that, in the coming years, a number of actions should flow from that strategy, including master planning, for example, using the Gobbins as the focal point. A master plan could be developed, linking in the immediate area of Islandmagee and Blackhead into the existing master plans to the south in Whitehead and Carrickfergus, and similarly to the north through Larne, Glenarm and onwards up towards the glens.

Partnership is key to moving forward between government, the private sector and the community and voluntary sector. While the days of the old regional tourism partnerships (RTPs) are at an end, it is imperative that collaborative working between councils continues. While Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is at the centre of the constituency, there is a vital role for the Causeway and Antrim and Newtownabbey councils, and even Belfast City Council, to link into projects moving forward. The RTPs served their purpose, but now a modernised framework must be put in place to benefit the constituency and serve a wider unified area.

I welcome the commitment of Tourism NI and the commitments of a previous Minister. It is also encouraging to see some of the recent developments from the private sector. I am acutely aware of the priority given to the Causeway coastal route by some of our well-established tour companies, particularly those that link into the cruise

ship boom. Another recent development has been the launch of the East Antrim coastal tourism hub, a project delivered by Carrickfergus Enterprise. It was funded by the coastal communities fund element of the Big Lottery and helps service providers in Carrick, Larne and Newtownabbey to develop their businesses in reaching out to visitors and in encouraging more spend in the area and, at the same time, provides mentoring to develop their businesses. There have already been tangible benefits from the project by way of job creation.

It is not all whistles and bells. There have been issues of concern in the industry. One of the biggest blows, particularly to the accommodation providers, has been the demise of the Troon ferry. That has resulted in a real downturn in trade from the very natural linkages with Scotland. We have heard about North/South links, but there are also east-west links. Those linkages with Scotland provided the accommodation sector with a traditional trade that it relied on. I hope that that will be to the fore in any strategy or planning.

As was said, the infrastructural developments of the A2 and A8 have helped with the better movement of people coming into the area, but signage is a bugbear with many in the industry. If the rigid rules governing signage were to be given some thought, it would be very much welcomed by those who want to put their facilities on the map. Hopefully, a future strategy could help to deal with those matters.

Finally, I highlight the issues around hosting events in the area. Previous events have been important to the local economy, particularly in Carrick and Larne where, under the old council's programming, they were crucial in attracting visitors to the area, even just as day visitors, because the spend is equally as important. Those towns were able to reap the economic benefits derived from good programming. While we still have a few big-ticket events, like the Dalriada Festival, and even, in the Ballymena area, golf's Northern Ireland Open, a focus should be given to the smaller, more localised events that are often run by local organisations, clubs and volunteers. We have witnessed Departments walk away from potential growth events like the Lughnasa Fair and the ladies' international soccer tournament in Carrickfergus. Very small sums of investment are required, despite the fact that such events have the potential to achieve government targets, if delivered right.

There is a real opportunity to develop cultural tourism through the events. One only has to look at the weekend past, with the Bruce anniversaries, the tented village, and knights jousting in the shadow of Carrickfergus Castle. There were thousands of spectators, many of whom were from all over the world, courtesy of the cruise ship/bus link-up tours. Each of them got an experience of some of the best that Northern Ireland has to offer. Again, this weekend, as was said, the annual pageant of the landing of William at the same location will attract many thousands of people to the area. I think that that is the only day of the year that I have hair, if anybody wants to come along to see that.

We have touched the surface for the potential of tourism in East Antrim. It is only with a collaborative, cross-departmental and partnership approach that we can raise the bar and make it work.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): It may well be worth a visit to see you with hair.

Mr Attwood: Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your appointment to the role. Obviously, I am not an MLA for the area, but I spent much of my childhood there. We had day trips from Greenisland up the Antrim coast and holidays in Ballycastle, so that may give me a little bit of insight. The clock is not on, so I am sure that I will get an extra bit of time.

When I was in government in the old DOE, I was down at an event in Armagh Planetarium, and I had to introduce a guest. I finished my introduction by looking over my left shoulder at the guest and asking whether he agreed with me that the scale, wonder and beauty of Northern Ireland's natural, built, archaeological, Christian and industrial heritage was greater in this part of Ireland than in any parts of these islands.

When you interrogate that assertion, which I very much believe, I think that it is true for each and all the parts of this part of Ireland that the scale of our industrial, natural, built, archaeological and Christian heritage is bigger than that in any other part of these islands. It is no less true for East Antrim, and for all the places that have been named by other MLAs. From south of Carrick, through Carrick and up to the glens, you can see therein the scale and wonder of that heritage, including, in one way, lesser-known opportunities such as the salt mines at Kilroot. I spent a summer working in those salt mines in Carrickfergus — voluntarily, I might add — loading the boats as they came in from Belfast lough. That in itself is untapped potential of the experience in East Antrim.

4.15 pm

However, if east Antrim, south Down, the north coast or Derry are to measure up to the potential that it offers for visitor numbers and visitor spend, there are a number of issues that the Minister and his Department will have to grapple with. I would like to name some of those, as I think that they all impact East Antrim. Mr McMullan rightly referred to the latest interventions from Fáilte Ireland for its tourist product — namely, the Wild Atlantic Way and the Ancient East — but said that they stop at the border. Here we are in Northern Ireland with the jewel in the crown of Christian heritage on this island and, arguably, in the world, save for the Holy Land — namely, St Patrick — yet it is not part of the Ancient East. The Minister's constituency has a beautiful and wonderful spot, Nendrum, yet it is not part of the Ancient East. Similarly, for the north coast, when it comes to the Wild Atlantic Way, the glens of Antrim are not part of that experience.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he not concede the point that the DUP has been making on the issue, which is that Tourism Ireland is not properly promoting and including Northern Ireland in some of its tourism projects? Does he think that that is a fair criticism and that action should be taken to address it?

Mr Attwood: The Wild Atlantic Way and the Ancient East are Fáilte Ireland not Tourism Ireland, but I will come back to the point that the Member makes.

If we are to maximise the opportunity, we have to embrace the branding and marketing opportunities, and those include the Wild Atlantic Way and the Ancient East. We are cutting off our nose to spite our face.

The question to the Minister is this: will he be the Minister who makes the paradigm shift, who looks at the marketing opportunities on this island, be they in tourism or in many other aspects of his brief, and says that, if we do not punch and market and gather together, we all lose together?

Mr Dickson touched on a point about infrastructure. When I was Minister of the Environment, I made a somewhat controversial decision that was challenged by the National Trust, which failed in its legal challenge, on the proposed golf course up at the Causeway. The thinking behind that decision was not the golf course, however. The thinking behind it was the lack of infrastructure and not having a five- and a six-star hotel. Mr Dickson is right: visitors come from Dublin, race up to the Giant's Causeway and leave again because there is nowhere to stay. If we do not build hotels outside greater Belfast — greater Belfast is clearly developing successfully; it is the other areas that are not, and those include East Antrim and the glens — you will not have visitors coming and an increase in visitor spend. You will not have that unless you grow the infrastructure.

I agree also with Mr Dickson's comment about licensing. We have to get a grip on it. We have to recognise that the businesses — the pubs, the clubs and the hotels, wherever they may be, including in East Antrim — are begging for the issue to be decisively dealt with. I sat in government and saw the interests of sectors that were not economic prevail over the interests of sectors that were economic and which created jobs. I ask the Minister to show his authority in that.

I welcome the fact that it now appears that we will get a tourism strategy. I look forward to what it might be, although I worry that if it has been sitting around for a long time, will it be published in a reheated version or in the expansive version that it needs to be? To be fair to the Minister, there are very few Ministers in this part of the world who have had ministerial portfolios in Health, Finance and Economy. Will this tourism strategy be a reheated version of what was not published before, or will it be something that measures up to the needs of this debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I thank the Member. I did, of course, allow an extra minute because of the intervention.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): I begin by congratulating my party colleague, Mr Lyons, for securing this Adjournment debate, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue, particularly at such an important and exciting time for tourism in Northern Ireland.

Tourism is now recognised as a key economic driver in Northern Ireland. It attracted 4.5 million visitors in 2015, generating a total of £760 million for the local economy. Of that, £541 million was brought into the economy from external markets, making tourism a £541 million export sector. Tourism supports 43,000 jobs, representing one in every 18 jobs in Northern Ireland. Those jobs are spread right across our region, as the tourism and hospitality industry is an easily accessible market that generates jobs in every constituency and at every skills level.

As one of Northern Ireland's key service sectors and economic pillars, the tourism and hospitality industry offers one of the best opportunities for Northern Ireland to strengthen its economy, and it is still an industry in the early development stages with huge growth potential

compared to our nearest neighbours. There is still huge growth potential in our tourism and hospitality industry. Tourism represents 5.2% of Northern Ireland's gross value added (GVA) and supports 5.4% of jobs in the total workforce. These figures are much lower when compared to the rest of the United Kingdom where the figures range from 8% to 10%.

The latest tourism figures for 2015 point to continued overall growth in local tourism. We had a record number of external visitors last year. A total of 2.3 million visitors from outside of Northern Ireland enjoyed our local attractions, landscape and hospitality last year, bringing £541 million into the Northern Ireland economy. However, there is still much to be done for us to reach our full tourism potential.

I intend, as the previous contributor indicated, to bring forward a new tourism strategy for the next 10 years to drive growth in this important sector. I want to work across government, as encouraged by many contributors this evening, and with the industry to build an internationally competitive and inspiring destination of which we are all very proud. The new strategy will set the future direction for tourism within the context of a refocused economic strategy. There is a new appreciation of the potential for tourism to contribute to the growth of the Northern Ireland economy and to deliver on jobs and investment. Growing visitor numbers from our external markets provides an opportunity for significant economic growth through new money coming into our economy. Tourism is, in effect, an export business.

All areas of Northern Ireland can benefit from a growing tourism sector, and, as we heard today, many of those attractions exist for visitors across the East Antrim constituency. I visit the area frequently; it has many great tourism assets, some of which I will turn to shortly, including Carrickfergus Castle. I can confirm that the pageantry around King William's landing and other events on that theme that happen over the summer, and which were mentioned by Mr Beggs and Mr Hilditch, are great attractions and are one of the things that draw me and my family to the area. I can testify that it is indeed worth the trip for anybody, whatever their background, to go to Carrickfergus this Saturday to see Mr Hilditch in period costume. I would visit Carrickfergus this Saturday just to see him. In fact, he has on occasions frightened my children with his wig and his period costume; it is well worth the visit for that alone.

The east Antrim area is a key part of the Causeway coastal route, and this represents a huge tourism opportunity for the area. Both Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland actively promote the route, encouraging visitors to slow down and enjoy key sites along the way, including those which are located in the east Antrim area. East Antrim has iconic visitor attractions with the potential to be showcased in international markets.

I will take up Mr Lyons's offer and his invitation to visit the Gobbins, which I have not visited yet, on the one condition that, I think, was a running theme throughout the debate: the condition that he take me to the Rinkha afterwards for an ice cream.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): That is absolutely shameless. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: It is pretty shameless. The ice cream is very good, I have to say. It is part of my job to promote local food and drink as Minister for the Economy.

Mr Lyons: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Deputy Speaker not to have tried the ice cream? Should he not try the ice cream before he comments on it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I am not sure that that is a point of order. All I say is that I am not yet in receipt of an invitation to try the ice cream. I might be open to that.

Mr Lyons: The invitation is there.

Mr Hamilton: I have sort of forgotten what we were talking about there. We will have to have an Adjournment debate on ice cream at some stage.

The Gobbins is an exciting and exhilarating project that provides a truly unique coastal experience. That uniqueness is key to it; it is an experience that nowhere else in Northern Ireland or indeed many parts of the world will have. It is a compelling reason, therefore, for visitors to come to the area. The Gobbins has proved very popular with international travellers and has featured strongly in Tourism Ireland campaigns in Great Britain and, indeed, overseas. In addition, the east Antrim area is featured regularly on the itineraries of visiting international media from across the globe.

I recently took the opportunity to help Tourism Ireland highlight its third major 'Game of Thrones' campaign to promote Northern Ireland as a filming location for the hit TV programme. The campaign is timed to coincide with the sixth season of the series and builds on the success of last year's social media campaign, which reached up to 100 million potential visitors. Forgive me if I get this wrong: is "Shillanavogy" correct? I did not want to sound like a direct rule Minister when reading that out. Shillanavogy valley, Cairncastle and the Cushendun caves, which are all 'Game of Thrones' filming locations, are highlighted in the campaign.

I am delighted that businesses in the east Antrim area have embraced WorldHost. Glenarm, in particular, was awarded WorldHost Village status in March 2016. I am pleased to hear that Northern Ireland's Year of Food and Drink is also being widely promoted, with Jamie Oliver's hugely popular Food Tube channel filming in Glenarm. The Seaview Hall in Glenarm is another tourism heritage project providing a unique craft visitor attraction. I am pleased to note that Tourism NI provided financial assistance, alongside the local council and other funders, to renovate and regenerate the derelict old school hall.

Investment is also being made in new tourism product for the area. A £3 million project is under way to transform the existing Whitehead railway site into a major visitor attraction. This investment will deliver a living engineering museum that will provide an educational and interactive experience. I look forward to the official launch, which is planned for early autumn. It will complement the many tourist attractions along the Causeway coastal route, encouraging visitors to stay longer in Northern Ireland and spend more in our economy.

The aforementioned Carrickfergus Castle is another iconic attraction in the east Antrim area. With continued product development and marketing, it has the potential to be a strong attraction for out-of-state visitors. The east Antrim

area also hosts a number of significant events, many of which were mentioned during the debate. Tourism NI provides support for the Dalriada Festival, which had a wonderful food offering this year. Lots of other smaller events were mentioned by contributors. One that I recalled as Members were talking was the Carrick Sevens in Carrickfergus, which is one of many successful events in that area but is a particular one that attracts hundreds of visitors from all over Ireland and beyond annually. It is now a firm fixture in the calendar. There are many reasons for East Antrim to be proud of its tourism assets and potential.

4.30 pm

Tourism NI recognises the significant potential of the east Antrim area and is co-funding the development of a local tourism strategy in partnership with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. Tourism Ireland also works closely with major ferry operators, and a cooperative marketing campaign in partnership with P&O Ferries was launched in April to promote travel to Northern Ireland this summer via the Cairnryan to Larne route. The campaign included radio, newspaper, digital and social media ads, targeting potential visitors from Scotland and the north of England.

Tourism NI is also working with local tourism businesses in East Antrim and along the Causeway coastal route through a mentoring programme to help them collaborate and collectively maximise the opportunities on offer from Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI in out-of-state markets. I encourage local businesses to work closely with our two tourism bodies and the local council to maximise the tourism potential for their area.

In closing, I again congratulate the Member on securing the debate. He raised some specific points about the area, which I will respond to in due course in writing. I congratulate him for highlighting the real tourism assets that the East Antrim constituency has to offer.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I raise the point yet again that contempt has been shown for the House by the fact that, while the House has been meeting this afternoon, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Justice Minister have seen fit to introduce and make announcements about the paramilitary panel report outside the House rather than coming to the House. When will the House get respect from Executive Ministers by making this the place of announcement, not other places outside the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I have carefully noted the Member's point. It is now on the record, and I will refer it to the Speaker for further consideration. Thank you.

Adjourned at 4.32 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 13 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Members, I want to start this afternoon with some brief remarks. Our first proper week of plenary business was a very positive example of the potential of the Assembly. The Deputy Speakers and I are struck by the different atmosphere in which we have started this mandate. Like any political institution, there will be disagreements between Members and parties in the months and years ahead, but our scrutiny and legislative functions will be much more productive if we express our differences with courtesy and respect. In that context, there are just some general points about how our debates are conducted that I want to bring to the attention of new and, indeed, returning Members.

Constructive debate is as much about listening and responding to the contribution of others as it is about making your own speech. Therefore, if Members wish to contribute in a debate and cannot be in attendance for the full duration, they are expected to be in the Chamber at the start of the debate and for at least two speeches before and two speeches after their own. From the Chair, the Deputy Speakers and I will always seek to include as many as possible in a debate. Therefore, as a courtesy to others, Members should prioritise what they want to say and move to an immediate conclusion when whoever is in the Chair intervenes to point out that their time is up. If Members repeatedly carry on speaking beyond the agreed time, it is disrespectful not only to whoever is in the Chair, who is trying to accommodate other colleagues, but to Members with equally valid views.

I am keen to encourage engaging debate, with interventions between Members, but references to each other should always be respectful and good-tempered. Members should abide by the existing conventions requiring the use of proper names and official titles when referring to other Members, Ministers or parties. Members should also focus on debating the issue at hand. There is sufficient scope for the cut and thrust of debate, through Members explaining their own policy positions and challenging those of others, without resorting to denigrating the personal integrity of other Members.

Whether in the Government, the Opposition or on the Back Benches across the House, I have no doubt that all of us are here to seek the best for the people we represent. The Deputy Speakers and I will facilitate Members to articulate their views as best we can. The understandable focus on outstanding issues in the past may have slowed our evolution as a parliamentary institution, but all Members have a role in its development. Maintaining a culture

of constructive debate in which Members are focused on considering the views of other Members as they are making their contribution can only be good for the reputation of this institution.

Finally, before we commence today's formal business, I know that many people received awards at the weekend, including our colleague Mr Dunne. However, I take this opportunity on behalf of the House to congratulate the chief executive, Trevor Reaney, on being awarded a CBE by Her Majesty in the Birthday Honours. It is a thoroughly well-deserved award.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Matters of the Day

Orlando Shooting

Mr Speaker: Mr Nesbitt has been given leave to make a statement on the mass shooting in Orlando, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I shall not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr Nesbitt: We return to the House after the weekend, which is a time traditionally set aside for us to pursue our passions and our lifestyle choices, whether it be the arts, culture, religion, sport or recreation. I wish I could be standing here congratulating Rory Best and the Irish rugby team on their phenomenal success in South Africa at the weekend or welcoming Northern Ireland's return to the finals of a major football tournament, although that has been overshadowed not just by the result but by the tragic death of Darren Rodgers, which we will hear about in greater detail in a moment.

As somebody who has lost a friend on a holiday in continental Europe, I have some understanding of the shock of such a sudden loss and of realising that somebody you thought was going to be in your life forever is no longer in your life at all. That feeling is being replicated in the United States in no fewer than 50 families because of the attack in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, where a single gunman killed 50 people and injured 53, some of whom, as we speak, are fighting for their lives. It was described by President Obama as:

"an act of terror and an act of hate."

Those are two things we know about only too well in this country. I am very struck by the quote attributed to the gunman's father, who said that his son had become "very angry" when he saw two men kissing. What a way to express your anger. Fifty people are dead. What a lesson to us all about intolerance in our society and how we must not permit it to infect how we think.

We have our own special relationship, I think, in Northern Ireland with the United States. It is a history that goes back centuries. Many of our citizens holiday in Florida, many Floridians and Americans holiday here and, of course, many Americans invest in Northern Ireland. We have a lot at stake in our relationship with the United States. I would like to, with your permission, Mr Speaker, ask you to write to President Obama on behalf of the Assembly and the House to express not only our shock but our solidarity with all the people of the United States at this shocking and tragic time.

Mr Clarke: It has been a very painful weekend for the families of those involved. My heartfelt apologies go to those families. I thought about them over the weekend. As the previous Member has said, similar events have happened, albeit not in the same numbers, on our shores here in Northern Ireland. It was not right here, it has never been right and it has proven never to be right. There is nothing we can do, in terms of words of comfort we can give to the families of those people who were brutally murdered at the weekend, other than give them prayerful support. I

suggest that Members keep them, and their families, in their prayers over the coming days and weeks ahead.

Mr Lynch: I want to express my shock and horror at the multiple deaths and 53 injuries. My heartfelt condolences go to the family, and also on behalf of my party. These people were targeted simply because they were gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). This attack has brought into sharp focus the fact that, despite moves towards equality, LGBT people in the West have massive issues. The perpetrator of this murderous event was not born homophobic — he was taught it. We as political leaders — I agree with much of what Members have said — must stand together on this issue and face down homophobic behaviour. We must send out a message to people at every level that human beings are valued as equal.

The fact that people cannot live and get married here is a problem. That is wrong. We need to change the law so that all citizens are treated equally.

Mr Eastwood: I thank Mr Nesbitt for bringing this matter of the day to the House. It is extremely important that we stand with people all across the world in revulsion at what has happened in Orlando. It is shocking that so many people could be gunned down in such a way, and even more shocking that so much hatred can reside within one person. We have seen this type of hatred acted out against our gay community right across the world. I think of places like Uganda, and other parts of the world, where gay people are not treated the way they should be. It is not for me, or for us, to talk about the internal laws of the United States, but it is important that our friends in the US hear that we cannot understand how anybody can get their hands on automatic weapons and use them in this way. I think it is important to make this point.

It is also important that we not meet hate with hate: that we meet it with love and we do not give succour to the base instinct that has been so prevalent within US politics in recent times. All of us need to show minorities in our community that they play a full and equal part in our everyday lives. We here, and right across the world, need to ensure that the gay community feel equal and full citizens. We have to do everything we can, and change whatever law we have to change, to make sure that happens.

Mrs Long: I would like to associate myself with the comments that have been made by others, and to thank Mike Nesbitt for bringing this matter to the House. I think anyone who has read and heard the horror of the last moments of those who died, or were injured, in the Pulse nightclub could not fail to be moved. This was a horrendous, brutal and profoundly homophobic terrorist attack, and it should be condemned by all right-thinking people. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and the friends of those who have been murdered. They are also with those who have been injured, and also with the LGBT community more widely. We should be under no illusion that gay clubs are not only places for fun and enjoyment, they are also safe spaces for members of our community who often feel afraid, intimidated, threatened and ostracised.

When such spaces are violated in that way, the ripples of fear are much wider than in the immediate vicinity. Fear ripples out among the gay community right across the globe. I stand in solidarity not just with those in Orlando

and the United States but with those globally who are persecuted for their sexuality.

12.15 pm

It is vital that the attack be properly investigated, and, whatever the warped motivation of the individual who launched it, it is important that what we replace that homophobia with is not another form of bigotry and that we keep our remarks temperate. Our response must be to stand against homophobia, terrorism and violence of any kind. Our response must be to stand for the values of an open, liberal and tolerant democracy and to redouble our efforts to build that here at home and abroad. That will be the best tribute to those who lost their lives in this horrendous attack.

Mr Allister: I join the condemnation of the horrendous attack. Yet again, the Western World has been demonstrated to be so vulnerable to Islamist terrorism. That is what it was, and those who seek to cloak it as otherwise do the Western World no service. It is quite clear that, in our society, there are those who have come to live amongst us who share no values, no common cause of interest and no respect for the sanctity of human life, and who are prepared, be it a perverted view or otherwise of their cause, to visit the most horrendous terror on society. It needs to be called out for what it is and condemned for what it is.

We in the West are particularly vulnerable now to these sleeper terrorists of Islamic persuasion who are visiting the horrors of their viewpoint on us. I condemn that, and I think of and pray for those who have been so suddenly bereaved by that horror. Just as we in this Province have lived through the horrors of terrorism, be it Greysteel, La Mon, Kingsmills or anywhere else, so we know the vile cruelty of terrorism that comes without justification in any cause.

Mr E McCann: I, of course, associate myself with the remarks that have been made so far regarding the horror and distress that we all will have felt at the news from Florida last night. That terrible atrocity is a reminder that, despite all the social advances and changes in the legislative framework over recent years in this part of the world, although we have not completed the journey yet, and all around the world, LGBT people still face hatred and violence. Uganda has been mentioned, and anyone who looks at the background to the treatment of LGBT people in Uganda and the killings there will be aware of the extent of the problem not just in the United States but elsewhere.

I welcome the statement that was made last night by LGBT Against Islamophobia, an international organisation, in which it appealed to people not to allow the atrocity to be used to whip up hatred against any section of the community and, in particular, not to allow it to be used to intensify the Islamophobia that is being spread in the United States, including by very powerful people. I regard it as ominous that one of the presumptive presidential candidates in the United States last night issued a statement announcing that he will be expressing his forthright views in a major speech on Orlando tonight. We wait to hear what he has to say, but it would be foolish of any of us to imagine that the atrocity will not be used for nefarious purposes by people who are peddlers of hate to exactly the same extent as the Islamic fundamentalist

ideologues who are behind the thinking of those who perpetrated the atrocity are.

It is also relevant to mention the fact, given that reference has been made to people from other cultures coming here, that the presumed perpetrator of the Orlando atrocity was American born. He did not come from anywhere but the local neighbourhood. We should keep in mind that Western forces do not simply come among people of Muslim lands but have actually come above them in drones or in aeroplanes and have been massacring — massacring — thousands of Muslims over recent years. That is not in any way, not by one iota or a sliver of 1%, a justification for what happened in Orlando but it is part of the context in which we could understand it. We should be against all hatred and killing, no matter where it comes from.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to —

Mr E McCann: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Death of a Northern Ireland Football Fan in Nice

Mr Speaker: Mr Robin Swann has been given leave to make a statement on the death of a Northern Ireland fan in Nice, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order until this item has been finalised.

Mr Swann: It is with sadness that I make this statement this morning. Death leaves a heartache that no one can heal. We were all in shock and sadness this morning when we heard of the death of a Northern Ireland fan in Nice, young Darren Rodgers who was 24 years old. He was a young man who went, like many others, to France to support his team and his country at the football. He was a young man whose life was in front of him but has been tragically cut short.

The town of Ballymena is numb due to the news that is slowly filtering out, and Northern Ireland fans in France are trying to understand the loss of one of their own. It puts things into perspective. I ask the fans who are out there, and those intending to go, to look after one another and themselves and to stay safe. The thoughts of the House, as with the other matter of the day, are with Darren's family and friends as they come to terms with the loss of a friend and a loved one.

Darren's is the second fatality to occur in my constituency this morning. There has also been a death from a road traffic accident in Ballymoney. There will be two homes this evening in North Antrim that will have empty chairs and it is right and proper that we reflect on that and think of those families at this time.

Mr Storey: In life we are in the midst of death. How sad it is for Members of the House to have to come again and be reminded that there is but a step between us and death. None of us know, when we rise in the morning, who it is that will prepare our body for the shroud. When Darren went to France, none of us knew or thought that the celebrations that we would have as a nation would be tempered with such sadness.

We extend our sincere sympathy to his family, friends and his community. As with the families in Orlando and families across the globe who, because of a variety of issues and problems, face death. It is good for us all to take a moment in the Chamber and remember that we are all mortal and that there will come a day when each of us will pass from this scene of time to eternity. Where is our comfort in the midst of sorrow? The psalmist David penned it well when he wrote:

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

It is sad that there are those who believe that death — the taking of innocent life — is sometimes justifiable, whether it is in the sick mind of someone filled with the hatred of his cause under the banner of religion, such as we saw in Orlando, or for some political cause. This little country of ours has seen too many funerals, too many sad days. I trust that, as we move forward as a society, the one thing that we can do collectively in this House is stand

together to say that there should never, ever again be any justification for death.

I say to Darren's family and the wider football community, and to Superintendent Goddard from the PSNI, who is there at this time, that our thoughts and prayers are with you all.

Mr McCartney: Ar son Shinn Féin, ba mhaith liom comhbhrón a dhéanamh le clann Darren Rodgers, a fuair bás aréir. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I offer our sincere sympathies to the family of Darren Rodgers, who died last night in a tragic accident in Nice, in France, in what was obviously a time of great joy, a festival of football. I know that Paul Frew knew the man personally and that he played for Braid United, so he was obviously a passionate soccer player and, indeed, soccer fan.

At a time of great joy, to have this type of tragedy visited upon himself and his wider family, our thoughts and prayers are very much with them. I hope that there is some consolation in whatever efforts can be made to ensure the safe and speedy return of the body because, sometimes in these tragedies, it can take a long time for people to be repatriated. I hope that his family can get a speedy return and have some solace in what are tragic times for them and the community in north Antrim.

Ms Hanna: I would like to associate our party with the comments of others and add our sincere condolences to this young man's family and, as others have said, to the wider footballing family.

It was obviously a trip of a lifetime. He probably saved up for it, and the memories would have sustained him and his mates for years to come. It is devastating that an accident of this nature has happened. They will take a long time to get over it, particularly at that formative age. I hope that they look after one another in the coming weeks, during the rest of the trip and in the years to come.

I am no footballing expert but, like a lot of people, I have been so encouraged by the positivity of fans of both the teams on this island, in particular how they have related to each other and to other teams as well. They know that, other than people who obsess about the politics of football, it is about people getting together, using their best endeavours, going out and putting on a show for the benefit and enjoyment of the people who watch.

I had my first trip to Windsor Park a couple of weeks ago to watch Northern Ireland in their last match before heading off. I was very taken by the positivity and warmth of that fan base, of which Darren would have been one, and he was probably there. We send our deepest condolences to his family and to all his friends as they come to terms with this.

Mr Ford: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I also extend our condolences to the family of Darren Rodgers. It was a matter of great shock and sadness for those who thought that, this weekend, we could celebrate the result of a rugby match in South Africa and at least a creditable performance on the football field in Nice, and to then hear that there are things much more important than sporting achievement, which will have deeply affected not just a family but a circle of friends.

As was said, Darren was not just a football fan but a football participant who enriched the life of Braid United. By the remarks already on social media, which refer to him

as a true gentleman who contributed a great deal, he was clearly well respected. I understand that the green and white army will pay tribute to him at the Ukraine match. That is appropriate, but it is also appropriate that, in this place, we remember his friends and family at this time.

I suppose that it is particularly disappointing after all the positivity that surrounded the match. The fact is that it is not always the case that, at football matches, supporters of the two teams can go to a match together, can come away from it together and can celebrate together in a constructive and positive relationship, and that perhaps makes it even more poignant that there was a tragic end to that night for one particular individual. We can assure the family, the friends and the playing colleagues of Darren Rodgers that he will be in the thoughts and the prayers of all of us at this time.

12.30 pm

Mr Allister: I thank Mr Swann for bringing this matter to the House, and I join in expressing condolences to the family of this young constituent. It is a reminder of how quickly joy can turn to sorrow, and none of us anticipated that we would be standing here today speaking in these terms about the joyous visit of so many to France. The football fraternity are a very close fraternity, and their enthusiasm knows no bounds. No doubt they all set off to France with unbounded enthusiasm and joy, and, today, many are devastated. One of my colleagues, Alderman McDonald of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, is very much involved in the football fraternity and was with Darren yesterday. He was talking to him, and little did he or anyone think that today we would be mourning his passing.

I join with those who have made an appeal to the authorities to make sure that there is speedy return of the body. We do not want this tragedy compounded by delays in that regard. The family in Ballymena who are so grieving today need to know that all possible is being done to help. Our thoughts also need to be with the football fraternity, over whom this dark cloud now rests in the rest of this campaign, because it will be a difficult time, while they seek to continue to enjoy themselves, to realise that one who was with them is no longer with them. Therefore, no matter what way you look at this, this is a profound tragedy in which we commit to our thoughts and prayers all who are affected by it.

Mr Speaker: I thank Members for that.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received the resignation of Mr William Irwin as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure with effect from 7 June 2016. The nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party, Mrs Arlene Foster, has nominated Mr George Robinson to fill the vacancy with effect from 9 June 2016.

Public Petition: Bell-Gray House, Newtownstewart

Mr Speaker: Ms Michaela Boyle has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Ms Boyle: Mr Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me to bring this public petition to the House, and I thank the Business Office also. I want to welcome those who have travelled here today from Newtownstewart and surrounding areas in my constituency to be with us in support of this petition. I also want to take the opportunity to thank the unions and, indeed, Mr Niall McCarroll for being here today.

Apex Housing Association took a decision on 14 April to inform residents and staff of Bell-Gray nursing home in Newtownstewart of its intention to close this vital community service. This announcement obviously sent shock waves and caused great stress and worry for residents, staff and their families. The decision is tantamount to having an impact on their well-being and mental health.

Bell-Gray provides accommodation with care for 29 people all over the age of 70, and there are 75 people employed at the nursing home. The reasons being put forward by Apex Housing Association to justify the closure of this nursing home need to be clarified and investigated thoroughly.

Today we are seeking any assistance the Health Minister and her Department can provide in finding a solution to this decision. The proposed closure of this nursing home will have a detrimental impact not only on residents, their families and staff but on the local business community. West Tyrone cannot afford to lose any more jobs. More job losses would represent a significant financial loss to the local business community.

I congratulate the residents, their families, staff and the unions for getting behind the campaign to keep this much-needed facility in Newtownstewart open. The campaign is fully supported by all six MLAs in West Tyrone and the MP.

Whilst we recognise that this is a private organisation, we are calling on the Health Minister to speak with the chief executive and officials from the Western Trust and to Apex Housing to review the decision so that those who have lived in the home and called it their home for a long, long time can remain there.

Ms Boyle moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward a copy to the Health Minister and the Committee.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr William Irwin replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. — [Mr Clarke.]

Business Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Dr Stephen Farry be appointed as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr Clarke.]

Council of Europe: Regional Chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That this Assembly nominates Mr Stewart Dickson to be a full member of the regional chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe with effect from October 2016. — [Mr Clarke.]

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair)

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 June 2016.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 June 2016.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the 2014-15 Excess Votes

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The next two motions relate to the Supply resolutions, and, as usual, there will be a single debate on the motions. I shall ask the Clerk to read the first motion on the 2014-15 Excess Votes and call on the Minister to move it. The debate on the two motions will then begin. When all who wish to speak have done so, or when the time limit is reached, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion — the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17 — will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and winding up. All other Members will have seven minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £69,281,105.15 be authorised for use by the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, for the year ending 31 March 2015, as summarised in part II of the 2014-15 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1-3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Nuair a shocraigh muid na rúin seo, ní raibh a fhios againn go mbeadh an áit líonta le brón as siocair an tsléachta in Orlando agus bás Darren Rodgers. Ach cuirfidh mé mo ghuth le guthanna eile a ardaíodh. When we organised today's business, we did not know that it would be a day filled with sadness because of the slaughter in Orlando and the death of Darren Rodgers. I add my voice to those voices that were heard earlier in regard to those deaths.

As you have set out, a Príomh LeasCheann Comhairle, the debate covers the Supply resolution and Excess Votes in respect of the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. The resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2016-17 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies, as set out in the Main Estimates. The Main Estimates and Statement of Excesses were laid in the Assembly on Wednesday 1 June 2016.

The resolution before the Assembly relates to the supply of cash and resources for the remainder of the current year — 2016-17 — as detailed in the Main Estimates. A Vote on Account was passed by the Assembly in February, which provided initial allocations for 2016-17 to ensure the continuation of services until the Main Estimates could be presented to the Assembly for approval. This resolution, and the Budget Bill that I will introduce later today, request the balance to complete the total cash and resource requirements of Departments and other public bodies for 2016-17. The balance to complete amounts to almost £8 billion of cash and over £8.6 billion of resources. Those requirements have their origins in the Executive's Budget for 2016-17, which was approved by the Assembly on 19 January 2016, as well as the demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME). On behalf of the Executive, I request and recommend the levels of Supply set out in this resolution under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Accelerated passage is required for the legislation, and there is provision for this specific instance in Standing Orders. I understand that the Committee has agreed to grant accelerated passage. I thank the Chair, Emma Little Pengelly, and members from all sides for that permission, and I place on record my appreciation of their early start to this mandate in agreeing this important step in the process. Le linn na díospóireachta inniu faoin rún tábhachtach seo, tá mé ag súil go gcluinfimid guthanna mórán daoine as achan taobh, agus iad ag úsáid na díospóireachta seo chun ceisteanna tábhachtacha ábhartha a thabhairt chun solais.

During today's debate on this important resolution, I expect that we will hear many voices using the debate to raise important and relevant issues, and I look forward to that. Ón tús, is mian liom an uailmhian atá agam a thabhairt le fios go soiléir go ndéanfaidh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin seo beart de réir a bhriathair i rith mhandáid nua an Tionóil seo.

From the outset, I wish to make clear my ambition for this Executive to deliver over the new mandate. The expenditure set out in these Supply Estimates will see investment in high-quality public services and, most importantly, a commitment to oppose the austerity programme being driven by the Westminster Government. I aim to work with all our local communities to create a prosperous, shared society and help to grow a stronger economy with opportunity for all.

These Estimates are the means by which the Executive's Budget, which was agreed in January this year, will be brought into effect. I am on record as saying that I believe that that Budget will serve our people well. In particular, I am proud that we are delivering the most generous welfare protection in these islands, with over £500 million specifically to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society will be protected from the worst excesses of the Tory Government's austerity agenda. We are blocking the bedroom tax, preventing the imposition of water charges and keeping student fees affordable.

12.45 pm

The Westminster Government's austerity programme is self-defeating. I note that the Tories stood locally across 18 constituencies in the last election in May and did not manage to get 10,000 votes across all those constituencies. They have no mandate in the House. Therefore, I believe that our opposition to austerity is a view shared by Members across the House. It is also a view shared by many eminent people whose opinions are well worth listening to. It is interesting that, in recent times, the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) — many people might put the blame for where we are with the IMF — Christine Lagarde has argued:

"In too many countries, economic growth has failed to lift these small boats — while the gorgeous yachts have been riding the waves and enjoying the wind in their sails. In too many cases, poor and middle-class households have come to realize that hard work and determination alone may not be enough to keep them afloat."

I am determined that, under this Executive, the vulnerable people in our society will not be abandoned in a latter-day 'Raft of the Medusa'.

Pope Francis articulated the same issues when he said:

"I think of how many, and not just young people, are unemployed, many times due to a purely economic conception of society, which seeks selfish profit, beyond the parameters of social justice."

Pope Francis, of course, is one of the pre-eminent opponents of austerity in the world. I assure you that the community and society that we live in is not just an economy; it is a society made of people, each of whom has their own needs and ambitions. We will certainly grow the economy, not as an end in its own right but as a means of providing for all our people, including the most disadvantaged.

I do not believe that anyone in the House accepts the claim of Prime Minister Cameron that we are all in this together in our approach to the recovery. In fact, the truth, as expressed by the bishops of the Anglican Church ahead of the general election last year, is that:

"the greatest burdens of austerity have not been borne by those with the broadest shoulders".

As Minister for the new Department of Finance, I am using the opportunity of the Supply resolution and first Budget Bill of this mandate to signal that I will oppose austerity. I assure you that I stand ready to join other Finance Ministers across all the 28 states of the European Union in speaking out against austerity and the political mentality of profit at any price with no concern for social exclusion.

The 2016-17 financial year, like previous years, will present significant challenges for the Assembly in the provision of public services. That is as a result of the austerity agenda imposed on us from another place. It is up to all of us to work collectively to overcome those challenges. Over coming days, I will meet the Finance Ministers of Wales and Scotland to discuss pooling our resources and making common cause in the interests of all our people. The challenge has been set, and now we must move forward collectively to overcome the barriers in our way. Members

will know that I have also spoken to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to relay my concerns and the priority issues that I wish to discuss, and I have written to Chancellor George Osborne seeking an urgent meeting.

The Fresh Start Agreement represents a good start. It provided significant additional funding in 2016-17. In addition, the Executive agreed to set aside £135 million to top-up the British welfare arrangements here. Of that amount, £75 million related to welfare enhancements and £60 million related to tax credits. In addition, funding was provided for security and to tackle paramilitary activity. Additional money was provided for a shared future, and £30 million funding was provided for bodies to deal with the past. Some £50 million was provided for shared and integrated education and shared housing.

The Fresh Start Agreement allowed the Executive to agree a balanced and deliverable Budget for 2016-17. That Budget outcome is reflected in the Estimates before us now; they ensure that the necessary resources are in place as early as possible to allow good planning and delivery of essential public services. It would be easy to stop there and focus solely on delivering public services, but we as an Assembly must continue to support our economy and encourage our private sector as it continues to face financial difficulty — and I am thinking, in particular, of the entrepreneurs and start-ups out there who are trying to create jobs and wealth in our society. We must utilise the resources contained in the Bill in the most effective way possible to ensure that we can provide a sound footing for our businesses, our society and our people.

Given the difficult financial environment, it is important to explore options for enhancing the Executive's capacity to invest, including exploiting our borrowing facility. Borrowing is a normal part of governance, but it should be undertaken only on an affordable and prudent basis. In that context, I welcome last week's announcement of European Investment Bank (EIB) funding for two housing associations here.

The Stormont Agreement and implementation plan confirmed the flexibility to use up to £200 million of borrowing in 2016-17 to fund voluntary exit schemes. Allocations of £117.6 million are being made to Departments in Budget 2016-17 for their proposed schemes. There will be further opportunity for Departments to submit bids to the fund, with allocations for the second tranche being made in June monitoring.

The Fresh Start Agreement also provided the Executive with the flexibility to access the full amount of additional borrowing provided by the Stormont House Agreement, even if it is able to realise the agreed efficiency savings from voluntary exit schemes without switching the full amount of existing borrowing for that purpose. Therefore, any funding not used by the public sector transformation fund (PSTF) may be used for additional capital projects that are suitable for borrowing. That is very welcome.

I have pledged that I will be relentlessly positive, bold and ambitious in investing prudently and wisely for the future. I know that, across the House, we share a commitment to help support economic growth and the ambitions of our communities. One of the means by which I intend to take forward that investment is with the establishment of a £100 million investment fund. The overall aim of the fund is to promote investment, economic growth and jobs here.

The fund will use public money — financial transactions capital — and will seek to address access-to-finance market failure. The intention is that the fund will provide loan, equity or mezzanine finance to viable local private-sector projects that cannot obtain funding from commercial banks. Funding is expected to be provided on commercial terms to avoid falling foul of state aid rules. The success of the fund will be measured by economic outputs rather than by a narrow financial return on capital. The classification of the fund is currently under consideration by the Office for National Statistics, and that will determine the balance sheet treatment of the fund. Until that is resolved, it is not possible to be clear on whether co-investment directly into the fund will be possible. However, there are other ways in which investors can participate in the fund's activities. One is to co-invest at project level, which would then provide the fund with leverage and preserve the fund's capital for other projects. Another is to participate by, for example, buying up project debt once the project is completed and the construction and demand risks have been removed. That would help the fund deliver on its objective to recycle the NI Executive's capital quickly. It is expected that the fund will be in place before the end of the 2016-17 financial year, and that is a priority for me.

It is easy to interpret some of the constraints that we face as a reflection of an economy in difficulty; I am certain, however, that we face 2016-17 in a better position than we might have envisaged. There are signs that the economy is beginning to stabilise. I saw another report from the Ulster Bank this morning in that respect. For example, the employment rate rose to 69% in the first quarter of 2016, and the economic inactivity rate fell to 26.3%. Welcome as those figures are, I do not think that they are yet good enough. The latest Bank of England growth forecast suggests that activity will recover later in the year but at rates lower than the historical average. For the North, the April Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index (PMI) signalled another month of expansion. It is the twelfth consecutive month of growth in that index, and it suggests that our economy is on the road to recovery. In fact, over the past three months, the pace of expansion has exceeded the average in Britain. However, again, the pace of recovery is nowhere near fast enough for me.

We should support those involved in building the economy, equip our workforce and direct our public services to maximise opportunities arising from the position in which we find ourselves. To do that, we need to improve our infrastructure, and we have again responded to that need. We all want to see cranes above the skyline in our cities and towns. Although the Executive agreed only a single-year Budget for 2016-17, the nature of some capital projects means that it is important to provide funding certainty beyond that time span. The Executive have therefore agreed to identify flagship projects for which funding will be agreed now for future periods. Those include, of course, the A5 western transport corridor and the A6, both ultimately serving the north-west, and I know that there are other projects dear to your heart, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, that we wish to move forward in this mandate.

I believe that the Estimates before Members today mark a key step in countering the austerity agenda that others have sought to impose on us; indeed, they will protect the most vulnerable in our society while facilitating a process of development and growth, putting us four-square behind

entrepreneurs, start-ups and those building a vibrant economy.

With Members' permission, I will say a few words about the second motion before the Assembly, which concerns an Excess Vote from the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. I can confirm that the Public Accounts Committee has considered the Excess Votes and recommended their approval. I am anxious to ensure that the circumstances leading up to the breaches are not repeated. I take that very seriously. I note that steps have been taken in both cases to minimise the risk of a repeat occurrence.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is Mr Philip Smith's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Smith: I shall do my best to be uncontroversial.

The motion on the Main Estimates is, to a degree, a technical process, as the Minister has said, providing approval of expenditure for the remainder of this financial year for a Budget agreed in the previous mandate. The Excess Vote motion includes over £68 million incurred by Department of Finance superannuation due to the incorrect rate being used to calculate the interest on scheme liabilities. I have already raised that issue in Committee and have been assured that it is essentially a technical accounting issue in the AME budget that will have no real impact.

Many Members to speak today will focus on spending lines from specific Departments: my intention is to look at the bigger picture, the overall scope of the Estimates and how we have got to where we are. As this is my maiden speech, it may be helpful to give some personal context. My work background has been about managing change in the public and private sectors. I worked in consultancy for many years, helping businesses and organisations to drive change proactively and, sometimes, in reaction to events. Latterly, I have managed in the public sector. I understand the difficulties and challenges of making change happen in our local public sector. The Estimates come before us today in a challenging financial environment for the Northern Ireland Executive, but the Minister's party continually parrots that the English Tories are to blame for all our ills. I know that the other party of government is now copying that mantra, as the forging of the new coalition Executive continues apace. How long ago the panic of "Vote Arlene to stop Martin" now seems, as the workings of the pre-agreed partnership are exposed.

Treasury austerity measures have, of course, impacted on the Estimates, but other regions and countries in these islands have fared much better in equally challenging financial circumstances and without the benefit of a generous £9 billion subvention, the Barnett formula and the additional money from Fresh Start. The bottom line is that the Estimates do not meet Northern Ireland's requirements, and the blame lies squarely with the DUP/Sinn Féin Executive for failing to progress reform and change in the public sector during the previous nine years. Their inaction and prevarication have got us to that point, and attempts to blame others will not wash.

I know that it is form during a maiden speech to promote your constituency, but the people of Strangford already know that they live in one of the most beautiful

constituencies in the UK. I believe that they would prefer us and me today to devote my time to highlighting the Budget issues in our public services.

Our two largest Departments, which provide the schools and hospitals that we all care about, are in financial crisis. The new Health Minister told us on Monday that she needed an increase in funding to tackle, in her words, "excessive waiting times". The Health Minister went on to say that her Department's waiting list crisis had been caused by:

"increasing demand, financial constraints and a slowness to bring about radical change and reform." – [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p34, col 2].

That is a critical point: failure to change and failure to reform resulting in financial pressures that lead to a deteriorating service. We await the outcome of Bengoa review, but I hope that this opportunity for change will not gather dust like its predecessors. Additional money was found, pre-election, to tackle waiting lists, but these ad hoc funding allocations, much like the monitoring round process, are too often like using sticking plasters to cover major wounds.

Education is another major source of financial concern. A 0.8% budget reduction for schools is now increased to 8%, as the outgoing Minister refused to fund superannuation, National Insurance and teacher pay increases. School heads now openly warn that the only way to balance budgets is to cut the number of teachers and increase class sizes, yet 41% of the education budget is still held centrally, compared with 10% in other jurisdictions. Of course, we continue to pay for duplication, from teacher training to school facilities. This is more failure to reform and change coming home to roost.

It is also disappointing that the Executive's budget allocations for our higher education institutions have been identified as a soft touch over recent years. Expenditure for teaching grant fell by over 24% between 2010 and 2015, and, in today's Estimates, the trend continues with a consequence of fewer staff and fewer students.

Cuts to higher education would be bad in any circumstances, but they are ridiculous given that the Executive have based their future economic strategy on building a knowledge economy, using reduced corporation tax to transform our private sector.

1.00 pm

I am also concerned that, during last week's Finance Committee, the Minister said that the Executive had not yet agreed whether a cut to corporation tax is affordable. This has resulted in much media speculation, with commentators stating that we are witnessing the start of the Executive's U-turn on this key policy. Perhaps the Minister could use his summing-up of today's debate as an opportunity to end speculation around the Executive's commitment to corporation tax reduction.

One potential opportunity is in the increasing capital sums that allow for investment in major projects like roads. However, once again, the previous Executive's record has been patchy at best, with failure after failure to progress major projects, thereby missing the opportunity to boost local construction as well as enhance our infrastructure. Desertcreat, the Maze, Belfast Northside, Casement Park

— I could go on — all show a lack of capability to draw down funding and deliver on investment.

Of course, that brings me to longer-term funding. The Minister has stated that he wants to grow the funding pie, but additional debt brings its own challenges: the more we borrow, the more interest we pay, leaving less to fund services. Interest is already forecast to hit £200 million a year in the near future, before we add more. We are already the most indebted devolved Administration, with over £1,000 debt per person in Northern Ireland, compared with £400 per person in Scotland, and that is before university and housing association debt is included.

In conclusion, the Estimates before us are the symptom of inaction and failure to reform in the previous nine years. No doubt, in a week's time the Minister will be back in the Chamber to announce monitoring review changes, and I hope he is successful in finding additional funds to help Health and Education. However, I am afraid that it will be no more than a sticking plaster. These Estimates show the scale of reform and change needed, and I urge the Executive to get on with it.

Mrs Little Pengelly (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I will speak first in my role as Chair of the Finance Committee. Senior departmental officials briefed the Committee for Finance last Wednesday in relation to the Main Estimates and the associated Budget (No. 2) Bill. In advance of the meeting, the Department of Finance provided the Committee with a briefing paper, together with advance copies of the Estimates and the Bill.

The Committee, in its scrutiny function, has an important role in deciding whether to grant accelerated passage to Budget Bills under the power in Standing Order 42(2). Importantly, this is on the basis that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the expenditure proposals in the Bill.

As Members may be aware, the Vote on Account that was debated by the Assembly during the last mandate was taken on the basis of the 12 Departments, as constituted at that time. However, following restructuring, the Main Estimates now reflect the new nine Departments. In this regard, members questioned officials to establish whether new Departments were experiencing budget reductions against provisions made under the old departmental structures. Officials advised that there have been revisions to the 2015-16 provision and the 2014-15 out-turn, under the subhead detail, in order to offer a level of comparability, but they acknowledged that budgets have reduced against previous years.

Turning to the Supply resolution for the Excess Votes 2014-15, there are two Statements of Excess. Regarding the Statement of Excess relating to the Assembly Commission, the Committee noted the Public Accounts Committee's report that recommended that the Assembly provides the additional resource. However, in noting that an excess of £68.3 million was incurred by the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Committee questioned departmental officials to identify the nature of the issue. In response, members were informed that this arose as a result of a misunderstanding between the former Department and the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) over the interest rate assumption when calculating the interest on scheme liabilities for the principal Civil

Service pension scheme that was only identified when GAD was preparing the year-end figures.

Officials provided an assurance that, to mitigate any future occurrences, the Department has built in an additional process that will require the GAD to review the rates before the spring Supplementary Estimates are finalised.

In consideration of further improvement to the processes, it would be helpful if Departments could brief their respective Committees on prior-year out-turn at an early stage. That should enable scrutiny of the incoming Budget to be informed by consideration of the prior-year financial performance of each Department.

In concluding my remarks as Chair of the Committee, I look forward to a constructive working relationship with the new Minister, confident that the Committee will work closely with the Department in exercising its roles in advising, scrutinising and holding the Department to account.

Turning now to speak in my role as a member of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Budget detail being debated today and over the next few weeks has already been the subject of some considerable debate and discussion, including within the Chamber. It came on the back of what had been a difficult and challenging period for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. However, the Fresh Start Agreement has provided a new and optimistic foundation on which to recalibrate and work together collaboratively, focusing on a joint desire to tackle the processes and barriers to effective delivery.

I believe there is a new energy and a fresh hope, as well as a clear determination to make the institutions, this Assembly and our Government work and deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. I warmly welcome this new approach towards building a better Northern Ireland, and some of this is already evident in what is being debated today. I welcome the effective roll-out of the voluntary exit scheme (VES) and the savings that have been realised in that. I welcome the clear agreement on the date and rate of corporation tax, and I welcome the new Minister embracing the previous Minister's agenda of reform and transformation of public services. This opportunity will arise more significantly in the multi-year Budget negotiations in the autumn.

The DUP stands for a strong, sensible and sustainable approach to maximising and managing Northern Ireland's budgetary, economic and fiscal concerns. I know that we will drive that agenda both within and outside government. We are, of course, aware of the many pressures right across the Departments, not least in relation to Health and Education, our universities and our capital infrastructure. Funding is required, but funding alone will not resolve those issues. Fundamental reform is required if we are to get on to a sustainable and managed Budget.

I am realistic. We will continue to have challenging economic and budgetary constraints, but I am confident and optimistic that this new hope and collaborative working will continue. I am determined, as Chair of the Committee and as a Member of the Assembly, to play a fully constructive role in building the better Northern Ireland that I know we jointly want to see.

Mr O'Dowd (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee):

I will open my remarks by speaking as Chair of the Audit Committee and will report on the views of the previous Audit Committee on the Budget process. The first meeting of the new Audit Committee will take place on Wednesday. On behalf of the Audit Committee, I confirm that the provision for the NI Audit Office in the Main Estimates corresponds with the amount agreed by the previous Audit Committee and laid before the Assembly in March just before the end of the last mandate.

As you know, the Estimates provide for a resource budget requirement of £8·193 million for 2016-17. That is made up of resource requirements plus £197,000 relating to Consolidated Fund standing services, less £10,000 in notional charges. With the exception of a minor technical adjustment between the figures for the Consolidated Fund standing services and the net resource requirement, those figures reflect the amounts included in the Audit Office's corporate plan for the years 2016-17 to 2018-19, which the previous Audit Committee considered and approved in February this year.

At that time, the Committee was satisfied that the draft corporate plan allowed for the Audit Office to continue to hold the public sector to account for its spending through its core activities of the financial audit of central and local government bodies and the provision of value-for-money reports for consideration by the Assembly. Also, I understand that, as is the norm, the predecessor Committee gave due regard to advice from the Public Accounts Committee and the then Department of Finance and Personnel when considering the Audit Office's estimate. Prior to agreeing the estimate, the Committee took evidence from the C&AG and senior Audit Office officials on 8 March 2016, during which a range of issues were explored.

The Committee noted that the Audit Office was confident of managing its budget for the incoming year in the light of savings made under the voluntary exit scheme. It also discussed internal changes as a result of the VES, which led to greater flexibilities across different business areas in the organisation. I shall not go into detail on these or on other technical issues that the previous Committee examined, as they were set out in its report on the Estimates of the Audit Office 2016-17, printed on 13 March 2016.

In concluding my remarks in my role as Chair of the Audit Committee, I confirm that the previous Committee was satisfied that the provision in the Estimates will enable the Audit Office to continue to deliver on both its statutory and ad hoc work, which provides the Assembly with truly independent audit assurance in relation to public moneys. The new Audit Committee, as I stated, will meet on Wednesday this week to receive initial briefings from both the Audit Office and the public services ombudsman. I look forward to working with members of the Committee.

I will now make a few comments in my role as party spokesperson on finance. I welcome the statement set out by the Finance Minister on his vision of our finances going into the future. He has set out the real challenges that we face in the financial constraints that have been imposed on us by the Westminster Government. Contrary to Mr Smith's comments, which may lead Members to believe that the Welsh and Scottish Executives are content with their lot from Westminster, the public record and statements from Ministers, right up to the First Ministers

of Wales and Scotland, have pointed out that the financial constraints placed on devolved Administrations in these islands are having a damaging impact on the abilities of local Administrations to deliver public services. That is the reality of the situation. None of the devolved Governments is hailing the economic strategy set out by the Westminster Government as the proper or correct way forward.

As our Finance Minister stated, we have to use our moneys as effectively as possible to ensure that front-line public services continue to be delivered. In doing that, we can stand up to the challenges of austerity, presented to us by the Westminster Government. It is clear from the Fresh Start Agreement that when the senior Executive parties united and spoke with one voice, they were able to secure significant funding for this Executive that was not available previously. We now have the most generous welfare system on these islands. It is far from perfect. It is far from the system that anybody — or most people — in this Chamber would want, but we have managed to achieve something that the Scottish Nationalists and the Welsh Executive could not. We have secured additional funding for welfare and to protect the most vulnerable in our society — from within our own resources, I accept — and an additional £50 million capital to be spent on the construction and refurbishment of schools through shared education and integrated education. That is a major injection not only into education but into our economy.

The Finance Minister has made it clear that he wants to see job creation in our society. While you cannot build an economy simply on the construction industry, construction is an ideal way in this society to pump money into local communities very quickly. Communities see the end result, whether it is a new school or youth club, refurbished hospitals and community facilities, or additional social housing. That is a physical manifestation of change in our society. It is also an injection into the economy through the construction industry and a very good use of public moneys. The previous Executive secured significant amounts of money for that investment.

The discussion that the Finance Minister has opened up on public borrowing is an important one. Mr Smith put down the challenge as to how the Executive will reform, referring to necessary reforms and change. He did not outline, from the Opposition's point of view, what that means — I look forward to hearing more detail — but no one could say that the previous Executive were not involved in reform. We were. The VES scheme —

1.15 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: I will. The VES was one fine example of where public-sector workers were allowed to leave posts with dignity, and the savings that have been created from those posts are being reinvested in public services.

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

Ms Hanna: I want to formally wish the Minister well. I admire his defence of these Estimates. I know that you probably did not even have time to open your pencil case before the Department had to issue them, but, as somebody who has shared a constituency with you for the last five years, I do hope that we will see the energy and

ambition that people correctly associate with you put into future documents from the Department of Finance. We do not see it in this one.

I note that, in your remarks, you pre-emptively and quite comprehensively pin all the blame on the Conservatives and austerity. We are no fans of them, but the fact of the matter is that you, your party and your partners are now in the driving seat. It is your job to be smarter and more effective with the money and to, as you say, grow the pie and certainly slice it more effectively than has been done in the previous two mandates.

Today, we are addressing the Supply resolutions for the Budget we approved earlier this year and for the Main Estimates for the year ahead. As others have said, it is largely a matter of process. We accept the procedural requirements for keeping salaries paid and services running and we will not oppose those procedures today. However, we reiterate our concerns about the flawed priorities that the Budget has rubber-stamped and the contorted budgeting process which is a symbol of the systematic process failure of this Executive, particularly in bypassing the Assembly.

I congratulate the previous speaker for his very detailed maiden speech. He correctly raises the issue of the excesses, primarily the £68 million arising from the incorrect rate of interest being applied on pension scheme liability. I agree, just for transparency, that a little bit more clarity will be required on how that happened and how it will be addressed. The Member also touched on the issue of borrowing. Our party is certainly not opposed to borrowing for strategic reasons for viable capital projects — indeed, the reform and reinvestment initiative was an innovation by the SDLP to encourage this sort of sensible economic planning — but, shamefully, this Executive has borrowed something like two thirds of their borrowing capacity for, I believe, revenue purposes and, we believe, for killing jobs, not creating them, in the scheme that the previous Member seems to be very proud of.

The sad life story of this Budget that we are tinkering with in this mid-year process began with disagreements over welfare and the Fresh Start talks that, I think, gave the character of how the Executive would work; that there would not be partnership or accommodation of differences. It was cobbled together to get over an election. We think that this half-year version of it is treading water in the absence of a programme. We are democrats and we accept the outcome of the election, but I think that we are past the time when it is just about having a big mandate: it is about what you do with it. We do not believe that this programme or Budget do anything very substantial with it. The Estimates that we are being asked to consent to come with very little explanation. We are not coming from a position where all these amounts are unjustified, but, in many cases, we do not know for certain what they are being used for. We are in a position to only scrutinise the bulges and contractions in the figures.

This debate comes a week after the discussion on the Programme for Government. I will not go over all that again, but it is fair to say that this does not fill in any of the blanks that many of us felt were in it. The Government parties will start, I am sure, with the single transferable criticism that we are too vague and are not setting out alternatives; but when these Estimates provide detailed operational plans like "housing" and nothing else, you are

not in very good shape to criticise the rest of us for not having a lot of detail.

Like it or not, and most people seem to like it except the parties across, we are in a new phase in the Assembly. Over the coming months of the mandate, we will have to recalibrate the processes. The budgeting scheme is something which desperately needs work. This is the only government institution in these islands that does not have an annual budgetary process. Instead, we have these quarterly reviews and supplements. That has not served Northern Ireland very well nor provided enough strategic focus. Yes, of course, the one-year Budget that we are looking at now is unique in supplementing the additional year of the mandate, but the process is still flawed. We have argued for some time that we need a Budget oversight committee. Regrettably, that was rejected in the last mandate.

We have correctly restructured down to nine Departments. That is a good thing, but it means that each scrutiny Department has more areas to scrutinise, and that has not been factored in effectively. In many cases, the information has not gone before the relevant Committee.

We, as the Opposition, will give good ideas a fair wind. We think that part of that might involve hard decisions and some form of zero-base budgeting. We cannot keep saying, "There is no money for this" or "There is no money for that" and, if anybody makes a suggestion, presenting it as just stealing money off something else. A reformed budgeting process should start as day one. At the moment, we feel that the Budgets are essentially just tinkering with the direct rule Budgets that have not served this place very well for the past 40 years. They are a cut-and-paste of information that is coming over from London, taking by rote what the Treasury is setting down and not really putting any of the creativity and imagination that devolution, and devolution's specific tailoring to circumstances, was supposed to address.

The issue of corporation tax has been raised, and I will not have time to go into it, but we need some clarity on what rebooting the negotiations will mean and on the various positions of the two Government parties. We believe that the devolution of corporation tax will be justified if it brings demonstrable, value-added, productive and decent jobs, but, so far, we have had a lot of rhetoric and no strategy. It is a myth that investors are waiting for the tax rate to drop. They are not; rather, they are waiting for skilled employees and 21st-century infrastructure. The Budget that we are tinkering with does not go any way to addressing that.

In wrapping up, I will say that one thing that has not been addressed, and I do not expect it to be in this Budget, is the need for some direction on what the Executive are planning to do if we leave the European Union. Anything that we say today will become absolutely irrelevant in two weeks' time if there is a no vote, and we need to know what we will do to address that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Hanna: If we are out of the European Union, it will take a lot of money from London and a lot of policy and imagination from this Executive. As the young people say, "Good luck with that".

Dr Farry: First, I join in welcoming the Minister to his new post. I wish him well. Today is the first opportunity for the Assembly in the new mandate to discuss Budget issues and to take a position on the public spending situation as we go forward. As much as I am critical of the positions that have been adopted by the Executive parties, I am slightly concerned about the timidity of the parties in opposition who are allowing the motion to go ahead today as some form of *fait accompli*. It is our intention to seek a Division later this afternoon or this evening, whenever the vote comes. There are good reasons why we should not simply treat this as a given.

First, the Assembly has until the end of July to pass the Budget (No. 2) Bill, so there is still time in this process. The entire point of having a Budget (No. 1) Bill in February and March and then a separate discussion in June, or even in July, is to allow for greater scrutiny of the Budget and the Supply resolution at this point in the calendar. The point of the first Bill is to allow the Vote on Account to proceed in order to get the money flowing through Departments before taking a step back and having some more detailed consideration. If we are not prepared to do that at this stage, we may as well wrap up the whole process in the one piece of legislation in the spring and get on with it rather than go through a charade at this point. It has to be meaningful and be about setting forward alternatives. I believe that there is an opportunity for the Executive to take the Bill back and reflect further on the points that I and some of my colleagues will make today and, indeed, those from other parties will make.

We have a further complication, in that there are suggestions that there may be a need for some form of Budget rewrite on an in-year basis. The Budget may well be unravelling as we speak. If that is the case, it is not sufficiently democratic to rewrite a Budget through a monitoring round. A monitoring round is there to reallocate underspends from one Department to another. It is tinkering on the edges, but, if we go back to the situation that prevailed a couple of years ago in which we were passing severe cuts in-year through monitoring round decisions, that has to be subject to proper accountability and scrutiny. If the opportunity exists to have that rethink, and if people believe that it is necessary, that is best done in the context of the formal Supply resolution and Bill rather than for it to be left for scrutiny in the spring Supplementary Estimates in February 2017.

I will set out the issues that we have with the situation that we find ourselves in. We do not believe that the Budget agreed by the Executive and the Assembly is either strategic or sustainable. We voted against it in the Executive and in the Assembly. The process was badly flawed, and it is not a good piece of work. The context, of course, was set by a very late spending round in Westminster, and the issue came to the Executive towards the end of December. There was no draft Budget, and so the Budget was presented to at least two Executive parties with an hour's notice and then rammed through the Executive without any discussion. Facts have proven subsequently that there was time for even some sort of structured consultation with some key stakeholders, but that was passed up. So there is a major issue here with how we got to the Budget that is before us. The process was flawed, and it came in the wake of Fresh Start. You could not find a more negative demonstration of the words

in Fresh Start about how decisions were to be taken than the process used for the Budget.

I have concerns that the Finance Minister is seeking solely a narrative around blaming the UK Government for our financial situation because of the way in which they have addressed the UK deficit. Of course that is a factor, and we have to lobby them in that regard. However, if that allows us to take our eye off the ball in the reforms that have to take place in Northern Ireland, we will miss a major opportunity to put our finances back on a strategic footing.

I am concerned, for example, that we are not planning ahead sufficiently for a lower rate of corporation tax. I agree that the Minister needs to clarify the Executive's position. Is it, as Emma Little Pengelly suggested, definitely happening in 2018, or is it, as the Minister suggested, subject to affordability? Those are contradictory statements. One is right; one is wrong. Please tell not just the Assembly but the business community of Northern Ireland and internationally what our plans are for it.

It is not just about having certainty about what is happening but about investing in skills and infrastructure, and no steps are being taken to turn the tap on in the right direction. In particular, the skills funding deficit will be approaching £85 million per annum by 2019-2020. We have to step up in that regard. We are not addressing the cost of a divided society. A report from Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre, which is gathering dust on the shelf, points to major distortions in our public spending. We are well aware of distortions in health and education spending at present. We have got to grips with serious reform in that area. I am concerned that there is an intent to spend, potentially, an extra billion pounds a year on health by 2021, which the DUP and Sinn Féin have signed up to. That will not be credible or sustainable. We have to look at what reforms are required and put money behind them rather than simply making a pledge about resource input, especially if we do not consider any other reforms. For some Departments and agencies, that will potentially mean cuts as high as 20%.

I know that the Minister will say, "Well, it is all and well good for you to say all these things, but where is the alternative? Where are the different proposals for how you would do things differently?" Let me set out a few things. Maybe my colleagues will explore these in more detail, and I will touch on them tomorrow. For example, we believe that we should cancel the social investment fund; Departments can carry on that work. We should cancel the relocation of DARD to Ballykelly, as it is costing us money, we do not need to do it, and it will create massive issues for business continuity. We should address teacher training. I am flabbergasted that Mr Smith referred to the inefficiencies in teacher training when his party overruled me at the Executive when I tried to do something about it. We need to end rates capping and prescription charges. There also needs to be some modest increase in the regional rate. All those things could be done this year by the Executive.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Dr Farry: That is an alternative, so do not say that we have not put one forward.

Mr Bell: What the public in Northern Ireland are principally looking at is what devolved government can deliver to them in excess of what was there before. There is a record there that, I think, is indisputable. We have brought more jobs to Northern Ireland than at any time before, and we have looked at foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland. For years, we were told that Northern Ireland was at its high watermark and that we had achieved more foreign direct investment per head of population, with the exception of London, and that was fine because nobody could compete against the city of London and the London economy. Yet, in about August 2014, Northern Ireland, per head of its population, exceeded London in attracting more foreign direct investment than any other part of the United Kingdom. Significantly, for periods, our unemployment rate has been very attractive in comparison with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

1.30 pm

There are major challenges ahead for all of us. What can we do? Yes, we have the Fresh Start Agreement. Incidentally, I welcome the fact that we have an Opposition of sorts and that they are looking towards scrutiny, but, ultimately, the scrutiny came in the last number of weeks at the election. Mr Smith said that it was "Vote Arlene", but it was also "Vote Mike" and others. The scrutiny came from the electorate, Mr Smith, and they voted Arlene Foster in as the First Minister of Northern Ireland with an overwhelming mandate and gave Mike and your party its lowest share ever. Ultimately, all of us elected politicians look to the scrutiny of the electorate.

We have major challenges at this time. I look specifically towards the Department for Communities. In the last year of the previous mandate, I attended a manufacturing event at Queen's University led by the previous acting vice chancellor, Professor James McElroy, where he outlined that, according to figures he got from the United Nations, I believe, Belfast was the second-safest city in the world and second only to Tokyo. So we are attracting record levels of foreign direct investment. We have a safe place. We have an education system in Northern Ireland that, as a rule of thumb, is 10% higher than its competitor areas, and we have a strong further and higher education sector that, in many cases, is leading the world. But there are major challenges.

There are challenges with housing. We have seen some good news recently in the social housing sector. We have to look not only towards the successes but at the fact that a huge number — too many people — are waiting in the social housing sector. I raised the point and laboured it at the Committee, and I will raise it again. I am particularly concerned about the numbers of people in our social housing sector who do not register in the homeless figures. They are living in substandard accommodation that none of us in the House would accept. I can bring you to a house in Newtownards, where there is a single mother with a number of children, and she cannot sleep in her own bedroom. Ards and North Down Borough Council has been out, and environmental health has been out. They have said, "Yes, this is unacceptable", but a private landlord is challenging that and saying, "Oh, we can get a plumber to do something different from what is being asked for". Meanwhile, the single mother lives in a house that is unacceptable but does not appear in the homelessness figures because she is apparently in

suitable accommodation even though the council has been out and deemed it unsuitable. We have levels of hidden homelessness that we must address, and we have to look towards the reform of social housing and how we can actively help people in the private rented sector.

Urban regeneration will be a major challenge, but we also look on the back of the sporting achievements, not only the challenges that there were last night, albeit in the context of a tragic death, but we can see out there that Northern Ireland sport is again playing at the top level, and we look towards major events that are coming in. The Irish Open will be here again in 2017, as will The Open, the world's largest golf tournament, in 2019. How can we use our sport to help in such areas as autism awareness, sports injury and concussion, and the Special Olympics? Those are all challenges in our Budget.

We have to find suitable employment for people. That is about helping them to find employment and to make sure that they, particularly our young people, have the right careers guidance for where they want to progress in the future.

There are challenges in our world-class natural heritage, in benefits and pensions, in supporting children and in local government. All in all, those are challenges that we must rise to because we have to create more jobs and increase family incomes in Northern Ireland. We have to look towards a world-class health service and to seeing what we have continue to develop. We need a proper infrastructure in Northern Ireland to support that. Finally, we need to do two things. First, we need to protect family budgets. We need to keep as much money as we can —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Bell: — in families' homes. We also need to build on education not just for the top who are achieving but for those who are underachieving.

Mr McElduff (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Go raibh maith agat as iarradh orm labhairt sa díospóireacht seo. To begin, there is some good news, in that the overall education resource figure has increased. That is obviously a positive. It is a considerable sum of around £35 million, which has been added to the 2016-17 baseline to meet substantial additional liabilities associated with teachers' pensions. In addition, the cost base for schools has reduced by perhaps around £12 million — that is my understanding — owing to voluntary staff departures. There is considerable expectation that other money, perhaps in the region of £20 million, will be allocated to education in June monitoring, with £15 million for school budgets and, hopefully, £5 million for special educational needs.

There is less good news — bad news — in the additional pressures that schools find themselves under. Those arise in the first instance from a reduction by the Westminster Government in the National Insurance rebate for employers. That decision may cost schools in the region of £1,000 per teacher. That is a worrying situation for those who manage school budgets. The other pressures include a possible increase in teachers' pay, which if it happens may generate £10 million of extra costs to schools for every 1% rise in teachers' salaries. That is clearly a very challenging situation for schools. The solution may well come in a number of parts, including extra money from the

Executive, further reductions in the school cost base and, in some but not all cases, a new approach by schools to excessive budget surpluses.

I turn now to the capital programme, which has increased to £193.4 million. That increase is, of course, welcomed by the Committee. I think most Members will be aware of school enhancement programme work and so-called minor works in their constituency that have either been completed or need to be completed or undertaken. Members will also be aware of some major works, for example, new school buildings, that have been promised but not yet delivered. The Department now has a full pipeline of capital works of all kinds and in all sectors. The Committee hopes that we will see progress on all those projects or areas of projects in 2016-17.

It is also worth noting that up to another £50 million per year of capital will be available for shared and integrated education projects under the Fresh Start Agreement. I know that the predecessor Committee took an active interest in shared education projects in Ballycastle, the Moy, Limavady, Brookeborough and Toomebridge. I am sure that Committee members past and present and all Members will generally welcome progress on those projects

It is also worth mentioning that the Department raised concerns recently that it might be unable to spend all of the Fresh Start money on education projects, as planned. In the Finance Minister's response today, I would like the Aire Airgeadais to give the House some assurance that that money will not be wasted if that is the case. I would like him to indicate, if possible, whether some of the Fresh Start money might find its way to supporting other innovative shared education projects, like that under construction at Strule in Omagh.

I wish to add a few comments as a Sinn Féin MLA and a West Tyrone MLA. One thing I would like the Executive and the Minister of Finance to be aware of at all times is the whole area of rurality. We have rural proofing and the Rural Needs Bill, but on the ground those need to translate into the remedying and repair of rural roads, particularly B- and C-class roads, where possible. There is also the area of inadequate rural broadband. Coming fresh out of the Assembly election campaign in West Tyrone, I know that those are two very serious messages coming from the people: rural roads and rural broadband. I will probably repeat those quite often in this mandate, in the hope that we see major progress in those two areas. At the end of the day, roads are about people more than they are about roads themselves. If you have poor broadband in a community, it definitely curtails the competitiveness of small businesses. It prevents farmers from completing forms online and prevents young people from social interaction.

I also throw into the mix a priority of additional respite for adult carers of those with learning disability. That is a health matter, but an essential matter that needs to be mentioned today.

From a constituency point of view and marrying it with my education role, I met nine school principals from the Omagh district last week. I was accompanied by two other MLAs from the constituency. We heard the message loud and clear from the nine principals about the pressure on school budgets, perhaps leading to unacceptably large class sizes and more teacher redundancies. There is a

protocol — obviously, the Minister of Education has the primary role in addressing that issue — but I invite the Minister of Finance to also be cognisant and aware at all times of the pressures coming on school budgets and perhaps to give a listening ear to school principals, if that is not to usurp the role of the Education Minister.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Will he bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McElduff: I certainly will. Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the chance to speak.

Mr Nesbitt: I congratulate Philip Smith, my colleague from Strangford, on the impressive delivery and insightful contents of his maiden speech. "Insightful" is not a word you could direct towards the Estimates, however, whose 338 pages give very little away.

Before focusing on the scant information about the Executive Office, I turn to the opening remarks of the Minister. I welcome him, and wish him every good fortune for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. We were promised scrutiny. I notice that he chose to refer to the Ulster Bank's purchasing managers' index but used the April report to suggest that we had had 12 months of progress. I am sure the Minister is aware that the May index was published earlier today. He chose not to use it. Is that because the headline included the words "nine-month low" and the commentary included the opinion that Northern Ireland's brief period of outperforming the rest of the UK as a whole appears to have come to an end? I hope he addresses that in his closing remarks.

In terms of the Executive Office and the Estimates, there are some clues — let me be positive — because it lists a number of areas where money will be required. They include settlement of the Civil Service equal pay claims.

That was a big issue on the doorsteps in Strangford during the election and, I have no doubt, in the Minister's constituency of South Belfast. Public servants were disadvantaged because they were not made aware of the implications when they agreed to secondments to the Northern Ireland Office or to the old Police Authority of Northern Ireland. This has dragged on and has gone through the courts. First Ministers have talked about feeling a moral obligation to those who missed out through no fault of their own. I invite the Minister to make an unambiguous and time-bound commitment to remove this stain from the Executive.

1.45 pm

There is very little information in the Estimates about the historical institutional abuse inquiry, but the Minister will know that Sir Anthony Hart is due to report to the Executive no later than January, within this financial year. The Minister will know that victims and survivors have waited not years but decades for relief and for an apology and that, increasingly, there is a call for reparation. For many, reparation is synonymous with financial compensation. They have welcomed the fact that the chair, Sir Anthony Hart, has said that he will recommend some form of reparation, but there is no budget line in the Estimates for the historical institutional abuse inquiry to lead on to reparation in the form of financial compensation. Again, I ask the Minister to address that. I understand that other organisations such as the institutions may be called on to contribute, having contributed to the abuse in the

first place, but I do not think that that is any reason for the Executive not to lead and make provision and then reclaim the money from other organisations that may be deemed to have responsibility.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I will give way to the Chair of the Committee for Finance.

Mrs Little Pengelly: The Member spoke to the point that I was going to raise. I am sure that he will agree that many of the admissions thus far to the HIA inquiry have come from the institutions as opposed to the Government. It is only right and proper that they make a suitable contribution towards that. Likewise, given that we are waiting for the independent report from the independent inquiry, having a budget line to outline redress from the Government would, in fact, prejudge the outcome of that. We need to be extremely careful to maintain the independence of the independent inquiry.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you very much. I do not accept the Member's point: if you are 70, 80 or 80-plus years of age, you expect your Government to do the right thing by you. The niceties of maintaining the independence of Sir Anthony Hart and his inquiry are not compromised if the Executive say, "We will put in a budget line that we may or may not draw down when we finally receive the report of Sir Anthony". On those issues, let us not forget that there are many victims who do not have access to the inquiry, not because they were not victimised and were not abused — they were abused, arguably in exactly the same way, physically and psychologically, as the victims who have access to Sir Anthony's inquiry — but because of geography. It is because they were abused not in an institution but perhaps in a domestic setting. I ask the parties, particularly those that are for equality, this question: where is the equality in saying, "Because you were abused in location A, you get into the inquiry, but someone else, abused in location B, does not"? That is not a matter of equality.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Briefly.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. Will he confirm that the Ulster Unionist Party agreed to the terms of reference of the historical abuse inquiry?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, we did, and the legacy Committee agreed to it because we were told that, if we tried to keep reopening the terms of reference of the inquiry, we would hold it back. It was better to go with this inquiry for those who could get access to it and put pressure on the Executive to do something for those who were excluded. I thank the Member for that clarification opportunity.

I see in the Estimates over £6 million for the social investment fund. That money should not be there, not because the social investment fund was not a good idea but because the timeline was a disaster. The information that we have is that the £80 million that should have been spent in total by March 2015 will not now be spent until financial year 2019-2020: a five-year overrun for a three-year programme.

What about childcare? There was £12 million for OFMDFM in the previous mandate, and I believe that it spent only something like £4.6 million. Where is the £7.5 million? He can oppose austerity coming out of London, but does the Minister accept that about £100 million of programme money in OFMDFM not being spent added to austerity rather than eased it?

I have one other point. The Executive talk about moving away from the silo mentality between Departments, but, as I said to the First Ministers when they were before the Committee last Wednesday, our scrutiny Committees are not doing so. We are still in silos, and that sometimes makes it difficult to scrutinise programmes such as Delivering Social Change, where the lead may be with the Executive Office but the delivery is with another Department. The Assembly has to think about how we achieve non-silo working in our Committees as well as in the Executive.

Mr Farry attacked my colleague Philip Smith by saying that the Ulster Unionist Party overruled a proposal from him on the Executive. Simple maths for Mr Farry: his party had two votes on the Executive, while we had one. How on earth can one vote overrule two?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Nesbitt: This man was in charge of further and higher education.

Mr Stalford: This is an interesting debate. It takes place in the context of the Fresh Start Agreement, which secured greater investment from central government for Northern Ireland than would have been the case had it not happened. We are therefore debating how a pie that has, frankly, become larger should be sliced up inside government, and that is a welcome context for the discussion.

Reference has been made in the debate to the social investment fund. My experience of it, from my time as a council representative for south Belfast, has been a good one. Other South Belfast representatives can confirm that the projects in our constituency that the social investment fund will be directed into are of benefit to people on the ground.

Ms Hanna: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes.

Ms Hanna: The Member has brought this up before. Nobody is suggesting that there is not social need out there or that there are not problems that need to be solved. The Member needs to accept that people are critical because it is an invite-only scheme — only preferred suppliers and organisations have the opportunity to tender for the work. Nobody wants to take the money away from the early years schemes that you refer to, but do you not agree that any organisation with ideas and solutions should equally be allowed to apply for the money and deliver the solution?

Mr Stalford: This is the second time that the Member has repeated that inaccuracy. The Member knows that the working groups appointed to oversee the social investment fund were appointed in an open and transparent way. She also knows that the Office of the First and deputy First Minister had no hand in determining which projects would and would not be approved. That decision fell to

the panel in each area, and those panels were appointed independently.

It is really sad that, as a Member for South Belfast, you cannot find it in yourself to recognise the positive impact that the social investment fund is having in our constituency, particularly in Sandy Row, where the money from the fund will go towards the creation of a training and employment centre. It is an area of great social need, and it needs that. I think of Taughmonagh, where the money from the social investment fund will provide a day-care nursery in an area of social deprivation — somewhere where it is needed. An important point about the Taughmonagh day-care nursery is that it is used by people who are from way beyond the confines of Taughmonagh — by people from throughout South Belfast. Those are projects that are bringing positive benefits and creating positive change in our constituency, and I know —

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: No. Later on maybe, but I want to make some progress.

I know that there has been a lot of criticism directed at the social investment fund, but we can see for ourselves, with our own eyes, the positive impact that it is having on the ground.

Reference was made to the historical abuse inquiry.

It is not right to refer to the need to maintain the independence of the inquiry as merely a “nicety”. If parties agreed the terms of reference, as they did, and the way in which it would proceed, as they did, we should allow it to proceed. I agree with the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party that the horror that those people who were abused went through is beyond measure, and we, as a Government, are right to recognise that horror for what it was. It is because we recognised it for being the horror that it was that the inquiry was established in the first place. It is because of the need to ensure that we move forward together united to address this injustice that all parties that were then around the Executive table agreed that this was the way to proceed. Having initiated the thing, we should not suddenly decide that we want to alter the terms of reference or interfere with the independence of the inquiry.

We are in a better position. Northern Ireland is in a better position than it was before the Fresh Start Agreement because of the additional resources that have been secured for spending on things that matter to every person, whether they are in the Government or the Opposition. It is on that basis that we should continue the discussions. We should, of course, refine our Programme for Government at later points to ensure that maximum delivery occurs for our people. In those two areas — the social investment fund and the historical abuse inquiry — it is important that we try, insofar as is possible, to maintain a unity of purpose to ensure delivery, not only for the communities that need it but for the individuals who have been so badly affected by the despicable behaviour of others.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mark Durkan.

The debate stood suspended.

(*Mr Speaker in the Chair*)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: We will start with listed questions. Before I call Mrs Sinead Bradley, I inform the House that question 4 has been withdrawn.

Executive Meetings: Minutes

1. **Mrs S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the officially recorded minutes of Executive meetings are not published or made available to all Members. (AQO 1/16-21)

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): It is essential for the Executive to be able to conduct their work in an environment where Ministers can engage in full and frank discussion and be confident that the content of their papers and their views are protected. We do not, therefore, routinely release information, including minutes of meetings, that provides details of Executive business or their decision-making processes. The Executive may, however, where they consider it appropriate, make a statement on their decisions or views on a particular issue. We have no plans to depart from that practice.

Mrs S Bradley: Thank you, Minister, for your reply. Will you explain why the two parties represented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister at last week's Business Committee did an about-turn on a fully crafted and agreed position of all five parties in March 2016 on the provisions for Opposition debate on the Floor of the Assembly? Did that about-turn perhaps happen after —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to a question.

Mrs S Bradley: — two Opposition debates?

Mr McGuinness: The question specifically refers to the decisions and minutes of meetings of the Executive. During the course of the conversations that we have, we always think it valuable that Ministers have the ability to engage in discussions to enable outcomes that make sure that we are in a position to provide better government as we move forward.

The work of the Business Committee is obviously the responsibility of that Committee, but it has been made abundantly clear that we regard the position that we have adopted, in the conduct of our business and how we relate to the Assembly, as being appropriately suited to the outcome from the Fresh Start Agreement.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for those remarks. Does he accept that a lack of transparency, perhaps mixed with not a very timely disclosure of ministerial information, often leaves senior civil servants in an impossible position, not least when they try to brief Statutory Committees?

Mr McGuinness: It is always our commitment to ensure that, when civil servants attend Committees, they are in a position to provide as much information as they possibly can. It does not take me to remind people that, during the

course of the last mandate, we had a situation where we had a five-party coalition. People talk about transparency; many meetings of the Executive took place where at least two of the parties had no difficulty whatsoever with stepping outside of the protocols and briefing the media on the confidential business of the Executive.

Mr Ford: I am quite sure that the deputy First Minister was not referring to Stephen Farry or me in his last comment. Given what he has just said about the releasing of information from the Executive, the complexity of the work to be done around the Programme for Government framework and the subsequent development of the Programme for Government, particularly where it relates to cross-departmental issues, will the deputy First Minister inform us of how Members of the House and its Committees will be involved in that process?

Mr McGuinness: I thank the Member for the support that he and his party gave to the approach that we have adopted during the course of the Programme for Government. It is absolutely clear that that work, which began last year, was supported the whole way through by the Alliance Party. In the aftermath of its decision not to come into the Government on this occasion, it stood by its commitment to process a Programme for Government draft that had at its heart the responsibility to engage with the community, society and key stakeholders.

I appreciate that contribution. As we go forward in processing the work of the Programme for Government, we will take into account the point that the Member just made. I think it is vitally important, as we go forward, that we share as much information as is feasible.

The Executive Office: Roles and Priorities

2. **Mr McGrath** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the roles and priorities of their Department between now and 2021. (AQO 2/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: In determining the roles and priorities of the Executive Office over this mandate, we will be looking to the contribution we can make to the high-level outcomes in the Executive's Programme for Government. A draft framework for the programme was agreed by the Executive on 26 May 2016 and was published the following day for public consultation. It contains 14 strategic outcomes that, taken together, the Executive believe articulate the society we wish to have. Those outcomes are supported by 42 indicators that are clear statements for change. A key feature of the new programme will be its dependence on collaborative working, and we will, therefore, be working as part of the Executive team to deliver that programme and drive work across departmental and sectoral boundaries.

During the period of public consultation, we will continue to deliver against our statutory responsibilities and existing plans, undertaking important work in equality, human rights and social change; building a united community; strategic investment and regeneration; our relationships with others, North/South and east-west, and with Europe; and promoting our interests abroad. None of that work is going to stop, but we will be looking in the new Programme for Government at ways to do things better, taking a more joined-up approach with our stakeholders and partners and finding ways that will deliver the greatest benefits.

Mr McGrath: Could the Minister explain whether, given the reduced responsibilities of his Department, it is still justified in having two Ministers, two junior Ministers, a fleet of ministerial cars and the largest collection of special advisers that our Government has? Are there any plans to reduce that burden on our taxpayers?

Mr McGuinness: The answer is yes, it is justified.

Mr Kennedy: In originally looking at the reduction in the number of Departments, the idea had been for the Executive Office to move to a coordinating role, rather than one of service delivery. Can I ask the Minister this: what changed?

Mr McGuinness: I think we still regard the coordinating role as very important, but given that we are now in a two-party coalition, it is a huge responsibility — it is a responsibility that we and the DUP have taken up against a backdrop of others opting out — to ensure that we continue to give leadership. It falls primarily to the First Minister and me to ensure that the work of all our Departments is coordinated in a way that ensures delivery. Of course, our responsibilities are greater than the work that happens at the Executive. There are other responsibilities that we have, such as meeting delegations and people who come here on an ongoing basis. The whole business of the work of government basically now falls, in the leadership involved in taking it forward, to the DUP and Sinn Féin and specifically to the First Minister and me.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister confirm that other parties had an opportunity to develop the draft framework? Was there any objection to that in principle?

Mr McGuinness: We have been over that a number of times over recent weeks. It is on the public record that the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party stood by the commitments that we made to put in place a Programme for Government that had the widest possible consultation and involved key sectors from within society and the community that wished to contribute. This was a different approach. It has worked successfully in some of the states of the United States, Scotland and Finland. From our perspective, we believe it represented the best way forward.

It was also supported by key people within the stakeholder section who came out very publicly and said that they agreed with this approach and that it was an opportunity for them to have the greatest possible input to the Programme for Government. It is vital that we continue to process that in a way that gives us the best possible outcomes, and one in which society can be satisfied that they have had their opportunity to have their say. The fact that other parties stood back from that and disavowed the commitments that they made at the beginning — specifically one other party, I should say: the SDLP — is a matter for it. The SDLP was fully engaged in the process from the beginning, and it was only in the aftermath of the election, not before the election — at no stage before the election did it voice any disagreement with the approach that was being adopted — that it disagreed with the process. I believe that that was down to its election results.

Mr Dickson: Deputy First Minister, in light of the recent United Nations report which highly criticised the segregated nature of our education system, can you assure the House that integrated education will receive

the highest priority when it comes to considering Together: Building a United Community?

Mr McGuinness: I, as well as many other Members, absolutely value the contribution that integrated education makes. Of course, I think there are many other sectors that make an incredible contribution to an education system that has seen dramatic improvements in recent years, with increasing numbers of young people emerging from school with five or more GCSEs. I think the United Nations report that came out over the weekend is a very, very important report that should be studied by every Member of the House.

Brexit: Contingency Plans

3. **Mr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any contingency plans their Department has in place should the UK decide to leave the European Union. (AQO 3/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: An exit from the European Union is not a certainty. It will be negotiated only if the public vote to leave in the referendum on 23 June. The British Government have indicated that they are not planning on that basis. We will also await the outcome of the June referendum.

Mr Aiken: In view of the concerns raised by the Northern Ireland business community, Northern Ireland business organisations and many of the political parties in the Assembly, including his party, will the deputy First Minister be in discussion with his other governmental party about looking closely at what the implications of a Brexit vote may be and what support a Brexit vote may raise? Will he then formally take the opinion and view of the Chamber and, on behalf of all the Government, represent that view to the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr McGuinness: I think that, by this stage, the views of all the parties in the Assembly are well known. I do not think our partners in the Government have any difficulty in understanding our position in relation to the referendum. We are very firmly in the “Remain” camp, for all of the reasons that the Member has articulated. Obviously, our partners in the Government have a different view. This is a democracy; people are entitled to their view. I very strongly hold to the view that any decision to leave the European Union would be hugely detrimental to society, our business community, our farming community and the community and voluntary sector. I also note that people say there will be no checkpoints on the borders in the event of a Brexit. This morning, on social media, I saw a photograph that somebody had put up of the border that exists between Norway and the European Union. Do I want to see checkpoints on the roads from Derry to Letterkenny, from Tyrone to Monaghan and from Newry to Dundalk? Certainly not.

Ms Hanna: It is interesting that the deputy First Minister noted that he would wait to see the outcome of the election before setting a hard course. That is a good idea; it is a pity nobody else is allowed to do that. In the disastrous event of a Brexit, which powers that are currently with the European Union does he see being devolved to Northern Ireland? Has he done an audit of those powers? Which would usefully come to the Assembly?

Mr McGuinness: People are jumping to a position regarding the referendum. The referendum has not yet

been held. It will be held on 23 June. I do not know what the outcome will be. I hope that it is a vote to remain.

In the context of the debate thus far, there are so many unknowns about what will happen on the other side of the referendum, and we will have to deal with them, whatever they are. If, unfortunately, we end up in that scenario, there will be a two-year position with regard to negotiating a way forward, and I presume there will be a lot of negotiations in that period. However, I am not working on the basis of this being a Brexit vote; I am working on the basis of it being a "Remain" vote.

2.15 pm

Mr McAleer: The Minister obviously agrees that an exit would have a massive impact here in the North of Ireland, given our particular circumstances.

Mr McGuinness: I think that we all understand that any such vote would have a massive impact. We have had the debate. Obviously, we represent only a very small percentage of the overall number of people entitled to vote, but I think we can say, without fear of contradiction, that, at the moment, given the support from the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the Ulster Unionists and us, the hope is that the majority of people in the North will vote to remain. If so, we will stand proudly with Scotland, which I believe will vote to remain. However, the big vote will be in England, as many of us know. It is not a situation over which we have any control. I will be in England later this week, making a speech outlining the implications of all of this for us. I hope that people in Britain, particularly the Irish community, will recognise the great dangers for our economy and social interaction, North and South.

Mr Agnew: The deputy First Minister mentioned the possibility of border checks. Does he agree that the "Leave" campaign cannot have it both ways? They argue, on the one hand, that they will control the borders and reduce immigration and, on the other, say that we will not have a border checkpoint. Does he agree that we should protect the free movement of people and that the "Leave" campaign should be honest and admit that, if they want to control the borders, that will mean having checkpoints?

Mr McGuinness: I listened to Nigel Lawson's interview on 'The Andrew Marr Show' a couple of weeks ago, and he gave the game away very clearly. He was emphatic in his belief that there would have to be checkpoints. The fact that we have seen, this morning, the photographs of checkpoints that exist between Norway and the rest of the European Union adds validity to his argument. He is not the only person who has said that.

It has to be a source of great concern to all of us who, I think, have all benefited from the open border. You can now drive from central Belfast to central Dublin in an hour and a half or an hour and three quarters without hitting a red light or a checkpoint. I think that the last thing people here want to see — particularly people in the business community and those who socialise regularly, as is happening increasingly as the peace process develops — is anything that in any way interferes with the very important social interaction, North/South or, indeed, east-west.

Mr Allister: If the people of the United Kingdom have the wisdom to unshackle us from the disastrous EU, is there an assurance that the deputy First Minister and his

party will not seek to stymie the opportunities to liberate business, including farming, from costly regulation, will not stand in the way of the resulting bonfire of regulation and will not stand in the way of the rebirth of our fishing industry?

Mr McGuinness: Well, I think I represent a very responsible political party in this Assembly. The Member may not think so, but I certainly think so. In the aftermath of the vote, whatever the outcome, we will behave very responsibly indeed. It is hugely important that we all recognise the seriousness of what is about to happen. The Member takes a different view from mine, but, again, he is entitled to that opinion. Whatever happens on the other side of the vote, we, behaving responsibly, will deal with our partners in government and other parties in the House to ensure that we continue to move our society forward.

Mrs Long: Like the deputy First Minister, I hope that the vote will be to remain. However, regarding contingency plans, has he or, indeed, the First Minister received any assurance from the UK Government that the money that we currently receive from the EU into Northern Ireland would be replaced by money from Westminster were we to go through the process of withdrawing from the EU?

Mr McGuinness: The answer to that is no. Neither the First Minister nor I has received any assurance whatsoever. Even if we had, I would not trust it for one minute. This is a British Government that were ruthless in dealing with our block grant over the period that they were in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. I have absolutely no faith whatsoever that whatever money is lost through single farm payments, the CAP or anything else will be returned to us by a British Government that are totally and absolutely committed to austerity.

Mr Poots: Does the deputy First Minister recognise that removing the United Kingdom from Europe would bring many more powers back to the Assembly, and, instead of having unelected commissioners making decisions that impact on the lives of the people, the Assembly would be making those decisions and bringing about a far greater level of democracy for the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr McGuinness: My position is the same as that of my party, which is one of critical engagement with the European Union. Not everything about the European Union is hunky-dory, and we have articulated our concerns about different aspects, some of which the Member referred to in his remarks. However, we have to deal with the impact of a Brexit vote on how we develop our economy. Of course, as the Member will know, over the course of my dealings with Rev Ian Paisley — God rest him — Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster, then as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and now as First Minister, our visits to the United States were hugely important in attracting more foreign direct investment and jobs than at any other time in the history of the state. For all the delegations, through the access that we had courtesy of the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to the highest levels of the business community in the United States, the issue of our continuing involvement in Europe always came up.

One of the big difficulties that we face in the context of any Brexit vote will be how that will have an impact on our ability to attract foreign direct investment, given that one of the major arguments that we used was that we were a near-shore location for a jump-off into the European

Union. There are huge implications for us from this vote, and I hope that, in its aftermath, the wisdom of the people will come through and that they will recognise that the great benefits, particularly for us, are ones that we should not spurn.

The Executive Office: Staff

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the total number of staff employed by their Department. (AQO 5/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Fearon to answer the question.

Ms Fearon (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): As of 1 June 2016, the total number of staff employed by the Executive Office was 284.

Mr Beggs: Each of the nine departmental Ministers has a special adviser, and many of the direct functions that were in OFMDFM have now transferred out. Given that transfer of functions, how can the First Minister and the deputy First Minister continue to justify the increase in special advisers that they instigated? Will there be a reduction below the original six, given the reduction in functions?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for his question. There are no plans to reduce the numbers of special advisers in the Department. I take the Member's point, but, although the Executive Office is now more streamlined following the restructuring of Departments, it still covers a wide range of functions, and the work of Ministers has not reduced in the office. Much of our work also facilitates the business of the Executive and of other Ministers and their Departments. We remain a key strategic driver across the Executive, and that requires a lot of detailed work.

The Department continues to have responsibility for issues of significant political and cross-community interest, as well as for a number of key priority areas for the Executive.

Structures and staffing levels in the Department are regularly reviewed to ensure that work is delivered in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Mr McMullan: What have been the reduction in staff numbers and the savings to the Executive Office arising out of the voluntary exit scheme?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for his question. The voluntary exit scheme resulted in a reduction of eight posts in the legacy Department, OFMDFM. The last person exited in tranche 4 at the end of March this year. All reductions were achieved prior to the formation of the Executive Office. In-year paybill savings realised as a result of the voluntary exit scheme amounted to £104,000, with ongoing anticipated annual savings of £336,000.

Ms Mallon: I find it interesting that our deputy First Minister does not trust the Tories when it comes to Europe but left our most vulnerable in their hands when it came to welfare reform.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Mallon: In light of the number of functions that have transferred out of the office, can the junior Minister detail the savings to the public purse from the reduction in staff?

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for her question. I do not have the budgetary details with me, but I am more than

happy to write to her. I will say, however, that, with the transfer of functions, 56 posts went from OFMDFM to other Departments.

Legislative Programme

6. **Mr Agnew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration they have given to publishing a legislative programme. (AQO 6/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: As the Member will be aware, we recently issued for consultation a draft Programme for Government framework, which sets the direction for the Executive for the next five years. By the end of this year, we intend to have detailed plans in place for delivering our intended outcomes. It is therefore essential that the Executive's legislative proposals for this mandate should reflect and support the priorities in the Programme for Government and be developed in tandem with this process. While we acknowledge fully the need to advise the Assembly of our legislative proposals, this cannot be done in isolation from the wider development of the Programme for Government, and we will give further consideration to the timing and most appropriate means of providing this information.

Mr Agnew: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. A lot of work has gone into looking at how to make the Assembly operate better. Members are only too well aware of the flurry of legislation towards the end of the last mandate, meaning perhaps that some very complex Bills did not get the time and attention that they deserved. What guarantee can the deputy First Minister give that we will produce legislation in a more managed, strategic way, rather than in a rush at the end of the mandate?

Mr McGuinness: In the previous mandate, 60 of the 64 Executive Bills introduced were passed by the Assembly, following a huge effort by Members, Ministers and Committees, particularly from January to March of this year. That was comparable with the 2007-11 mandate, when 65 Executive Bills were introduced. We hope that we can build on those experiences and, taking into account what the Member has just said, learn whatever lessons need to be learned to ensure a successful outcome for the Executive's legislative programme in the current mandate. While the remit of other legislatures differs, it is nevertheless interesting to note that, compared to the 60 Executive Bills passed in the last Assembly mandate, the equivalent figure for Scotland was 67 and for Wales 25.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The deputy First Minister answered my question in his last sentence.

Mr Attwood: While acknowledging the independence of the Hart inquiry, given that Judge Hart has said that he will recommend a compensation or redress scheme for victims and survivors, which many of them have demanded, is it not time for the Executive Office to, as a minimum, scope out what a redress scheme should look like, in advance of, and complementary to, the forthcoming recommendations of the Hart inquiry?

Mr McGuinness: The Member asks a very important question. We have been guided from the get-go by Sir Anthony Hart's stewardship of the process. He has made it clear in the course of the inquiry that he believes that there will be a need for a redress system. We take that

very seriously indeed. I have no doubt whatsoever that our thoughts are turning to how we can deal with that. He also went on to say that he still has work to do. Of course, in the aftermath of this, and without attempting in any way to pre-empt the outcome of it, responsibility for redress may well fall to parties other than the Government here. It is obviously something that can be decided only by Judge Anthony Hart. At the moment, he is in the final stages of his inquiry, as the Member well knows. Hopefully we will not have too long to wait, although I think that, given what victims of abuse have been through, that is obviously not the answer that they seek at this time. I hope that all of this can be processed very thoroughly indeed, in line with Judge Hart's handling of the situation. I want to pay tribute to him for the incredible work that he has done on behalf of us all over the course of recent years.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Fresh Start Panel Report: Publication

T1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister can explain why the publication of the paramilitary panel report was not announced in the Chamber. (AQT 1/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: Obviously, announcement of the paramilitary panel report fell to the First Minister and me. During the course of the Fresh Start negotiations, it certainly became quite clear to me that there was a very strong probability that, in the aftermath of the election, we would find ourselves in the Government with the DUP; effectively a two-party coalition. We were the people who asked and actually appointed the panel members. I want to put on record our deep appreciation to John McBurney, Monica McWilliams and Lord Alderdice for the very thorough work that they did. We believed that it was important, as soon as it was feasible and practicable for us, to publish the report as quickly as we could. I think that that does no injury to the right of anybody within the Assembly to have a view on that report. It is a report that, I think, has been widely welcomed by people within society. As we go forward, obviously Members have a duty, if they feel that they have a grievance about this, to raise it in the Assembly. The important thing for me is the work that they were engaged in, the outcome of that work and the key responsibility that we now have to put in place, by the end of this month, a process for implementing it. That primarily falls to the Democratic Unionist Party, ourselves and the new Justice Minister. Parties like the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP effectively stepped away from that responsibility.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Perhaps, in future, it would be better to make such announcements, if they should definitely be made, in the House. However, we are where we are with this one. Can he provide the House with an update on the action plan following this report and when it is likely to be completed?

Mr McGuinness: We gave a commitment in the Fresh Start Agreement announcement that we would keep to the time frames that were laid out for us. The time frame for putting forward the implementation plan arising from the work of the three-person panel is that it must be completed by the end of this month. Presently, as we speak, that work

is being undertaken. I can give an absolute commitment that, by the end of June, we will have kept to the public commitment that we made.

Corporation Tax: Sinn Féin Position

T2. **Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the deputy First Minister's response to those who are saying that Sinn Féin is not committed to the devolution of and reduction in corporation tax. (AQT 2/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: Sinn Féin is committed to the reduction in corporation tax. At the very beginning of the debate, the five larger parties in the Assembly were absolutely in favour of such a process on the basis that we did believe, and still do believe, that it can create anything in the region of between 35,000 and 37,000 new jobs.

So, we are absolutely committed to that, but, as the Fresh Start Agreement makes clear, it has to be on the basis of affordability. We believe that it can be on the basis of affordability, so we are working on the basis that the reduced rate of corporation tax will come into being by 2018.

Ms Bunting: In the light of the deputy First Minister's answer, will he confirm that he and his party are taking and will continue to take all opportunities to sell the future prospects in Northern Ireland after corporation tax has been reduced?

Mr McGuinness: I think I have a very strong track record in selling the need for jobs and our proposition to not only US investors in particular but to places like China and the European Union. The reality is that, over what was the worst world economic downturn that we have ever seen, the work that I was engaged in with my colleagues in government, principally from the DUP — Ian Paisley, Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster — brought in more foreign direct investment jobs than at any other time in the history of the state. So, I am absolutely committed and dedicated to providing more jobs, particularly for young people.

I think that, in all our engagements in the United States, there was intense interest in us reducing the rate of corporation tax, which is a further incentive for foreign direct investors to come. Obviously, I do not know what view those investors will take in the context of the run-in to the referendum. I think they are all sitting waiting to see what the decision of the people here and in England, Scotland and Wales will be in relation to Brexit. I do not know what their view will be on the other side of that. It amounts to another one of these unknowns, but, absolutely in principle, my view is that we need to have all the tools we possibly can have to ensure that we are continuing to show that we are open for business and are attracting new jobs for people who need them.

Orlando Shooting

T3. **Mr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister will join the Assembly in condemning the horrific attacks in Orlando and whether he agrees that violence has no part to play in forwarding any political agenda. (AQT 3/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: I unreservedly condemn the terrible massacre that took place against innocent people in Orlando. It was an horrific crime. It again raises the whole

issue that is to the fore in the United States of America about the ability of people to access weapons by just walking into a shop and purchasing them. It seems that the character who was responsible for the massacre in effect did that over the last couple of weeks.

Thankfully, we here in the North — I am reading into the question the attitude of my party, for example, in the context of all we have been through over 40 or 50 years and, more importantly, over what has been a very important peace process that has transformed the security and political situation — are committed to totally peaceful and democratic means. We are absolutely totally committed to totally peaceful and democratic means to the point where those who are not in favour of peaceful and democratic means have threatened our lives and attacked our homes. My track record is second to none, just as it is good on attracting jobs and standing up to so-called dissident republicans and extreme loyalists who try to ferment conflict on the streets.

Mr Aiken: I thank the deputy First Minister for his views on Orlando. Will he also outline what he and his Department are planning to do to remove the scourge of paramilitarism and political violence from Northern Ireland?

Mr McGuinness: Again, on Orlando, the First Minister and I will go tomorrow to Belfast City Hall where we will jointly sign the book of condolence. I think that sends a very strong message. We have already issued a statement about it, as well as, obviously, remembering a young man, Darren Rodgers, who lost his life in an accident in France overnight. We are all absolutely gutted at that.

From our perspective, as we go forward, I think that the three-person panel has done an incredible job on our behalf. It is our task now to implement that. It is also our task to continue to show that politics works and that we as politicians, coming from different ideological backgrounds and different allegiances, have the ability, against the agreements that we have made between us over the course of the last 20 years, to continue to take our society forward. That has essentially meant that, for all of us, compromises have had to be made. I am proud of the compromises that I have been part of, and I hope that everybody else in the House attached to other political parties are proud of the compromises that they have made. That is the only hope for going forward in our society, and it is one that I believe is overwhelmingly supported by those who support the peace process.

Fresh Start: Departmental Delivery

T5. **Mr Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister is confident that the reduced number of Departments, on the back of the Fresh Start Agreement, will have delivery as their focus. (AQT 5/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: I think that there has been a very wide welcome for the reduction in the number of the Departments from 12 to nine. I suppose that one of the key decisions made in the context of that exercise was the amalgamation of the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment into a new Department for the Economy. That is absolutely vital for us as we try to continue to develop our economy, particularly in relation to, hopefully, the new jobs that we believe we can attract but the huge

responsibility that we have to ensure that we have people educated in the proper skills to ensure that we have the ability to attract those jobs. The big challenge for us going forward is to ensure that we support further and higher education. That will require a commitment. I have no doubt that that will be a big feature of the consultation process that we will go through over the course of the next seven weeks. The amalgamation of those two Departments represents an enormous change, which we have all signed up to and which we believe will produce economic dividends for our people.

Mr Anderson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response and for the answers he has given to me. I think we all agree that, whatever happens, it is essential that delivery is at the forefront as we move forward over the next mandate. Does the deputy First Minister also agree with that?

Mr McGuinness: I absolutely agree; I think that delivery is of critical importance. I think that the Ministers around the Executive table from both the DUP and Sinn Féin are absolutely committed to ensuring that we deliver and are full of enthusiasm and determination to ensure that we all work collectively together. Just last week, the First Minister and I went to the new Committee for the Executive Office. We both made it clear that we do not believe that Departments working in silos is of any benefit whatsoever to us. What we need to see is a cohesive, joined-up approach, with Departments delivering on the basis of working through each other, examining what more can be done and ensuring that, as they do that, we are in a position to bring forward the processes and strategies that will be of benefit to the people whom all of us represent.

Programme for Government: Benefits for Mid Ulster

T6. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the benefits of the draft Programme for Government for the young people in the Mid Ulster constituency. (AQT 6/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: I hope that people in Mid Ulster — I was very proud to represent that constituency over many years; I have now obviously moved to the Foyle constituency — will engage in the consultation, just like people in each of the 18 constituencies in the North, to ensure that we get the widest possible buy-in. Of course, there has to be a big focus on young people, education, health and, indeed, our ability to attract jobs that will put those young people into gainful employment.

We could talk about the individual circumstances of an individual constituency, but I do not want to pass up the opportunity to send a very clear message to each of the 18 constituencies out there that the next seven weeks provide a golden opportunity for stakeholders and society in general to engage in a process that gives them the maximum possible buy-in on issues that affect them, not least the whole issue of our young people, our education system, our health service, our ability to attract jobs and our ability to ensure that we lead communities that are not full of despair but full of hope.

2.45 pm

Ms Dillon: Can the deputy First Minister give us a reassurance that the final draft will prioritise early

intervention to give our vulnerable young people the best start in life?

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that he has a minute for a reply.

Mr McGuinness: It is a very valid point. It is hugely important that all the Departments that have a responsibility recognise that prevention is better than cure.

Mr Speaker: I call Carla Lockhart for a quick one. You may not get a supplementary.

Delivering Social Change: Funding Commitments

T7. **Ms Lockhart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether all the central funding commitments in the Delivering Social Change framework, which was announced in 2012, have been met. (AQT 7/16-21)

Mr McGuinness: Delivering Social Change, which involved a range of issues, was a hugely successful process that we were involved in. It was set up by the Executive to tackle poverty and social exclusion. The central funding for the six initial signature programmes, which were designed to tackle poverty and to improve children's health and well-being and their education and life opportunities, completed in March 2016. Of course, there are three further programmes jointly funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. All of this has been an enormous success and, until March of this year, had been fully funded.

Education

GCSE Attainment

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education, given the year-on-year increase since 2007 in GCSE attainment, to outline his plans to ensure this improvement continues. (AQO 16/16-21)

3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress made in raising educational attainment, particularly at GCSE level. (AQO 18/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 3 together. It is probably a slightly surreal experience that the first question that I receive is from the former Education Minister. I almost feel that I am in one of those body-swap comedies from Hollywood. While he has the opportunity, he can let me know where the money has been hidden in the Department. I would gratefully receive that information.

I welcome the improvement in GCSE outcomes detailed in the recent publication on our performance. In education, we often deal with many of the problems facing the subject matter, but we sometimes do not celebrate success and achievements. The credit for that goes to our young people, teachers and school leavers. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of school leavers achieving five GCSEs or more and an improvement in the results. That has not simply happened across the board. In particular, there has been a greater speed of improvement among those on free school meals and from socially deprived backgrounds than in other sectors. While there is much work still to be done, that

is to be cherished and built upon. That has occurred because of a wide range of factors, particularly the support being provided to schools. I am keen to encourage and, indeed, support particularly the school budget through a range of interventions, and I am keen that, where we see improvements in the school system, those are protected, albeit in difficult financial circumstances. Where interventions need to happen and where the speed of improvement has not been fast enough, I am keen to see what improvements can be made.

Mr O'Dowd: I want to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate Mr Weir on his appointment as Education Minister. It is a vital role in our Executive and in our society, and I wish him every success with it. Unfortunately, I cannot tell him where the money is hidden in the Department of Education because there was no money left to hide. I know the financial pressures that he will face in the future.

Will he agree with me that education is one of those areas where it is vital that the Executive work together because many of the issues facing our young people in relation to educational underachievement are factors outside the school that impact on young people's lives outside school?

I note his comment about the increase in GCSE results for our young people. The previous Executive and the Executive before that —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to a question.

Mr O'Dowd: — have seen a 10% increase in GCSE results for our young people. Does the Minister agree with me that it proves that, regardless of who the local Minister is, we can do things better for ourselves?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his congratulations. Although we have seen clear success through improvements in exam results, we should always be ambitious and look to see where we can make further improvements. It is also the case that education is a key driver for the economy and society as a whole. What is most vital about education is the difference that it can make to an individual's life. For many young people, education can be the game changer in their life, and that is where we always have to think of the individual.

I certainly hope that the Executive will give priority to education. We are obviously in very difficult and tough financial circumstances, so that will not be easy. If there is any help that the Member opposite can give, it will be welcomed. If he wanted to have a word with the honourable Member for South Belfast about financing the Department of Education, I would be grateful for whatever help from whatever source it was delivered.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far and welcome him to his first Question Time. Will he give an indication of what progress has been made on raising educational attainment at GCSE level among working-class Protestant boys?

Mr Weir: Thank you. I have said that, across the board, there has been an improvement in educational attainment. That has been mirrored in a range of groups that has traditionally underachieved. If we take free school meals entitlement as a yardstick, over the past eight years, we have seen a virtual doubling of achievement in the number of Protestant boys who are entitled to free school meals.

That still, however, leaves a considerable gap to the average levels of achievement.

It is noticeable, for instance, that, in both the Protestant and Catholic communities, the level of increased success among girls has appeared more rapidly than it has among boys, so there is a gender issue to be looked at as well. I will particularly be looking at where there are still weaker educational outcomes to see what interventions can be tailored for those people.

The previous Minister made a very valid point that, although we will focus on what happens in schools, there is a wide range of interventions available, and we had a debate last week on early intervention. A lot of that is critical to long-term success. Particularly in education, we need to ensure that we look at things from a long-term perspective. If you are making interventions with children who are two or three, for instance, the impact of that on exam results may well come 10 or 15 years down the line, but we should not shy away from making those interventions simply because we are not seeing the fruits of them very swiftly.

Mrs Dobson: Before the new Minister rushes to congratulate or give credit to the former Minister for improvements in GCSE results among Northern Ireland students, will he reflect on the former Minister's comments from when he was in post? He said that Northern Ireland does not have a world-class education system and:

"we remain average by Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) standards, and we still have too many young people who do not achieve the expected level in literacy and numeracy." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 69, p28, col 2].

John O'Dowd said that on 21 November 2011.

Mr Weir: There is always room for improvement. I should highlight the fact that the latest GCSE figures came out the morning after I became Minister. I am not passing that praise on to the former Minister but claiming it for myself. [Laughter.] I am not going to get into he-said-she-said territory. There are many successes in our education system that we need to acknowledge, but it is also the case that we have to be ambitious for our children and see where improvements can be made. I hope that the whole House can unite around that as a positive agenda rather than trying to analyse where we believe we are failing. It is about making those important improvements.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Sinéad Bradley. I remind Members that, if they want to ask supplementary questions, they should continually stand.

Mrs S Bradley: Minister, welcome to your first Question Time.

Does the Minister share the concern that pupil attainment may be compromised going forward owing to the reduction in the number of rewarding bodies that are available, because of changes that have been made to the grading system elsewhere?

Mr Weir: The grading issue is a separate one and I know that there are questions on that later. My aim is to try to maintain, or restore, an open market in qualifications and I have been working with officials and the key bodies to see what actions can be taken to solve that problem. It is important that the choices are there for schools and that

we have an outcomes-based focus. We must ensure that, whenever pupils receive qualifications, comparability and portability are clear. It goes beyond simply qualifications; it is how pupils are able to use them in the future. That is an ongoing issue to which I hope to provide some level of certainty to the House soon. I appreciate that a lot of schools are faced with particular choices come September and it is important that, at the very least, we establish a clear direction of travel as soon as possible. I am acutely aware of the issue and have already had initial discussions with officials.

Mr Allister: Could I encourage the Minister to address that issue with some urgency? It is great to have good GCSE results but they must be relevant in that they must be portable. It is imperative for the Minister, given the disastrous decision by his predecessor, to reverse that decision at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Weir: I always take encouragement from the Member with great face, and I welcome that point from him. It is important that we get a resolution to the issue. It is not simply a matter that if the previous Minister did x then I have to go entirely in the opposite direction. The key element of this will be the outcome. The Member highlighted the significance of the comparability and portability of exam results which, for the individual student, will be the key test. That will be the basis on which I am seeking a resolution. I am acutely aware of the urgency and agree with the Member, which is why I have held initial discussions on that matter. There is a need to make progress very quickly and I hope that we can do so.

SEN Nursery Provision

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Education Authority's review of special educational needs nursery provision. (AQO 17/16-21)

11. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Education Authority's arrangements for consulting with those affected directly by the review of special educational needs nursery provision. (AQO 26/16-21)

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will also answer Question 11 as the two questions are related.

I met with the chair and interim chief executive of the Education Authority (EA) on 7 June to address the authority's review. The chair informed me that, while good progress has been made on many aspects of the review, issues associated with the planning and provision of preschool places in special schools are complex and sensitive and will require very careful engagement with principals and parents. I emphasised the need for meaningful engagement with those who are directly affected. The chair has assured me that the review will involve the establishment of a professional practitioner group and a parent stakeholder group. It is anticipated that the review will take a further six months to complete. The authority has assured me that it will not be implementing any substantive arrangements, in terms of any review, before September 2017.

There is, however, the need for preschool places in special schools which are anticipated to increase by around 20% by September 2016. The EA has agreed to a number of interim measures to extend early years' provision

across the special school sector to meet these immediate demands. The authority has confirmed that it has engaged with the schools involved and that they are all fully aware of those plans. It advised that it is taking a careful and considered approach, with interim steps to meet the needs of children for September 2016, while planning and engaging on a longer-term approach that puts children and their needs to the forefront. I assure Members that no long-term decision on the matter will be made prior to the completion of the review. I will continue to monitor progress to ensure that the authority delivers on what it said to me and on its commitments.

Mr Lyttle: The Education Minister and the Education Authority speak of no new substantive arrangements but then outline substantive interim measures. Does the Education Minister accept that this approach is leaving parents feeling anxious and confused? Will he make clear his support for the retention of full-time hours in special educational needs nursery schools, and will he accept my invitation to meet with parents on this important matter?

Mr Weir: First, it is not universal across the board that there is full-time provision for special needs; it has been of a differential form. A range of measures has been taken. In some cases where there has been, for instance, provision of around two hours or two-and-a-half hours, that is actually extending to three hours. It is an issue of capacity and, in the interim arrangements and because of the pressures that are there, we are trying to ensure that there is a place for every child. This is the most crucial element, and I have to make that provision.

On many occasions, with children presenting because of assessments even over the summer, that figure is not finalised and we are moving on almost a daily basis in terms of increases. We are left with the interim situation of an increase of about 20%, and there is an attempt by the EA, in its primary responsibility for placements, to ensure that there are sufficient places and at least a place for every child.

3.00 pm

The Member mentioned full-time places. I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the overall review, but the key thing is trying to ensure that there is at least something in place for children in 2016; that is fairly clear. It is important that we give that level of reassurance that there is clarity around that.

I will be happy to meet parents at some stage. The initial contact, because it is the responsibility of the EA, has to be that direct conversation between the EA and parents. That is the initial contact, but I am more than happy, as part of the process, to meet representatives of parents.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Rosemary Barton.

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, I think that question is linked with 11.

Mr Speaker: Sorry to the Minister. The Fresh Start Agreement and the Opposition position indicates that the first question after is to go to a member of the Opposition. Therefore, I call Mrs Rosemary Barton.

Mrs Palmer: Thank you, Mr Speaker —

Mr Speaker: OK, I call Jenny Palmer.

Mrs Palmer: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Would the Minister agree and can he give an assurance to the Assembly that we have confidence in the review of special educational needs provision at nursery level, when it has been alleged that, in March, the former Education Committee was given erroneous information by an official that Fleming Fulton nursery school was closed? Could the Minister correct the record and assure us that the existing capacity for nursery provision at Fleming Fulton is fully recognised and utilised? Will parents whose children have a statement of physical disability with associated learning needs and have expressed a preference to attend Fleming Fulton —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to her question.

Mrs Palmer: Would the Minister give an assurance on that?

Mr Weir: It is clear that there was wrong information given to the Committee, and the EA has entirely acknowledged that. I suppose I have an axe to grind on this in that I think I was Chair of the Committee when that wrong information was given.

In terms of confidence in the approach itself, that is why it is important that the review is not rushed and there is an opportunity, very directly, for proper engagement, particularly with parents and schools. Too often there is the allegation that consultation on any form of review or any consultation that is issued simply becomes a tick-box exercise. It is important on this issue more than any other that that is not the case.

As regards the specifics of Fleming Fulton, it is a school that I have visited on a number of occasions. I am aware of the issues, and I know that a lot of good work is happening in Fleming Fulton.

As regards the broad position of nursery places, we are assuring people that there will be a place for every child. It is a key issue in ensuring that provision is made. Whether that will be for the exact duration that every parent wants cannot be guaranteed, because we have to make arrangements in terms of the capacity that is there. However, we will make sure that no child is left behind in ensuring that there will be. Indeed, as we move ahead with the review, it is also clear that children will have different needs. "Special educational needs" is often thrown out as just a loose term by people when it actually covers a multitude of situations. What will be of benefit to one child with special needs may not be of benefit to another. That is also something that has to be given a degree of cognisance as we move ahead with the review.

Mrs Long: The Minister will be aware that the Education Authority failed previously to disclose the opposition of parents to its proposals. I realise he has indicated that the first point of call for parents should be directly with the Education Authority, but what reassurance can he give parents that, going forward, the arrangements put in place by the Education Authority will be more open, transparent and effective in taking on board their views and reflecting them in the decision-making process than they have been to date?

Mr Weir: From that point of view, the only assurance that can be given is that we are part of a lengthy process. It is not simply being bounced through, and there are indications that the Education Authority is already starting to meet some parents and, indeed, will be trying to

work through not simply professional practitioners but a stakeholder group. As indicated, there are complex issues with this, and that is why the Education Authority is taking a level of time. It is also the case that I will scrutinise what will happen, and, indeed, if there is a lack of real engagement, that is something I will bring to the Education Authority. I can only seek assurances and push people to give those assurances and then try to make sure that they are delivered in practice, but I will make sure that that is the case.

Mrs Hale: I congratulate the Minister on his first Question Time, and I thank him for coming to Dromore yesterday for the church service for Central Primary School.

Minister, you are well aware of the crushing pressures that special needs schools and statemented children in mainstream schools are under, so what action are you taking on overall funding pressures in special educational needs?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. I pass on my best wishes to Dromore Central Primary School, which had a very good day yesterday with the service to acknowledge its 78 years as a school.

As I mentioned, the figures suggest that we are in the region of a 20% increase this year in the number of children who are seeking a place in special nursery provision. Beyond that, there has been increasing demand for SEN support and associated costs; indeed, many of those things include virtuous things in our society. For instance, thankfully, some children's life expectancy has increased greatly, and that is something that we should welcome. It is also the case that the percentage of SEN pupils with a statement has increased from around 4.3% just four years ago to just under 5% now.

A significant amount of the EA's budget is spent on special education services such as special schools, specialist support services, classroom assistants and transport costs. That funding has been protected as part of the budget-setting process in the last years, and additional funding for SEN has been secured from the Executive as part of the in-year monitoring rounds. Should the EA identify budget pressures for SEN and they cannot be met within the education budget, I will continue to work with the Executive to secure additional funding. Indeed, some of those budgetary pressures were part of the monitoring round bids that we put in, and I am hopeful that the honourable Member for South Belfast will be able to deliver on those in the near future.

Mr McGrath: If the House is to have faith in any future consultations carried out by the Education Authority, will the Minister agree that, given that we have had misleading information presented to the House, we have dissatisfaction from a major stakeholder in the process — the parents — and there was a consequent extension of the deadline to the process to accommodate a different outcome, an internal investigation will be required to learn lessons from this?

Mr Weir: Where mistakes are made there is always an opportunity to learn lessons. That will be critical. Let us be clear on this: mistakes were made by the EA, particularly on the failure to give information, and I take that very seriously. The timescale is to ensure that we get a proper, robust outcome. There is a serious issue with the provision of special needs education, particularly at nursery level,

and that cannot be done with simply a couple of meetings at the EA without consultation and the follow-through of a report. It has to be substantive in its nature, and it has to be carefully examined. Indeed, there is a key role for representatives of all sectors. This cannot simply be driven by officials; it has to go through the full board of the Education Authority to have that scrutiny. Most of the major parties have representatives on the board, and, indeed, there are representatives from all sectors. That sort of robust approach will, hopefully, build some level of confidence. As with any review or report, there is no guarantee that the outcome will satisfy everyone, but we have to try to ensure that we get the best possible outcome from that review.

School Enhancement Programme

4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the school enhancement programme. (AQO 19/16-21)

Mr Weir: The school enhancement programme (SEP) is a capital build programme targeted to meet the immediate and pressing needs in schools through smaller-scale works. It caters for construction costs that will be between £500,000 and £4,000,000. Fifty-one schools were originally approved in March 2014 to benefit, at a total estimated value of £134 million, and 12 of those schemes have now been completed. Indeed, in my first week as Minister, I was able to visit one of those at Belfast High School to see the good work that had happened there. There are a further 20 projects currently on site, with another 14 approved to move to construction and expected on site over the summer. Two schemes are currently parked following completion of their design. They will move to construction as soon as funding becomes available. These are St Malachy's contract two and Our Lady's Voluntary Grammar School. The remaining five SEP schemes are continuing to advance to design completion, at which point they will also be held until capital funding becomes available.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he also give me an update on the school enhancement programme project at Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt in my constituency? What future funding opportunities might there be through the programme for the school?

Mr Weir: Obviously, all politics is local in the House, and I welcome the Member's interest, particularly in Rainey Endowed School. The project addresses internal refurbishment of the existing school accommodation and the replacement of old mobile classrooms with new modular classroom units. In addition, the project will have a new-build permanent physical education facility. The project has a financial director-approved cost of around £4 million that covers construction costs, professional fees, statutory charges, F and E and VAT. The contract itself is broken down into two parts. Contract one, which was commenced on site in September 2014 and completed in August 2015, provided new modular buildings to address an urgent shortfall in accommodation. The works contract was carried out by Lawrie Construction. Contract two commenced work on site in March 2016 and is due to complete in March 2017. It will provide a new sports hall and ancillary facilities. Work is being undertaken by Dixon Contractors and is progressing well. Later this week, I will, I think, have the opportunity, along with another

engagement in the mid-Ulster area, to visit the school and see for myself what progress has been made.

We are also in a position where, as well as progressing the works that have already been announced, it is likely, given the success of the SEP, that there will be further calls and the opportunity for schools across Northern Ireland to make applications on a fair and competitive basis. A school's having received some level of support in the past will not preclude it from potentially receiving support in the future.

Mr McAleer: Minister, are there any new builds that could be impacted on by budgetary pressures?

Mr Weir: From a budgetary point of view, in terms of the overall SEP position, there have been a considerable number of announcements about the capital spend. Clearly there are pressures on the education budget in general, and from that point of view it is no different from any other Department. Those pressures are strongest on the resource side, and there are greater opportunities on the capital side. It will mean that there may be delays in how quickly projects move forward at times, but the opportunities are there. I have seen at first hand the advantage of SEP projects, in that their speed of movement can be a lot greater than for a normal full-scale capital build. From that point of view, I anticipate that we will be in a position to make further calls for SEP projects.

I want to make sure that, when we get progress on those, we do not have a situation where things simply become parked and are not in a position to move forward. When announcements are made, it is important that they are followed through on.

3.15 pm

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his answers so far, and I wish him well in his new ministry. In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, there is a great need to upgrade school infrastructure to ensure that it is fit for the 21st century. In light of that, can the Minister provide us with an update on the progress being made on the redevelopment of Mount Lourdes Grammar School and Erne Integrated College, both in Enniskillen?

Mr Weir: It may be better to write to the Member to give details on those two proposals rather than trying to fit them into a short answer. As we move ahead, all areas of Northern Ireland will be treated equally in proposals for capital build. We will have robust criteria. All Members will have a desire to see particular capital builds in their constituencies. One of the by-products of being in Dromore yesterday was my discovery that the entire departmental budget could well be blown there if I were to accede to the requests that I had yesterday. That could find favour with at least one Member here.

I will write to the Member on the detail of the two schemes he mentioned because that is better than trying to squeeze it into an extra minute.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now have up to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Education Budget

T1. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Education, after congratulating him as a North Down colleague on his

elevation to ministerial office, for his assessment of the Education budget that he inherited from his predecessor. (AQT 11/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his good wishes and I assure him that, in a similar vein of sending good wishes, I will continue to use his shop in Groomsport. [Laughter.] We are in a tight financial situation. As I indicated, there are pressures on the resource budget, and those are particularly acute when it comes to schools funding. Once the monitoring round is out of the way, I will reassess the broader Education budget to see whether there is, at least in the short term, a small amount of additional money that can be allocated to ease some of the burdens in schools.

There is a wider examination that needs to take place in the broader Education budget to ensure that we are getting as much front-line delivery as possible. That will be a longer exercise because, as with a lot of things in Education and in other Departments, it is not that easy to turn things around very quickly. Undoubtedly, we are in a situation where, because of wider decisions taken within the national Budget, every Minister is trying to operate with a certain level of funding. It would be a lot easier if additional money was available to us, but we have to make do with what is there unless I am able to find the money that John O'Dowd has hidden somewhere.

Mr Chambers: Before the election, the thing that was exercising headmasters was the unplanned increase in teacher salaries, pension contributions and National Insurance contributions that had been placed as a burden on the school budgets. Has the Minister identified a solution to that? Can he give any hope to the three schools in North Down that have been waiting for a rebuild that, in the short term, they might achieve the funding for those rebuilds?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for all his questions. As regards the pressures on the pensions side, it was about £30 million. There has been a little confusion on that, because it has been built into the aggregated schools budget. The £30 million pressure came and has been mainlined within that budget. The issue of the £22 million comes from the National Insurance side of things. This is something that has hit across the public sector because of decisions that were taken at Westminster. It is undoubtedly a major stress for schools.

I am looking to see whether any additional funding can be found in the short term within the budget for 2016-17. Obviously, as part of the overall process of the monitoring round, a bid was put in. That was part of an earlier indication of around £15 million for school monitoring or the aggregated schools budget.

I will be working to ensure that, hopefully, that will be delivered. However, it is also a question of seeing whether there are any short-term actions that can be taken to ease the pressures on school budgets.

As was indicated, we are in a position in which there is heavy pressure on the resource side of capital build. Whereas I suspect that the capital budget could be spent four or five times over, there is at least less of a pressure on it because there has been a degree of protected growth in the main budget and in the additional funding for shared and integrated schooling, which is capital funding that has come separately from the Government.

There was an announcement shortly before the election that two of the schools that the Member referred to, Bangor Central and Priory, have their foot on the first rung on the ladder to getting that level of approval. Obviously, linked with Priory will be the wider Holywood schools project. I am also acutely aware of the situation at St Columbanus' and of the pressures there. There will be opportunities for bids to be put in for future funding. That will be done on an open and competitive basis. I am aware of the real needs of the school.

Education Sectors: Equal Treatment

T2. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to ensure that all education sectors are being treated equally. (AQT 12/16-21)

Mr Weir: Pupils, schools and sectors will all be treated equally as we move ahead. No schoolchild in any school should be disadvantaged simply because of the badge on the uniform. That is an important principle that I will be taking forward.

Specifically, there will be issues around area planning. Although there is good representation on some of the local groups, I will try to make sure that all the key players will be at the top table to have a say on the provision of regional area planning. It is important to get buy-in from all sectors.

One of the optimistic things that we can look forward to with the Education Authority is that all the major players in education, possibly for the first time ever, will be around the table. We have seen the establishment of the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), which was one area in which there had traditionally been a gap. It is important that it is within the Education Authority as well.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned the Controlled Schools' Support Council. Will he give an indication of the progress that has been made on its establishment?

Mr Weir: It was agreed by the Executive in September 2014 that the council would be established. Funding has been provided since October 2014 to the working group that established the Controlled Schools' Support Council. The CSSC will receive an annual grant of around £1 million. It is expected to be operational in September 2016. Obviously, one of the first steps taken was the recruitment process for a chief executive. Interviews were held on 25 May. Somebody has been agreed for that position. The next step is the recruitment of the three second-tier senior management posts, which is due to commence shortly. It is anticipated that the chief executive and the second-tier staff will all take up post on 1 September 2016. Subject to the finalising of the lease arrangement, it is anticipated that the Controlled Schools' Support Council will be located in Stranmillis College.

Controlled Sector: Post-primary Places in Belfast

T3. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Education, after commenting that, when she previously asked questions of the Minister, it was in a much less formal setting and wishing him every success in his new role, what action he is taking to address the shortage of post-primary places in the controlled sector in Belfast. (AQT 13/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her good wishes, albeit both of us are in different roles.

Obviously, there has been pressure on school places in the controlled sector, particularly on the non-selective side of things.

That has happened both in the east of Belfast and in the northern part. Specifically, I visited the Girls' Model School on Friday and was able to have an exchange on that with some of the local representatives. There has clearly been an impact. There is a longer-term issue that will have to be looked at; in the short term, temporary variations have been sought by the Boys' Model School and by Hazelwood. I anticipate that there will be an application for a temporary variation from the Girls' Model School as well. The first two have been dealt with; they were granted, so at least there has been a degree of relieving of pressure. However, there is also a longer-term issue that the Department will need to look at.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he please provide an update on the long-term development opportunities for Ashfield Boys' and Girls' schools in east Belfast?

Mr Weir: There are two aspects to that. At the moment, there is no direct published development proposal for either school. However, the EA has indicated, in the annual action plan for the period up to March 2017, that it will consult on the establishment of co-education learning support centres for autism spectrum disorder, and Key Stage 3 and 4 general learning support at the schools, with the proposed effective date of 1 September 2017. As that is likely to lead to a development proposal on which, legally, I will be giving a final verdict, I cannot comment on the particular merits of that. I mentioned that there is the longer-term issue of pressure on school places. Around July of this year, the next report on area planning across Northern Ireland will be produced. That will identify, in a strategic way, where there are pressures in the system. I anticipate that that will look particularly at the position of east Belfast and also, to some extent, north Belfast. That will let us see how that issue can be taken forward in a much more long-term way.

It is not a long-term solution for any school to rely on temporary variations. It also needs to be looked at in the context of whatever pressures, opportunities and difficulties it will create for the wider school population in the area. It is not just about what will happen to an individual school.

Transfer Test: UN Report

T4. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister of Education for his assurance that he will give due consideration to the most recent report from the United Nations, which called for the abolition of the transfer test. (AQT 14/16-21)

Mr Weir: I had a funny feeling that the Member might ask that question. The report is fairly lengthy and covers a wide range of children's services; it impacts not simply on education issues. I appreciate that it will also create a range of questions for the Justice Minister. The Department will give due and careful consideration to the report. From my initial examination of it, there are a number of aspects that I would not necessarily fully

support. I take a different view on a number of issues, not just on selection.

I have made it very clear, on the issue of selection, that I support the right of schools to select on the basis of academic ability. That is something that is now enshrined in legislation and, in many ways, from that point of view, it is something that has happened. We have different views on that issue in the House, and we might get into a sort of trench warfare as to whether we are pro- or anti-selection. There is a range of key issues in education that can make a significant difference to children's lives — particularly issues such as early intervention — where there needs to be a focus. If we get bogged down in a battle over something on which there is not going to be a degree of consensus, there is always the danger that we will ignore those other issues.

The Department will look at the full report, but that does not mean that there will be carte blanche agreement with it.

Mr Kearney: Mo bhúiochas duit, a Aire. Thank you very much for your response, Minister. Does the Minister agree that it is important that we take due regard of international authorities on these matters and, when we speak of consensus, it is entirely appropriate that we take regard of international opinion as well as the collective opinion of the House?

3.30 pm

Mr Weir: It will not greatly surprise Members, but one thing that there has not been a shortage of since I became Minister of Education is a range of people and organisations offering me their opinion, all of which will be given proper due regard. I accept that any international body will come up with conclusions. From that point of view, I think that due regard will be taken of them, but we also have to realise that we are in a system in which there is proper democratic accountability. We have to make judgements for ourselves. It is always important to take that level of advice, but, as it would be if I were to give advice to a range of countries on what their practices should be, it may not necessarily be the correct conclusion. Ultimately, we have to take our own decisions on that basis.

I agree with the report when it mentions that there is a need to ensure that there is educational opportunity for all. My concern is that if we move away, simply, from academic selection, we will entrench some of those differences and create much more of an obvious situation. You need only look across the water to England, where there has been comprehensive education for a large number of years. It has led to a greater level of entrenchment, where those who have the greatest ability to pay can pay for public schools and can send their children to the Etons and Harrows, as we can see from the composition of the current Cabinet, for instance. I think that, rather than aiding social mobility and educational opportunity, it has tended to be regressive in its nature. I am careful that we do not go down that line. I appreciate that there will be many debates on the issue, particularly on academic selection, but I suspect that it may not be one on which there will be agreement across the House.

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am seeking clarification on the ruling of members of the Opposition

asking supplementary questions. At the start of Education questions, Mr O'Dowd and Mr Middleton had questions that were grouped. Each of them was able to ask a supplementary before Mrs Dobson was called for the Opposition. However, on the second question, Mr Lyttle and Mrs Long had questions grouped, but Mrs Barton asked a question before Mrs Long. Whatever the case may be about Mr Middleton — I understand he is certainly not a member of the Opposition, formal or informal — it is my understanding that all those who have tabled questions that are taken will be taken before the question of Opposition supplementaries comes up. I would appreciate your guidance on that.

Mr Speaker: On the first occasion, the error in the sequencing was mine at the Table. The second occasion was in line with the decision under the Good Friday Agreement, where, in the first three questions, the Opposition Member gets the preference. So, it was an error on my part at the Table, Mr Ford.

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

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the 2014-15 Excess Votes

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £69,281,105.15 be authorised for use by the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, for the year ending 31 March 2015, as summarised in part II of the 2014-15 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1-3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call Pam Cameron. I beg your pardon; I call Mark Durkan.

Mr Durkan: As a member of the Opposition, I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister and to wish him well in what is certain to be an extremely challenging role. I listened to the Minister's speech earlier and was extremely heartened to hear him declare his opposition to austerity. I am hopeful that we will not have to remind him of that too often during his time in office.

The Minister spoke of the fix-all Fresh Start Agreement and pointed to the £500 million mitigation fund, secured to ensure that vulnerable people would not be left behind, in his words. Of course, though, that £500 million being spent in mitigation is coming from other budgets, and we must ensure that it does not create more vulnerable people or make life more difficult for vulnerable people by resulting in reduced services.

I would also like some reassurance that this fund, designed to protect against the worst impacts of welfare

reform, will be sufficient to do so, particularly as the Fresh Start Agreement predated the passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Act through the House of Commons. That Act, passed after the Minister's party voted with the DUP to hand responsibly for welfare issues back to the Tories, is a further attack on the vulnerable people the Minister says he is determined must not be left behind. It will see the benefit cap, for example, reduced from £26,000 per household per year, which affects fewer than 500 families here in the North, to £20,000 per household per year, which, I imagine, will affect a few thousand more households. Perhaps the Minister can clarify how these new cuts have been factored into the spending of the mitigation fund.

As the SDLP health spokesperson, I will move on to how much more wisely, as opposed to just how much more, money should be spent on health. We, as an Assembly, need to ensure that less money actually needs to be spent on health in the first place. We need to ensure that our population is healthier, and one way of doing that is to ensure that our population is wealthier. An improved economy is something we all want, but we are going to need a bit more than the magic bullet that is a reduced rate of corporation tax. I am not the only Member with questions about the trajectory of that magic bullet and whether it is or is not still on target. The confidence of Ms Little Pengelly earlier that the reduction of the rate of corporation tax will proceed when stated and as stated contrasts somewhat with the Minister's mysterious musings on the subject in the media last week. There is also an inevitable impact on public services with the reduction of corporation tax, and I know Dr Farry touched on that when he spoke.

We need to see further and cleverer investment in skills and education to create a ready workforce, and we need to invest properly in infrastructure so that companies can access that new workforce. In that regard, I am very pleased to see the commitment to the A6 and A5, but I am a wee bit cautious that these much-needed and much-welcomed projects will face further delays down the road.

The Minister spoke about the possibilities afforded by borrowing. Certainly we should look at what opportunities exist to draw down cash to invest in projects that will boost our economy and create employment, but we cannot just go around the banks, borrowing money just because we can and racking up debt for our and future generations. Unless, of course, the Minister subscribes to the fiscal policy that his party espoused not that long ago — it was just last year, in advance of the Westminster election — that all debt should just be wiped.

Also, when entering any finance agreement, it is very important that we read the small print. Members will recall the £100 million loan sought from the Treasury by the DUP and Sinn Féin to ease a budgetary crisis. That basically allowed the Treasury to dictate to us how we manage our financial affairs.

We heard an extremely positive piece of news last week about the money coming from the European Investment Bank for housing. That is to be welcomed, but if we are to meet the huge need for social housing across all our constituencies, we have to maximise the borrowing power that we have at our disposal. That can be done only by allowing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive the same

access to borrowing as housing associations, maximising the value of its housing stock.

On health, I will reiterate the point I made last week that the redistribution of services from acute settings to community care as outlined in Transforming Your Care and costed at £83 million is essential. That will see a reduction in bed-blocking, as it is termed, although I do not particularly like the term, and our much-maligned, and rightly maligned, waiting lists will reduce in length.

Surely we can find the money to invest to save, if we can manage to find £30 million or £40 million every monitoring round to throw at the problem of waiting lists without ever dealing with the issue.

The Health Committee learned just last week that the number of GP training places is being increased to 85. That is very good, but, given the crisis facing general practice that we also heard about in the media last week, we do not believe that it goes far enough. We would like to see a further increase and, indeed, have costed proposals on that, which you will hear more about in the weeks and months to come. There needs to be further investment in early intervention in mental health, which will save our economy a lot of money in the long term and will save a lot of patients and families a lot of heartache and headaches.

Mr McKay: This is my first opportunity to wish the Minister of Finance well in his new role and on his particularly significant speech today on the Main Estimates. The Business Committee could have timed it better, because it looks like he will be responding at exactly the same time as Sweden play Ireland. In future, when the North or the South are playing, perhaps sittings could be suspended whilst those matches are taking place.

There is a clear need to ensure that the money we spend on health goes further. As the Health Minister has said, it is not primarily about buildings; it must be about services and improving health outcomes, reducing health inequalities and ensuring that all Departments put a greater focus on prevention. Health, as I have said many times before, is not an issue for one Department alone. We need to do things differently when it comes to health, and there are a lot of tough choices to be made. Why? Because, as a population, we are getting older. The number of over-65s is to rise by 44% — nearly 50% — in the next 15 years. We are getting more obese: it is projected that 40% of the population here will be obese in the next nine years, according to BMA figures. More of us are being diagnosed with diabetes, and there is a rise in the number of people with chronic conditions.

The current health system here will not be able to deal with the changing public health make-up and, therefore, it needs to change. The significant reduction in our Budget as a result of Westminster cuts will make this all the more challenging. That presents a challenge not only to the Executive and to government but to all the political parties, because the future of our health service and the prize of a world-class health service is more important than petty political point-scoring. I look forward to Professor Bengoa and the panel reporting to the Minister very shortly. There is also a need to reduce waste in health, especially with regard to cross-border services in the border areas. Clearly, there are opportunities there to free up money by having more joined-up services. That money could go to other services that are in need. That, for me, is a no-

brainer, and I look forward to the Minister looking at that and exploring solutions to it.

I will now move on to a couple of other issues. The Chair of the Education Committee mentioned the need for investment in the rural road network, and we look forward to the Executive delivering on the A5 and A6. Those are major projects that need to be delivered as soon as possible, but there is a concern in rural communities and in places that I represent, such as Dunloy and Loughgiel and up towards the glens of Antrim and Ballycastle, that the roads are in a bad state. That needs to be dealt with, and rural communities need to be assured that big projects such as the A5 and the A6 are not going to be delivered at their expense.

3.45 pm

The previous Agriculture Minister delivered the Rural Needs Act, and the incoming Executive need to be cognisant of the fact that the rural community has acute needs to be protected. I look forward to the Finance Minister's comments on how we protect the rural community and the budget for rural areas.

I would like to congratulate the Executive on delivery. In the north-east, the A26 is progressing well. This is key, not only for the many commuters to Belfast from places such as Ballymoney and Ballycastle but for tourists. We want to see more people coming to the north coast, not only to the port but to Ballycastle and elsewhere, including 'Game of Thrones' country in north Antrim.

Another issue that concerns the tourism community is air passenger duty (APD) and I am heartened to hear that the Finance Minister has made it one of his priorities. There is a lot of talk about the need to deliver on corporation tax, but APD is key to tourism and affects us here more than it does those across the water because of the North/South differential, highlighted in a PricewaterhouseCoopers report a couple of years ago and by the Finance and Personnel Committee. If we get APD right, we can deliver more tourists, more business and more jobs. You always hear anecdotally of the number of local people flying to and from other destinations and, of course, when it comes to the price of flights, Dublin wins hands down. We need to address that. We need a level playing field to ensure that we can compete with the rest of the island and get our fair share economically, which is not the case at present. There is an opportunity to bring in more tourists, more business and more jobs, and I am sure that the Finance Minister will lead in that respect.

Finally, the Department will bring forward reliefs for sports clubs. That is a huge issue in rural areas. I know many GAA and rugby clubs that are affected by quite significant rates bills. In a lot of communities these clubs are the only show in town. They bring communities together and deliver not only on sport but on mental health and many other things.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr McKay: I would like an update from the Finance Minister on how he will look at that issue.

Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak in support of the Supply resolution for the Northern Ireland Main

Estimates 2016-17, which grants the Department of Justice the resources to enable it to fund its responsibilities and priorities.

As the Justice Committee has not yet had an opportunity to scrutinise the Department's budget in detail, I will, of necessity, keep my remarks short. We have received some general information on the key budget allocations for 2016-17 and the pressures and challenges faced as the result of a reducing budget allocation. We have also had sight of the Department's June monitoring round return. The Committee is due to receive a more detailed briefing on the Department of Justice budget at our meeting this week, and I have no doubt that, following the meeting, Members will wish to schedule regular updates on the budget position, the various monitoring rounds and the development of the draft budget for 2017 onwards.

The Department has continued to prioritise front-line policing and other front-line areas as far as possible in this year's budget, with the aim of protecting outcomes for the public and funding to the voluntary and community sector and the policing and community safety partnerships. I am sure that the Committee will be supportive in its approach in common with previous Justice Committees. However, it is clear that the Department of Justice faces substantial challenges in this year's budget, and that pattern is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Clearly, identifying priorities is imperative in this type of budgetary climate.

The development of the Executive's Programme for Government provides the opportunity to do that and to ensure that the available budget is spent to best effect and achieves maximum impact. It also provides an imperative to identify proactively new ways of working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the justice system. The previous Justice Committee produced a report titled 'Report on Justice in the 21st Century' at the end of the previous mandate that included a range of recommendations for innovative approaches, including the use of problem-solving court solutions to address offending behaviour and reduce reoffending and the use of online dispute-resolution mechanisms for low-value civil claims. In my view, the Department needs to move to implement those and other new approaches swiftly so that the same or better outcomes can be achieved for the public at less cost. It is also essential that the Department develop robust plans and programmes to enable it to access funding that is available from the Fresh Start Agreement to assist with, among other things, legacy-related pressures and tackling paramilitarism.

The main pressures emerging at this early stage of the Budget cycle for the Department of Justice relate to the NI Prison Service staff and pay pressures; the NI Courts and Tribunals Service fine-default hearing costs and the shortfall in income; and the perennial problem of the cost of legal aid. Despite the Executive allocating £15 million in the 2016-17 Budget to the Department in recognition of the ongoing pressures that it faces with legal aid, additional pressure is already emerging. Given the plans that are in place to address the backlog of Crown Court cases that have arisen as a result of the action taken last year by solicitors and barristers, there is potential for that pressure to increase during the 2016-17 Budget period. The Committee will undertake work on legal aid policy and legislation over the coming months and will wish to monitor

and take account of the budget impact and pressure in that area as well.

There is also the potential for significant pressure depending on the outcome of test cases on fine-default imprisonment, which the Department of Justice does not have the capacity to fund. It will need to be monitored closely.

I turn briefly to the capital budget. Again, the Department has had to prioritise its spend in the area. The overview briefing by the NI Prison Service to the Committee on 9 June highlighted a range of capital initiatives that needs to be progressed to assist its reform programme. The PSNI also has a range of capital requirements. Further decisions will have to be made in the area. I am sure that the Committee will wish to assess the capital priorities as part of the ongoing budgetary process.

Briefly, on the Department of Justice's 2015-16 provisional out-turn figures, its non-ring-fenced resource DEL underspend of £10.6 million represents 1% of the budget. Of that, the PSNI underspend accounted for £3 million, which represents 0.4% of its total budget. The capital underspend of £1.2 million represents 2.7% of the budget. Those figures are encouraging and illustrate that the Department has worked hard over the past financial year to identify proactively and manage emerging underspends, in order to ensure that the budget is utilised as fully as possible to support the delivery of its priorities and objectives.

I conclude by adding some very brief remarks as a Member from the Democratic Unionist Party. The Department has shouldered some extreme budgetary cuts. We must ensure that we look for innovative ways in which to safeguard it from any further constraints, which, if they were to transpire, I fear would have an inevitable negative impact on front-line services. I am aware of the difficulties surrounding legal aid, which have gone on for some time and for which there is no easy fix, but we must look as a matter of urgency to resolve those issues to ensure that the already diminished budget is not put under any further pressures. I look forward to ensuring that we access the £32 million Fresh Start security funding for the PSNI and overseeing that it is allocated in a prudent, inventive and sensible manner to maximise its potential. I support the Supply resolution and Main Estimates 2016-17.

Mr Poots: I will make just a couple of comments on some of the issues that were raised by Members who have already spoken before getting into the issues that I most want to talk about. Claire Hanna's assertion about hand-picked SIF organisations is just an assertion and is nonsense. It is one that she should desist from making, because it is wholly inaccurate. I put that on record.

I invite her to come and see some of the really good work that is going on and which is making a fundamental difference to the lives of children and will ensure that we have better education outcomes and reduce health inequalities as a result, as opposed to such negativity.

Mrs Cameron has just spoken about legal aid. I trust that it is something that Ms Sugden, our new Justice Minister, can get to grips with. In the last mandate, the Minister did not get to grips with legal aid, and we are still expending far too much on it. That really needs to be got to grips with.

As well as that, the Prison Service has been left in a dreadful situation; Prison Service staff morale has never been so low. That is a significant challenge for the Minister. Funding is a critical issue in the Prison Service, and it is an area that I think she needs to address. Taking money from the legal aid budget to ensure that prisons are safe environments where people come out with the opportunity of reform is something that we should all aspire to and have fewer people in the justice system as a consequence.

I want to make some remarks in respect of DAERA. It is a very interesting Supply resolution period, given that many Departments have come together, and it will be interesting to see whether the funding has truly followed the responsibilities. Miss McIlveen has many challenges ahead of her in DAERA, not least because of the inability of the previous Ministers to deal with TB. Tuberculosis is something that most of the general public do not hear much about, but we spend £30 million every year on it, and we are not reducing the problem. Interestingly enough, I sat in a North/South meeting where the last Minister, Michelle the second, wanted to have a greater all-Ireland strategy, and Simon Coveney challenged her on where we were on TB. We could not move forward on what Sinn Féin wanted — an all-Ireland health strategy — because of the TB situation, and the Government in the Republic of Ireland would not accept that.

The reason why Mrs O'Neill would not move forward with the Irish Government on TB was because of the protection of badgers. The Irish Government had a completely different attitude to that which existed in Northern Ireland. It is important that we have a healthy bovine population and a healthy wildlife population. Ignoring the problem or dealing with one section of the problem — removing the bovine population that has TB while not removing the badger population that has TB at the same time — will ensure that we continue to expend public money on not dealing with the problem. That money could be better spent elsewhere, such as on health, education and justice or on improving our farm businesses.

There are other significant areas of challenge. We have had a lot of focus on moving offices from greater Belfast to other areas. There has also been a notion of creating a new computerised system to replace APHIS. At one stage, the Department was looking to spend somewhere in the region of £40 million. I challenged it consistently throughout that period that it does not need to spend that amount of money on a computerised system to monitor the movement of animals and that it could do something considerably less. We managed to produce an electronic care record, which contains the records of 1.8 million people. It is transferable between the primary sector and the hospital sector.

That was produced for £9 million — very thick files. We will need to see an effort by the Department to move away from the grand spending scheme that was previously proposed and find a means of developing a more cost-effective system there.

NIEA as an organisation is detested in the rural community. It treats farmers as criminals until proven otherwise. We need to have a serious look at the role of the NIEA and how it conducts its business to ensure that those in the agriculture community, who have been the custodians of our countryside for many generations, are able to do their jobs in a way —

4.00 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. This touches on his comments regarding the image or perception of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in the rural community. Does the Member agree with me that an independent or arm's-length environmental protection agency might be the way to go?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Poots: Thank you.

No, absolutely not. If you give the same people that unfettered power, they will potentially be even worse in how they conduct themselves.

Last year, one farmer in County Down shot himself after an NIEA visit, such was the pressure that he was put under. That is the significance of what those people do. I was speaking to another farmer recently who has TB as a result of the inability to deal with the badger population in his area. In fact, it had been found that all the badgers that had become roadkill had type 2 tuberculosis, which is the one that is transmissible to cows. As a consequence of that, he has had six herd tests. When his animals went up over a certain level, NIEA came in and did a farm inspection and said, "You've too many animals on your farm for the slurry tanks. Therefore, we're actually fining you and are taking money off your single farm payment", in spite of the fact that, legally, he could not sell or move animals off the farm. Those sorts of things need to be dealt with.

The wreckage of DOE has left huge challenges in that respect that have to be dealt with —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Poots: — and I wish the Minister well in doing that.

Ms Boyle: First, I welcome the Minister to the House and wish him well in his new role.

I wish to speak as a member of the Justice Committee on the Justice budget in the Main Estimates Supply resolution. The vast majority of Justice budget funding goes to policing, and that is accepted. However, the Department of Justice had a range of priorities in its previous budget, and I want to focus on the amount spent on domestic abuse through the PCSPs, the Public Health Agency, the PSNI and statutory agencies.

The newly appointed Justice Minister, Claire Sugden, has already given an assurance and a commitment that she will make domestic abuse a priority for herself and her Department, and I welcome that, as do others on the Committee. A recent PSNI report on statistics for domestic abuse motivation makes stark reading, with 28,287 domestic abuse incidents recorded in 2014-15. That is the highest level recorded since 2004-05 and is 35% higher than it was at that time. Indeed, 13,426 domestic abuse crimes were recorded in 2014-15, and that is also the highest number recorded since 2004-05. Given that and moving forward into the Budget, we have to reflect on those high levels and make changes, albeit that that will be challenging given the cuts to our block grant by the Tories.

The level of violence against a person with a domestic motivation continues to increase year on year, and it can

involve a range of offences from minor assault that can cause physical harm to murder. There has also been an increase in breaches of non-molestation orders, with 972 recorded in 2014-15. While there has been a lot of good work in the Department of Justice and other agencies on domestic abuse, there is always room for improvement. With proper priority-based resourcing and a review of all services, not just those the Department of Justice delivers but those delivered by the PSNI, with a particular focus on domestic abuse, then and only then will we see a slight change and a decrease in the figures that have been recorded.

The overall budget for tackling domestic abuse is not enough. I could not find the overall figure either from PSNI or the Department of Justice, but, if the Minister is to make domestic violence a priority in her Department, it needs to be adequately funded. She needs to be supported in the call for funding to tackle domestic abuse and domestic crime so that the statutory agencies, along with Women's Aid, the courts, the PSNI and the PPS, can have the confidence and ability to protect vulnerable women, men and their families from those who commit these crimes against the person.

Any reduction to the budget in this area can and will have a catastrophic consequence. It will be felt mostly in rural areas, where they find it difficult to get access to the right and proper people who can provide that support to women and men. I am well aware of cases where the PSNI, for different reasons, has failed to fully carry out its duties when dealing with domestic abuse. That includes not recording or taking statements, not following proper procedures and not putting in place arrangements for a victim to get medical assistance and to access the right assistance at the time. There are areas within that that need to be looked at, and we need to ensure that the budget goes in the right direction.

We also need to look at the training of all our PSNI officers. I am aware that in all the districts of policing there is a domestic violence team, but it is essential and important to note that all officers have the ability to deal with domestic abuse. It should be one of the PSNI's strategic priorities for the coming year. I am aware of a corporate plan that the PSNI has for keeping people safe, but in that plan domestic abuse must remain at the top and high on the agenda of priorities. If it is not, we will be failing the public for generations to come. The PPS should also review how it treats cases of domestic abuse. I am aware of instances when the PSNI has forwarded cases to the PPS and the PPS has responded with "No case to answer". That can be horrendous for the victim and their family.

As I stated, the public need to have the confidence to report domestic abuse and crime, and there needs to be innovative ways of dealing with that. Although we have increasing numbers of recorded domestic abuse incidents year on year, the under-reporting of domestic abuse and domestic crime against the person still remains very high. Only when we have an effective and responsive justice system from the PPS and the PSNI through to the courts can we collectively address this scourge on our society.

Moving forward with this topic, we need to learn lessons from the 2014-15 Budget on how funding for front-line services like Women's Aid is prioritised so that groups and organisations can continue to deliver the good work

they do in this area. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on that when he makes his final comments.

Ms Bradshaw: I have two points to make before I get into the body of my speech. First of all, I pass on my good wishes to Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, my South Belfast colleague, in his role as Finance Minister. I would also like to address a comment made by Edwin Poots and the irony of his criticism of the Alliance Justice Minister for his approach to addressing the reform of legal aid and the Prison Service head on, despite the fact that successive DUP Health Ministers, during the last mandate, failed to make any inroads into the need for reform in the health and social care sector. It is rather ironic that he chose to do that.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Yes.

Dr Farry: Does the Member also recognise that the issue was brought by the Justice Minister repeatedly to the Executive, but it was blocked by the two parties that controlled the Executive agenda.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you.

Earlier today and this afternoon, we have heard many issues arising from the Budget. I emphasise that I oppose the motion, but I wish to put forward a constructive viewpoint of opposition to it. It bears repeating that we are very concerned by the failure to consider the long term adequately, the failure to tackle vested interests, particularly segregated institutions, which means money is wasted on buildings that are not necessary, and the failure to invest adequately in skills and training where it is required, rendering it —

Mr Stalford: I thank the Member for giving way. She referred to the need to stop investing so much in buildings: is that a reference to Stranmillis University College? Is it still the view of the Alliance Party that it should close?

Ms Bradshaw: We do not believe in buildings; we believe in services. We encouraged those institutions to work together to come up with a workable solution that would have saved money from the public purse.

As I said, the failure to invest adequately in skills and training where it is required renders pointless any attempt at promoting inward investment by taking a further chunk out of our public service budget to reduce corporation tax in certain cases.

The Programme for Government actually offers hope for the future. It is mystifying why some parties who were involved in the work that went into it have now turned their back on it completely. Therefore, I intend to take my time here to be constructive and ask questions about whether we are really aligning some of the better aspects of that framework with our Budget priorities, particularly around health.

The Programme for Government framework has 14 outcomes. A first step will be to consider how much of the overall devolved Budget is allocated to each outcome, perhaps also considering if there is any other money, for example through welfare expenditure or, dare I say, EU funding, that can usefully complement it. Doing that will not be an exact science, but it will usefully help allocate

responsibility for each outcome and lines of accountability for delivery. That may be usefully extended to indicators. How much of the Budget is being allocated to reducing health inequality, for example? How much of that is being allocated in the most efficient manner? For those responsible for the programmes under each indicator, are they able to take a broad view, beyond their individual silo, to allocate the funds in the most efficient manner and with accountability?

We have already this term had a debate in the Assembly on illegal drugs, which particularly affect health in the areas where life expectancy is broadly lowest. Yet, this is not a Department of Health issue and nor is housing, welfare provision or education. All of those have an impact on health. The same applies to increasing healthy life expectancy, improving mental health and reducing preventable deaths, as they are all issues that go well beyond any Department.

The outcome-based approach that Scotland has been developing for nearly a decade is genuinely innovative. The fundamental question is whether this Budget is genuinely innovative too. Scots involved with developing the approach will tell you that it requires tackling vested interests — notably institutions — managing expectations and more local allocation of funding, often well beyond central government.

On the first of those, my colleagues have given an obvious example: it is clear that we do not need to train so many teachers in segregated colleges. Continuing to do so is the precise opposite of the outcome-based approach the Executive parties are now embarked on and supposedly supporting. The same applies, frankly, to education and health. An outcomes-based approach would see the notion of community-based schooling — allocating budgets not to the interests of individual schools but for the overall local communities they serve — taken seriously. We have supposedly been doing this for some time, but there is scant evidence of any actual outcome.

In health, of course, we have been told by reviews, reports and panels that we need to re-image the health service, yet absolutely no work has been done to explain that to local communities, who fear that reform, which would, in fact, be good for their health, is actually a loss of some sort.

4.15 pm

The second of those — the management of expectations — again requires more realistic engagement with the public and local communities about how far the taxes and rates they pay will go. An outcomes-based approach requires more honesty from civic leaders, including politicians, that not every demand can or even should be met and that often the issue is not how much money is spent but how it is spent. I therefore ask how the Executive parties propose to openly and honestly engage with the public on the need to reform services, including merging institutions and relocating services for the greater long-term good.

There is also the issue of more local allocation of funding, which the Executive parties have not been comfortable with until this point. The failure, for example, to devolve urban regeneration to councils is a step away from an outcomes-based approach, not towards one.

For some of the reasons outlined, the whole purpose of the new approach is for communities to have a greater say in their health provision, their welfare provision, their education and everything else. The problem with the Budget is that it does nothing to demonstrate how the new approach outlined in the framework has been taken into account.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Quickly, yes.

Mr Storey: Is it not also the case that some councils are happy for regeneration powers not to be devolved at this time until they become accustomed and used to the powers that they already have? When the powers come, the councils will be in a better place to use them to the ultimate benefit of their constituents.

Ms Bradshaw: I appreciate that that was the case, but we are now two years into the council term. Many of them should be up to speed by now.

How far, for example, will we travel in the right direction on a good jobs index if we are not adequately investing in skills? How do we increase the proportion of graduates moving into employment within six months if we continue deliberately to train hundreds of young people for careers that we know do not exist? Many more such questions arise from the Budget and Programme for Government process.

In conclusion, I summarise by saying that the Programme for Government framework requires a re-imagining of how we do public services, but I see little re-imagining of how we do the Budget. In principle, I have no objection to borrowing more money or raising more revenue in a fair way —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Ms Bradshaw: — but I absolutely oppose doing that while leaving segregation in place and deliberately mismatching skills.

Mr Aiken: First, I welcome the Minister to his role. I will speak in my role as the Deputy Chair of the Economy Committee and as the opposition spokesman on the economy. I also extend my good views on his endeavours to achieve some form of control and direction over the Northern Ireland Government's financing, budgeting and forecasting process. May I also say that, having personally worked with you before, we, as an Opposition, look forward to seeing how much you can bring your business perspective to the Department and, hopefully, achieve a much more focused and fit-for-purpose Department and see if you can achieve some much-needed reform? While we may disagree on the degree of austerity that is coming from Whitehall, my party would point to the impenetrable state of our financial processes. As we have seen from the plethora of SpAds, inefficiency and quangos and a governing organisation that seems to be significantly overstuffed at some levels for its purpose, we believe that substantial savings can be achieved and passed on, not just to the Department for the Economy but to other Departments.

Our Committee and I have yet to see or be briefed on the detail of the in-year budget, spend, resource or cash and have not yet, regrettably, had the opportunity to discuss

with the Economy Minister his plans and programmes for the future. I therefore apologise for making these limited observations based on the Statement of Excesses and the Estimates. While I am aware that some of these issues may have been raised before, we have some questions in relation to the presentation of the figures for the overall Budget and, indeed, for the Department for the Economy. Having looked at the Excess Vote, I have to ask how we manage to get the excess of resource expenditure to be close to £16 million or 15.8% out in our 2014-15 spring Supplementary Estimates. While that has been described as a technical accounting issue, I am sure that, in his previous roles, the Finance Minister would have found such a negative variation unacceptable, and we should not find it acceptable either.

As an Opposition, we would like to be assured that budgeting and accurate forecasting are now at the core of his Department. Again, I call on the Minister to institute a rigorous annual benchmarking of the delivery of our Government against those of the other regions and the Republic of Ireland so that we, the people of Northern Ireland, can assess whether we have a Government and Civil Service that are actually fit for purpose.

In the rather thin Department for the Economy part of the Estimates, I note issues that the Minister and his Department may wish to comment on. One of the most significant is that the Department for the Economy is also the managing authority for the Northern Ireland European social fund (ESF), which has a total value from 2014 to 2020 of £360 million. What contingency has his Department made to fill the shortfall in the event of a Brexit, and has other work been conducted across all Departments to see how much funding is being expected from EU funding lines and on the impact that a Brexit would have on those programmes? I suggest that we look at those issues fairly urgently.

I would also like to look at the Main Estimates for 2016-17 in his Department's resource-to-cash reconciliation, particularly when it looks at depreciation, impairments and revaluations. The 2014 out-turn had a negative variation of about £121 million and a provision of minus £131 million in 2016-17. In the 2015-16 presentations, it was a positive variation of £92 million. In the absence of any form of detailed explanation, can the Minister ask the officials to provide some detail? That looks like a variation from baseline of some £232 million. How could that possibly be? Unsurprisingly, however, the 2015 net cash requirement appears, miraculously, to be broadly in line with the other years. I do not understand that, and, Minister, using your experience in the business community, I think that you would probably like to have a close look at that one as well, because I do not understand it.

We also have concerns, among others, over support to the universities sector; the promotion of Northern Ireland plc by Invest Northern Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland; and the role of North/South bodies and their efficacy and value for money. I am sure that the Finance Minister will bring a greater rigour to future budgeting and forecasting, and, as an Opposition, we will be providing suitable scrutiny and vigour. For that, however, we need appropriate and timely detail, for not just us but, importantly, all the Northern Ireland community, and we need to do that as a matter of urgency.

Mr Attwood: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish him well during his tenure.

I want to ask him a number of questions. I ask the Minister to look, sometime or other, at section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016, which refers to draft Budgets and the obligation that falls on him to table, in a financial year, a motion on the UK funding allocated for that year. That might be in the future, but my question is in the short term.

Section 9(2) refers to the fact that you would be required, if the Secretary of State so directs, to lay a statement if the amount of the block grant had been revised in-year. Therefore, my question to the Minister, and this was picked up earlier by the Alliance Party, is this: are you picking up anything that suggests to you that you might have to come before the House, under the legislation passed by the Westminster Parliament earlier this year, with a statement about a revised Budget block grant from London? I ask that not least because of the comments made by Mr Nesbitt on what Ulster Bank says today — not in May but today — about the economic circumstances for the next quarter; namely:

"a marked deterioration in business conditions within the construction sector"

and that:

"a significant slowdown has been in evidence."

One of the reasons for that is what? The slowdown in the construction business in Britain.

I come to my second question for the Minister. A motion on childcare was passed last week, endorsed by the Minister's own party and not opposed by any other party. The Minister of Education indicated that, although he may have some issues about when and how to roll out childcare, he did not appear to oppose the principle of the roll-out of childcare to 20 hours, and 30 hours thereafter, for three- and four-year-olds.

If the Minister of Education were to come to the Minister of Finance with a specific proposal in that regard in this year or in coming years, what would his attitude be? I ask that not least because, as the Minister rightly indicated, the roll-out increasing it to 20 hours a week even in this financial year would cost £15 million. That happens to be in and around the suggested figure that you will allocate in a June monitoring round to deal with the in-year pressures on our schools budget. Until the Chair of the Education Committee indicated this, I was not aware that £15 million will be released under June monitoring to deal with the in-year pressures on our school budgets and £5 million for special needs. Can you indicate whether, if that is the case, that is a quick fix for the problem this year or whether it will be an enduring approach over the lifetime of this mandate so that our school principals have certainty in respect of their budgets, not just for this year but for coming years?

My fourth question to the Minister is on the A5. As he will know, his predecessor tabled a ministerial statement on 17 December outlining spend on the A5 in each of the financial years up to 2021, the spend for 2016-17 being £13.2 million. The Minister may or may not be aware that the deputy First Minister said that, in respect of that spend, construction work would be commenced by the

autumn of this year. Yet, as the Minister is likely to know, or will know soon enough, a public inquiry will not even be commenced or concluded by the autumn of this year. A recommendation will go to the Minister for Infrastructure some time in the spring or summer of next year, and the earliest possible date of any spend on construction works on the A5 will be the autumn of 2017. That matter was confirmed to us in our conversations with senior civil servants during the abortive PFG negotiations. Can the Minister confirm that the Budget allocation of £13.2 million this year for the A5 is substantially not going to be spent because there is not going to be substantial works completed in respect of the A5 during this year?

My fifth question to the Minister concerns the fact that he raged against austerity, and he was right to do so. I have spent many a long hour, maybe too many hours, in the Chamber — Mr Storey is laughing — raging against austerity and also making proposals to deal with austerity on the pensions, Budget and welfare sides. Mr O'Dowd also raged against austerity in his speech, and he was right to do so. Will the Finance Minister now confirm that, when powers on welfare were surrendered last autumn, just before Christmas, to London, the consequence of that was that there will be a freeze on benefits for the next four years and that the Chancellor of the Exchequer can unilaterally change the rules on the benefit cap and reduce it without reference to you or to anybody in this Chamber and can make other malign welfare changes? Will the Minister confirm that, in all the rage against welfare reform and against austerity, you signed up to austerity with the legislative consent motion that was passed in the Chamber last year? So much for raging against austerity.

I have two final points. I go back to the point raised by Mr Nesbitt. Is it not time for even a notional budget line to be created to give victims of institutional abuse some sense that now, on the far side of Hart, there will be a redress scheme? If you meet the victims of institutional abuse, they tell you that they are dying as we speak. They deserve some certainty. Give it to them by even a notional budget line for a redress scheme rather than let it hang and hang and hang until the far side of Hart and beyond for many a long year —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Attwood: They have, Minister, been waiting far too long.

Mr Storey: I rise to make a few comments in relation to the onerous task that lies to the Finance Minister over the next couple of days. Having been in that post, I know all too well the challenges that he will face. I have to say, however, that I am disappointed that the previous Member who spoke did not go as far as he did when I was the Minister and accuse the current Minister of being employed by DWP.

Mr Attwood: That is tomorrow.

Mr Storey: That will be tomorrow — or by the Treasury, because he obviously wants to take away the current Minister's capacity for independent thinking.

4.30 pm

When you speak in the House on finance, it has to be set in a particular context. Sometimes, the comments that

come from the leaders of the opposition parties really amaze me. I say the leaders of the opposition parties, not the leader of the Opposition, because we have a plethora of opposition parties, and, at the last count, I do not know how many leaders there were of the opposition. They all have their views on what should be done, but the one thing that they all seem to forget is that we are dependent on the fact that we are part of the United Kingdom; that we are part of the sovereign Parliament at Westminster, which gives a block grant to Northern Ireland; and that, for the last number of years, there has been a considerable strain on that particular Budget.

As Members and citizens of the United Kingdom, I think it would do us well to always couch what we say in reality, and not live in this constant world that is easy for people to live in, where a money tree grows at the bottom of the Stormont estate — a place where all they have to do is come to the House, make a few complaints, get a few petitions, have a few nice words, have the press statement out before you come to the House and, suddenly, the money will appear. Well that is not how it works in reality in the real world. I am surprised by people like the Deputy Chair of the Economy Committee, who, as he tells us regularly, having been in the business world would recognise some fiscal realities for how we have to operate in the political world.

I will move on to some of the issues that, I think, are of relevance for our constituents.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he recognise that the two parties that went into the last election making the single biggest promise on spending were his party and Sinn Féin with respect to an extra £1 billion for Health? All of the other parties' spending commitments were dwarfed by that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: Yes, and I also say that the electorate endorsed what my party did, and that is why we had the election result we did. I am not one of those people who believes that, as a senior member of the Ulster Unionist Party in north Antrim famously said, an election manifesto is only good for the day of the election and after that the world moves on. I still have a copy of our election manifesto, and the commitments that we made in it are not just words that are written to fill pages; they are things that we actually believe should happen to ensure that Northern Ireland keeps moving forward. That includes the creation of more jobs. In my constituency of North Antrim, I know all too well what it is like to deal with the consequences of the closure of JTI; the closure of Michelin; the devastating impact that Pattons had in relation to the difficulties that were created; and many other jobs that have been lost.

If it is now down to the two parties in the Executive, and it is, I say to the Minister to work with his colleagues in other Departments and that our focus needs to be the creation of jobs. I do not just want jobs created in North Antrim for my own constituents — I want them wherever the need exists. We have seen a slight increase in the unemployment figures recently. We have the news today coming in relation to the Ulster Bank. Those are issues of concern. They are issues that we ought to be worried about, but let no one be foolish enough to think that somehow coming into the House and making throwaway comments —

making good headlines if you can get on 'Newslines' at 6:00 pm — will somehow, automatically, fix the issue.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He refers to the context of these things, and, of course, the context is that we now have a Tory-majority Government, which only one party in the Chamber campaigned to put in office. If fingers are to be pointed anywhere for the constraints in the Budget in Northern Ireland, who campaigned for them in 2010, and who put them in?

Mr Storey: I also happen to be one of those individuals who keeps —

A Member: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Storey: Does the Member want me to give way?

I happen to be one of those people who keeps a lot of election memorabilia, and I have the UCUNF document. That was that failed political process with the Tories. If we want to see where the problem lies, I think one of the leaders of the Opposition need not look any further.

Let us come to some issues that have been of benefit to our business community. I refer to employment and the need to create new jobs in Northern Ireland. That has to be for us a priority, whether it is in Loughguile or Loughgall, or whether it happens to be in Ballymoney or Banbridge. Wherever it is across Northern Ireland, the focus has to be on creating good, sustainable jobs for our constituents. It is also about those small and medium-sized businesses that are the backbone of our industry and our economy. In the previous Executive, let us not forget that we helped over 35,000 properties through small business rates relief; let us not forget that a total of 530 properties benefited from the empty property relief scheme; and let us not forget that it was this party, the DUP, that gave the commitment to, and delivered on, industrial derating, which benefited a total of 4,443 properties. That, I think, was a commitment not only to what we want to see in new investment but to what we have.

I know how important small and medium-sized enterprises are in my constituency. I ask the Finance Minister to continue to do the work that needs to be done to underpin those small and medium-sized enterprises and the large manufacturing companies. I am delighted we now have a number of those large companies in north Antrim, such as Terex, which is a world leader in the manufacturing industry. I want to see those companies progress and prosper in a way that benefits not only them as companies but the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I am pleased to speak as the Chair of the Committee for the Economy. I say that with the caveat that most Committee Chairs have felt or expressed today, namely that the Committees have only recently begun to meet and are involved in high-level briefings with departmental officials. So, in detailed matters such as those in front of us, the Committees have yet to take a view. However, the Committee sees its roll in scrutinising the Department's budget as a key function. We look forward to closely engaging with the Minister on that.

The Economy Department's activities underpin a great deal of what is in the draft Programme for Government. The Department is pivotal to the development of greater prosperity across the North and ensuring, as people have been referring to, that there is the benefit of well-

paid jobs for people right across the North, including an improvement in skills and innovation.

Members are aware, of course, that the debate allows detailed scrutiny of spending plans for Departments and seeks the authorisation of Members for that funding to be provided. The Committee notes that the provision sought by the Department for 2016-17 is 18.5% higher than the final net provision for 2015-16. However, as we have not yet seen the detailed outworkings of the reasons for and the impact of that increase, it is difficult to comment on it. The Committee is also aware that a significant proportion of the Department's budget is controlled through arm's-length bodies and other core-funded partner organisations. In addition, the Department has considerable annually managed expenditure in the form of demand-led programmes.

The Committee is, I am sure, in agreement that the Department for the Economy should be properly resourced, but we also recognise that there is a difference between adequate resourcing and money well spent. In the debates last week on the draft Programme for Government, the manufacturing strategy and the economy strategy, we highlighted that the Committee would be undertaking a detailed analysis of the models of resourcing that the Department and its key arm's-length bodies use. Members want to ensure that the Department is responsive to the needs of the North and our need to work as part of a global economy.

We have asked the Department for more information on a range of issues, including budget and finances, and we look forward to engaging with the Minister on all that. We also look forward to engaging with the stakeholder groups, industry, businesses, unions and others that have a very strong industry. Of course, the further and higher education sectors are now part of the Committee's remit on the outworking of the Department's work in the time ahead and the budget that will, hopefully, match that.

I have a couple of points on my own behalf. I have been listening to the debate, waiting for some pearls of wisdom to come from those who criticise and, in the case of the Alliance Party at least, intend to vote against the motion. Stephen Farry, in fairness to him, did put forward some suggestions — none of which I agree with, but at least he put forward some suggestions. I have not heard much from others. I heard the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee saying that the Minister must learn to slice the money more effectively. I certainly hope that he has much greater ambition than simply fine-slicing the pie that we already have. He is on record as looking for ways to raise further money and increase the spending power of the Executive.

Ms Hanna: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Ms Hanna: Did you just walk in halfway through the sentence? The Member will recall that, prior to the part where I talked about more effectively slicing the pie, I talked about growing the pie and seeking some information on the revenue raising that would be part of that.

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that I was here for the entirety of her speech. That was the remark that stood out for me. As I said, I hope that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Murphy: — the Minister displays more ambition than simply the slicing of the pie in a better way.

A number of Members raised the issue of corporation tax. That strikes me as amusing. It was also raised at Question Time with the deputy First Minister. The position around corporation tax is in the Fresh Start Agreement; it outlines the target figure, the target date and the negotiation that has to take place in and around affordability. Interestingly, during the negotiations, the British Government wanted to remove the affordability part of that discussion, because they wanted a done deal there and then and no further negotiations to try to get the best deal possible for the Executive and, consequently, the people of the North. It seems now that people want to return to that position; they argue that we should just settle now and that the Minister should not involve himself in a negotiation to try to get the best deal possible but just have the matter settled and accept what is on the table at the moment. That would be an absolutely unwise strategy. I wonder why people who purport to represent constituents out in the community, who want better spending and who criticise the spending of the Executive want to shut down an important negotiation that the Minister of Finance and the Executive will have with the Treasury ahead of the process.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I appreciate what he is setting out and that there is an issue, in his mind, about affordability. Certainly, from our perspective, there is an issue around skills. However, the potential problem is that your colleagues in the DUP are saying that this is happening — no ifs or buts. Invest Northern Ireland is out selling Northern Ireland as an investment location today on the basis that this will be in place for certain in April 2018. There is a mixed message coming from the two parties in the Government.

Mr Murphy: It is not the case in my mind; it is the case in the Fresh Start Agreement. A caveat in the delivery of that is affordability. If we were to simply say, “Let’s scrap the bit about affordability and just go ahead with the target date and the target rate”, we would be going against what is in the Fresh Start Agreement. There is no contradiction between what is in the Fresh Start Agreement and the certainty that people want to provide. We are certain that we can make it affordable and make the date and time frame. However, there is a negotiation to be had with Treasury. It leaves me somewhat bemused when I continuously hear people raising the question again, as if to close down that negotiation, settle for what is on offer now and just say, “This is happening; what’s on the table at the moment is good enough”. What is on the table is not good enough. The Treasury wanted to close the negotiation down. I do not understand why other people in the Chamber want to assist it in doing that. It certainly was not doing that in the interests of the people whom we represent in the Chamber.

This is an important issue for us. I wish the Finance Minister well in the negotiation that he will be involved in. Regardless of whether the parties here consider themselves to be in the Opposition or in the Executive, or whatever their particular position happens to be, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that we get the best possible deal so that we have the maximum amount of finance available to us to deliver a step change in growing the economy and the other key planks of the Programme for Government: well-being, public services and protecting

the most vulnerable in society. We need to arm ourselves with as much as we possibly can to try to deliver on those objectives.

I wish the Finance Minister well. The position in relation to corporation tax is in the Fresh Start Agreement. It was negotiated by all the parties. That is where it sits, and that is what needs to be delivered. I do not doubt that we have the right person in the job to try to do that.

4.45 pm

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak today from a health perspective. First, however, I register my bitter disappointment at the information — or, rather, the total lack of information — that we received from Health officials at last Thursday’s Health Committee. Presenting before us for the first time in the new mandate, officials were scheduled to brief us on the June monitoring round. However, despite the Minister referencing this bid in her statement to the House last Monday, they told us that they were unable to discuss or answer any questions on the June monitoring round, which was the very reason why they were attending the Committee in the first place.

While other Committees have had Ministers and permanent secretaries before them, the Health Committee has had departmental officials who were unable to take questions from us on the very reason why they attended. At a time when the crisis within all levels of the health service is felt dearly by staff and patients alike, this does not bode well for the future; neither does the apparent lack of commitment from the new Minister and her Department to see an end to short-term funding of the health service. That is an aim that the Executive should work towards. When you speak to the trusts, GPs and health managers at all levels, you find that the one thing that they crave, but do not have, is stable finances. I was initially heartened that the Minister included that very phrase in her address to the House last Monday. She talked about attaining:

*“the prize of stable finances and sustainable services”
— [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115,
p34, col 2].*

while continuing to seek short-term funding from the Executive. However, it now appears that “stable finances” are to receive only lip service. Officials told me on Thursday that they are working on just a three-year budget for capital and four years for resource. That does not show the forward planning that is needed in our health service, and, indeed, surely when we receive the findings of Professor Bengoa and the subsequent response from the Executive, the long-term budget will become clear. Would it not be more sensible for that budget to look to the future, across the next 10 years or so, as is happening in other regions of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland? On the one hand, we have the promise of stable finances and sustainable services that can only come with reform; on the other, the wheels of government grind slowly.

It looks as though our health service vision is already being set for just the next three to four years, before we even see the findings of Professor Bengoa. We should be looking seriously at proper, costed, future planning to achieve the best healthcare system for all our people. I know that the Finance Minister has a business background, so he will know the importance of future planning. I encourage him, in speaking to his Executive colleagues, especially

to his colleague the Minister of Health, to seek to forward plan, not to budget for the short term but seriously plan for the long term. Failure to do so could result in yet further headline-grabbing, multi-million-pound figures that, whilst giving short-term confidence to patients, do little to fix the problems experienced by one in five of our population and by the very dedicated healthcare professionals at all levels who seek to care for those of us who are ill.

Health is arguably the most important Department in the Executive, though, apparently not when it comes to choosing it during a d'Hondt process. It consumes half the Executive's Budget, which should be reason enough to ensure that its future is planned and is, therefore, stable, rather than being held together and managed for the short term. There are undoubtedly many challenges that our health service faces: an ageing population; the increase in the incidence of diabetes; the delivery of autism services; the promotion of public health and healthy eating; and, from my perspective, the continued promotion of the life-saving power of organ donation.

Last year, as a result of the chaos in our health spending over recent times, the Minister of Finance and the Executive were given unprecedented controls over the Department of Health's expenditure. I ask the Minister for an update on those powers, and whether he is confident that the contents of the Estimates before us mean that this summer will not see a repeat of the bizarre scenes from two years ago, when our then Health Minister went on the airwaves in some sort of internal party pincer movement.

Looking at the document before us, I find that the figures in it are effectively impenetrable, given the extremely limited information accompanying the spending lines.

That, along with the failure of the Department to brief the Committee, makes genuine scrutiny almost impossible, and that is something that, I hope, the Finance Minister will consider. Nevertheless, with the new Health Minister in place, an opportunity exists to address some of the long-standing concerns over the management of her Department's finances, not least the levels being spent on administration — something that, I see in today's Estimates, is set to increase yet again — but also other more practical steps, such as, once and for all, giving the Fire and Rescue Service the front-line status that it deserves. Those are not challenges that can be forgotten about; they must be addressed head-on. To do so, they must form part of the planning for the future system of healthcare in Northern Ireland.

Without a sure and stable financial footing, our health service will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis. Its staff continue to work in unprecedented conditions, and, as patients, our constituents are left to wait, worry and risk coming to even greater harm. If the Executive are serious about tackling the number one priority that they face — the deepest crisis since devolution was restored — I implore the Finance Minister to seek to set a sure footing for the finances of our health service for the long term.

Mr Lunn: Like everybody else, I welcome the Minister to his new post. I am sure that he will bring his normal energy and enthusiasm to the role. We may not see quite as many tweets from the towpath, although I am sure that he will get his exercise all the same.

This is a question of balance, is it not? It is about balance between promises and commitments made and resources

available, with the need to eliminate waste and inefficiency thrown in. I am interested in the various views, particularly those that the Minister put forward in his opening remarks. He has indicated that he has no intention of allowing any revenue-raising opportunities. That is how it sounds to me. He mentioned student fees and water charges: we will not give him an argument there. However, is he opposed to all forms of revenue-raising, such as the removal of the rates cap, prescription charges or the removal of the link between the regional rate and the rate of inflation? There are opportunities there, but he seems to be very much in favour of borrowing; indeed, if the Minister has met him, I am sure that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is still recovering.

Borrowing has its place; of course it does. The recent announcement of funding for housing associations from European funds — just to make the point, Mr Deputy Speaker — is very welcome. The more of that, perhaps, the better. It comes at a very advantageous rate of interest from the central bank. That is fair enough.

Mr Storey majored on job creation being the ultimate priority for the Assembly. I do not disagree with that at all, but the main lever — the silver bullet — for job creation remains corporation tax. No matter how many times I listen to Sinn Féin talk about corporation tax, I remain doubtful about what is going on.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the comment that the Member made about the money recently secured from the European Investment Bank by Choice and Apex. Does he agree that, if we can get the issue of housing right, through a structure for the Housing Executive, the private sector and the housing associations — I trust that the Finance Minister will take this into account with his colleague in the Department for Communities — we will unleash the construction industry in Northern Ireland? Given the comments of the Ulster Bank today, the construction industry needs that help, and it will certainly be to the benefit of our constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank Mr Storey for that. I know that those things interlink: one benefit produces another benefit. That is sound thinking.

The impression from the DUP is that corporation tax is a done deal, and the impression that I get from Mr Murphy is that corporation tax will be a done deal. The comment from the Minister, I think, on the radio recently was that corporation tax was not yet a done deal.

If I were a businessman in charge of a multinational company and was approached in America, let us say, by Invest NI with a proposition, I would be looking years ahead at these arrangements. In less than two years, this thing is supposed to be devolved, but we are not there yet. We should now be touring the world, as Minister McGuinness and the First Minister will obviously be doing, to promote this as a huge advantage to doing business in Northern Ireland, and we are not there yet. This thing could easily be postponed.

Mr Ó Muilleoir will know perfectly well that there is nothing that business hates more than uncertainty. You have to have certainty. You have to have infrastructure, a low wage base and all the factors that feed in, but uncertainty is the killer.

Look at the promises that have been made. A reduction in corporation tax is one; the abolition of air passenger duty is another. Somebody mentioned earlier £1 billion for the health service. Another figure that I saw recently in the 'Belfast Telegraph' was £1 billion for roads infrastructure. In fairness, I have not heard that from the Minister, but I have heard promises galore, particularly coming up to the election, when it seemed as though every substandard road in Northern Ireland was to be improved. It was promises galore; big money. I wonder how all this will balance.

Should we borrow first — borrow our way out of trouble — or should we be engaged, perhaps, in trying to eliminate waste and improve efficiency? I know that we bang on about this, but look at the costs of a divided society; they are there for all to see. Deloitte and various authorities come up with figures. I do not know what the correct figure is, but I imagine that if it was eliminated, it would cover that £1 billion for the health service for sure.

Look at the education system, and I am sure that others mentioned it today: we have maybe 70,000 empty desks in a school population of just over 300,000. That is close to 25%. I am not saying that eliminating that number of empty desks would eliminate the same proportion of schools that we do not need. If it did, it would be upwards of 200 schools. Now, I am not for one minute suggesting that that is a way to go, but there has to be some rationalisation eventually. Those are the decisions that we keep putting off. Here we are, after an election, with three years clear, perhaps, in which people do not need to worry quite so much about being re-elected, and it is really time to move on some of these things.

Others mentioned the health service and the clear demand there to take rational decisions and try to work within its budget. We cannot keep increasing the health service budget by whatever the required figure is — some 6% a year. We just cannot do it. That is on top of the £1 billion, apparently. The money is not there; it will not be there. I do not believe that we can borrow our way out of that situation. In fact, it would be totally incomprehensible to me if we tried to do so.

Somebody mentioned the Prison Service, and there is a clear requirement to put more money into it; it has been starved of finance for far too long. I could mention Desertcreat. Where does that stand now? As far as I can see, it has gone from the Department of Justice, and now the Department of Health has to look after it, as it will be a Fire Service facility. How much money has been spent on Desertcreat already, and we have not yet cut a sod? Actually, we may have had a sod cutting; I am not sure, but, figuratively, we have not done anything about it.

Is the removal of the headquarters of what is now DAERA to Ballykelly to go ahead? Does anybody think that it actually makes sense in the present circumstances? We should be trying to merge those Departments —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr Lunn: — not build a grandiose new facility in Ballykelly. It just does not make sense. Those are my questions to the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, to conclude and wind up the debate. The Minister has 47 minutes, and he kicks off, coincidentally, with events in France.

5.00 pm

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): Kick-off, perhaps, is the correct metaphor. If it has not kicked off yet, I wish Martin O'Neill and na buachaillí glasa — his team — well in their match. The good news is that those of us who wish to see the second half of the game will certainly see it.

I thank all those who took part in the debate. There were many brickbats for other Ministers, and I will let some of those Ministers respond to those, whether it is the Economy Minister, the Health Minister or others, but I will try to address the issues that are central to my remit. If I may, I also thank the Committee Chair and the Committee, the Opposition and members of the DUP and Sinn Féin who allowed accelerated passage of this Bill.

I will start at the end, which means that Mrs Dobson can go and watch the game if she wishes. First, however, I appreciate Mr Lunn's candour, and I differentiate between — I do not know what to call it; maybe Mr Nesbitt can inform me — the junior coalition of the SDLP and the UUP and the Alliance Party, because the Alliance Party today had a raft of alternatives to the spending plans that we have and a series of suggestions. I am not saying that I agree with any of them; as you know, I am vehemently opposed to many of them, but still, there is in the Alliance Party an alternative way forward that is lacking in the other parties. I will begin at the end with Mr Lunn if I may, and I want to respond to as many points as possible.

In relation to corporation tax, I concur with my colleague Mr Murphy. We want to see corporation tax reduced. We have set the date and the rate, but everyone here agrees that we want to do that to create as many jobs as possible. Therefore, it is in our interests that the reduction to the block grant is kept to the minimum. There is no one here, in opposition or in the Government parties, who would like me not to get the best deal. Have the negotiations on that best deal started? No, they have not. This may be no surprise to those who followed the income tax discussion in Scotland. The deal on income tax with Scotland was made one month before the election. When I say that we should reboot or refresh the negotiations, my entreaty has gone off to the British Chancellor, Mr Osborne, to say that we need to start those negotiations. Mr Lunn is right; we need certainty and to bring those negotiations to a conclusion about the reduction in the block grant. That is where we are. Am I confident that it is achievable and affordable? Yes, but everyone here expects me to get the best deal possible, and that is what I intend to do.

I will move on to what Mrs Dobson had to say. She is right, although she and Mr Storey may disagree about the most vital issue for the Executive moving forward. Jobs and health are the building blocks, and while I am neither the Minister for the Economy nor the Minister of Health, it is

my intention to ensure that when those Departments come seeking support, we find a way, with Executive colleagues, to support them. I echo Mrs Dobson's sentiments, and she can be sure that I will support the Health Minister in particular when she comes forward. However, let me say this: everybody here agrees that money is not the solution. It is not a case of throwing more money at Health. I have heard Members from every party saying that. We all agree that Professor Bengoa from Euskadi, the Basque country, is setting in front of us an alternative to the blank cheque. The blank cheque will not work in health.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he also accept that herein lies the difficulty? I appreciate the comments he made in relation to the Alliance Party, one of the parties of opposition. However, in terms of what the Ulster Unionists are saying, if there is — there may be, and that is an issue for the Health Minister — at some stage a reduction, for example, in bureaucracy in the health service, the first people who will be standing on the picket line, signing a petition and putting out the press statement are the very same people who came into the House today and said that we have wonderful professionals but there has to be change. How do you square that circle? When will those parties start to be honest and tell us who it is that they want to sack or take off the payroll and the benefits that that will bring us?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have more faith in the positions of everyone in the Chamber than my colleague. It is important that they have said that it is not just about money, and we will hold them to that. That said, we made a commitment pre-election — we will hold to it — to provide £1 billion extra for the health service, but in the context of understanding that there has to be real reform. We need to do this better, and we cannot continue to put more money into the system without better outcomes.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for giving way. He takes the position that no party wants to throw money at the health service, but we are committed to £1 billion. How does the Minister know it will be £1 billion? It could be more, or, if the reforms are very successful, it could be less. Why stick a stake in the ground that it must be £1 billion at this stage?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: We have made that commitment. I would be surprised if we could not improve the health service with that extra money, never mind stand still. If they are improvements, that is what they will be. We will spend the money on them, because there can always be enhancements to the health service. I have to say that the pressures in health make me believe two things: first, there will be calls for extra money, and, secondly, we need to get to grips with this and progress Professor Bengoa's proposals as quickly as possible.

Mrs Dobson referred to the "impenetrable" Estimates: I thought her colleague Steve Aiken did a fairly good job of penetrating the Estimates and drilling down and almost performing an audit on them. That said, it seems to me that — I do not know whether we refer to them as the junior coalition; I presume I am allowed to — the UUP/SDLP coalition, if I was able use some of the language of Steve Aiken and compare the balance sheets, is weak on cohesion. There are no proposals on what we should do differently. It is very weak on costings, because there were no suggestions from our colleagues in the UUP or SDLP about where we should take money out of and move it to.

We have been there previously. My South Belfast colleague Ms Hanna, at the last debate on the Budget, proposed taking £800,000 from the Executive Office, which would have led to the closure of the victims and survivors unit. Of course, we faced that down. This time, however, they have not made one proposal to move money round in a £10 billion-plus budget. Although Mr Nesbitt called —

Ms Hanna: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Of course.

Ms Hanna: First of all, in the previous debate I did not say that; I proposed taking £800,000 from the extensive administration budget in OFMDFM, which had gone up year on year. We have made proposals, and tomorrow we will again. You choose to ignore them. My colleague in health set out some. We have set out things for childcare, and you ignore them as well. We also made a suggestion about zero-based budgeting. It should not be a case of "This is what we will do, because it is what we have always done"; we should start from day one. Will you respond to that specifically, rather than cherry-pick the things that you will and will not listen to?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I do not mind: the SDLP can have its cake and eat it on this one. If it was not to close down the victims and survivors unit by removing £800,000, it was to make 20 people redundant. You can take your pick, but removing £800,000 arbitrarily from what is now the Executive Office would have ended up with that conclusion. I am happy to take recommendations from Members on all sides about how we can do this process better. If they are about zero-based budgeting or a revised process, let us hear them all. However, this is still the core question for the junior coalition: where would they take the money from? I will respond later to Mr Attwood. If we said we wanted —

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he has been very generous with his time. The Minister is right in the sense that, to be fair to the Alliance Party, it has had the gumption to outline some proposals. I do not agree with many of them, but at least they had the gumption to do so. In our constituency, the Minister will be aware, there are many elderly people who, although asset-rich, in that they live in expensive houses, are cash-poor. Does the Minister agree that the proposal to remove the rates cap would not hit millionaires but would, in a constituency like ours, hit pensioners, who can least afford it?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: We may come to rates later. It was interesting that, in a long debate on finances, Mr Lunn was perhaps the only one who touched on rates. No one else touched on rates, which is the one area where we can raise taxation.

In my view, the balance sheet of the government parties is strong on costings. The policies are there, and the costings are there. We are saying that this is what we want to do. It is strong on vision for a prosperous, shared society. It is strong on operations. We are saying that we think we can be more efficient as a Government and as Departments, and we will push Departments hard to see where savings can be made, such as by moving from 12 to nine Departments. We are prudent in borrowing, but we are also imaginative, and we will not close anything down.

In that respect, I note that Mr Durkan would like us to find a way for the Housing Executive to borrow money to build homes. I am in favour of that, but, of course, if it is on the balance sheet, it does not make any sense. The question and challenge for us as Members is this: do we have the genius and imagination to find a way to allow the Housing Executive to borrow hundreds of millions of pounds, if necessary, and then to pay that back on the basis of the homes and the income streams they create? I believe that it was the view of one of my colleagues on the Finance Committee that we should close up shop and go home because we could not do anything and Westminster held all the cards. I do not actually believe that. It has always been a truism in civil services across the world — I say this with respect to the Department for the Economy, the Department of Agriculture and everybody else — that the real cream is in finance. I believe that that is what we have here. I have no doubt that the team that we have in the Department of Finance will find the ways to grow the funding pie, borrow prudently and give us the funds that we need to invest in the prosperous and shared job-rich future that we wish to create.

My friend, colleague and constituency comrade Claire Hanna made the comment that we are in the driving seat now. That is true: the government parties are in the driving seat. We have the responsibility and the obligation to make the numbers add up. We have the duty to deliver for all people, no matter whom they vote for, but there are also back-seat drivers who can chirp up. They can say, “Go this way” or “Go that way”, but, when it comes to the tough terrain, it is up to the driver to make the judgement. When it comes to the tight corner, it is up to the driver to make the right call. When it comes to ensuring that we have vision and we can see straight ahead, again, that is for the Government. That is why we are in the driving seat. Those who wish to be in this seat have to do more than just speak and carp from the back seat. I look forward to that in the time ahead.

I will move to some of the many comments. I commend my young colleague Philip for making his maiden speech here today. Mr Smith makes a number of strong points. Having heard his maiden speech, I look forward to returning to those points and engaging with him in the time ahead. While he has been critical of the government parties, I think that we will find common ground on some of the things that he says. I will work with him. I went to the Finance Committee at the earliest opportunity. This is where we will part ways, Philip, if I may: your party was the enabler of austerity by supporting the Conservative Party in the 2010 election. That lit the fuse on this austerity nightmare that we have been enduring for the last six years, which has, as Nicola Sturgeon recently commented, added great burden and hardship for ordinary people. In my mind, whether you be Tory, Tory-lite or Ulster Unionist, it lacks credibility to come into the House and comment, carp and criticise the Government’s policies when you enabled the Tory Government to wage this ideological austerity assault on our people. Yes, we will work together. Yes, I will take on board the points that you raised, especially, as Mrs Dobson said, with regard to health. However, I think that you are holed below the waterline with regard to credibility because of the endorsement and support that you gave — perhaps now you regret it — to the Conservative Party in the 2010 election.

I thank my colleague, the Chair of the Finance Committee, for her constructive remarks. I expect to be challenged by the Committee in the time ahead. We had a useful exchange. I hope to be back to consider other issues. You talked about hope: we are here to give hope to our people. We intend to do that. You talked about a new energy that you feel in the Assembly, and I agree with that. I sat through the year of limbo here when some of you, like Mr Stafford, were lucky enough not to be here, but I see now a completely different approach in the Assembly. I welcome the fresh injection of energy that that has given to all our people in opposition and government parties.

Christopher Stafford talked about the social investment fund, which endured a number of brickbats from some of our friends. Mr Nesbitt described it as a disaster. Ms Hanna criticised how the decisions were taken. I have asked for the figures on the social investment fund. In my view, we are getting it right. Was it good enough or fast enough? No. Do I intend it to be better? Yes. But we are getting it right.

5.15 pm

So, was it a disaster? Taughmonagh healthy business centre — £1.1 million, commenced and detailed design, and the cost being finalised prior to contractor procurement; Sandy Row resource centre — £1 million, commenced and contractor procurement due to commence; increased community service at Sure Start Taughmonagh — £51,000, letter of offer issued; increased community service at Sure Start Belvoir and Milltown — £329,000, letter of offer issued. That is only in south Belfast. I could go on and read some of the other areas, and I note that, in east Belfast, Bryson Street surgery got £1 million, and the build is complete and operational. Am I, as Finance Minister, going to insist that procurement is done more quickly and that we find faster, more efficient ways, while being very careful with the public purse to do these things? Yes, I am going to insist on a fresh approach to this, but to describe that sort of money going into working-class communities as a disaster beggars belief.

The Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA) came up several times today. I have worked with that group and consider some of them friends and all of them heroes. I believe that it is incumbent on us to find a way to make sure that we offer redress for the terrible horror that they suffered from those who were given positions of responsibility by society. Discussions are continuing. We are following the inquiry. It is up to the Executive Office to come forward with plans, and I look forward to this, but I say to my colleagues and friends in SAVIA that we are with you, we support and admire what you are doing. We can never bring the horror that they suffered to a close, but I hope that we can bring to a conclusion the inquiry and some proposals around that as soon as possible.

There were some questions about Excess Votes and so on, which were technical matters. I think that we will leave those.

I note that Mr Nesbitt mentioned the pay claims of former NIO staff in the settlement of the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claims. He is right: those are works in progress. Discussions are continuing, and if Mr Nesbitt or anyone else wants to come and meet me on those issues, which came up on the doorsteps, as we all know, I am very happy to do that.

Maidir le mo chomrádaí, Barra Mac Giolla Duibh, nach bhfuil anseo anois, creidim; tá sé ar shiúl leis ag amharc ar an pheil ar ndóighe, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Ach ba mhaith liom a rá go nglacaim ar bórd gach rud a dúirt mo chara atá ar iarraidh anois. Agus tá súil agam, de bharr an chaiteachais atá leagtha amach sna Meastacháin Soláthair seo, go ndéanfar an infheistíocht i seirbhísí poiblí ar ardchaighdeán, agus, ar ndóighe, mar a dúirt seisean, sna bóithre agus i gcúrsaí oideachais. Déanfar sin. Barry McElduff's absence is noted. There must be a football match on. I do not believe he calls it football — there must be a soccer match on. I am committed to doing what I can to ensure that rural roads maintenance gets the funding it needs within the constraints of budgets because we cannot and do not have enough money to do everything we want to do.

John O'Dowd is giving up the football match and is still here. That is a fealty that I have not seen very often in politics, but I take on board his remarks about the financial restraints that we are under, and if we are going to talk about teams, I should say that, in joining up with our colleagues in Scotland and Wales, I will be meeting Derek Mackay, the Finance Minister of Scotland, on Wednesday evening and Mark Drakeford, the Finance Minister of Wales, on Thursday morning. When are they playing the English? Does anyone know? I do not know what sort of mood Mark Drakeford will be in Wales, but I believe very much in this trilateral approach. We have many things in common.

Taking on board what Mr Attwood and Mr Durkan said about austerity, no one should think that we have stopped the austerity juggernaut from Westminster and the Tories. There are all sorts of ways, and Mr Durkan touched on some of them, in which they will continue to pick at and try to undermine our Budgets, but, for me, one of the important things is that we are in frequent contact with our colleagues, friends and fellow Celts in Wales and Scotland so that we can push against the people who got fewer than 10,000 votes in the last election.

I note that Mr O'Dowd also mentioned the extra money, which is mentioned elsewhere, for shared and integrated education capital build, and I welcome that.

Stephen Farry wants the process slowed down; the Budget is too fast. I have spent the last 16 months in this place asking people to do things faster while maintaining that they have to be done properly. So I would have thought that everyone would welcome the process of the Estimates and the Supply resolution being speeded up, but not so.

I think that the Committee agreed to the Bill getting accelerated passage because it studied the proposal that we put in front of it and realised that that was the best way forward. Therefore, although I may agree with some of the stuff that Mr Farry says, I cannot agree to slow the process down. I think that we need to move on.

Some Members mentioned the monitoring round. I am sworn to secrecy. Although Mr Attwood indicated that Barry McElduff may have let the cat out of the bag, I cannot say what will be in the monitoring round. It will be announced tomorrow. Mr Farry made some commitments. I know that he would be pleased if those commitments that he made before leaving office were honoured, because he, like me, believes in investing in higher education and that having corporation tax without skills and infrastructure

is not good enough. I will be doing, and have been doing, my very best on that, not for Mr Farry or me but for our young people, to ensure that we get the jobs that we want to see. The issue of skills is very important for me. He is aware that, in the 2016-17 Budget, we committed an extra £5 million for the skills enhancement agenda. The previous Finance Minister stated that his intention was to make the first £20 million of resource DEL available in June monitoring. That is an IOU that the former Minister left for me. Hopefully, we can make some progress in that regard tomorrow.

Mr Farry said that there will be a Division, which caused some dismay to Members who were maybe hoping to get home for the football or to watch it somewhere else. I saw the alert go out — no one is allowed to leave the Building — and he will be voting against the motion. The interesting thing is that this is not the first debate, and some Members — those who were fortunate enough, or unfortunate enough, to be here in January and February — will realise that some of the arguments have been rehearsed. At that time, although the SDLP, the UUP and the Alliance Party voted against the motions on the Budget, the Supply resolutions and the Vote on Account, Stephen Farry abstained. I do not know whether it is progress or whether we are going backwards that, tonight, you are going to vote against the motion, but we will take that —

Dr Farry: I was the Minister at the time.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: You were the Minister at the time.

Dr Farry: Ministerial code.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar — tá sé i bhfad ró-fhada, mar a thuigeann tú. Jonathan Bell, when speaking publicly, has twice now addressed the issue of housing waiting lists and the very real hardship and misery that lie behind not having a home. Those of us who support families realise that you cannot really have a family unless you have a home. We talked about the big issues of health and jobs, but housing is a priority issue. When it comes to borrowing prudently, I think that all of us will welcome the European Investment Bank loans to Apex and Choice last week to enable them to build more homes. People here who have concerns about borrowing should allow us to see whether there are ways in which we can make sure that, for example, the Housing Executive can borrow so that we build more homes. I take on board Mr Bell's comments on homelessness. I hope that we return to the issue, because we need reminded at every turn about how important it is. I also take on board his other two comments. One was about the challenges in the Budget: that we do not have enough money to do what we want to do. The other was about our determination to make sure that jobs, and the creation of jobs, are central to everything that we do.

Mr Durkan, I think, opened a door and agreed with me that we need to find a way of maximising borrowing for organisations such as the NIHE that cannot borrow at the minute. I think that he had a swipe at the Fresh Start Agreement, but, of course, not so long ago, we all supported the Fresh Start Agreement. I am not sure at the minute where the SDLP is on key elements of the Fresh Start Agreement. Certainly, those of us who signed up to the Fresh Start Agreement and the Stormont House Agreement are going to honour them.

We should make it clear that the European Investment Bank loans last week are very welcome. We should have a really positive and almost daily dialogue with the European Investment Bank. It is involved in the NI investment fund, but there are other ways in which to work with the EIB, and I have already asked my officials to start looking at the potential for European Investment Bank framework loans to support local council investment here. I take on board what Mr Storey said about some councils being at different levels. I agree with Paula Bradshaw, who said that Belfast City Council is leading the way on those matters, and we should not hold it back. In fact, I think that we have a lot to learn from Belfast City Council. I am not saying that because Christopher, Claire and Paula were on the council not so long ago, but I do think that we have a lot to learn from Belfast City Council's alacrity in getting things done.

Mr Durkan referred to the welfare reform mitigations, but Mr Attwood attacked the deal that we did on welfare mitigations. In my view, we set aside over £500 million, and we have a panel that is making recommendations on how that money should be used. We know that tax credits did not go ahead, so we have a bit of space there. Someone said earlier — maybe from the Ulster Unionist Party — that it is a big commitment from our society to say that we will have the most generous welfare mitigation package in these islands. It is a big commitment from the supporters of the DUP, the supporters of Sinn Féin, and the supporters of the other parties that support that package. Those who do not support it should say what they want it reduced to. If the Ulster Unionist Party wants to attack the welfare mitigation deal, it can say how much it wants to take off. If Mr Attwood or others think that we should be doing more, let them state how much more we should put into the welfare mitigations and where it should come from. That is the missing element again and again today, with the exception of the Alliance Party, which dealt in broad strokes. Neither the UUP nor the SDLP, when they called for more money, including £20 million for childcare, said where we will take it from. Does it come from the universities, the arts or the hospitals? Who will provide the money for us to do all the things that we want to do? Thus, those of us who are in the driving seat have to make those tough decisions, and we have made them in this Supply resolution and in these Estimates today.

I do not know whether mo chomrádaí Daithí McKay is still here, but it would be above and beyond if he is missing the football match to be here. He raised important points about the delivery of health services, and I take those on board. We have made very bold commitments to health, not only in trying to provide extra money to the tune of £1 billion but in insisting that we will stand by the need to restructure and reform health along with Professor Bengoa. It is vital, therefore, that any reforms identified as a result of the work led by Professor Bengoa be implemented with the support of the Executive. I would go broader than that and would like to see the support of the Opposition for those reforms, but let us see how that develops.

Barry McElduff and Daithí McKay mentioned rural communities. I have not had an official visit yet to a rural community, but it has come up. That is unless we think that Enniskillen is a rural community. It did come up at a meeting in Enniskillen with the chief executive of the council who said that — you will understand this, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as it is your constituency as

well as that of others — we have to ensure that rural communities get a full share of this peace dividend.

The derating of sports clubs is an issue on which Mr McKay has majored and which the Finance Committee spent most of last year discussing. I can update the Assembly on it. My Department recently completed a consultation to inform drafting regulations to allow 100% rate relief to be given to unlicensed community amateur sports clubs. The new legislation will be presented to the Finance Committee prior to my asking the Assembly to approve it in September. Qualifying clubs will then have to apply for enhanced relief. At the very latest, this will take effect in the next financial year, but I will be asking Land and Property Services to explore options for implementation for the remainder of the current year, bearing in mind that, legally, it cannot be backdated.

Looking beyond that, I will also ask my officials to look at more fundamental changes that can be made to the treatment of amateur sports clubs as part of the wider review of rating policy to ensure that reliefs are better targeted. All of us realise in our constituencies that the sports clubs do absolutely magnificent work. Perhaps that was undervalued in the past. Part of building up strong, vibrant, dynamic communities is, I think, getting behind sports clubs even more vigorously, and hopefully these proposals on rate relief to sports clubs will help.

Michaela Boyle spoke about domestic violence. That issue came up in a discussion between the new Justice Minister and me earlier today, because it is an issue that she has expressed a real interest in and is determined to focus on. I am happy to work positively with the Justice Minister if she comes forward with additional proposals that need further funding.

I take on board all Paula Bradshaw's points about the Programme for Government, the main thrust of which was that the Programme for Government and the next Budget need to be aligned. We will come forward in the autumn with a Budget for resource from 2017-2020 and for capital from 2017-2021, and we need to make sure that there is joined-up government.

People will have different views about the priorities in the Programme for Government, but one thing that the public will not forgive us for is if we come forward with a Budget for the period ahead that is not wedded to the Programme for Government. I like the word "reimagining". I might steal that. I might not use it in exactly the same context, but I think that we have to reimagine. It is a new era, it is a fresh start, and there is a new look and feel to the Assembly. If that means reimagining the way we approach all the tasks ahead, I think that we should do so.

5.30 pm

Steve Aiken had the temerity to mention Brexit, which, as Minister, I will not comment on, but you know the Sinn Féin position that it would be a severe setback to our society if Brexit were to succeed. He made fair points about how we prepare for the outcome on 23 June. It is around the corner and is on top of us, but let us follow that carefully and see what happens. We will then be able to take our counsel on 24 June. Members have their own opinions, and, of course, the House is split on that issue.

I have a very complex response on Excess Votes, which Ms Hanna and Steve Aiken brought up. Claire, I think

that you should ask for a meeting with me or the officials rather than me reading that out tonight. They are technical matters; they are paper transfers. Would you like me to —

Ms Hanna: You could email it to me.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I will email it to you. OK.

Alex Attwood — I think that two people suggested that budgets are going to unravel — I do not know whether it was Mr Farry who used that word — and that there is maybe a need for additional statements. I can assure you that we are in control of the budgets and that I am content with where we are, with the caveat that we do not have enough money.

Budgets, especially resource budgets, are continuing to be squeezed, and the austerity juggernaut has not stopped. I do not use that just for the rhetoric; I use it because, when we unite with one voice, we can halt that juggernaut. You saw that in Britain, where one voice united against an assault on disability payments and stopped the austerity agenda. I want to elevate the commentary about austerity above rhetoric and stress to my colleagues that, with one voice — hopefully with our colleagues in Scotland and Wales — we need to say to London that that is not the way to build the peace or strong societies and that they cannot come back and cut budgets. I assure Mr Attwood that there will not be a further statement to the House. I am content that we will have an interesting monitoring round in the morning and will then push on towards the next big challenge with the Budget in September.

Mr Attwood mentioned the Ulster Bank index and said that he was talking about today and not May, but of course, it is the May index. That is why we mentioned it. Mr Nesbitt mentioned it. I did not mention it. Actually, I did because I have the email, but I read the bit about April. I always take cognisance of economists, but we should not let them be the only source for our policymaking or our strategies. As we are in the throes and the maw of the Brexit referendum, no one will be surprised that there is a lack of confidence, but I note from the Ulster Bank index today that we are still moving forward.

I look forward to the June monitoring round tomorrow. I do not know where the feeling that there may be some issues came from. I think that there will be a positive June monitoring round in the morning. I reiterate what I said about SAVIA: my commitment to SAVIA continues.

Mr Attwood also asked about the budget for the A5. I am confident that if we do not spend that money this year for different reasons, especially if they relate to the Planning Appeals Commission's public inquiry, that it will be spent in this mandate. That is a bold statement: we will deliver the A5 and A6 in this mandate.

We are surely coming to the close. Mervyn Storey is more laudatory of the British Government than I would be. That may surprise people. He lionises their commitment. It is my view and conviction — we mentioned it at the Committee last week — that the link to Britain is not to our advantage and that our economy would be much more prosperous if the decisions were not made outwith this place, but we will move on from that. The one thing that I will agree with Mervyn Storey on is that we will focus on jobs. The Estimates are not just Estimates for health and education. They are also Estimates for entrepreneurs, for small and medium-sized enterprises, and for larger investment.

I note the hammer blows that his constituency has suffered over the last 18 months, with major manufacturers closing.

Lastly, I do not know whether we have any news from the football game.

A Member: Nil-nil.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Nil-nil. In that case, I want to draw my remarks to a close. I thank Members for their good wishes. I am sure that you will not be just so temperate and considerate in your comments in the time ahead, when we get into this role properly. It is a big privilege, and I believe that I have the good wishes of all of the House. We may disagree, but it is my conviction that, at the end of the day, we want the best for our people and our constituents.

Assembly approval of the Supply motion today and the associated departmental expenditure plans laid out in the 2016-17 Main Estimates is a crucial stage of the existing public expenditure cycle. Failure to pass the 2016-17 Supply resolution at this juncture would have serious consequences for the ongoing provision of public services.

I do not think there has been a Division on the Estimates in some time, Mr Farry, but that is what democracy is all about. Le do chead, a LeasCheann Comhairle, sílim go dtáinig mé isteach beagán faoin am, ba mhaith liom an rún seo a mholadh don Tionól, agus tá súil agam go nglacfar leis. I commend the motion to the Assembly and beg to move.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the vote on this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £69,281,105.15 be authorised for use by the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, for the year ending 31 March 2015, as summarised in part II of the 2014-15 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As there are Ayes from all side of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

We will now move to the motion on the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17, which has already been debated. Glaoim ar an Aire Airgeadais. I call the Minister of Finance.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Le do chead, a LeasCheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom an Bille Cáinainéise uimhir a dó a chur i láthair an Tionóil. I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Have we agreed the previous one?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): No. Can I ask you to move the motion on the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016-17, le do thoil?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I beg to move:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food

Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1·3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the vote on the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 56; Noes 10.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr O'Dowd and Mr Robinson.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Allister.

Other

Mr Agnew, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw and Mr Dickson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>[84.8%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>[96.9%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1·3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Budget (No. 2) Bill 2016: First Stage

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): Mar sin arís, a LeasCheann Comhairle, le do chead, ba mhaith liom an Bille Cáinainéise uimhir a dó Thuaisceart Éireann a chur i láthair an Tionóil. I beg to move the Budget (No. 2) Bill 2016 [01/16-21], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31st March 2017; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31st March 2017; to authorise the use of certain excess resources for the year ending 31st March 2015; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That constitutes the Bill's First Stage, and it shall now be printed. The Speaker is satisfied that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly, and I can inform Members that confirmation has been received from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that the Bill can therefore proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Adjourned at 5.54 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it compatible with the processes of this House for the Finance Minister to authorise his officials to give evidence tomorrow to the Finance Committee about the June monitoring round and, today, pre-empt and nullify that process by choosing to make the June monitoring statement in advance of that? What sort of way is that to do business?

Mr Speaker: Mr Allister, I think you are aware that Standing Order 18(4) makes provision for a Minister to make oral statements at short notice. I am satisfied that those procedures have been followed and that the statement is in order. As you know, the Speaker does not become involved in Committee matters. Committees or Members who have concerns regarding the timing of statements should address them directly to the Minister.

Public Petition: Special Educational Needs Nursery Provision

Mr Speaker: Mr Chris Lyttle has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Mr Lyttle: It is a privilege to have the opportunity to present this petition of over 6,000 signatures to the Education Minister on behalf of the Parents for Equal Education Coalition, calling for full-time nursery provision for children with special educational needs in our community to be maintained.

Children like Charlie and parents like Angela and the many others who have gathered at Parliament Buildings today have been an inspiration to me and many other MLAs. The dignity and commitment that they are showing in their fight for full-time special educational needs nursery provision for their children is in stark contrast to the totally unacceptable approach of the Education Authority, which has failed to disclose to this Assembly parental and principal opposition to its proposals and to engage with parents meaningfully on the issue.

I call on the Education Minister to avoid becoming associated with that flawed approach and to make clear his support for full-time special educational needs nursery provision in our community.

Mr Speaker, I thank you for accepting this petition on behalf of the over 300 children who are only three years old and face having their future made more uncertain. I hope that the Minister of Education will receive this petition. As I said, over 6,000 members of the public agree that we should be giving our children with special educational needs the very best start in life and should be maintaining those vital early education services. I know the Education Minister is monitoring this extremely serious issue. I call on all MLAs to wake up to the urgency of the issue and work together to ensure that the reductions do not happen.

Mr Speaker: If you bring forward the petition, it will be lodged with the Minister of Education and a copy will be sent to the Committee.

Mr Lyttle moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Ministerial Statement

June Monitoring

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Finance wishes to make a statement on June —

Mr Smith: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Allister alluded to this to a degree, but this morning, the Assembly was given less than an hour to consider a 37-page statement on the monitoring round. In addition, as far as I am aware, no Committee has been given a detailed briefing before today's announcements. Any opportunity for scrutiny has been strangled by the DUP/Sinn Féin Executive, who appear to be genuinely terrified of genuine accountability. *[Interruption.]* As such, under Standing Order 16, I am formally asking —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat. That is not a point of order. If you have a point of order, raise it.

Mr Smith: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Under Standing Order 16, I am formally asking for this item of business to be adjourned until next Monday, 20 June, to give parties time to consider the content of the statement.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: We need to take time to consider that. I ask the Member to clarify under which Standing Order he is making his request.

Mr Smith: It is Standing Order 16.

Mr Speaker: Standing Order 16 refers to a debate:

“during any debate, any debate on the motion”.

This is not a debate. It is a statement by the Minister. Therefore, Standing Order 16 does not apply.

The Minister of Finance wishes to make a statement on June monitoring. Minister.

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): It was good to hear children's voices in the Gallery earlier. Occasionally, we hear childish voices in the Assembly, perhaps from all sides, but certainly children's voices give a right good lift to the day. If you will allow me, Mr Speaker, in relation to Chris Lyttle's proposal, I want to say that, in this monitoring round, we will allocate £5 million for special educational needs. I know that that will bring cheer to him and the parents who are with us today.

There have been two attempts to delay this statement. There have been concerns about the style of the statement and the monitoring round. Let me say to all my colleagues that this is what streamlined, efficient government looks like. This is the earliest monitoring round presented to the Assembly. This, in my view, is an example of a Government that deliver, and this is an indication of how we intend to do that in the time ahead. So take it, a Cheann Comhairle and Members, as a statement of intent to deliver for all our people.

A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt duit as deis a thabhairt domh an ráiteas seo a chur i láthair an Tionóil inniu. Is é seo an chéad bhabhta monatóireachta den treimhse nua seo, agus tabharfaidh Comhaltaí faoi deara nach ionann é agus na bhabhtá a chuaigh romhainn ar chúiseanna a mhíneoidh mé ar ball beag. Mr Speaker, I thank you for affording me the

opportunity to present this statement to the Assembly. This is the first monitoring statement in the new mandate and it signals a marked departure — as Members have noticed — from previous formats, for reasons that I will explain shortly.

The monitoring round presented the new Executive with a number of very significant challenges. Many of those challenges emanate from the austerity agenda that the Westminster Government seek to impose upon the devolved Administrations. No doubt, we will return to that later in the Budget debate and rehearse some of the arguments we heard yesterday about how the Tories have no mandate here, what their wishes for our people are and how we are going to resist those. The imposition of an austerity agenda is entirely unacceptable, and I will make best endeavours to prevent the least-well-off from shouldering that burden.

Despite the challenges, the Executive have been able to conclude the monitoring round without having to engage in a draconian cuts exercise, confounding, may I say, the predictions of the naysayers. Given the pressing need to bring clarity to Departments and Ministers on the 2016-17 in-year position so that they can get to work with the money I am allocating, and in the interests of efficient governance, the Executive have agreed to my request to expedite the monitoring round through the urgent procedure mechanism. This is the earliest point at which any Finance Minister has announced the June monitoring outcome, and the quick conclusion of the process signals my intention, and the intention of my ministerial colleagues, to conclude business in a timely manner. I believe that the next Executive meeting will be at the very end of the month, and I think that this is a much more efficient way to proceed for all the people we serve.

Turning to the substantive issues within this monitoring round, let me begin by highlighting that the Executive's deliberations have actually delivered many positive outcomes that citizens will warmly welcome. The allocations are a signal of intent, as well. They show where our priorities lie.

Here is the detail. The starting point for the June monitoring round has to be the outcome of last year's provisional out-turn. That determines how much money we have carried forward from the previous financial year into the monitoring round. I therefore begin with the 2015-16 provisional out-turn. Provisional out-turn is critically important for the Executive. Not only does it provide a strong indication of departmental budget management performance during the last financial year, but it determines the amount of resources that the Executive can plan to carry forward through the devolved Administration Budget exchange scheme (BES).

In detailing this position, as well as in relation to the June monitoring round, my focus will be on the non-ring-fenced resource departmental expenditure limit, as that is the element that funds our important public services. I will refer to that as “resource DEL” for simplicity hereafter. I will touch on the non-cash ring-fenced resource DEL element, which is handled separately, since that is strictly controlled and cannot be used for any other purpose.

Under the Budget exchange scheme, the Executive may carry forward a limited level of underspend, based on a percentage of the final Budget for the year. For 2015-16, the

limit of 0.6% resource DEL equates to £59.5 million within the 1.5% capital DEL limit, providing for up to £11.5 million, including ring-fenced financial transactions capital (FTC). Members should note that any underspends recorded above those amounts would be lost to the Executive.

10.45 am

Before I turn to the amount that the Executive have been able to carry forward, I would like to highlight the individual departmental position. I will start with the departmental outcome. In their provisional out-turn returns, Departments registered total underspends of £44.4 million for resource DEL and £20.8 million for capital DEL. That is detailed in the tables attached to this statement. The level of departmental underspend in resource DEL is a little higher than I would have envisaged, given the budgetary challenges faced by Departments during 2015-16, although I recognise that an element of the underspend relates to the allocations made from the public sector transformation fund for voluntary exit schemes, where actual costs were often dependent upon the decisions of individuals and, therefore, as Members will understand, difficult to forecast.

The total departmental underspend of £20.8 million in capital DEL comprises £9.5 million relating to conventional capital DEL and £11.3 million relating to financial transactions capital. We will come back to that issue. The level of underspend of financial transactions capital is indicative of the challenges associated with developing suitable schemes that can utilise this funding, which can be used only for the purpose of loans to, or equity investment in, the private sector. I put out that challenge again — it was put out yesterday to Members — to find imaginative and innovative ways to use financial transactions capital.

I will move on to the implications of the carry forward of resources. The Budget exchange scheme carry forward is determined at block level. Therefore, account also needs to be taken of the various centrally held items that impact on the overall block position. The main component of these is the year-end overcommitment position, which, following the receipt of some additional Barnett consequentials and easements identified by Departments, amounted to £9 million of capital DEL, with £9.2 million of resource DEL being held unallocated for carry forward. In capital DEL, an element of the departmental underspend related to projects funded by borrowing. As the actual level of borrowing drawn was reduced to take account of that, some £1.3 million of the departmental underspend is not included in the block underspend position.

As a consequence of these adjustments, the Executive have marginally exceeded their conventional capital DEL control by £0.8 million. In line with the Budget exchange scheme rules, this will be deducted from our resource DEL carry forward. Therefore, there will be no carry forward of conventional capital DEL into 2016-17. However, the Executive can carry forward in full their underspend of FTC totalling £11.3 million.

With respect to resource DEL, the unallocated £9.2 million, combined with lower than forecast reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) interest payments and a small increase in regional rate income, has resulted in the carry forward of £56.1 million of resource DEL into 2016-17.

In conclusion, and most importantly in relation to provisional out-turn, no spending power has been lost to the Executive as a result of year-end underspends. As the tables show, there is an underspend of £11.5 million on ring-fenced resource DEL, which would exceed the amount available for carry forward. However, as that may be used for only the non-cash costs relating to depreciation and impairments, it has no impact on the level of funding available for public services and is, instead, a technical accounting matter. As the Executive have ample funding for these non-cash costs, no additional benefit would be gained should it be possible to carry forward that amount. Whilst I remain concerned by the level of underspend on ring-fenced financial transactions capital — as I said yesterday, and say again — it is pleasing that no resources have been lost to the Executive and that significant resource DEL can be carried forward under the Budget exchange scheme to help address the many pressures in the June monitoring round.

I turn now to the June monitoring round. Before getting into the specifics of the monitoring round, I think it is worth highlighting that the Executive have secured £4.5 million from banking fines to establish an air ambulance service. I know that Members across the House called for that air ambulance service. That funding will be received over three years, and £1 million will be allocated to the Department of Health in this monitoring round. I think all Members will agree that this is a welcome development that will greatly benefit our community. I think it will be particularly welcomed by those outside the city of Belfast.

I will turn now to the specifics of the June monitoring round, starting with a number of adjustments relating to centrally held items. Members may recall that the Budget 2016-17 held £30 million of the funding, previously identified for mitigating measures for tax credits, pending the results of Professor Evason's work on welfare reform mitigations. As you know, Professor Evason's report recommended that the Executive should introduce measures costing £64 million in 2016-17. With £75 million having already been allocated to the Department for Communities, the £30 million held centrally is now available for reallocation.

Updates to forecasts of regional rate income and interest payments on borrowing provided an additional £2.3 million, while the block grant adjustment for air passenger duty (APD) being lower than provided for in the Budget contributes a further £0.2 million.

The Chancellor's March 2016 Budget provided additional Barnett consequentials of £5.8 million of resource DEL and £3 million of capital DEL, which are now available for allocation.

As I set out earlier, the Executive can now plan to carry forward £56.1 million of resource DEL and £11.3 million of financial transactions capital under the Budget exchange scheme. Of course, that amount is subject to review once Departments have provided final out-turn information, based on their audited accounts. Any adjustments to the amount carried forward will be handled in a future monitoring round.

I turn now to the central pressures, of which Members will be aware. In 2015-16, receipts from the carrier bag levy exceeded allocations to environmental programmes by £0.5 million. Receipts from the levy must be used to

support environmental programmes, so the Executive must now return £0.5 million to DAERA for that purpose.

The Executive must meet the cost of the May 2016 Assembly elections. It is currently estimated to be £5.3 million, and that amount has been transferred to the Northern Ireland Office. Adjustments will be made later in the year when final costs are confirmed.

Under legislation, the salaries of statutory office holders are met directly from the NI Consolidated Fund (NICF). Those include the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Lands Tribunal and judicial salaries. The salary costs also show in the relative Department's resource DEL budget, but, as they are a direct charge on the NICF, the costs are funded centrally. The latest estimate indicates that an additional £1 million of resource DEL funding will be required in this year, and it will be transferred to the relevant Departments in this monitoring round.

In total, taking into account the opening overcommitment and other central issues that have been noted resulted in £87.7 million of resource DEL and £3.2 million capital DEL being available, before taking account of departmental reduced requirements.

Departments declared reduced requirements in this monitoring round of £35.1 million of resource DEL and £18.5 million of capital DEL. Full details are in the tables provided with the statement. The most notable item on the resource DEL side is the reduction of £35 million from the Department for Communities for welfare support measures reflecting the outcome of the Evason review, which I mentioned earlier, and slippage in the roll-out of welfare reforms — the welfare attack.

I turn now to internal reallocations. With changes to departmental structures and new Ministers taking up post only in May 2016, there is clearly a risk that the departmental budgets for 2016-17 are not aligned to ministerial priorities in the new Departments. I think that that is understandable. In that regard, the Executive agreed, through the Budget process, that the first monitoring round of 2016-17 should provide an opportunity for new Ministers to realign their own 2016-17 Budget allocations. Ministers have therefore been afforded the opportunity in this monitoring round to move funding across spending areas without recourse to the Executive. New unit of service tables aligned to the June monitoring position and reflecting ministerial priorities are detailed in the tables accompanying the statement.

Departments may also, for a number of reasons, seek to reclassify expenditure from resource to capital, or vice versa. All such reclassifications need Executive approval, and those are also shown in the tables accompanying the statement.

Departments may also, subject to Department of Finance approval, seek to move budget between the ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced resource DEL categories. The impact of those moves is shown in the table detailing the ring-fenced resource DEL position.

All the adjustments impacted on the total amount of resource available to the Executive in this monitoring round. Once all the issues were taken into account, the Executive had £126 million of resource DEL and £17.7 million of capital DEL available to allocate.

Before turning to the mainstream allocations, there are a number of other important issues that I wish to highlight to Members, starting with ring-fenced financial transactions capital (FTC).

After taking account of the carry-forward of £11.3 million of FTC from 2015-16, the Executive have a total FTC budget of £124.8 million this year. Of that, £55.8 million has been set aside for the planned investment fund.

Departments have declared reduced requirements in this round of £11.4 million, while the Department for Communities has been allocated £5.5 million to support co-ownership housing, which is welcome news, in particular given Jonathan Bell's comments yesterday and the concerns of all Members. The £5.5 million towards co-ownership housing will contribute to delivering social and affordable homes over this mandate.

As a consequence of those changes, the Executive exit this monitoring round with £17.2 million of financial transactions capital remaining unallocated. Our capacity to identify suitable projects that can spend the FTC available to us remains an area of concern, and I have therefore asked Ministers actively to seek opportunities to utilise the funding through loans or equity investments in the private sector.

I now turn to central funds. As part of Budget 2016-17, the Executive set aside £14 million resource DEL and £15 million capital DEL for Delivering Social Change (DSC) in this financial year. The Executive Office has confirmed a range of allocations under the Delivering Social Change banner to be processed in this monitoring round, including the following: £13.8 million resource and £6 million capital to the Executive Office for various social investment fund and Delivering Social Change projects, which will cheer everyone; £1.6 million resource and £0.7 million capital to the Department of Health for the Bright Start school-age children scheme and Delivering Social Change; and £0.3 million resource to the Department of Education for Bright Start childcare. All those allocations will be welcomed across the House.

The Executive have also agreed to the transfer of £1.7 million from the Atlantic Philanthropies fund to the DSC programme to provide sufficient funding for all the allocations detailed. Any time we mention Atlantic Philanthropies and its generosity towards this Government, we should also salute the great Irish-American philanthropist Chuck Feeney. The Executive also agreed the transfer of £0.4 million capital DEL from DSC to the shared future programme. Following these allocations, there is now £7.9 million capital DEL and no resource DEL unallocated relating to the Delivering Social Change programme.

Budget 2016-17 set aside £8 million resource DEL for the Atlantic Philanthropies programme, which I referenced. The Executive Office has advised that an allocation of £3.6 million resource to Health for the early intervention and dementia programmes should be processed in this monitoring round. Taking account of the transfer to the Delivering Social Change programme, this means that £2.6 million resource DEL remains in the Atlantic Philanthropies fund.

Colleagues will recall that, in Budget 2016-17, the Executive set aside £7.1 million resource DEL for a change fund, including £1.5 million for estate rationalisation

led by the estate management unit in conjunction with the reform of property management programme in the Department of Finance. A further £4.5 million was set aside for cross-cutting reform projects and £1.1 million for a pilot small business research initiative challenge fund. I can now report that all that funding has been allocated to Departments in this monitoring round.

The Fresh Start Agreement secured £60 million over five years to support the creation of a shared future. The Executive's Budget 2016-17 set aside £12 million resource DEL in this year and the Executive Office has advised that the following allocations should be processed in this monitoring round: £7.4 million to the Executive Office to cover a wide range of shared future measures; £1.5 million to Education for summer camps and shared education campuses; £1.5 million to Communities for shared housing and cross-community sporting events; and £1.1 million resource DEL and £0.4 million capital DEL to the Department of Justice for the removal of interface barriers. That is all good news. My officials will engage with the Treasury in securing access to this funding through the Westminster Supplementary Estimates. Following these adjustments, £0.5 million of the funding available for a shared future remains unallocated.

The Department of Justice has been provided with the requested £0.8 million resource and £0.5 million capital from the funding provided by the Executive to progress measures to tackle paramilitary activity. This will fund the cost of a three-person panel and supporting secretariat, a Fresh Start implementation team, a publicity campaign, and the purchase of specialist forensic science equipment.

I now turn to other allocations in the June monitoring round. Allocations totalling £140.1 million resource DEL and £29.1 million capital DEL have been agreed. The individual allocations are detailed in the tables and include £67 million resource DEL to the Department of Health, bringing the total additional funding provided to health in 2016-17 to £200 million. In anyone's language, that is a significant commitment to health. However, as we are all aware — it has been repeated across the House from all sides — continually providing additional funding to Health does not address the underlying issues. Therefore, it is vital that the reforms identified as a result of the work led by Professor Bengoa be implemented. The Executive have agreed to support the Health Minister in delivering substantial reforms to our health service.

Thirty million pounds in resource DEL has been allocated to the Department of Education. This comprises £20 million for schools in line with the commitment provided to the previous Education Minister by my predecessor. There is a further £5 million for special educational needs, which I mentioned at the start of my statement, and £5 million for the drawdown of school surpluses under the schools end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme.

Twenty-five million pounds in resource DEL has been allocated to the Department for the Economy. This comprises £20 million for skills in line with the commitment provided to the previous Minister for Employment and Learning by my predecessor; that is three commitments in a row kept. There is a further £5 million for the drawdown of further education (FE) college surpluses under the FE college end-year flexibility scheme.

The Department for Communities has been allocated £8.3 million resource DEL to cover pressures, including £4.3 million for maternity grants and funeral loans.

It also includes — I am very pleased and proud about this — £2 million to honour the commitment in the Fresh Start Agreement for welfare advice centres. This will help those most in need to receive their full benefit entitlement. The remaining £2 million will be used to address other inescapable pressures in the Department, such as the derating grant.

11.00 am

A total of £1.5 million resource DEL has been allocated to DAERA for the knowledge transfer scheme to address the skills gap in the farming sector; £3 million resource DEL to the Department for Justice for a number of central pressures; and £5.3 million resource DEL to the Department for Infrastructure for road maintenance and flood prevention, another issue that came up yesterday.

On capital DEL — I know that Members will welcome this — the Department for Infrastructure will receive £22.9 million, with the majority going to improve our roads infrastructure. Flood prevention and Waterways Ireland are also to receive allocations.

The Department of Health will also receive £5 million capital DEL. Each year, the hearing of approximately 25,000 babies is screened here, with around 450 babies requiring referral to diagnostic audiology services. This funding will provide a robust mechanism for recording the results of these tests, ensuring that the right treatment is provided to babies where that is necessary. It will also enhance the communication systems between ambulance control and crews, providing for more reliable 999 responses.

I have spoken, at Committee and to the media, several times since my election about the importance that I place on the regeneration of border regions, which are on the periphery of two economies. Cross-border cooperation, however, puts those same communities at the heart of the all-island economy. That is why I am proud to be the first Minister since 2010 to make a capital allocation to a cross-border body in a monitoring round.

On Friday past, I visited the headquarters of Waterways Ireland. I met the amazing team leading it and saw the transformational work that they are involved in to make the Loch Erne waterway a beacon for tourism. With 6,000 boats on the Erne, Waterways Ireland is on the cusp of creating the most outstanding blueway in Europe, which will boost tourism, create jobs and revive the border region. I am allocating £1.4 million to the Department for Infrastructure, which will assist Waterways Ireland with its bold capital investment plans.

I have also provided the Department for the Economy with £1.3 million to complete the HMS Caroline museum project, which will also boost our tourism sector. This project — I was at the launch — benefited hugely from Big Lottery money, but we need to complete the project if it is to fulfil its tourism potential, so I am pleased to make that allocation also.

Ring-fenced resource DEL is strictly controlled, and funding cannot be moved out of this area. Changes to the area are shown in the tables accompanying this statement.

Colleagues will note that we exit this monitoring round with £15.6 million of ring-fenced resource DEL unallocated. This funding may be used only to address pressures within the ring fence — depreciation and impairments — it is therefore not available for allocation by the Executive.

Before concluding, a Cheann Comhairle, I would like to update Members on the public sector transformation fund. Colleagues will recall that, in the Budget 2016-17, the Executive agreed allocations totalling £117.8 million, including £84.7 million for voluntary exit schemes and £33.1 million to restructure the teaching workforce. The Executive also agreed that £25 million of the £200 million available to the public sector transformation fund in 2016-17 should be used for capital projects, leaving some £57.4 million available for allocation through the 2016-17 in-year monitoring process.

The public sector reform division has, over recent months, liaised with Departments to identify easements on allocations agreed in the Budget and any new allocations to schemes with capacity to deliver further savings for the Executive's Budget. Changes to allocations in this monitoring round under the public sector transformation fund are detailed in the tables accompanying this statement.

As a result of the allocations detailed above, we exit this monitoring round with a £13.5 million overcommitment in respect of resource DEL and £11.4 million on capital DEL.

Earlier this year, we had a lengthy debate in the House on the renewable heat incentive scheme and the problems with it. Members who were there or who read about it in the media will be aware that a potential additional resource DEL pressure exists in relation to commitments under the renewable heat incentive. I am not proposing an allocation to the Department for the Economy in this round as the Executive are determined that every effort be made to reduce this pressure. I ask Members to support any measures brought before them that would help to mitigate what would otherwise be a considerable ongoing pressure on the Executive's DEL. I would also like to assure Members that this potential pressure has been considered when developing these monitoring round proposals, and I am content that it can be managed within our DEL controls.

Before I conclude, I would like to make Members aware that the Executive have agreed a draft timetable and approach for the upcoming Budget that will set resource DEL plans up to 2019-2020 and capital DEL to 2020-21. It will come as no surprise that there are a number of strategic issues facing the Executive over this period, not least the need to work in parallel with the Programme for Government process to allow the Budget to support the Executive's priorities while ensuring that those aims are realistic within the overall funding envelope. In light of this, the Executive have agreed that Department of Finance officials will work closely with Departments over the summer to form a view on the funding each Department requires.

In conclusion — and this is the conclusion, a Cheann Comhairle — as I said at the start of the statement, I am strongly opposed, and we will hear it later today, to the austerity agenda and the constraints that it inflicts and imposes upon the Assembly. I will continue to fight against austerity at all levels and, alongside that, seek to develop innovative funding options. However, despite the constraints inflicted upon us, I am pleased that the

June monitoring round reflects a positive outcome with additional funding being provided to key public services — around £170 million in funding for Departments if I have got my sums right. This monitoring round has delivered extra resources for health, education, skills, roads, housing, welfare and tourism.

Mar sin, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom an babhta monatóireachta agus an ráiteas seo a mholadh don Tionól. I commend the June monitoring outcome to the Assembly.

Mr Smith: The Minister said that today's statement is significantly different from those of previous monitoring rounds. He is right in that this Assembly used to be informed not only of allocations but of bids. Looking at his statement today, I see no indication whatsoever of the pressures Departments had identified and bid for. Can the Minister explain why this information was left out of the statement? Can he give a commitment that, after today's proceedings, he will circulate it to the House?

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I think that it is appropriate for Mr Smith to take up the points that he said earlier in an attempt to delay the statement. I think that I might be the first Minister to go in and see the Committee for Finance, maybe simultaneously with the Executive Office Ministers. I intend to have very collegial and honest engagement with Members from all parties. This morning, I became the first Minister in some time to brief the Chair and Deputy Chair. My predecessors, God bless them, briefed only the Chair on these matters. I intend to stay with that tradition of seeing the Committee often and seeing the Chair and Deputy Chair.

I will say this: this is the choice that you have made. We want to have an effective, streamlined, efficient Government delivering for all our people. You want to be in an Opposition that is in the back seat. You want to drive from the back seat. You want to hold progress up. Our intention is to ensure that we do things. We deliver the actions. We do the deeds. Others may be strong in words, but this Government will be very strong in deeds moving forward. You can be assured of this: the Assembly and the Committee will have my full cooperation, but you cannot hold back progress. Scrutinise and challenge, certainly, but let us move forward. People want us to make progress swiftly.

Mrs Little Pengelly (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I would like to thank the Minister for the very strong statement this morning and in particular the swift agreement by the Northern Ireland Executive on June monitoring. I particularly welcome the additional £67 million to the Department of Health along with the increase at the beginning of this Budget period of an additional £133 million. This does meet the commitment of the Executive to that additional £200 million each year. As the Minister will be aware, and we have discussed this already, much more is required than just resources to put Health on a sustainable footing. Transformation is required. I notice from his statement that there is £69 million of unallocated financial transactions capital and £59 million unallocated in the public sector transformation fund. Will the Minister give a commitment to work constructively with the Committee to look at those unallocated funds and opportunities around funding and initiatives in order to bring about the

necessary transformation to put the Department of Health on a sustainable footing?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: You can take it that this is not a spectator sport. You are right: there are parties in government and in opposition, but I think that ideas on how we be more efficient in delivery of services should come from all sides. It cheers me that we have reached a place in this House where people are not saying that the solution to the pressures that society and the community face is always to spend more money.

I think we all agree that on health the solution is to have better outcomes, to use our money wisely and to adopt the Bengoa proposals. That, in many ways, is depoliticising health. So, on all the matters you raise and in the interests of cooperation and making sure we get the biggest bang for our buck, you can be assured that I will work positively with colleagues.

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with the Minister that the public out there are more interested in product than in process and want to see changes being delivered to our society. Will the monitoring rounds form part of a strategic delivery of product to our people out there? Will they form part of a budgetary process to see resources being directed to where they are required?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Aontaím go huile agus go hiomlán leat gur tábhachtaí le daoine táirge ná próiseas. I agree with you entirely about delivery of product rather than process. This was not a horse-trading exercise. We have a positive Government with the DUP and Sinn Féin and with Claire Sugden as Minister of Justice. We did not engage in having the wish lists that I have seen in previous Governments where Ministers put in bids that they know are not realistic. We had a hard-headed negotiation with all the Ministers. They understand, as I understand, that we are all in this together. This is a holistic Government. For years, people in here have complained about a silo Government and silo Departments. This is a Government acting with common purpose, moving forward together. So, in that regard, the monitoring round has to fit into our overall ambition for this Government and for our people. It should not be a wish list, horse-trading or hoping that one Department will get money and deny it to others. In fact, what I saw with ministerial colleagues in our private discussions was that they understood that, if there is a greater priority, you need to step back. If we need to finish a project or fund a project and your Department does not need it as much, you need to step back and say, "What is for the greater good?" This is a Government fuelled, I think, with common purpose that shows by this monitoring round that we are intent to deliver, but I take entirely on board what you say, and this has to be part of our strategic approach.

It is early days. This, I think, is a good outcome for us today. We have managed to allocate £175 million. We have made a significant difference, but let us keep up the good work. Let us keep our shoulder to the wheel because we need to repeat this later in the year not only in relation to the Budget coming up for 2017-2020 for resource and 2017-2021 for capital but in other monitoring rounds.

Ms Hanna: We appreciate the Minister's energy, but we support the view that there has not been sufficient time to scrutinise the statement. The first big report of the mandate was the paramilitary report. The First Ministers

completely bypassed the Assembly on that occasion. At least you have taken questions, but one hour for Members to scrutinise is not sufficient.

I am looking at a couple of the figures here. Despite having significantly reduced powers in this mandate, £19.2 million has been allocated to the Executive Office for the social investment fund and Delivering Social Change, and a further £7.4 million has been allocated for shared future measures, as well as money that has gone to other Departments for the same purpose. Will the Minister clarify what that shared future measures money for the Executive Office will be spent on?

Can I get clarity on one other item? On page 6, you refer to a £126.2 million resource DEL and £17.7 million capital DEL, and, on page 8, it refers to a £140.1 million resource DEL and £29.1 million capital DEL. Will you outline the reason for the discrepancy in those figures?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that only one question is allowed.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member and thank her for attending the briefing this morning. She is right: I have some sympathy. The sympathy I felt for Mr Nesbitt yesterday was to do with the 138 pages of Estimates. We need to make government work for the people, and there is a chance now to look at what we have done and to comment upon it, and you are welcome to do that. The figures are right, and I am happy for you to drill down into them.

I want to say this: this is the second time in two days that the social investment fund has been attacked and traduced in this Chamber. I am going to read again where the social investment fund is making a difference. Those who are trying to pillory the efforts of working-class communities, especially in Taughmonagh and Sandy Row because that is where the target has been, need to visit those communities and meet the heroes and pioneers who are trying to build up those communities, which have not received an adequate peace dividend, whether it is Tigers Bay, the Markets or the New Lodge.

11.15 am

With your permission, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I am going to state again some of what the social investment fund has done. It provided £1 million to make the Bryson Street Surgery happen, which people know is at a very difficult interface, and of course, the build is complete and operational. On increasing community services, there is the Best of East Visitor Centre. That build is complete and will commence operations in the coming weeks. In fact, I think that it has perhaps commenced operations, because some friends have visited it. Who is not proud of the marvellous work being carried out by our friends in EastSide Arts and the East Belfast Partnership?

Again, on increasing community services in Belfast, there is £1.7 million for the community centre at Finvoy Street, the Greenway Women's Centre and the centre at Castlereagh Street. Again, that is another marvellous result from the social investment fund. There is £99,000 for the Short Strand Community Centre, for which a letter of offer has been issued. The list goes on, and those projects are being delivered.

Was that too slow for my liking? Yes, it absolutely was too slow, and I am determined as Finance Minister to be

swifter. When we are swifter with the social investment fund, I hope that people do not come to the House and say, "It's too fast. You are getting the money into communities to rebuild them and transform lives too quickly", because, for me, that is very much our job.

The shared future fund goes through the Executive Office to other Departments. The district councils' good relations programme is £0·6 million. Summer intervention funding is £0·11 million. The central good relations fund is £3 million. Summer camps funding is £0·2 million. I will do what I did yesterday for the Member and email her this later.

Ms Hanna: You can tell us now.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I will have to continue to read this then. Urban Villages is £0·7 million. Urban Villages is £1·6 million. Contested spaces is £0·2 million. Together: Building a United Community shared future promotion publicity is £0·03 million — that is £30,000. Shared future staffing for Urban Villages is £0·149 million. I think that we will leave it like that, but I could go through the whole list.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to make all their remarks through the Chair.

Dr Farry: I congratulate the Minister on his efficiency with the June monitoring statement. I do not believe that any procedures have been broken by the manner in which the statement has been brought to us today, but there is a genuine issue around transparency on the full pressures being faced across Departments. Hopefully, the Minister can rectify that gap.

On the additional money for skills — I welcome his following-through on the commitment made by his predecessor — does the Minister recognise that the £20 million will only avoid further cuts happening on an in-year basis? If we are to see proper investment in the transformation of our economy through future Budget rounds, there needs to be a further ramping-up of investment in skills across apprenticeships, FE colleges and, indeed, our universities. Will he clarify whether the £20 million is to be baselined, as was the intent of his predecessor in his correspondence to me in my previous role?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thought that the former Minister might have more of a smile this morning. I am disappointed to see that the glass is still half empty, because when Mervyn Storey left those IOUs, I was not obliged to honour them, but I thought that it was important to do so. You are absolutely right about the need to invest in higher education and to point out that we cannot really build for corporation tax if we do not have a strong tertiary-level education system delivering first-class graduates.

This is my first bite at this particular cherry. I have tried to honour your commitment. I have met both vice chancellors, Paddy Johnston and Paddy Nixon: one in Derry and one in Queen's University. You know that they make a strong case, and you know that it is a cogent and logical case, but we do not have money to do everything that we want to do. I do not want to promise further than what we have done today. The £20 million is, of course, not only for universities. I am a big fan of the Belfast Met and the other community colleges — I suppose that that is what you would call them — and they have to get some money out of it as well.

The Member should be content that, even though he has left the post, the thrust of what he wanted is being delivered. There is much, much more to do, but I understand the vital importance of third-level education to the success of this community, and I want to make sure that as many people as possible can access a third-level education.

Mr E McCann: Will the Minister allow an intervention?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, there are no interventions allowed during questions to a statement.

Mr E McCann: OK.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to resume his seat. Thank you. The Member will have opportunities for questions.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I think that Eamonn was going to mention Magee, so we might get to that as well.

Anyway, I believe, as was said previously, that access to university should be based on your ability to learn, not on your ability to pay. I commend the stance that the Minister took previously. Maybe he did not get the funding when he wanted it, but I think that we are on a different trajectory now, and I hope that this is the start of continued investment in building up our universities and further education colleges.

Mr Girvan: I welcome the statement and thank the Minister for it. I appreciate that two amounts have been set aside for capital and resource for the Department for Infrastructure. Each and every one of us has concerns about the road maintenance budget, which has already been cut in the projected budget for this year. The maintenance budget is £5·3 million, but I would like clarification: was there a bid for additional moneys for the maintenance budget for the forthcoming year?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his question. The interest in roads — it was referenced yesterday — is twofold. We want efficient roads that are passable, that we can be proud of and that we can drive on, but we are also concerned about the construction industry and making sure that the many jobs for the people who are out maintaining our roads — we see them every day — are still available when we release the budgets.

When I met my ministerial colleagues, all wanted more at first cut, but, after mature discussions, the bids from Departments were, by and large, realised. I think that you will find — I am sure that the Minister for Infrastructure will speak about this — that this will make a significant difference in-year to the number of repairs that we do on our roads. It is not really a very wise policy to have potholes, because people then claim against the Government and we lose money, but you will find that this will make a significant difference in the time ahead. I do not know whether it will cheer you entirely, but I think that you will find that it makes a significant difference.

Mr McElduff: Tá ceist agam, agus moladh agam, don Aire. I encourage the Finance Minister to continue, where possible, to support early intervention programmes and special needs programmes in education. I seek an assurance from the Minister that he and the Education Minister will support and give a good listening ear to school principals, who, at this time, feel under pressure because of the with additional pressures on school budgets. I

appreciate the financial constraints imposed on the Minister by the Westminster cuts.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Chomhalta as an cheist sin a chur. Is ambasadóir láidir é ar son an oideachais, agus tá a fhios agam go bhfuil deachaidreamh aige le príomhoidí, le múinteoirí agus le tuistí i gceantar s'aige. The Member is a strong ambassador for increased investment in education and always carries the standard for principals, teachers, parents and children.

I am pleased that we have been able to make an additional allocation to schools. I am a supporter of the Bright Start programme. The discussion on how the money will be used is now with the Education Minister, Peter Weir, but the views of the Member and my views are perfectly aligned. We understand the importance of early intervention, making sure that all children have a great opportunity in life, and it has to start very early. I am heartened not only by the passion of the advocacy by educationalists and parents but by the fact that, across the Chamber, Members from all parties agree that education is a priority.

Given that we never have enough money to do everything that we want to do, it is fair to say that we understand where the priorities are, and that is why there is extra money in this monitoring round for education and for special educational needs. I want to make sure that we reinforce the delivery of initiatives such as pathways, and I wish the Education Minister well as he endeavours to make sure that we make an even greater positive impact for our young people.

Mr Wells: I am sure that the Minister will accept that he is building on the strong foundations laid by his predecessors Mr Hamilton, Mr Storey and, of course, Mr Wilson.

Mr Allister: And Mrs Foster, no?

Mr Wells: And Mrs Foster, yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: And Mr Robinson.

Mr Wells: And Mr Robinson. And Mr Dodds. Will he accept that, as my colleague has already said, whilst the monitoring round improvements in funding for road maintenance are indeed welcome, if we do not, through either the monitoring rounds or better funding in the main Budget, deal with the situation soon, we are storing up huge problems for the future? If we do not maintain our roads, in 20 or 30 years' time we will have a vast expenditure, because we will have to fundamentally rebuild them.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I do, Mr Wells. I think you have forgotten Finance Minister Durkan. I do not think that goes back before your time; it certainly goes back before the time of many Members here, but I think you were here for that period as well. You are absolutely right: penny wise, pound foolish. We need to invest in our roads infrastructure; we need to get this right. It is important that, as we do face constraints, we do not ignore investment. If we do, what will happen is that a year or two down the road we are landed with a huge financial headache. We take that on board. It has been a position voiced by many Members, about not only the roads in Belfast but the rural and minor roads as well. We need to make sure that we invest in this network — it is important for our people, it is important for the success of our society, it is important for tourism and it is important for visitors. Your point is well made.

Each of the Finance Ministers you mentioned — whatever about the Finance Minister I mentioned; that was before my time — was prudent and aware of the pressures which impose upon our spending, and they always tried to act in a wise and prudent fashion. I intend to do the same to make sure that there is no neglect in investment which will create a headache at a later date.

Mr Swann: Minister, you mentioned the renewable heat incentive and asked Members to support any pressure brought before them because you have not made a bid in this monitoring round. Can you therefore give us guidance as to what the timescale is for those measures that are going to be brought? Also, I see you are content that any pressures can be managed within your current DEL controls.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his question. I think, Robin, you were here for the debate on the renewable heat incentive. I was, like other Members, very energised by the way the scheme was operated. It is clear there are a number of flaws and fault lines in that scheme. I have pressed back hard on officials in relation to how we are going to rectify this problem. I do not want to make an allocation for it now, but I am preparing for an allocation if that is necessary. We need to study this carefully, but we also need to act rather swiftly because until we rectify the problem it will continue to gather pace.

Of all the issues we address in the time ahead, getting a handle on this renewable heat incentive is absolutely vital. In England they got a handle on it when it was thought there was going to be an overspend. I look forward to my colleague Simon Hamilton's proposals. He is equally energised about this issue and is focused on finding a resolution and coming to the Assembly, and to me, as early as possible, with a strategy for dealing with the problem. It is not a secret to Members, because we did discuss it at length, that it has not been a well-run scheme. I look forward to Minister Hamilton bringing forward his proposals.

Mr S Bradley: First, I, like others, have obviously not had sufficient time to read the report in great detail. I welcome some of the headline figures, particularly the news that there will be funding for roads. I will be watching carefully to see how that funding is allocated regionally. I know in particular there is a need in south Down for more tarmac —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Has the Member a question for the Minister?

Mrs S Bradley: Certainly, yes.

I also welcome funding for Waterways Ireland. Until now there has been a real danger of some of the cross-border bodies withering on the vine because they have not had adequate funding or support. The Minister did comment that he has had —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask her question, please?

Mrs S Bradley: Yes, thank you.

He mentioned that, during frank discussions with the Executive, some projects may have to be set aside. Given the renewed commitment to cross-border bodies, I hope the Minister can give an assurance that Narrow Water bridge project has not been set aside. Given his commitment to cross-border projects, he could give that assurance to the people of south Down.

11.30 am

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that it should be a question to the Minister and not a statement. I ask Members to make their questions brief.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank Ms Bradley for her question. She is right to focus on rural roads — those of us from Belfast are accused occasionally of forgetting that there is anywhere outside the city limits — so I intend to do that. You are fortunate in that I think that Chris Hazzard does not live too far away, so he can certainly visit and view those roads with you.

In terms of Waterways Ireland, I think that part of the Ulster canal may be in your constituency. I am happy to visit it and to look at it with you to see how we might progress that project. That is another example of a project that has been around for too long and that we, as Governments, have not delivered on, yet it is a transformational project. In fact, as Jeffrey Donaldson reminded me, if we can get from Belfast to Lough Neagh and then to the Shannon, we will have a new all-island highway, or an old highway reopened. I am with you on that entirely.

It is a statement of intent, and I, of course, have to work with other Ministers. Do I believe that it is to the benefit of all our people, as Sir George Quigley believed, to develop an all-island economy? Yes, I do. Do I believe that communities in the border regions are on the periphery of two economies, yet could be at the centre of an all-island economy? Yes, I do. Do I believe that border communities — I know that you represent some of them — deserve a bigger slice of the peace dividend? Yes, I do. You will find me an ally for any proposals on constructive cross-border cooperation that encourage the all-island economy and encourage cooperation between our communities and peoples in the time ahead.

I remain a fan of the Narrow Water bridge project. As I said to the Committee last week, I generally support bridge building; it is a good way of moving forward. I saw that project before I was returned to the House, and I will be working with you and with other Members to realise the dream of having a bridge at Narrow Water. The work starts. It is not, of course, with my Department, but you can be sure that I think that that project is a priority, and I hope to see it realised in the time ahead. In the House, “the time ahead” sometimes can mean a long time, but I hope that we can get stuck into that project.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your statement. I want to return to the renewable heat incentive. Can you give us an assurance that that matter, regardless of the sums involved, will be dealt with directly by the Executive rather than being left to the Department for the Economy, the sole role of which should be to transform our economy and which should not be burdened in that respect? Will he give the House an absolute assurance that that matter will be dealt with directly by the Executive?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his question. You were in for the debate earlier this year. It is one of the most vital and pressing issues that we face and it is the right decision to move it to the centre. I look forward to seeing the proposals. It will be our friends in the energy section of the former DETI who will deal with it — they are dealing with it daily. It is a crucial and vital question.

We will move to allocate it to the centre if necessary. You can take it that, wherever it sits, it is a priority for me to get a handle on it and make sure that we have a solution.

Mr Aiken: I apologise for not having had the chance to go through the statement forensically as the Minister knows that I would have liked to have done, but there are a couple of questions to which I would quite like answers if he has the opportunity to do so.

Despite the increase of £25 million, much of which will go to restoring part of the issues to do with the skills shortage in Northern Ireland, I note from the ring-fenced resource DEL that there is a reduction of £34.2 million. Again, we have not seen those figures, and we would like to see the reasoning behind them fairly soon. On the second issue, I would particularly like —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that it is one question to the Minister.

Mr Aiken: In that case, I shall sit down. Thank you.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: It is a matter of great disappointment that you have had 15 minutes and have not forensically examined all those figures, Mr Aiken, because I know that you are well capable of it. I do not have the full reasons for that fall. I did not realise that there was a fall. I am not sure which Department you are referring to, but I am happy to discuss that with you.

Overall, I think it is a good monitoring round. Many of the issues that have been raised by the Opposition since I came here are addressed as well. Those issues are priorities for the Government parties, but the reality is that some of the big issues we have addressed were raised by colleagues in the Opposition parties yesterday. We can all stand over that. Your priorities are addressed in this monitoring round, and I think that is a reason to welcome it. There will be an opportunity, with individual Ministers or with me, if you wish, to go through each reason for slippage or underspend. There are all sorts of reasons for that, and some of them can be very genuine. Welfare mitigations have not moved ahead as swiftly as we thought, thank God; so there is some money being returned to the centre. There are some Barnett consequential as well. When I went back to Departments and asked why they had not spent money, it did not seem to be through inefficiency; there seemed to be other factors at play. It was, in my view, justifiable and correct that they should surrender the money for reallocation. I am happy to pore over the figures with you at a later date.

Ms Mallon: The Minister has made much reference to the importance of delivering on actions and I welcomed the fact that he said yesterday that housing is a priority for him. Considering that there are 40,000 households on the waiting list, 22,000 of which are in housing stress, how many affordable and social homes will be built from this allocation? For our most vulnerable people, a roof over your head is important but also, critically important, are wrap-around services. Where is the funding for projects like Supporting People and the housing first model?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Stephen Farry’s glass was half-full. Ms Mallon, I think your glass is about a third-full. There was no indication, in any of the media reports before this announcement, that there would be anything here.

One of my esteemed colleagues in the Alliance Party talked about the unravelling of budgets. Mr Attwood talked

yesterday about bringing urgent statements to the House regarding the Budget situation. In fact, this is a very positive outcome across Departments and, in particular, for co-ownership housing. We need to come up with more ways to spend this financial transaction capital but we have managed, and I have said this candidly to Members, to find £5.5 million for the co-ownership scheme. That will be for social and affordable homes. It is not the preference of everyone. It may not suit some of the people we are talking about, but it is my intention, and we talked about priorities, to provide the funding where I can do so, or ensure that we can find ways to raise money or borrow in a prudent fashion against a revenue delivering project, to build the homes that we need.

Before the election, Sinn Féin committed to building 10,000 new homes, but even that is not enough. As I said yesterday, you cannot have a family if you do not have a home. The figures and the level of housing stress and homelessness are really worrying and are an indictment of our society. We need to make a start in tackling it. That is why I welcomed the £280 million from the European Investment Bank (EIB) last week for two of our housing associations — Apex and Choice I think. That is why I will make housing a priority. If the Minister for Communities comes to me with other proposals about enhancing support for the homeless and those seeking homes, I will be very sympathetic. Nothing is more important. Nothing is a greater test of our ability and efficiency as a Government than delivering homes.

We have made some progress: £5.5 million is not enough, and the Member can work out for herself what she thinks that will deliver in terms of homes and the cost of them. The sum of £280 million from the EIB is not enough. We need to find a way of allowing the Housing Executive to borrow off balance sheet so that it can get on with what it is good at, which is building houses and making them available to families. So, if she wants to prioritise housing, especially housing the homeless, I suggest that she brings that, robustly, to the Minister for Communities. She will find me an ally with a very sympathetic ear. If she works in concert with the Minister for Communities on housing, she will find that I will be very supportive in doing what we can to ease housing need.

Mrs Dobson: I, also, thank the Minister for his statement and, like others, welcome the additional £72 million being allocated to the Department of Health. Equally, I welcome the realisation from the Minister that this does not address the underlying issues. He will remember that I touched on this yesterday. What guarantees can the Minister give that our health service has the capacity to use these additional multi-million pound allocations? Also, the statement lacks clarity on what the £67 million resource —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is entitled to one question.

Mrs Dobson: — and £5 million capital will be used for. Can the Minister break it down for us?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister to answer one question of his choice.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank Mrs Dobson for prioritising and focusing on health again, and reiterating what everyone is saying, which is that while this additional money is very welcome — it brings to £200 million the extra amount we

have allocated to health this year — money alone is not the solution.

I have honoured some of the commitments made by Simon Hamilton, the outgoing Minister, to the health service. I have worked with my officials and Health Department officials to make sure that every penny of this is used. I will not be pleased if any Department comes back and says, “The money that we bid for in June monitoring, we didn’t or couldn’t use”. That would be a bad marker to put down with me, because we really made sure the bids were realistic. We really worked hard with other Ministers and officials to make sure that the money really was needed and will be used.

In terms of how it will be used, there is demand for unscheduled care. New and unplanned attendances at emergency departments have increased, as you know and highlighted, since 2014-15. Funding is therefore required in a number of areas to improve patient care and unscheduled care, including winter pressures, as well as capacity expansion on acute sites and staffing in emergency departments. Key aspects of the social care system remain under significant pressure in 2016-17, with additional investment required in domiciliary care in the statutory and independent sectors, as well as in children’s services, learning disability and psychological therapies. This allocation will help to address front-line pressures and improve patient flow. I am happy to meet you to talk in more detail about where that is going, and I am sure that Minister Michelle O’Neill will be as well.

I will say what I said on housing: please highlight health. It is not my Department but, as with housing, I want to remain an ally and advocate for wise and prudent spending that delivers better outcomes in health.

Mr McGlone: Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cá mhéad den chaiteachas sna hearnálacha éagsúla, thar na tréimhsí áirithe, a thagann ón Aontas Eorpach. How much of the total amounts in all key spending areas is sourced from the EU?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Chomhalta as an cheist sin. Bhí tú sa Chathair mhór aréir; anois tá tú arais i measc na dtuataí. Tá a fhios agam cá bhfuil tú ag gabháil leis an cheist sin, agus molaim an treo ina bhfuil tú ag gabháil fosta. Tá tú ag iarraidh fíricí. Baineann an caiteachas seo leis na Ranna s’againne amháin; seo caiteachas s’againne. Gan amhras, áfach, cuirfear airgead ón Eoraip leis sin. Sílim go bhfuil €280 milliún ag SEUPB agus thart faoi €270 milliún ag INTERREG.

I welcome the Member’s question. I know and applaud where he is going on the question. This is our departmental expenditure, but European funds are essential to the delivery of services. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), and Members might correct me, provides, I think, around €280 million, and INTERREG provides around €260 million. Without that funding, and without referencing Brexit, we would not be able to deliver the vast majority of the projects that I know you are interested in, for example in rural and border areas.

This is our commitment to the kitty, but without European funds we would not be able to deliver the services that are so vital to our people. So, your resolve, like mine, is to make sure that on 24 June those funds are still available.

11.45 am

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement, but I must say that I find the new format unhelpful. Like others, I am concerned about the lack of transparency. I believe it is healthy to be aware of the bids, choices and pressures that were there. Can the Minister advise whether there were bids to, for instance, provide additional capital funding to improve health centres — there is an issue with those in my constituency — or, in education resource funding, to address some of the effective cuts to our schools? Were there any unsuccessful bids, and will the Minister publish all the bids?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his question. The bids in my negotiations and discussions with ministerial colleagues are, of course, confidential. What I can say is this: you always find at your first meeting with Ministers that they want the earth, the moon and the stars, but we had realistic discussions very early on. This is a new style of government. I do not think it would have been to the benefit of any health centre, school or community project to have unrealistic bids trawled for a month through Committees, exercising all types of commentary and speculation, when it is much better, in my view, to have a Government of common purpose, focused on a holistic response to all the pressures facing us, making realistic bids to me, discussing those with me and understanding what their sister Departments need. That has never happened before, because before, of course, in the five-party Government, it was every man and every woman for themselves.

What I can say is that every Minister — that includes not only DUP and Sinn Féin Ministers but Claire Sugden, the Minister of Justice — left content and realising that, although they would love more money and there is more they want to do, there is not enough money in the pot. As you said, some people made a strong case on issues that were of particular interest to them but that we could not meet at this time, so I will return to those discussions with ministerial colleagues in the time ahead. This streamlined, efficient style of government will make sure that we deliver the type of projects you are talking about in the time ahead.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's statement. Whilst the allocations to the Department for Infrastructure are welcome, will the Minister take steps to address the stop-start nature of funding to address road repairs and defects in structural maintenance? Will he undertake to put in place proper financial planning and a proper system to ensure that adequate funds are allocated at the earliest point so that contractors and the road construction industry can properly plan and road maintenance is no longer treated as a political Cinderella?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank Mr Kennedy for that question. I would have thought that you left a fairly healthy budget to Minister McIlveen. Now it is coming to me. If stop-start had not been part of the Department's approach, it will certainly not be part of my approach. I agree with you entirely. I want to deliver on those projects not only for the construction industry but for those who want to see projects, some of which, Mr Kennedy, some may say were stop-start under your tenure — the A5 and the A6 for example. There is very bold ambition on the A5 and the A6, and I want to deliver on them in a strategic fashion. There are always difficulties. There may be a planning

inquiry here or a difficulty there, but I agree with you entirely: there needs to be a cogent, forceful, passionate approach to building up the road infrastructure that we need. Our people who use the roads need that; our economy needs that; and our construction industry needs that.

I will say finally that, although the majority of money that I have allocated in this monitoring round is to do with road maintenance and so on, occasionally, with respect to the A5 and the A6, people who meet me talk about the north-west city region of Derry — Londonderry, as you would say, Mr Kennedy — and how they need to get to Belfast, Dublin or wherever. What is really clear when you visit Derry, as I did last week, when I met the Donegal County Council CEO as well, is that the contribution they will make to the wider economy of Derry and Donegal through a proper transport infrastructure will help all our people right across the country. It is the enabling of their contribution to us that will be the real genius of the A5 and the A6. I know that not as much progress was made on it under your tenure as perhaps you would have liked, but we make a commitment here that we will deliver in a consistent, informed, strategic fashion the road infrastructure our people need and our economy requires.

Mr Agnew: The Minister previously made reference to the benefits of the social investment fund, as he sees them. Does he share my concern, however, that there are those receiving SIF funding who wear the air of respectability by day but direct criminality by night — people who, by night, cause community tensions and, by day, seek funding to resolve them? What will the Minister do to ensure that public funding is withdrawn where evidence of such practice exists?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: You will note that I made an allocation towards strategies to end paramilitarism. I know that all Members will join me in this, but I doubt that there is anyone in the House who endorses or condones paramilitary activity. I know that there have been a series of worrying problems in your constituency and a concern on the part of ordinary people that the spectre of paramilitarism still lingers. You can take it from me: I stand four-square behind the community of North Down, of South Belfast and of every constituency in facing down the paramilitaries. However, I also want to say that I have worked with former paramilitary leaders in Sandy Row in South Belfast, and they have kept every commitment that they made to me. They have kept the peace every time that I have asked them to do so, and every engagement that I have had with them has been respectful. I believe that they are committed to the path of peace and building up their communities, and I will stand with them.

If Mr Agnew or anyone else has evidence against anyone involved in any of our programmes — I am not sure about singling out the social investment fund, as we spend money right across the piece — they should bring it to the PSNI and demand rapid and effective action against paramilitarism. We have come too far to let anyone drag us back. I will set aside your singling out of the social investment fund — if there is a project that you want to bring to the attention of the police or the authorities, please do so — but, that to the side, I stand with you in making sure that we have a society free of paramilitary influence.

Mr Allister: The Minister is anxious to impress with the speed with which he brought the statement to the House.

It is certainly quicker than last year. We never had a June monitoring round, and we all know the reason for that: it was because Sinn Féin was involved in a sham fight for welfare before it rolled over —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question for the Minister?

Mr Allister: I want to ask the Minister specifically about a matter in table four. Now that he is a custodian and not just a spender of public finance, is he satisfied that it is good value for money to have sold 621 acres at Shackleton for £1 million? Was that value for money for the taxpayer?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank Mr Allister — go raibh maith agat. This is the can't-do corner. It is not even a corner; it is only a small redoubt in the Assembly. I do not mind people who say "You can't do". Most of the Opposition say to me, "You can do. You can do more, and you can do it faster and more efficiently", but it is refreshing to have a can't-do corner. Every time I hear from the can't-do corner, I will respond as positively as I can, because eventually, the can do — as proved by 107 Members — outnumber, outshines and overshadows the can't do.

On Shackleton, obviously, I did not sell it; I have only been in post for two and a half weeks. If you believe that it was not value for money and you believe that what is proposed is not to the benefit of all our people, raise that issue and bring it to us. I want to see us move from a society that had symbols of division and the past at every turn to a better, more prosperous place. I am not sure that you want to be there, Mr Allister; I think that you would be very comfortable in the past. For today, this is a monitoring round about the future. This is a can-do monitoring round. Will it be tested? Will there be challenges? Of course there will. This is not the be-all and end-all, but it is a step forward — *[Interruption.]* I understand that you would like to come back: you will have plenty of opportunities to come back, because we will be here for a while.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask that all Members make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr E McCann: The Minister said earlier that we are all in this together. This is a phrase that, in recent years, has been mainly associated with Mr David Cameron, who repeats it at every occasion. As he puts the boot into the poor, he assures them, "We are all in this together".

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question?

Mr E McCann: Yes, indeed. I want to put that together with the Minister's suggestion that there are two vice chancellors in the North. He said that there is one in Belfast for Queen's and one in Derry. That is not true.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask his question?

Mr E McCann: Will the Minister give an assurance now that the management of the University of Ulster has no need for, and should call to a halt, the redundancy programme that is closing courses and getting rid of lecturers at Magee? How can we listen to all the promises about the expansion of Magee when what they are actually doing is contracting Magee?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I do not know whether there is a "can't-do" corner, but there is the "can't-hear" corner. I mentioned British Prime Minister Cameron's reference that we are

all in this together to denounce it and say clearly that it is a lie and a canard. That is why I used the expression; I did not do so to endorse it. You have to listen to the entire sentence and the one before and the one after, but you can check the Hansard report.

I went to Magee last week because I wanted to state clearly at this early stage what I was told by the chief executive of Derry and Strabane District Council, the chief executive of Donegal County Council, the business community, the Chamber of Commerce and others I met before I left the city, and vice chancellor Paddy Nixon, namely that the entire success in the future of what I am happy to call "the north-west city region of Derry" hinges on the success of the University of Ulster campus at Magee. I am happy to see that numbers there have increased. I am a big advocate — I have said this to my colleague and friend, the vice chancellor of Queen's University — of anthropology, the Irish language and history. I have a degree in two of those three subjects, though not a very good one, and I would like to see, and I have said this to all those involved in our universities, those particular disciplines grow in the time ahead as well as other disciplines. The way to grow our universities is to provide funding. We have done that today. I do not know if the Member heard — maybe he missed it — but we have just provided £20 million to make the type of investment that Dr Farry called for.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 01/16-21] be agreed.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle as an sos. Thank you for the break. This Second Stage debate follows the approval of the Supply resolution by the Assembly for the expenditure plans of Departments and other public bodies as detailed in the 2016-17 Main Estimates. That happened in time for the second half of the Ireland and Sweden game, which was a good result, as today's monitoring round has been.

As Members will undoubtedly be aware, accelerated passage of the Bill is necessary to ensure Royal Assent prior to the end of July. There were some concerns expressed earlier about the urgent process we use for monitoring rounds, but I am grateful, perhaps even more so because of that, that the Committee granted accelerated passage for the Bill. If the Bill did not proceed by accelerated passage and receive Assembly approval before the summer recess, Departments and other public bodies could have legislative difficulty in accessing cash, which would threaten the effective delivery of public services prior to our return to the Chamber in September.

I am glad to note, however, that the Bill can be given accelerated passage, because the Committee for Finance has confirmed that, in line with Standing Order 42, it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in it. That is an example of opposition and government working together. I hope that we see more of that. I thank the Committee for its work in agreeing to accelerated passage.

12.00 noon

The Bill's main purpose is to make further provision of cash and resources for use on services, in addition to the Vote on Account provided in the Budget Act that was passed by the Assembly in February, up to the requirements of Departments and other public bodies set out in the Main Estimates for 2016-17. Copies of the Budget (No. 2) Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today. The 2016-17 Main Estimates and the Statement of Excess 2014-15 were laid in the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

The Bill will authorise the issue of a further £7,986,369,200 from the Consolidated Fund and the further use of resources totalling £8,693,136,600 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of each schedule. Of course, those amounts are in addition to the Vote on Account passed by the Assembly in February, bringing the total amount of cash provided for 2016-17 to over £15 billion. In addition, the Bill sets for the current financial year a limit for each Department on the use of accruing resources — current and capital receipts — totalling £2,340,215,000. Therefore, the resources authorised by the Assembly in the Vote on Account in February and the resources and accruing resources now provided in the Bill bring the total resources for use by Departments in

2016-17 to over £19 billion. Of course, those amounts of resource include not only the departmental expenditure limits (DELs), on which our Budget process mainly focuses, but departmental demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME).

Clause 2 provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department of £3,993,184,000. That is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 1 for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I must stress to the Assembly that clause 2 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power, but it enables my Department to run an effective and efficient cash-management regime and ensure minimum drawdown on our block grant on a daily basis. That is very important when contemplating the daily borrowing by our Departments.

The Budget (No. 2) Bill authorises £68,328,183 — there is also a very important 78p there — which was used by the Department of Finance and Personnel in 2014-15, and £952,921.37 for the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was used in 2014-15 by way of Excess Votes. The need for additional resources for the Department of Finance arose from using an incorrect rate when calculating the interest on the principal Civil Service pension scheme liabilities. The need for additional resources for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission arose from an inaccurate assessment of the pension liability of the Assembly Members' pension scheme. The Public Accounts Committee has considered both issues and recommended that the Assembly provide the additional resources through an Excess Vote.

In bringing the first Budget Bill of this Assembly mandate, I am making clear my intention to deliver for the people whom we represent. The expenditure being approved in the Bill will see investment in high-quality public services and, most importantly, a commitment to oppose the austerity programme being driven by the Westminster Government. I aim to work with all our local communities to create a prosperous shared society and to help grow a stronger economy with opportunity for all. This Budget will serve our people well. I am proud that, with this Budget Bill, we are delivering the most generous welfare protection in these islands. I am proud that, with this Budget Bill, we are continuing to block the Westminster Government's bedroom tax. I am proud that, with this Budget Bill, we are preventing the imposition of water charges. I am proud that, with this Budget Bill, we are keeping university fees for our students affordable.

As I made clear in the Supply resolution debate yesterday, I will be taking every opportunity to continue to oppose austerity. I am meeting the Finance Ministers of Wales and Scotland tomorrow and Thursday to fight collectively for enhanced fiscal powers that will allow us to make decisions in the interests of all our people rather than have decisions imposed on us. I have sought an urgent meeting with Chancellor Osborne to drive that agenda forward.

It might be hard to translate the figures that the Bill that we are considering today contains into real-world public services. However, it is important to emphasise — some members of the Opposition mentioned health centres earlier — that every doctor and teacher, every road improvement, every hospital and every public service provided for under the authority of the Assembly is affected by the Bill. It requires legislation to operate legally

in this financial year. I think that this is probably the fourth time that we have had an opportunity to talk about our funding priorities. It is crucial legislation for our public services. Ba mhaith liom an Bille seo a mholadh. Is féidir go mbeidh díospóireacht thintrí againn air seo, ach tá a fhios agam go bhfuilimid uile ar son leas an phobail.

I look forward to the debate. I know that it may be heated at times, but I believe, even though we divide between Opposition and Government, that everyone in the House is united in wanting to see a better society and that this Budget is the bedrock of that.

On that note, I conclude. I will be happy to deal with any points of principle or detail of the Budget Bill that Members may wish to raise.

Mrs Little Pengelly (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I speak first in my role as Chair of the Finance Committee. As already outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources required to reflect the departmental spending plans in the 2016-17 Main Estimates. These are based on the Executive's one-year Budget for 2016-17, which was approved by the Assembly in February.

As outlined, the Bill also includes provision for excess cash and resource requirements by the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and the Department of Finance, and we touched on that in yesterday's debate. The Committee noted that this matter has been considered by the Comptroller and Auditor General and reported on by the Public Accounts Committee, which recommended that the necessary sums be provided by Excess Vote in the Assembly.

As on previous occasions, the Department of Finance has highlighted the need for the Bill to progress through the Assembly before summer recess. In that regard, at its meeting last week, the Committee agreed to grant accelerated passage to the Bill under Standing Order 42(2), on the basis of having been consulted appropriately on the expenditure provisions in the Bill; and I wrote to the Speaker to confirm that decision.

There was positive engagement with the Minister during his first appearance before the Committee last week, and I hope that that sets the tone for further meetings. I, in my role as Chair, and the members of the Committee, will scrutinise the work and hold the Minister to account, and, if he is found wanting, we will call him out on that. However, we want to have a constructive working relationship with the Department. It was evident, during the Minister's evidence session, that there is some common ground, most notably in the need to consider the regional economic impact of the Budget over the coming years. I believe that we all share the view that local needs and circumstances have to be taken into account and respected.

Therefore, as we move forward in this mandate, it is critical that all Departments engage constructively with their Assembly Committees, particularly in relation to budgetary matters. The provision of this information is important, for both the Finance Committee's cross-cutting scrutiny role and the role of all Statutory Committees in monitoring progress at a departmental level. The role of the Assembly Committees in scrutinising spending and monitoring savings, as well as service delivery, will continue to increase in importance, given the budgetary challenges

that we will inevitably face. Thorough scrutiny can add real value to the Budget process in that regard.

At tomorrow's meeting, the Committee for Finance will consider how we, as a Committee, can look to shape and influence the process on the forthcoming Budget for 2017-20.

In terms of the immediate business before us, however, and on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the general principles of the Bill.

As a DUP Member, I welcome the Minister moving swiftly on with the core business of finance. I welcome the level of agreement across the Northern Ireland Executive, as that is both necessary and critical if we are to tackle the key challenges that we face. I know that the Minister understands the urgency and importance of those issues.

We heard from some Members — I see that Stephen Farry is still in his seat — during the election that they stood under the banner of "Forward. Faster."; it seems now to be "Forward. Slower.". Sometimes, there is a sense from Opposition Members that they want to slow things down. However, I know that the Minister agrees with me that delivery is key, and we are determined to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. The multi-year Budget will be the core opportunity and foundation if we are to meet the key commitments in the draft Programme for Government that, with some amendments after consultation, should become the Programme for Government. If we are to make those commitments a reality, finance and the Budget will be the foundation. Therefore, although sometimes these things can seem a little dry and dull, they underpin absolutely everything that we do in government, and they are critically important.

There is a new outcomes- and impact-focused approach outlined in the Programme for Government. It must also happen, I think, that we take a different approach to our processes and how we deal with the Budget. I know that the Committee will consider this in the next number of months as we move towards those Budget discussions.

We have heard some discussion in the Chamber about the social investment fund, for example, which is having a positive impact on the ground. The Minister outlined some of the fantastic projects in Belfast South. I know that that is common across Northern Ireland. Employability South employs hundreds of people, and fantastic capital builds are supporting communities in need — communities that, perhaps, could not access funds previously. Yet, the social investment fund gets a hard time from certain parties and Members. I have talked to the Minister about this, and the difficulty and slowness with the social investment fund is not that there is a lack of agreement about what we want to achieve. There was commonality: we wanted to help communities; we wanted to talk to communities about the problems that they face; and we wanted to listen to them proposing solutions to those problems. That is very much what we did in the social investment fund.

The difficulty related to the business cases processes and procurement. I have spoken to the Minister. If a Department has a policy, but it takes years to go through the processes, those processes are not meeting the need, not delivering for the Northern Ireland Executive and, more critically, not delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. The Minister and the Committee are keen to look at this and ask, "How do we change not only the way that we do business in the Northern Ireland Executive but our processes and systems

in order to produce better results for the people of Northern Ireland?”. That is a huge piece of work. It is about public-sector transformation and doing things differently, but there is a commitment to do that. I look forward to working with the Minister on that important work.

Mr Smith: Yesterday, the Minister and his colleagues in the DUP referred to the Ulster Unionist Party as:

“the enabler of austerity” – [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p188, col 1].

because of its electoral relationship with the Conservative Party two elections ago. I will give a quick reminder for those with a short memory — a bit of a history lesson. Under Prime Ministers Blair and Brown, the Labour Party racked up, by 2009-2010, an annual Budget deficit of £170 billion. Proportionally, that is higher than when we required the IMF’s assistance in 1978. You will, of course, remember the infamous quote from the outgoing Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Liam Byrne:

“I’m afraid there is no money.”

That, of course, left the coalition Government with the task of moving the country away from bankruptcy by reducing public-sector debt as a percentage of GDP and adopting a fiscal model that would balance the books. Whilst we disagree with many of the Westminster Government’s spending priorities and policies, we do not wish to see Northern Ireland emulate the disastrous New Labour policy of borrow and spend, especially to cover revenue shortfalls rather than making capital investment. It is the Government equivalent of using the mortgage to pay for a shopping spree and a few good nights out.

In yesterday’s debate, Mr Storey said that there was no “money tree” in Stormont. I hope that the Minister took that point on board. I believe that there are a number of actions that the Minister could implement to instil greater confidence in his borrowing and spending intentions. First, will the Minister echo the commitment in the 2016-17 Budget:

“The 2016-17 Budget is predicated on the full drawdown of available RRI borrowing. However, given the need to be mindful of the overall level of indebtedness that results from RRI borrowing, the Executive will consider mechanisms for capping RRI borrowing ... This will ensure that the overall level of borrowing remains within manageable limits.”?

Secondly, will the Minister provide an update on the commitment in Fresh Start to establish:

“an independent fiscal council for Northern Ireland.”

especially its commitment:

“to prepare an annual assessment of the Executive’s revenue streams and spending proposals”?

Thirdly, does the Minister agree that the UK Government’s previous statement that they would legislate to ensure:

“the Assembly cannot consider spending plans which exceed the Block Grant or the Northern Ireland Executive’s borrowing limits”,

makes any plans to increase borrowing dependent on Treasury approval?

Yesterday, the Minister and others said that they wanted proposals from the Opposition, although the attitude of the Executive to date in providing information and facilitating the opposition process suggests otherwise. However, there are certainly potential areas for revenue generation.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. His introductory remarks show that whilst you can take the UUP out of UCUNF, you cannot necessarily take UCUNF out of the UUP. With regard to the way in which the information is being provided, the Member will be aware that, in Westminster — the system that the Ulster Unionists tell us that they want us to move towards in the House — Budgets are provided, and Jeremy Corbyn gets the equivalent of an hour to respond to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Member has been given much more information and much more time than that to respond.

12.15 pm

Mr Smith: I thank the Member for his intervention. I believe that the resources and how opposition is facilitated in Westminster is fundamentally different from what is on the cards here. That needs to change, or we will not have the effective government that we need in this country. That is something that needs to be improved.

As I said, the Minister and others said that they wanted proposals from opposition. I have a few that he can maybe review in due course. First, the asset management unit in the Strategic Investment Board has calculated that the Executive had over 1,100 hectares of industrial land on their books, little of which has been disposed of in recent years. Secondly, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive also holds significant amounts of land: 500 surplus and nearly 300 underdeveloped hectares, both of which could be considered for further divestment. Thirdly, we could bring forward a cull of arm’s-length bodies or quangos, as was agreed in 2011 but, surprisingly, since forgotten, especially as they are now under the auspices of more streamlined Departments, which should facilitate that change. Fourthly, we could focus on reducing administration costs in Departments, as six of the outgoing Departments have increased their spend since 2011.

Overall, as I said yesterday, the Budget challenges are exacerbated by the failure of the previous Executive to reform and to drive change. Of course, some change has happened — the reduction in the number of Departments, for example — and I welcome that, but, to date, too little has been done to free up the resources needed to target our key front-line services.

Mr McElduff, Chair of the Education Committee, rattled off a number of figures relating to education yesterday. From memory, I think that he talked about £35 million coming in for pensions and £20 million more in the monitoring round process. Bearing in mind how little notice we had today, I would be keen to get Mr McElduff’s lottery numbers for the weekend, because he could predict what was coming out today. He also talked about pressures that education faced. He talked about £1,000 per teacher for National Insurance increases and a further £10 million pressure for every 1% rise in teachers’ pay. The key question I have is this: what is the net impact on our schools? We have heard about the increases today — I welcome them — but when will heads know what their real budgets are and be able to plan the delivery of education for the next school year?

The health budget continues to grow as a percentage of our total Budget. In 2010, it was 42%, and now it is over 47% of the overall funding pie. We know that reform is needed as well as investment, although I was surprised yesterday at how Mr Storey again couched some comments about opposition parties on the issue. From memory, I think that he asked us whom we wanted to sack as part of the change process; I do not believe that that is a measure of anybody's commitment. I do not want to sack any doctor, nurse or health professional, but I want change in how we deliver our health service. That is a very different approach. The £67 million that the Minister announced today is very welcome, but, as he says himself, it does not address the underlying issues.

I may have misheard the Minister during yesterday's debate, but I thought that he said that Northern Ireland would be better off outside the UK. I assume that I was hearing things, as I cannot believe that anyone would be able to make that case when we still require a £9 billion subvention from Westminster. We all wish, obviously, that that was not so, but I look forward to the Minister maybe detailing his proposals to reduce our dependence on the wider UK public purse.

There was also much comment yesterday about corporation tax and its reduction. We all know that it is a key policy to transform our economy. I heard commitments from the Minister — Mr Murphy and others commented as well — stating that all would be fine and we were just working out the details and getting the best deal. Does the Minister believe that potential investors will understand those subtleties, or does he share my concern that we are, at best, sending mixed messages?

The Minister also said that he would be creative in borrowing, asking whether we had ideas to allow the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to borrow off balance sheet and pay off via rents. The Minister asked for positivity, and I am happy to be positive on the issue. The potential should be explored. The Housing Executive should be reclassified to allow it to borrow money and build its own homes rather than relying entirely on housing associations. It could borrow against its assets of 90,000 houses and the income stream of £280 million a year.

It is estimated that £6 billion is required over the next 30 years to upgrade our housing stock to a minimum standard. Also, the Housing Executive said that refinancing £410 million of historical debt at cheaper interest rates could release additional funds for investment. I see potential there, and I am more than happy to work in partnership to drive that forward if that is a suggestion the Minister wants to proceed with.

It is my belief that the Budget does not meet the needs of Northern Ireland and is a symptom of inaction and failure to reform in the previous nine years. That is the critical point: the Executive failed to change and failed to reform, resulting in today's financial pressures, which are leading to a deteriorating service, despite the monitoring round additions today. The Budget just highlights the scale of reform and change still required. As I said yesterday, it is using sticking plasters to cover major financial wounds. We will oppose it.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome that we are here today discussing the Budget (No. 2) Bill, which is further proof that we have a fresh start, that politics in this society can change and are

changing and that the Executive are up for delivering public services in very difficult financial circumstances. That is when you prove yourself, and that is when politicians and leaders have to prove themselves — in the most difficult of circumstances. It would be easy to be in an Executive or in government during good financial times or under the financial management of a Government who were not wedded to austerity, but our leaders in the Executive have set themselves a task, and I believe that task can be delivered, even though it presents many obstacles.

In most Parliaments, a Budget Bill contains not only the spending plans of that Government or Executive but their tax-varying powers. That is what is missing from our fiscal process — tax-varying powers. That presents a challenge to politics in this society.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will in a moment. Those who formed the Opposition or Oppositions told us they were doing so because they wanted to normalise politics and to bring greater normality to our political system. I do not believe that was their motivation, but that was their statement of intent: they were going to normalise politics. Then I think that, if we are going to normalise politics in this society, we have to normalise it in its totality. We, as elected legislators, have to take on the responsibility of fiscal authority over our society.

Before I move on, I give way to Mr Agnew.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. He refers to tax-varying powers, and, of course, to date any powers we have or have sought have been to reduce taxation and reduce the income for public services. Is the Member looking for more tax-varying powers to introduce more cuts to public services?

Mr O'Dowd: No. I deliberately used the term "varying". Any Government coming forward with a Budget would present their tax-varying powers on how they propose to raise taxation to deliver the services they believe to be important. We have Governments in Dublin and in Westminster that raise taxation to deliver public services in a limited way. I believe we can collect taxes in varying ways to support our public services, not to cut them. There is a challenge for the Government and the Administration in that.

I will give you an example. As I was driving down to the Assembly today, I was thinking this: what taxes am I paying today? Some commentators may doubt that politicians actually pay taxes, but we do. When I got up this morning, I went downstairs and turned on the kettle. That is automatically a tax: you are taxed on your energy. Thankfully, when I filled the kettle with water, I was not paying a tax, because the Executive have blocked taxes on our water. I sat down and looked at the messages on my phone. I am paying VAT on my phone. I have no control of that whatsoever, as a legislator, as a citizen or in the Executive.

My children were getting ready and watching TV. I count the TV licence as a tax: we have no control, authority or power over that tax. I had my breakfast, I left the house and I got into my car. I pay vehicle excise duty on my car: we have no control or authority over that tax. I turned on the engine. I pay fuel duty: we have no control or authority over that. I pay VAT on new tyres and parts for the car: we have no control over that. When I come into my place of

work, I pay income tax, National Insurance and pension contributions: we have no control over that. Yet we are standing here today voting on a Budget Bill as legislators.

Folks, that is the challenge for us going forward. All those taxes and levies are placed on us by the Westminster Government. Can we use them in a different way? Should we raise some of them? A Government govern largely in two ways: legislation and taxation. That is how you set society on a pathway. The classic example is taxation on tobacco products. Governments across Europe decided, rightly, to place heavy taxation on tobacco products to persuade people to give up smoking for health reasons. That is a classic, blunt example. However, if we as governors and legislators want to start making changes here, we will have to take on the mantle of not only spending tax but governing how and when that tax is raised and what purpose it is used for in alignment with the Programme for Government and our priorities for this society.

The other challenge coming down the road at us in relation to the processes for future Budgets set by the Executive is Brexit. No one knows what the outcome of the vote will be next week, but it is already creating uncertainty in terms of investment and potential investment. If the electorate — largely in England, it would appear, at this stage — votes for Brexit, then we are in a totally different landscape. European funding for this society would disappear over a number of years, and no one knows whether the current British Government or successive British Governments would fill that black hole. Just for the record — Members will know this — £236 million in direct payments for farmers comes from Europe annually and £186 million for rural development. That is only in the rural/agriculture sector. How will the Executive fill that black hole if we vote for Brexit? How will we ensure that European Peace moneys and the other funding that comes into our society continue to be delivered through our budgetary processes? All those things are unknowns and will have impacts moving forward.

There is one thing that is coming at the Executive and employers here next year, and that is the apprenticeship levy, another form of taxation imposed on us by the Westminster Government with little or no consultation and no approval by our Executive that will place a further burden on Executive finances and on private-sector employers. While everyone thinks it admirable that we should promote and invest in apprenticeships, is the apprenticeship levy the best way of doing so? Is the apprenticeship levy a blunt tool that will impact on public services and the private sector? Should that not have been done anyhow through general taxation and a sensible programme run by central government? Of course it should, but yet another levy is being placed on our Executive by the Westminster Government, and that will have a major impact on Budgets moving forward.

In winding up, I welcome the Budget (No. 2) Bill, but, if we want normal, mature politics and if we want to be true legislators, we have to get to the point where we set the taxation base and rate for this society. Not only are we, therefore, collecting revenue but, through the collection of that revenue — how we collect it and where we collect it — we set a pathway for this society and the shape of society that we want going into the future. I support the Bill.

12.30 pm

Mr McGlone: We return to the Budget with little having changed from the debate on the Executive's expenditure proposals for 2016-17 in the previous Assembly. The SDLP could not support that Budget, and we cannot support this one. That Budget was characterised by being cobbled together by two parties intent on staying in power, and this one is simply about treading water while they work out how little detail they can get away with in their Programme for Government.

For its part, the Budget has little in the way of investment in people. For example, we had experience of the prior Executive's dabbling in childcare, a project that failed because of its structure, not its aim. Helping parents with young families to rejoin the workforce and improve their prospects through education and training is paramount. Support for working families, particularly for working mums and, indeed, for those who have been forced through necessity to leave work rather than pay often expensive childcare, is crucial if we are to help those working mums reach and elevate themselves through the glass ceiling that exists to their advancement in the workplace. That should be, I would hope, a key element of the Budget's outcomes and indeed its policy direction.

The British Government are bringing forward an apprenticeship levy. Where is the Executive's investment in apprentices? We had a notional nod in that direction today through the allocation of funding to FE colleges, but perhaps we need that to be expanded a bit more and coupled with investment in higher education. The supposed Fresh Start Agreement promised the devolution and reduction of corporation tax to attract foreign direct investment without investment in our people — a highly skilled and motivated workforce — which is a key element of attracting that FDI to the North. Whether that is through investment in childcare to help more women back into the workforce or in additional skills and the acquisition of those skills, this is key to the success of corporation tax. Indeed, stability is key to that, and the instability offered by Brexit would certainly not help with the potential successes of corporation tax. Not only that, but the Finance Minister has told the Committee for Finance that he wants to reboot the negotiations on corporation tax. Whether that reboot is expected before or after he attempts to borrow an undisclosed sum from the Treasury is not entirely clear. What is clear is that the Finance Minister has reintroduced the uncertainty over corporation tax that has seen companies delay decisions on investment here. Those loose words risk sinking the economy.

The sustainability argument over corporation tax is of course a smokescreen to hide the division within Sinn Féin over a policy to which the deputy First Minister claimed to be fully committed. A commitment that was given on the eve of an election should have come with that significant health warning. That division will, once again, lead to a potential stalemate in the Executive as it has so often done before — the same old, tired stalemate that can lead to the deadlock with the same old, tired parties in this two-party Executive. However, we cannot risk the economy suffering as a result and our people suffering as a consequence.

The establishment of the new Department for the Economy, which I welcome in principle, was supposed to present an opportunity to deliver key economic development policies in a collaborative, cohesive and

targeted manner. I trust and hope that the divisions that we see within Sinn Féin does not delay a key economic development policy and lead to damage to the prospect of devolution of further fiscal powers.

On 8 June, the Secretary of State told the House of Commons:

“The Government remains committed to devolving corporation tax rate setting powers subject to the Executive delivering sustainable finances, as set out in the Stormont House Agreement.”

No sustainable finances — what sustainable finances? — and no devolution of corporation tax. The Secretary of State went further:

“We also recognise the potential for further fiscal powers going to the Executive.”

Do the two-party Executive recognise the potential for further fiscal powers going to them? Do they recognise that, if there is failure to deliver on corporation tax, that will scupper the prospects of further fiscal powers going to the Executive?

In the previous Assembly debate on the 2016-17 Budget, it was asked by party colleagues of the then Enterprise Minister whether an assessment was being done on the drop in funds that a Brexit would bring about or on how a Brexit would impact on Budgets. I now ask the Finance Minister — I referred to this earlier — how it is likely to impact on Budgets.

From 2007 to 2013, we had investment here of £2.4 billion. In the 2014-2020 programme of EU funding, there is the potential to raise €229 million under one of the EU programmes. Under INTERREG, there is potential for another €240 million. We had projected targeting by the then Department of Enterprise of the drawdown on Horizon 2020 funding for research and development — a key element of our economy — to develop research and innovation to help bring such jobs to the North, drawing on the resources, wherewithal and specialist knowledge of other parts of the EU and working collaboratively to help our economy rise, help our skills rise, help our knowledge base and improve our attractiveness to other investors.

Furthermore, with that comes the potential to realise €40 million and €42 million respectively in match funding. Has any consideration been given to, or any assessment made at departmental level of, the potential impact of the loss of those funding streams? I have mentioned some of them. What assessment will be made by the Economy Minister, or will he agree with an assessment by the Finance Minister? These are key parts of our way forward, as is trying to assess and accommodate their impact post-23 June.

The output of the Northern Ireland economy is estimated to be £33 billion per annum. Research shows that a Brexit could lead to a 3% fall, which is a £1 billion per annum effect on the Northern economy. Where is the two-party Executive's contingency plan for the impact of a Brexit, for which at least one of the parties is campaigning?

The PwC economic outlook report of 2015 stated that our local economy has been characterised as a job-creation economy rather than as an economy driven by productivity. That suggests that we have been able to create jobs despite productivity levels being low. Educational underachievement is present. The OECD

international comparison study of last year demonstrated that, in the North, academic ability among 16- and 17-year-olds is among the lowest in the United Kingdom and that wealth generation options are relatively low due to the size of our private sector. Our private sector accounts for only one third of our total economic output. The Executive have previously failed even to propose the development of a manufacturing strategy to help address that. As a result, a heavy burden is being placed on the public sector — a public sector that the two-party Executive plan to cut.

Our low-wage and low-skill economy is not best equipped to perform well and create prosperity, but those are the challenges facing us. Therefore, I come back to my original point. I challenge the Executive and the Minister. Have they ducked these questions? Have they ducked addressing the hole that there is likely to be in the public finances? Have they ducked the challenges that face us consequently?

Those are the questions that I leave with the Assembly. We have been provided with some information here today. However, we need much more information to absorb the direction of the Executive. Have the Executive sat down and worked through the void that there inevitably will be post-23 June if the wrong decision is made? Those are key elements for our Executive, the Assembly and, more importantly, the people whom we represent.

Dr Farry: Yesterday, we tested the views of the various political parties and MLAs on the current Budget situation. That was the first opportunity that we as an Assembly have had to do that since the election and the start of the new mandate. With the passage of the Supply resolution yesterday, we are now locked in much more tightly to the Budget situation as we find it. That said, we still have significant concerns about the Budget, and it is worth developing and highlighting some of those in a bit more detail today.

At the outset, I want to touch on the issue of skills, which was raised this morning and, indeed, has been touched on by a number of Members already in the debate. As the Assembly, and the Minister, will know, skills are critical to the transformation of our economy. As we look ahead, especially to a lower rate of corporation tax, we need to ramp up the investment that we are making in skills across a very broad front, including universities, our FE colleges, apprenticeships, and what we are doing with marginalised young people. All those interventions are critical. There is a range of policies and programmes already in place that can help us to do that, but we need to scale those up considerably.

The Minister is disappointed that I have not been more warmly welcoming of the allocation of £20 million. It might be useful to explain why I am not as enthusiastic about that allocation as some would have expected. We have had a number of cutbacks to skills interventions over the past four or five years, in particular. If we look to our universities as a key area of intervention, we see that there are three particular aspects that are important to bear in mind. First, the cuts that have been passed on in recent years have seen a reduction in student places and staff posts and, indeed, the consolidation of some courses. A lot of that is counterintuitive and will have an implication for our widening participation agenda. That is of massive concern to a lot of people and, indeed, to the future of our economy. Those cuts are still in the system; we have had only one

year of them working their way through, with the second year about to hit us in September 2016.

On top of that, we have a structural gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, which manifests itself in the amount of money that we spend per student. Depending upon the course of study, that varies between £1,000 and £2,500 per head. That will go to the heart of the quality of what we produce. The issue is not simply the volume of graduates that we produce in Northern Ireland but their quality. We know that Invest Northern Ireland is setting this area as an investment location based upon the quality of our universities and our graduates, so it is important that we do not allow that to erode.

The third issue is our expansion demand. If we are to meet the needs of local companies and investors coming in, what do we need to put in place to ensure that they have the pipeline of talent and, indeed, that that pipeline is being directed to the most appropriate areas? Not all of that will be the traditional model of a university degree; it may be a high-level apprenticeship. So, it is important that we have a mix, and we have to be mindful of that.

Based upon the figures of my outgoing Department, beyond the £20 million that has been allocated and confirmed today, by 2019-2020, we will need to spend an additional £85 million per annum on skills if we are to achieve those outcomes and meet the expected demand in our economy. Some of that may dovetail with the hoped-for expansion of the Magee campus in Derry. I am very enthusiastic that that happens, and I have done a lot to make it happen, subject to the constraints of resources. We have, potentially, a very exciting future there, but it is important that everyone in the Government fully understands the scale of what is required on skills interventions if we are to meet that demand.

The £20 million that was confirmed today is already factored into the budgets of FE colleges, universities and apprenticeships. It will not provide new starts as we stand today, but it will head off further cuts in the current financial year. I certainly welcome that, but people should be under no illusion that this substantially addresses the skills pressures faced in our economy.

12.45 pm

John O'Dowd referred to the apprenticeship levy, and I very much agree with his sentiments. This is not about investing in apprenticeships but about a different form of raising money from our business community, and it does cover the public sector. It is designed to address the deficit in terms of the UK as a whole and to try to pump-prime the English approach to what they term apprenticeships, which is a dumbing down of what is involved.

In Northern Ireland, we are much more in tune with the European standards of apprenticeships. We try to base what we do on quality and ensuring that we provide what employers need. In addition to the funding challenges that will come from this, it will come as a Barnett consequential to the centre. We will still need to ensure that we fund apprenticeships at the appropriate level, and that money may not necessarily be enough. It might help to cover other areas of youth training or working with companies on what they are doing with their existing workforce, but we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking

that the money will simply address all our apprenticeship needs. Hopefully, we can return to this issue in the future.

There are structural issues in the Budget, and I want to highlight a number of themes that we need to be very mindful of. First, we still face an embedded cost of managing a divided society. We have had a succession of reports, the most recent of which was from the University of Ulster's Economic Policy Centre, which was published by DFP in March this year. It is important that that does not sit on the shelf but becomes an active document whereby Departments are challenged on how they can do better in the provision of their services in the context of a divided society.

We also have inefficiencies in what we do in education. Part of that is obviously related to the fact that we have a number of sectors and a degree of segregation in our system. It is worth stressing that it is a very heavy degree of segregation. As my colleague Trevor Lunn mentioned yesterday, we are still talking about around 70,000 empty school desks. I believe that our school-age population is about 320,000 or 310,000, so we are talking about potentially 20% of our school places being empty. That is a level of inefficiency that most societies will struggle to justify. It has to come down. It will not be easy, but there are tough decisions ahead on rationalisation, which will, of course, be helped by an integrated area planning process rather than the piecemeal approach that has been adopted to date in many respects.

I am still very concerned about the big headline commitment that has been made by the DUP and Sinn Féin to an additional £1 billion for health. I appreciate that there is a need for additional spending in health. Healthcare inflation, based upon our current model of provision, is running at something like 5% to 6% per annum, which is an incredible fact to try to get your head around. That stems from a changing demographic, an older population and more expensive drugs and treatments.

In many respects, it is a good thing that we are faced with these challenges and opportunities, but, if we try to match that healthcare inflation, the distortions in the rest of our budgets will be massive and unsustainable. This has to be a very important driver of reform. Stating what your input will be cuts across what is the outcome-based focus of the Programme for Government framework document. To be clear, my party is comfortable with the ethos of that process but sceptical about some of the measurements, targets and indicators that have been set out. Health reform is important. We need to decide what change we will make and then resource that change, rather than simply making a very bold promise on the amount of money that will go into it.

A number of people have commented on the social investment fund. I said yesterday that I believe that this fund, in its entirety, was a mistake and should be done away with. That is not to negate the importance of government engaging with communities, particularly marginalised communities, and seeking to ensure grass-roots community development and economic development. The difficulty that I have with the fund is that the governance risks are substantial.

There are also risks with fragmentation and how money will be spent. While people can point in absolute terms to the success of the fund and say, "This would not have happened without the fund", it does not take into account

the relative opportunity that exists of working through Departments. With the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy under the current structures — the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment under the previous system — the opportunity existed for new schemes to be run through Departments for which there would be tighter governance and a much tighter audit process.

Departments can work in partnership with the community and voluntary sector. I did that with the NEETs strategy, Pathways to Success, and we distributed money on a sustainable basis to a number of different groups, some of which are actually benefiting from the social investment fund as we speak. The evidence is there that that can be done on a more sustainable basis.

Importantly, when money was earmarked for the social investment fund, it was in the context of cuts being passed on to Departments, so a lot of work that could have been done by Departments was hampered by the fact that our budgets were trimmed to produce that ring-fenced money for the social investment fund.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. He will be aware of the importance of localism, and his sister party, the Liberal Democrats, majored on that for many years. One of the great assets of the social investment fund is the fact that the local area working groups, which are responsible for administering the fund and making the decisions on it, are drawn directly from local communities. They are local people who know the situation on the ground better than any Department or official ever possibly could.

Dr Farry: I recognise the argument in favour of local delivery, but that does not negate my point that you can set up structures, through which there is much tighter control on governance and audit issues, and still create delivery structures with advisory groups that help in that regard. For example, with the Pathways to Success strategy, we have a very active NEETs forum that helps and advises officials on the allocation of funding. A lot of what is being achieved could be achieved differently but without the degree of risk that has been run. I hesitate to make predictions, but there may be some adverse comments in due course from the Audit Office about the value for money in public spending when the schemes have bedded down for a significant time.

Comment was also made yesterday about teacher training and the opportunity for its reform. The amount of money for teacher training may be relatively small in the big picture of budgets, but, in some ways, it is the front line of the challenge as to whether parties are serious about investing in a shared future and a different way of doing things. If we cannot train our teachers in a single, shared system it begs the question of how on earth we will get our schoolchildren in substantial numbers into that type of format. I was disappointed, not least that Mike Nesbitt very readily dismissed the fact that his party voted to overturn the steps that I was trying to take, both in the Executive and on the Floor of the Assembly, as did the other four parties in the Executive at that time.

That leads into the issue of the resources that are being used with the public sector transformation fund in education. I see that that scheme is now unwinding, and money is being surrendered back to the centre. I found it

bizarre that we were going to spend public resources to encourage existing teachers to leave their jobs to try to provide job opportunities for young people who had trained as teachers but who could not find a job because we are training too many teachers in the first place. The most logical thing to do would have been to address the flow of teachers being trained rather than keep the tap flowing as ever before and simply try to spend more money, having already spent money inefficiently on teacher training in the first place, to address the problem that was created. I do not think that is a good example of the wise use of public money by the Government.

I am conscious of the need to break for lunch soon, but I want to make a couple of very brief points. We need to look actively at the issue of revenue raising, and that needs to come in the context of addressing the cost of division first and looking at issues of tackling waste and inefficiency. Just to remind the Assembly, we have some existing powers; for example, the use of the regional rate and the removal of rates capping. I appreciate Sinn Féin is now dabbling in this area, but there have been votes in the past 10 years in the Assembly where that party has not supported an increase in the regional rate and where the opportunity has been forgone to overturn rates capping. Rates capping removal would raise only a few million pounds to begin with, but, again, it is symbolic. It is about our values and trying to have revenue as consistent with progressive forms of revenue raising as we possibly can.

I also think the Minister needs to come back and clarify what he is intending to do on corporation tax, because despite what was said yesterday, there is this latent uncertainty in the process. The Minister is saying he is confident that he will negotiate what he needs to negotiate on the resources from Treasury, but as the Minister will well know, any negotiation is never certain. If there is an uncertainty in the system, what are the implications for the long-term position of the Executive and the message we are communicating to businesses, not least given that Invest NI is out courting businesses to invest in Northern Ireland on the basis of there being a lower rate in 2018? Between himself, the Economy Minister and the Executive as a whole, I think we need a shared, collective statement across the piece, rather than one party saying one thing and a different party saying something subtly different so that people see that there is, in practice, a difference of emphasis, if I can put it no more strongly.

In the context of where we sit with regards to London, I certainly accept there is a need for the UK Government to rebalance their books. Where I have a fundamental difference is on the speed and rate at which they are doing it. They have had options on that, so they do not need to pay down the deficit at the rate they are. There is a point for us to continue to make on that.

I am concerned, however, that if we simply focus on what London are doing vis-à-vis ourselves in Northern Ireland, we will take the eye off the ball of the need to reform ourselves here. I think, frankly, if we have that very strong process of reform, we have a much stronger foundation for asking for additional borrowing, especially if that borrowing is then going to be linked to funding that process of reform, essentially on a massive invest-to-save basis that would make our public finances more sustainable in the long-term.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I

propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. After Question Time, the first person called will be Doug Beattie. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

Oral Answers to Questions

Communities

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish him well in his first Question Time.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016

1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the local impact of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. (AQO 31/16-21)

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for those warm words. I trust that Members will go easy on me in my first Question Time. I suspect — *[Interruption.]* I was about to say that I suspect that that will fall on deaf ears, not least among my own colleagues.

I thank Mr Durkan for that question. The Member will be aware that, as part of the Fresh Start Agreement, the Executive are committed to the introduction of the welfare elements of the Welfare Reform and Work Act as introduced at Westminster last year. Officials are working with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to take forward an Order in Council and accompanying regulations at Westminster later this year. My Department has previously published a detailed analysis of the impact of the planned reduction of the benefit cap from its current level of £26,000 to £20,000, and this information has also been placed in the Assembly's Library. This analysis showed that the number of households impacted on by the benefit cap will rise from the current level of an estimated 500 households to an estimated 2,440 households. The Member will also be aware that the Executive are committed to mitigating the full impact of the benefit cap, and I can confirm that the legislation and operational arrangements to make payments to protect households are now in place.

Work has been completed on the impact of the changes to a range of elements within universal credit, and I hope to be able to publish a detailed analysis of these changes in the next number of weeks. The alignment of the amount of benefit paid for the work-related activity element of employment and support allowance with that paid for jobseeker's allowance is projected to impact on 2,300 new claimants in the next financial year. This figure is based on the historical level of claims made in each financial year over the past three years.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that answer and congratulate him on his appointment. I remember how easy the Member went on me during Question Time — *[Laughter.]* — and I shall reciprocate.

I just want to double-check that the Minister is confident that the £500 million mitigation fund, as established by Fresh Start, will cover the new, and in some cases unforeseen, cuts contained in this subsequent legislation.

Mr Givan: The welfare mitigation measures that the Executive are committed to — some £0.5 billion — have been dealt with through Professor Evason and the report. That deals with what flowed from the 2012 Act, which we gave effect to in 2015. Obviously, there are new measures coming that are not in Professor Evason's recommendations.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer and congratulate him on his new post. Is the Minister aware of the projected financial savings for Northern Ireland, with the benefit cap being reduced from £26,000 to £20,000?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for her warm wishes. The draft Welfare Reform and Work (Northern Ireland) Order 2016 introduces the benefit cap at a threshold of £20,000 per annum for couples and households with children in Northern Ireland. At the £20,000 threshold, it is estimated that 2,440 households in Northern Ireland will be impacted on by the cap, with an anticipated saving of approximately £8 million per annum. At the original £26,000 threshold, it is estimated that the cap will affect up to an estimated 500 households, with an anticipated saving of approximately £1.1 million per annum. The benefit cap at the £26,000 threshold is being brought into effect, and the final actual caseload affected will be known in the coming weeks. It is anticipated that the £20,000 threshold will be implemented later in 2016. These measures flow from what was in 2012. Of course, the Executive have decided to mitigate the costs in the benefit cap. Therefore, the homes that this will impact on are going to be protected until 2020.

Mr Allister: On the secondary legislation that the Minister has yet to bring to the House on welfare issues, does he intend to persist with the obnoxious and amoral proposal that a terrorist who suffers a disability by his own hands, by his own terrorist act, should have his benefits protected on the same basis as an innocent victim of terrorism?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for the question. Social security benefits have always been blind to why people are suffering from their injuries, in the same way that the National Health Service is blind when treating people who present themselves to it. That is how it will continue.

Clare House, Newry

2. **Mr Murphy** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the plans to refurbish accommodation at Clare House, Newry. (AQO 32/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Housing Executive is carrying out an economic appraisal to assess a number of future investment options for Clare House. It has indicated that it is not likely to have this appraisal completed until late July 2016. However, once an outcome is known, the Housing Executive has committed to consult with its tenants in Clare House.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Minister for his response, and I also wish him well in his post. I know that he is only just through the door. I did have a chance to meet the previous Minister, the Social Development Minister, and press the case for this. I think that the current Minister will be aware, from a brief look at the notes, that this property is very badly in need of renovation and needs a serious amount of money spent on it. The original deadline for completing the appraisal was in June, but the Minister's answer suggests that it will now be in July. I ask him to ensure that

a sense of urgency is given to the assessment and that a decision is taken in consultation with the residents. This scheme has been awaited for a long time and is very much deserved by the residents, many of whom have lived there for the full 50 years that the flats have existed.

Mr Givan: As he said, the Member raised this issue with my predecessor, and work was carried out. There are 13 tenants for the Housing Executive to deal with. It met all of them individually to discuss their needs, and some of those needs have been addressed. However, the Member rightly raises a broader issue that was highlighted in the survey report, and, obviously, there are issues that the Department and the Housing Executive will need to consider. This issue is not unique to Clare House; it is one that affects other buildings of this nature in the Housing Executive stock and, therefore, there is a process to look at all schemes of this type, subject, of course, to our budgetary situation. I will certainly keep on top of this area.

Mr Dunne: I too wish the Minister well, and trust that he will remember the North Down community as he carries out his duties. What progress has been made with implementing the Housing Executive's long-term investment plan based on new asset management?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question and congratulate him on the prestigious recognition that he received from Her Majesty The Queen in the Birthday Honours list.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Givan: North Down is incredibly well represented, not least by Mr Gordon Dunne for his years of service, as a councillor and an Assembly Member.

Mr Dunne: Thank you.

Mr Givan: The Housing Executive has a new asset management strategy that sets out its long-term investment approach. The Housing Executive is drafting a 10-year investment plan for its stock, which is a practical reflection of the strategic approach set out in the strategy. This will prioritise and shape its long-term investment and it is planned to commence in April 2017, but will necessarily be constrained by the level of funding available to the Housing Executive.

Mr F McCann: I also wish the Minister well in his new post. Can he tell me how the Housing Executive and other housing providers will have the necessary budget to ensure that adaptations for tenants with disabilities are provided?

Mr Givan: This is a question that I will answer in more detail subsequently, but issues regarding disability and people who need wheelchair access, particularly into their homes, are very important to the Housing Executive.

In Northern Ireland, there are 457 people on the housing waiting list who require wheelchair access. This is an important area, and it is one that we all have experience of in our constituencies from trying to support people. It is something that we want the Housing Executive to work on. There is progress on that, which I will outline to one of his colleagues.

Libraries

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Communities what plans he has to protect libraries, including the Homecall

and mobile library services, to ensure continued access for people with disabilities, older people and people who are socially isolated. (AQO 33/16-21)

Mr Givan: I am aware that Libraries NI is considering a range of savings measures in response to the previous Executive's decision to reduce the budgets of unprotected Departments by 5.7%. I recognise the concerns that many in the community, including people with disabilities, older people and people who are socially isolated, will have about the impact of the reductions on their library service. I assure the Member, however, that, whilst Libraries NI will wish to continue to review the efficiency and effectiveness of the Homecall and mobile library services, neither will be affected by the current budget reductions exercise.

I regard the mobile library and Homecall services as important ways of ensuring that library services can reach people who are unable to access local branch libraries. They are particularly valuable to rural communities, older people, those with disabilities and parents or carers of children without access to private transport. They also make an important contribution to combating social isolation, which is one of the reasons why I am content that they are not affected by the budget reduction exercise.

I can also confirm that my Department received a bid for additional in-year resources from Libraries NI to help it meet some of its other existing pressures. That bid forms part of a wider budget review exercise that is being undertaken across my Department. I will, of course, be considering Libraries NI's bid in that context. Until all considerations are completed, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on that issue.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for his response so far and for his commitment, in his new role, to support those who access libraries. The library service received substantial support throughout the previous mandate. The Minister has identified categories of people who are in most need, so I ask him once again to do his best to ensure that those who are most in need — he listed the categories — will continue to be able to access library services.

Mr Givan: I am happy to give that commitment. Libraries play a vital role in Northern Ireland. Within a two-mile radius of libraries and mobile stops, nearly 90% of our population are within reach. They are a shared space and are valued by all of the community. People avail themselves of them, and it is important that they continue to play an important role in our society. It is an area that I am considering, given the pressures that Libraries NI is under, but there are particular vulnerable groups that need support, and I want Libraries NI to continue giving that support.

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister and offer him my best wishes. You have probably answered my question, but, for clarity, can you give us an assessment of the impact of the budget cuts on libraries, particularly for users with disabilities, older people and the socially isolated?

Mr Givan: A number of those issues were dealt with in my initial response.

I congratulate the Member on being elected to the House. I assure him that this is an area in which I invoke my experience in my constituency. I remember arguing that it was right to close a particular library because it was small and we were getting a new library. Of course, there were

people in the specific locality who did not want to see the closure of that library, but it facilitated a new library being built in Lisburn. Sometimes, those are the difficult decisions that political representatives need to take. They need to provide that leadership to the community, because, when you can see the bigger picture, you need to go out and sell it to people. This is an area that Libraries NI is acutely aware of. There have been investments in new libraries, and there are opportunities for the functions that libraries deliver to be broadened to include other aspects of government. That is something that I want to see Libraries NI continue to do.

Mr Stalford: First, I welcome the Minister to his place and wish him all the very best. I hope the Member for Lagan Valley — the Minister — will show kindness and deference to the people of South Belfast, as I am sure he intends to.

Will the Minister outline for the House the practical steps that the Department intends to take to address the deficiencies in disability access to the public library on the Lisburn Road?

2.15 pm

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that welcome from one representative of a great city to another representative of a city. I am delighted that Mr Stalford is here in the Assembly. I remember him well from our Young Democrat days, so I am particularly pleased that Christopher is here in the Assembly.

The Member raised issues around the deficiencies at Lisburn Road library. There are also issues with deficiencies at Coleraine library. I am delighted that capital funding has been secured for the redevelopment of the Lisburn Road and Coleraine libraries: up to £1 million is being provided to Lisburn Road and £250,000 to Coleraine library in this financial year. That funding will enable Libraries NI to begin to address any existing deficiencies and to provide modern libraries for the whole community. The total cost of each project is estimated to be £3.5 million, with £1.5 million for Lisburn Road library and just over £2 million for Coleraine library. It is envisaged that work at the Lisburn Road library will begin in December of this year, with work beginning on the redevelopment of Coleraine library starting in January 2017. Both projects will take approximately one year to complete.

I trust that that answer will be helpful to the Member. My colleague Mr McQuillan has been engaging with me in respect of Coleraine library, and I trust that that will be helpful.

Mr Dickson: Congratulations to the Minister on his appointment. Minister, many small libraries are valued by their communities. I place on record my thanks to the staff, who are highly dedicated in the service that they deliver to the public. They quite often go over and beyond that which is required of them as library staff. What assurances can the Minister give to my constituents in East Antrim that small and rural libraries will be retained and enhanced and their service delivery improved?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his question and his best wishes. Libraries NI has work to do. It has had to deal with a 5.7% reduction in its budget and is looking at ways in which it can do that that will minimise the impact on front-line services. Obviously, having access to a library is vital, but so is having stock in it. We need to make sure

that the libraries that we have will provide the services that the public expect. It is not always about maintaining bricks and mortar; it is about what is inside. I am keen to make sure that libraries continue to play an important role in our community. There has been investment in libraries in the past number of years, and I want to see Libraries NI continuing to do that.

Mrs Barton: I congratulate you, Minister, on your appointment. Will you give an assurance that Libraries NI will not transfer to local government?

Mr Givan: Thank you for the question. Maybe the Member has caught me out on this one, but I am not aware of there being proposals for libraries to transfer to local government. I am certainly happy to look into that issue and allay any concerns that the Member may have about it.

Housing: Wheelchair-accessible Accommodation

4. **Ms Mallon** asked the Minister for Communities how many people with physical disabilities are on the housing waiting list for wheelchair-accessible accommodation in the Belfast and greater Belfast area. (AQO 34/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has responsibility for managing the social housing development programme. It carries out annual housing need assessments of all district councils, examining the supply and demand of social housing, including wheelchair-accessible accommodation. The Housing Executive has advised that there were 96 applicants on the waiting list for wheelchair accommodation in the Belfast local government district as at March 2016.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I add my good wishes to you in your post. On behalf of those 96 families in the greater Belfast area and on behalf of the Forbes family in my constituency, who, since March, have been sleeping in the living room because they cannot get a home that suits their needs in terms of the mother's disability and the son's, I ask what assurances you, Minister, can give those families that you intend to review the policy on the provision of social housing for those with disabilities?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question and congratulate her on her election to this place. Her predecessor is someone whom I got on very well with and had a lot of respect for. I trust that I will have a good working relationship with Ms Mallon.

In the last financial year, 121 new starts were of wheelchair-accessible standard. This is an area that we will continue to work at. Does more need to be done? Yes, it does.

How people adapt their homes is an area that I have concern about as well. When, sometimes in emergency situations, people end up having disabilities, how quickly do we respond to their needs by adapting their homes? We need to address that. For minor adaptations, the time frame is six weeks, with the exception of showers, which can take 10 weeks to adapt for urgent cases and 40 weeks for non-urgent cases. The target time frame for major adaptations is 34 weeks for urgent cases and 50 for non-urgent cases. Those time frames concern me, and I want to consider whether we are providing a response quickly enough for families put into situations that, I believe, are

often unacceptable. I have had experience of that in my constituency, as, I am sure, have other Members. It is an area that I want to keep under review.

Mr McQuillan: I also wish the Minister well as he takes up his new role, and I welcome his announcement on the Coleraine library. What actions have the Department and the Housing Executive taken to ensure the better management of the allocation of bungalows?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. I am sure that we have all had experience of the allocation of bungalows, and it needs to be considered. A review of the design and space standards associated with wheelchair-accessible housing in Northern Ireland has been carried out, and the Department intends to introduce new wheelchair standards as part of the social housing development programme, which will involve a programme for new wheelchair-standard accommodation. That should, in time, lead to a reduction in the waiting list for this type of accommodation. Furthermore, my officials have sought assurances from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that initial and future allocations of this specialist accommodation will be retained for applicants who require ongoing wheelchair accommodation, and not used as a general needs allocation.

Mr Chambers: I offer my congratulations to the Minister on his appointment. Can he advise how many applications from individuals for assistance to adapt their properties have been turned down due to lack of funding?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. I undertake to find out the specific answer and relay it to the Member.

Older People: Policies

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Communities what policies he plans to bring forward in relation to older people. (AQO 35/16-21)

Mr Givan: My Department is committed to promoting and protecting the interests of older people by building on the good work previously achieved across Departments. My Department will continue to take forward and implement the Executive's Active Ageing strategy, which was launched in January of this year.

The key message of the strategy is that keeping active physically and mentally as we get older is the most effective way to enable as many of us as possible to enjoy the benefits of living longer and to minimise the problems that some older people face. That means addressing the problems that older people face now and encouraging people at midlife to live more active, healthier lives.

The strategy will be implemented using an outcomes-based approach. Six key outcomes have been identified. This is not dissimilar to the outcomes-based approach we are developing through the Programme for Government. Each outcome will be supported and measured with specific indicators. I understand that the Executive Office is completing an analysis report following consultation on the Active Ageing strategy indicators. This work had commenced prior to the policy responsibility transferring to my Department. My Department will take forward the outworking of the analysis report.

As work continues to develop a social strategy and a new Programme for Government, my Department will ensure

that, by working across Departments and engaging with stakeholders, we play a pivotal role in helping transform attitudes to and services for older people.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for his fairly extensive answer. What steps has he taken to work with the Commissioner for Older People?

Mr Givan: The Commissioner for Older People has a very important role to play in this, and I want to take it forward by engaging with her. I will request to meet her to find out how I can take that forward. It is vital that we send out a message to our older people that they are very much valued, supported and respected. That will be a key principle for me in my role in the Department.

On this one, I do sign up to the United Nations principles in respect of older people, which are ensuring that they have independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. Those are principles that we would all do well to abide by in how we take forward our policies.

Mr Lyons: I join in the chorus of congratulations to the Minister on his appointment and wish him well. I also highlight the importance of the East Antrim constituency, which, I have no doubt, he will be wanting to visit very soon. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the social strategy have a budget?

Mr Givan: The social strategy is part of the new Programme for Government. Obviously, strategies relating to older people and all strategies around social inclusion are going to feed into the social strategy. Currently, it is under development and a budget has not been aligned to it. Going forward, this might change once the proposed Programme for Government action plans are developed, but we will also be looking very carefully at our existing budgets to ensure that they are using resources to best effect.

Licensing Laws

6. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Communities when he plans to bring forward legislation to reform licensing laws. (AQO 36/16-21)

Mr Givan: Alcohol is not an ordinary product, and the sale of it must be regulated to ensure the protection of public health and the preservation of public order. I recognise that certain aspects of liquor licensing law in Northern Ireland are in need of reform, and I have copied to my Executive colleagues a paper that seeks agreement to introduce a licensing Bill. Provisions in the draft Bill mainly flow from the consultation that was carried out by one of my predecessors in 2012. The Bill includes a number of measures to tackle practices that may encourage alcohol misuse, safeguards for children and young people and minor changes to opening hours.

In recent years, drinking patterns in Northern Ireland have changed. Some 70% of drink is now sold for consumption at home rather than in the relatively controlled environment of licensed premises. It is important that our legislation is updated to take account of these changes.

When I have received comments from my Executive colleagues and agreement to the introduction of the Bill, I will publish full details of the measures in the Bill.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his comments and wish him well in his new appointment. He and I have

shared a number of Committees, and I am certain that he will bring dedication to the post; there is no doubt about that. It is well acknowledged by Hospitality Ulster that the food and hospitality sector sustains upwards of 60,000 jobs here in Northern Ireland. Does the paper that he has introduced address the anomalies that exist around the licensing hours on the Saturday after Good Friday and Easter Sunday, for example, and the anomaly that exists with regard to the situation —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to a question.

Mr McGlone: Will it address the licensing for certain locations where there will be under-18s, as that even leads to the very big anomaly for people attending church events?

Mr Speaker: The Member has asked his question.

Mr McGlone: OK. Thank you.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for those questions. Easter is a period of special significance in Northern Ireland, and that is reflected in liquor licensing law by the placing of restrictions on opening hours for licensed premises over the period. I have listened to the arguments put forward, but Members will be aware that there are restrictions around this time in other countries. The sale of alcohol is prohibited all day on Good Friday in the Republic of Ireland, and there are restrictions on opening hours for pubs during Easter in other countries, such as New Zealand and Australia. This is an issue that I have considered. The way in which the Easter period will be dealt with will be covered in the Bill. Clearly, Easter is a significant time for a lot of people in Northern Ireland, and I think it is right that we reflect that in public policy around different issues, not just this one.

Mr Speaker: We have time for a quick question from Mr Douglas and a quick response from the Minister.

Mr Douglas: I join the crescendo of congratulations and wish the Minister the very best. Currently, there is a voluntary code of practice for licensed premises. Will the Minister consider making that a statutory requirement?

2.30 pm

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. He is right to highlight the voluntary code of practice that exists. It was brought in by the industry to deal with irresponsible drinks promotions by people who have licensed premises. There was outrage at the consequences of a lot of those promotions and how they impacted on people. That will be dealt with in the Bill, and there will be penalties associated with it. For those who engage in these promotions, when it comes to reapplying for a licence, that is an issue that the magistrate will be able to take into account and that there will be penalties for.

Let me conclude on this point: alcohol is a substance that needs to be regulated, and rightly so. Gone are the days when you would go to people's houses and they would say, "Would like milk and sugar with your tea or coffee?"; now it is, "Do you want red or white?". There is a societal issue in how we deal with alcohol. We all know the consequences of it and its impact if it is not controlled sensibly, and that is the approach I intend to take in the Bill.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Brexit: European Investment Bank Impact

T1. **Mr Mullan** asked the Minister for Communities how he can reconcile his comments endorsing a recent European Investment Bank loan of £280 million to fund social housing projects in Northern Ireland with his support for withdrawal from the European Union, which would critically damage our ability to attract such investment. (AQT 21/16-21)

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that question. Let me make this clear: the outcome on 23 June will have no impact whatsoever on the contract that has been entered into with the European Investment Bank. I should also say that the European Investment Bank invests hundreds of millions of pounds outside the European Union, and, therefore, there is absolutely no detrimental impact in the United Kingdom leaving the European Union and continuing to get support from the European Investment Bank and other private lending institutions, which will be critical in taking forward developing social housing in the future.

Mr Mullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you will be aware that your party claimed that detailed discussions were ongoing about leveraging further finance from the European Investment Fund for social housing and urban regeneration. Will the Minister update the House on those discussions and the effect that Brexit would have on the central plan of his party's manifesto?

Mr Givan: Let me thank the Member for that supplementary. Ongoing discussions on securing investment from the European Investment Bank will not be impacted by the outcome of the referendum on 23 June. What would have a positive impact is this: should the United Kingdom leave — I hope that it does — that will allow us to take back control of our borders and to have a sensible policy on immigration and a sensible policy on the movement of peoples. We, as a society and a community, have a very tolerant approach, and that is right, but, ultimately, we need to be able to integrate and accommodate people. You cannot do that effectively without being able to control immigration, and you will not have that for as long as the United Kingdom remains within the European Union.

Housing: Waiting Lists

T2. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister for Communities whether he agrees that housing waiting lists are getting longer, with a larger housing stock the only way to address the problem, and to state whether he will embark on a programme to build more houses in urban and rural areas. (AQT 22/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Member raises a very important point; that is, the pressures we face in meeting the need that exists for housing. In the current year, the target is to build 1,600 new social homes. The Housing Executive has said that, over the next five years of this mandate, we should be building 2,000 homes each year. I would like to do more, but achieving that target in itself is going to be incredibly challenging. There are issues in how money is to be raised to finance the building of new homes. That is an issue that we need to be preparing ourselves for, because the Office for National Statistics is looking into the way in which housing associations are classified in Northern Ireland. If the direction of travel follows what has happened in England and those associations become recognised

as public bodies, that is going to have very serious consequences for the way in which we want to fund new social builds.

Mr McMullan: Look at the current figures for housing stock in urban and rural areas: there is a vast difference between them. The rural areas are lagging far behind in the numbers of houses that are being built. In my constituency in the glens — in areas of Cushendall, Cushendun and Waterfoot — no houses have been built for years. Will you ask your officials to look at this and carry out an investigation as to why houses have not been built? There is the land for them, and we still cannot get housing. We are losing young people out of rural areas who are moving into urban areas.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr McMullan: Building houses is part of regenerating rural communities.

Mr Givan: I have a huge amount of sympathy for the Member's point. The Executive have been looking at ways in which we can support local communities in rural areas in order to facilitate them with new housing. That is not always in respect of social housing; it is also about how the private sector can do that. Colleagues have been raising this issue with me from the point of view of social need and the new builds that the Housing Executive can take forward. I want to see our rural communities being supported, and part of that mix has to be the provision of social housing. I am happy to take the issue up with the Housing Executive.

Windsor Park: Redevelopment Update

T3. **Mr Logan** asked the Minister for Communities, after congratulating him and wishing him well, for an update on the redevelopment of Windsor Park. (AQT 23/16-21)

Mr Givan: The question is a timely one, given the tournament that is taking place in France. The new national football stadium at Windsor Park continues to progress well and is nearing the end of its construction phase. The majority of the project was completed in March 2016, delivering an operational stadium with a seated capacity of almost 15,000. The final phase, which is the reconstruction of the west stand and completion of the education and heritage centre, is due to be completed as planned in September this year. This will bring the seated capacity up to 18,500. The then DCAL contributed £28.75 million towards the national stadium project, funded by the regional stadia budget, and the Irish Football Association (IFA) contributed an additional £4 million. The project will be completed on time and to the agreed budget.

The Department has also invested in the redevelopment of the Olympia leisure centre, directly adjacent to Windsor Park, in partnership with Belfast City Council. That project is part of the council's investment in leisure transformation, with DCAL contributing £2.75 million from the regional stadia budget to the total £21.7 million cost of the project. The first phase will be completed in November 2016, with final completion in late 2017. On completion, the new leisure centre and sports village at the rear of the west stand will completely transform the area.

Mr Logan: Will the Minister also provide an update on the subregional programme for soccer?

Mr Givan: There was a 12-week public consultation on the subregional programme for soccer, which ended on 22 February 2016. There were 1,280 responses to the consultation document, which will help to shape the programme going forward, including the eligibility criteria for the programme. My officials are currently carrying out detailed consideration and analysis of the responses received, together with all the relevant information, before making recommendations to me on the way forward.

Malachi Mitchell-Thomas: North West 200

T4. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Communities, after wishing him well in his new post and hoping that he does not forget East Londonderry, particularly Limavady, whether he wishes to express his sympathies to the family of Malachi Mitchell-Thomas, the young rider who tragically lost his life doing what he loved at this year's North West 200, and to state whether he agrees that such tragedies are truly heartbreaking. (AQT 24/16-21)

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for raising this issue. All of us, collectively, in the House express our sympathies and condolences to the family of Malachi. We know of the tragic circumstances in which he lost his life. In the first instance, the incident is a matter for the organisers of the race, the Coleraine and District Motor Club, and the governing body of the sport, the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland, to investigate. It is their responsibility to look into how this happened.

Sadly, motorcycle racing is a dangerous sport, but it is one that is supported by huge sections of the community. Dangers are not unique to this sport; there are dangers in a huge range of sports. What is important to me as sports Minister is that we ensure that the environment in which road racing takes place is as safe as it can be. There has been investment to enhance safety measures, primarily through 2 & 4 Wheels, but I will actively look, within my Departments, at measures that I believe may be helpful in supporting these flagship events, particularly the North West 200 and the Ulster Grand Prix.

Mr Robinson: A lot of the focus has been on safety at the North West 200. Will the Minister assure the House that the Department will do all that it can to promote safer road racing throughout Northern Ireland?

Mr Givan: I am happy to give the commitment that we will try to ensure that events, when they take place, are as safe as possible. Sadly, that will not prevent something of this nature happening again. We need to work with the sport to make sure that it is as safe as possible. From 2009-2011, there was £2 million investment to support the sporting industry on this matter, and I will consider the issue going forward.

Councils: Use of d'Hondt

T5. **Mr McKee** asked the Minister for Communities, after congratulating him on his new post, to comment on the use of d'Hondt to allocate positions of responsibility in local councils. (AQT 25/16-21)

Mr Givan: This measure for allocating positions was introduced during the previous Assembly. The process is used in the Assembly, positions are now being allocated through it, and councils have had a number of years to embed it in the way in which they do business.

Mr McKee: There seems to be confusion across the country about the law concerning the allocation of committee places and positions of responsibility in the case of councillors who change their party designation midterm. Will the Minister consider amending the legislation to ensure consistency across the board?

Mr Givan: Members know that, at times, there will be changes in all parties. I suspect that where an individual has been elected because of the party they belong to, that party will feel that the seat was theirs and was endorsed as such by the public. We no longer have by-elections, and that is appropriate given the circumstances. For example, a by-election in a predominantly nationalist area, after a unionist loses the seat, may not return another unionist because of our proportional representation system. I suspect that there will be times when members of all political parties feel that the way this measure is being used is appropriate and times when they will not.

Anti-poverty Strategy: Update

T6. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on actions taken on the anti-poverty strategy following the completion of the judicial review. (AQT 26/16-21)

Mr Givan: This issue has to be taken forward by my Department. There is a range of strategies that come under social cohesion and inclusion that I need to take forward. The Member will know that the Programme for Government has set up an approach through a social strategy that will align with an economic strategy. All the strategies need to be incorporated in the social strategy that needs to be taken forward. I am committed to taking all those areas forward, including the issue that the Member raised.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Mr Lynch, we need your supplementary question and the Minister's response to be quick.

Mr Lynch: I was just going to ask that the Minister give a commitment to the strategy and an assurance, which he has done.

Mr Givan: I am happy to affirm that.

Economy

Household Income

1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy how he plans to increase Northern Ireland's gross disposable household income. (AQO 46/16-21)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): My Department is committed, through delivery of the new outcomes-based Programme for Government and the refocused economic strategy, to increasing the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy and to growing employment and prosperity for all. In doing so, it will be important to ensure that growth goes hand in hand with improvements in people's living standards.

It is a matter of record that earnings in Northern Ireland have historically been lower relative to the rest of the United Kingdom. That partially explains why Northern

Ireland's level of gross disposable household income per head has continually been lower than in other parts of the UK. On a more positive note, in April 2015, median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees in Northern Ireland was £485, up 5.4% from £460 in 2014. That represents the largest annual percentage increase in earnings since 2004 and the first increase in inflation-adjusted earnings since 2009. The median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees in Northern Ireland is now 92% of the UK level and is at its highest since the survey began in 1997.

High inflation has the effect of eroding earnings growth and therefore reducing any possible increase in gross disposable household income. At the height of the financial crisis in 2008, inflation was running at over 5%. However, inflation has been at historically low levels for some time now. In April 2016, inflation, as measured by the consumer price index (CPI), was 0.3%. With wages growing faster than inflation, that will result in higher gross disposable household income.

The most effective way of increasing household income is to have more people in better jobs. Since 2012, we have seen 40,000 new jobs created, with 26,000 fewer people claiming unemployment than in February 2013. We know from research that businesses that are innovative and invest more in R&D are more likely to be successful in global markets, employ more people and pay higher salaries — more and better jobs. Continuing with that policy will make a massive contribution to increasing local household incomes.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for the answer and wish him well in his new post. Does he accept that there has been a failure to close the prosperity gap, as evidenced by the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, which state that Northern Ireland has the lowest gross disposable household income of the four home countries and that, based on a comparison with the previous year, we are demonstrating negative growth?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his congratulations. I do accept that the level of gross disposable household income is disappointing. The latest figures for 2014 show that £14,645 per head is the average figure in Northern Ireland, which is about 81.5% of the UK average. That is not good enough. I could stand here and say to the Member and the House that it is something that has historically been the case and that Northern Ireland has always had far lower earnings on average than the rest of the United Kingdom, and just accept that as something that we cannot really do much about, given that we have done little to erode that gap over the past 10, 20, 30 or more years, but I do not want to do that. I want to make sure that, in trying to create a better, stronger economy for Northern Ireland, that entails bringing in not just more jobs but better jobs. By "better jobs", I mean jobs that pay more money to people in Northern Ireland. It is one area in which one of the factors that we can influence, or at least try to influence, as a Government is to try to attract more and better jobs.

Yes, we have managed to bring in 40,000 jobs over the past five years. I want to see that continue, grow and do better over this Assembly term. Just out of interest, I will say that, between 2011 and 2016, of the jobs that the Executive were able to attract into Northern Ireland through Invest Northern Ireland, 64% of those that were

created by locally owned companies were above the private sector median wage and 72% of those that were created by external investors into Northern Ireland were over the private sector median wage.

Targeting our work with Invest Northern Ireland on more and better jobs that have higher wages will also increase the gross disposable household income for people across Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyons: The DUP understands the importance of low taxation and, in particular, low household taxation. Does the Minister agree with me that the policies that the Executive have put in place have helped with disposable incomes in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: I share the Member's pride in the fact that we are a low-tax party and have rightly earned that reputation over the years in local government and in the Assembly. Taxation is a factor in disposable household incomes. There are others, including the size of a household, and, in Northern Ireland, households tend to have more children in them. There are also factors around inflation, as I mentioned, and earnings, but taxation is a factor. There is little that we can do to affect income tax, although the changes that Her Majesty's Government have brought in to increase the personal allowance will disproportionately benefit people in Northern Ireland because of their lower incomes.

As an Assembly, we have a proud record of keeping household taxes down. We have the lowest household taxes in the whole of the United Kingdom: the average household bill in Northern Ireland in 2015-16 was £842. That compared favourably with Scotland, where it was £1,300, England, where it was £1,400, and Wales, where it was over £1,500. When you total that up over the five years of the last Executive, the average householder in Northern Ireland saved £2,500. Add to that the policies that the Executive have pursued such as free transport for the over-60s and keeping the lone pensioner allowance in place, many of which are policies that some in the House, never mind people outside the House, told us to that we needed to get rid of because they were too expensive and we did not need them any more. Some, in fact, ran during the recent election on a platform calling for increased rates and the introduction of water charges and so on. Maintaining a policy of taking pride in having the lowest household taxes in the UK and withstanding the pressure inside and outside the Assembly to increase local taxes has helped to ensure that gross disposable household income in Northern Ireland is not worse than it is.

Mr Lyttle: The DUP claims to deliver low household costs, along with Sinn Féin. However, childcare costs for which they have been and continue to be responsible are second only to mortgage payments for many people and prevent many people from accessing employment. Will the Economy Minister, therefore, support an increase in the free hours of early education and childcare available to families in Northern Ireland to at least 20 hours per week?

Mr Hamilton: Everybody in the House recognises that there are long-standing, deep-seated structural issues with childcare in Northern Ireland and that it is not as good as we want it to be or does not compare favourably with provision, for example, in Great Britain. I want to support seeing more free childcare places provided to people across Northern Ireland, but I do not wish to intrude on the

departmental responsibilities of other Ministers, and I think that that is a responsibility for the Minister of Education, if I am right. I will leave it to the good offices of my friend and colleague Mr Weir to advance that in a sustainable way.

It is brave of the Member to stand up in the House and lecture me and my party about costs to households and taxation in Northern Ireland. His party ran in the recent election, and, at least, to be fair, it was honest in running on a platform of wanting to see water charges introduced and rates increased and wanting to do away with the proud record that we have of having the lowest household taxes in the whole of the United Kingdom. As Mr Nesbitt's question elicited, gross disposable household income in Northern Ireland is lower than we would like it to be, but it would be far worse if the Alliance Party had its way and people in Northern Ireland were paying £400 or £500 water bills and radically increased rates bills as well.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister agree that unrestrained immigration, to which we are subjected by virtue of our membership of the EU, has a downward pressure on wages and income and thus suppresses household incomes and thus is their opportunity on 23 June to do something radically positive about that?

Mr Hamilton: I commend the Member on his innovation in introducing the EU referendum into a question on gross disposable household income. It is that sort of innovation that I would like many of our companies in Northern Ireland to display. If they did, we would have a fantastic economy.

The Member raises a good, pertinent point. There are clearly issues, perhaps less so in Northern Ireland and more so in other parts of the United Kingdom, with immigration and the effect that it has on the local, regional and, indeed, in some cases, national economy. I think that we in Northern Ireland have benefited from immigration as well. In the public sector, many staff, particularly in our NHS, are immigrants — I had the privilege of being the Minister of Health for the last year — and we would not be able to cope were it not for those people coming into Northern Ireland to provide much-needed services. Similarly, many staff come from other parts of the world to work in agrifood businesses — I represent a constituency that has many such businesses — and those businesses would not be able to survive were it not for that support. I absolutely understand and take on board the Member's point. If, indeed, there were unrestrained immigration into the United Kingdom, it would have a depressive effect, as the Member indicates, on household incomes and the economy generally.

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the next question, it was remiss of me, Minister, not to welcome you to your first Question Time in your new role. I think that that is because we have become so used to you being at the Dispatch Box. I also inform Members that question 7 has been withdrawn.

R&D Investment

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for the Economy what plans his Department has to encourage businesses to invest in research and development. (AQO 47/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your comments.

Business investment in R&D is critical to economic growth. It leads to new, innovative products and processes

and increases in productivity and can drive sustainable export growth. To deliver our vision of a more dynamic and competitive economy, Northern Ireland needs many more companies engaging in R&D and innovation. In recent years, through the excellent work of Invest NI, our universities and our colleges, we have made positive progress in this area. Their support has helped to create the conditions in which our companies now invest more than £400 million annually in research and development — that is up 25% since 2009. Most encouragingly, we now have more firms than ever before investing in R&D.

In the last year alone, Invest NI has supported businesses, the majority of which are local companies, small and large, to invest £70 million in research and development. That has created a strong foundation for us to drive forward our ambitious plans for the economy. My Department, through its delivery bodies and by working in partnership with the private sector, will continue to focus on getting more companies engaged in R&D. A range of interventions is already in place to deliver that, whether it is the Invest NI monthly R&D clinics, the financial assistance from the grant for R&D programme, the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) run by universities or the employer support programme run by our colleges. The challenge that we face is supporting companies to take the risk to invest in R&D. R&D is a risk, but it is a necessary one to drive sustained company growth.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. The Finance Minister today referred specifically to allocations for skills and further education. The Minister has addressed the fact that Invest NI, skills and further education are key components in assisting local businesses. Will he give us some assurance that Invest NI, the further education sector and the skills sector will embark on work to ensure that local companies get enough support to attract, in particular, inward investment?

Mr Hamilton: It is incredibly important to have skills to attract inward investment into Northern Ireland and to help our indigenous firms to expand and realise the opportunities out there in the global marketplace. Developing our skills is a key component of our new draft Programme for Government framework. One of the indicators, as I am sure the Member will know, is to improve the skills profile of our population. A range of strategies is in place — I will not bore the Member or the House with those — to ensure that we have the right skills in place, whether that is delivered through higher education, further education, apprenticeships or youth training.

3.00 pm

As I indicated, there are some measures in place already through Invest Northern Ireland, colleges or universities to try to work with firms. It is a process of working with them to encourage them, and, in many cases, we are trying to get firms that have tentatively, or perhaps never before, been involved in research and development to do that for the first time in the hope that they will continue to do it.

There are a range of schemes in place. As I mentioned, there is an Invest NI grant scheme, R&D clinics and various funds in higher and further education. There are also national schemes such as an HMRC tax credit scheme and the patent box scheme, which reduces corporation tax to 10% for patents that are registered in the UK. There is also a small business research initiative,

which was utilised by my Department initially on a small-scale project on tourism apps but has more recently been used, in concert with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development as it was — it is now DAERA — on a project involving poultry litter. I hope to be in a position to make a positive announcement on that in the not too distant future. There are a range of measures in place to try to encourage businesses, whether they are indigenous firms or external investors and whether they are small-, medium- or large-scale businesses, to get into R&D and to continue to try to use it as a way to improve our economy.

Mr McPhillips: Thank you Minister for the answers thus far, and I wish you well in your new post.

Traditionally, most investment in research and development has gone on in the greater Belfast area. Can the Minister outline how he plans to increase investment west of the Bann, especially in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question and welcome him to the Assembly. I thank him for his kind comments.

I am tempted to say that the First Minister will ensure that I do my best to bring investment to the Member's constituency. That is stimulus and motivation enough for me to do my job in that respect. I had a discussion on this issue with one of the Member's party colleagues last week during a debate on manufacturing in Northern Ireland, and there is a perception that there is an imbalance in where investment and job creation goes in Northern Ireland. I can understand that. A lot of Members who represent constituencies that are not even west of the Bann but are in and around the greater Belfast area could perhaps point at elements that suggest that they do not get as much investment as they would like. Of course, everybody will fight very hard for their constituency.

There are, however, some interesting figures that show that, from 2011-12 to 2015-16, investment in the east of the Province was 282 jobs per 10,000 head of population but that, in the west of the Province, it was 301 jobs per 10,000 of the population. Obviously, more people live east of the Bann and in the east of the Province, but, if you look at it on a population basis, you will see that job creation through Invest NI assistance has been greater in the west of the Province. I am sure that the Member will be familiar with some of those examples in his constituency. Dunbia recently made an announcement on the creation of 209 new jobs in Dungannon, and Westland Horticulture will bring 70 new jobs to Dungannon, with an investment of £9.6 million. In Fermanagh, Teleperformance in Enniskillen has committed to creating 800 jobs. I can give the Member the assurance through the new Programme for Government as well, which has an outcome right at the head that says that we prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy. We want to create wealth, develop and improve our economy, and create jobs for the whole of Northern Ireland, but we want that to be regionally balanced and spread right across Northern Ireland so that everybody in Northern Ireland can prosper.

Mr Storey: I welcome my friend and colleague to his first Question Time and wish him well in his new role.

The Minister will be well aware of the turbulent times that the manufacturing industry has had in my constituency of North Antrim. Will he outline to the House the benefits

that R&D has brought as a result of investment in North Antrim? I am thinking particularly of companies such as McAuley Engineering and others that have been beneficiaries. Will the Minister give a commitment to that continuing?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question and for his best wishes.

The Member's constituency has had a rougher and tougher time than probably any other constituency over the last six, nine or 12 months in terms of the impact on jobs, given the decision of the two huge firms, JTI and Michelin, to close their operations. Of course, as a Department, we will do everything that we possibly can to try to soften that blow for the workers in both firms. I hope that we will also be able to continue to work with businesses in that area so that they can grow and expand and take on more employment.

One way in which we can do that, as the Member said, is to increase investment in research and development. I am very pleased that in the last financial year some £1 million was invested through Invest Northern Ireland's grant projects in the North Antrim constituency, and that was supporting a total investment of just over £4 million pounds. An example he mentioned is McAuley Engineering — a firm I visited with the Member some years ago in a previous role. It is an exceptional firm and goes from strength to strength.

Another great firm that we are all very proud of, no matter what part of Northern Ireland we come from or represent, is Wrightbus. It has received £5 million of assistance, which unlocked £26 million of overall investment over the last five years. That has allowed it to remain a market leader by investing in innovation, and to continue with exports to Hong Kong, Singapore, India and elsewhere. There are other examples of investments of small and sometimes modest amounts of money which unlock investment by the firm itself, which in turn stabilises the business and allows it to grow and take on more people. I know that is something that is very dear to the heart of the Member, and indeed other Members who are representing the North Antrim constituency.

Dr Farry: I too wish the new Minister well in his post. Given that Northern Ireland has a much higher dependence upon European funding for R&D spend than most other regions of the UK, how does the Minister envisage making up the shortfall in research funding in the event of a Brexit? We cannot rely on the UK Government to replicate the level of funding, not least given that the Barnett formula would not essentially cover what we are losing, even if the Government were minded to actually meet the Barnett formula level of funding?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question and his good wishes — as well as the innovative Member sitting two rows behind him in introducing this subject. I will not stand here and deny to the Member, or the House, that Northern Ireland has been a beneficiary in terms of R&D funding and innovation funding coming from the European Union. Horizon 2020 is obviously the big funding stream at this moment in time. The Member will know, from his previous role, that Northern Ireland has set ambitious targets to increase our drawdown from Horizon 2020. Northern Ireland researchers have secured just over €28.6 million, and there has been an additional €23.5 million

for a Queen's University project about innovation within medicine. In total, just over €50 million has been drawn down between January 2014 to November 2015.

The Member asks me a question as to how we might make up that difference. The Member knows full well that, whatever disputes there might be about the number, the UK is a net contributor to the European Union. I cannot imagine any UK Government, whatever its complexion, that will not want to spend money on research and development or in encouraging universities, colleges and businesses in Northern Ireland, and the rest of the United Kingdom, to invest in R&D.

The Member also talks about an uncertainty as to what any UK Government might do, but we also have the uncertainty about what any European Commission might do. With an expanding and growing European Union heading in a direction which brings in more countries which have greater need than Northern Ireland, there is every prospect that the money available to Northern Ireland, and to the United Kingdom as a whole, will diminish over time.

University Funding

3. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister for the Economy what plans his Department has to ensure that universities are funded to deliver the skills demanded by the economy. (AQO 48/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Universities and colleges are a core part of national and regional economic infrastructure, generating employment and output, attracting export earnings and contributing to economic growth. They are also part of local, regional, national and international networks influencing the political, social, cultural and economic climate. At a time of global economic difficulty, Governments across the world are looking to their universities to provide ways to support the national and regional economies, through development of new ideas, products and services from university research, as well as through continuing to raise the education levels of citizens and our capacity to innovate and adapt.

The economic importance of higher education institutions is particularly visible in our regional economy. The knowledge and skills of higher education graduates contribute to the creation of a more flexible and adaptable workforce, which is key to enhancing our region's economic competitiveness. If we are to attract sufficient investment for our economy to grow and for high-quality jobs to be created, we must in turn invest in the right high-level skills to attract that investment. The higher education sector is a key enabler in establishing a competitive skills system for investors to see Northern Ireland as an attractive place to set up and do business.

I assure the Member that I and my Executive colleagues will be examining a variety of options to ensure that our universities remain well positioned to deliver the skills required by the current and future Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Kearney: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Guím gach rath ort san Aireacht úr. I wish you all the very best in your new Ministry.

Further to that, Minister, have you had a chance to assess the development proposal for the expansion of Magee university? Do you agree that the successful development

of that project is essential to addressing the endemic patterns of inequality west of the Bann?

Mr Hamilton: I recognise the importance that representatives of the Foyle constituency and the north-west in general have placed on the expansion of Ulster University at its Magee campus. As the Member will know, my Department has recently received an outline business case that was submitted to the Department with support from a wide range of stakeholders from the north-west. That will be considered on its merits, as you would expect, and in the context of wider policy implications, particularly the sustainable financing of the sector.

I recognise that Ulster University has an aim of increasing undergraduate numbers at Magee, and I am absolutely certain that doing so would have a positive impact on the economy of that area, both through a direct impact on the economy and the wider and more positive impact it would have in making it a more attractive place to invest. You would expect me to consider all those points in the context of the budget available to me and, more widely, the Executive and of the implications for the wider policy on student numbers.

As I said, the outline business case has been received by the Department, and I will give it careful consideration. As the Member would expect me to, I will want to do that in concert with dialogue with Executive colleagues.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I also congratulate you on your appointment. Clearly, universities are not being funded properly to deliver the skills needed and have not been for some time. Do the Minister and the Minister of Education have a plan to deliver a funding model for third-level education that will allow universities to offer more undergraduate places and reverse the cuts that have been imposed on them in recent years?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question and her comments. I also welcome her; I think this is my first opportunity to welcome her to the Assembly.

The responsibility for this resides with me, not the Minister of Education. We obviously received good news today with the conclusion of the June monitoring round, which has seen £20 million of additional expenditure to my Department, much of which will go to higher and further education to deal with some of the challenges and pressures that the Member has highlighted. I want to see the financing of the sector placed on a long-term and sustainable footing. I want to consider all the potential options on that.

The previous Department for Employment and Learning conducted a consultation on this that set out a range of options. I want to study the responses to that consultation and the options in it, and I want to do that alongside discussions I intend to have with the vice chancellors of our two universities. I have had passing conversations with at least one of them, who mentioned that he had some ideas and proposals that he wanted to put to me. I look forward to receiving those, and I will obviously give them careful consideration. It is incredibly important that we get the university sector on to a sustainable financial footing so that it can continue to make a contribution to our economy and produce graduates with the skills we require not just now but in the future to ensure that our economy grows in the way we want it to.

Mr Speaker: Mr Buchanan for a quick question and a quick response from the Minister.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you. Can the Minister advise on the main sectors where graduate skills and employment are likely to drive the economy?

Mr Hamilton: All the indications and the analysis that we are doing show that there are five sectors that are displaying and will continue to display employment growth opportunities in Northern Ireland. They are ICT, professional scientific and technical skills, manufacturing, administrative jobs, and hospitality and retail jobs. In spite of the narrative that has developed around the pressures and challenges on the sector, its financing and making sure it is on a sustainable footing, we have a very strong skills base and a record of producing graduates whom businesses need. In ICT, for example, which is one of those growth areas for employment, we are producing highly skilled graduates. In Northern Ireland, 41% of staff in financial services are educated to degree level, and that compares with just 36% in the whole of the UK and 21% in the Republic of Ireland. Seventy per cent of IT and telecoms professionals in Northern Ireland hold a higher-level education qualification, compared with a UK average of 62%. In spite of the challenges that the sector has faced and will continue to face, Northern Ireland has a good record of producing highly qualified graduates with the skills that businesses in Northern Ireland need.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

3.15 pm

John Lewis: Economic Benefits

T1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for the Economy, after welcoming him to his new and most recent Ministry, even though he is probably welcomed out, for his assessment of the potential economic benefits of bringing John Lewis to Sprucefield. (AQT 31/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his welcome. I am sure that this will be the one and only Question Time in which I am welcomed to the House. I congratulate the Member on his election to the Assembly.

The issue of John Lewis coming to Northern Ireland is long and protracted. It is one that we have all observed, some from afar, representing other constituencies, and some very intimately involved, particularly those in the Lagan Valley area. There was an opportunity to bring John Lewis to Northern Ireland, not just to have a store at Sprucefield but to bring the centre of operations for, I think it was intended, the whole of Ireland. Unfortunately, we have missed that opportunity up to now. I know that others take a differing view, and I look at you nervously, Mr Speaker, as you are a representative for Belfast. There have been occasions when I think we have got the reputation, generally and usually through the planning system, of not being receptive to certain types of new investment. I know that people will take a different view on it, but I am very supportive of John Lewis coming to Northern Ireland. I hope that the opportunity has not been lost and we can secure that investment to Sprucefield or, indeed, wherever in Northern Ireland they wish to invest.

Mr Butler: Thank you for your answer, Minister. Given the regional significance of the Sprucefield area and its strategic location on the Belfast to Dublin corridor, what is your assessment of the full development of that site and its environs?

Mr Hamilton: Because of its location, Sprucefield, much like the Maze site not that far away, has huge investment opportunities. The benefit derived from investment in either site would not just go to the local area and the city of Lisburn but further afield and probably the whole of the region. The development of that site is probably more of a planning issue that resides now with the Department for Infrastructure in terms of strategic planning policy for Northern Ireland. I will leave it to that Minister to take that forward, but there are huge opportunities across Northern Ireland. We are on the cusp of what could be exciting economic times for Northern Ireland. There will be huge opportunities over the next number of years, but we cannot do things that lock down sites and make them unavailable for development in the future.

Cruise Ships: Belfast

T2. **Mr Logan** asked the Minister for the Economy, after congratulating him on his new role and welcoming the words that he shared with their colleague Mervyn Storey, with whom he looks forward to welcoming the Minister to North Antrim very soon, to outline how many cruise ships are expected to dock in Belfast this year. (AQT 32/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The growth in the number of cruise ships coming into Northern Ireland is a very recent phenomenon. Ten years ago, the very idea that cruise ships would come into Belfast would have been something that people laughed at.

This year, however, it is expected that 77 cruise ships will dock in Belfast, and there is a new terminal in the harbour estate for them. There has been a huge increase in the number — effectively from zero to 77 — in very short order. That is a vote of confidence in Northern Ireland generally, and in our overall tourism product. If we did not have things such as the Giant's Causeway, in the Member's constituency, Titanic Belfast or Mount Stewart in my constituency, for example, people would not necessarily want to stop here and it would not be a destination on the itinerary of all these cruise liners.

It shows the huge progress made in Northern Ireland as a whole but also the particular development of our tourism sector.

Mr Logan: Thanks to the Minister for that encouraging news. How many visitors do you envisage cruise ships bringing into Northern Ireland and what are they expected to generate for the local economy?

Mr Lyons: Bring them to Larne.

Mr Robinson: Limavady.

Mr Hamilton: There are several bids for cruise ships behind me.

Fifty-nine cruise ships docked in Belfast last year, bringing in over 116,000 visitors, including crew. That figure, because of the increase in the number of ships, is estimated to go up to 143,000 guests and crew. Last year's 59 ships and 116,000 people brought £6 million of visitor spend into Northern Ireland, so we would expect to exceed

that this year with a greater number of cruise ships coming into Belfast.

We did not think that this was imaginable at one time. We should warmly welcome them. With the investment by Belfast harbour in a new terminal capable of hosting vessels of all sizes, and our developing and improving tourism product not just in Belfast but all around Northern Ireland, we would hope to see the number of cruise ships increase and, similarly, the number of visitors and amount of spend.

Narrow Water Bridge: Tourism Potential

T3. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for the Economy, after joining with everybody else to welcome him to his first Question Time, whether he has assessed the tourism potential of the Narrow Water bridge project. (AQT 33/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Not specifically. I am fairly new to the post, as the Member will appreciate, and will want to take some time to consider a range of projects that will in some way or other come across my ministerial desk.

I know that this is a long-standing project and ambition of people in not just the Newry, Mourne and south Down area but across the border in County Louth. I have some experience of it in a previous role as Finance Minister, particularly around funding. Unfortunately, funding was not able to materialise for a range of reasons a number of years ago. As the Member knows, it is a project to which the Executive, and the Irish Government as well, remain committed in principle.

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Minister's positive tone. Will he agree with me that it is important that this Executive deliver infrastructure projects such as the Narrow Water bridge?

Mr Hamilton: Developing our economic infrastructure in whatever way, whether it be roads, telecoms or energy infrastructure, is incredibly important to improving our overall economy. In any measure, improving our economic infrastructure is key to increasing competitiveness and productivity and to ensuring growth. Part of that is increasing and improving our connectivity. It is a small project in the connectivity that it would deliver, but I understand from listening to people, particularly from Warrenpoint and the surrounding area, that it is something that they see as having huge potential to grow the tourism economy and attract visitors into their area.

I have not had time to assess it. I do not know exactly whether there is a bid in for funding. That will not, I am sure, come across my desk, but it may come across the desk of other Ministers, and I would not want to say anything to prejudice the process that they would have to go through. As I said, it is a project that the previous Executive and the Irish Government were committed to in principle.

Council Funding: 'The Detail' Research

T4. **Mr Smith** asked the Minister for the Economy, after adding his congratulations to the Minister and wishing him every success in his new post, whether he is aware of research undertaken by 'The Detail' into Invest NI funding between April 2011 and September 2014, which showed

that the former Ards Borough Council area received the lowest per capita funding of all 26 councils in Northern Ireland. (AQT 34/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I am not aware of the specific research, but, now that the Member has raised it with me, I will study it closely. The Member's comments are a very good example of the point that I was making to Mr McPhillips earlier. There is a perception that all investment goes to the greater Belfast area. The Member's point is one that I am familiar with. There is a perception in our constituency that we do not get the same level of investment. I think that, in some respects, that is because of our proximity to Belfast. Yet, the Member will be aware, as I am, of the many great firms and businesses in our constituency, particularly in the agrifood sector, that are thriving and have grown considerably over the last number of years, creating employment in our area and helping to grow an incredibly important sector of our overall economy.

Mr Smith: I thank the Minister for his answer and comments. As he rightly says, the Strangford constituency, which includes Ards, is close to Belfast, but so too are other areas that have fared much better: Newtownabbey, for example, got £295 of investment per person and Antrim got £265, compared to just £33 in Ards. What actions will the Minister take, unlike his predecessors, to ensure that Strangford receives its fair share of funding in the future?

Mr Hamilton: Of course, both as Minister and as a representative for that constituency, I want to see increased and improved investment in Strangford, just as I want to see it in every constituency across Northern Ireland. I will be doing my level best to improve and increase investment in every constituency, particularly Strangford. The Member touched on Invest Northern Ireland figures and compared the former Ards Borough Council area unfavourably with Newtownabbey, for example. There are other indicators, and I am happy to furnish the Member with the precise detail.

Take tourism investment, for example. The Member will know that the local economy of subregions has different constructions. The local economy in the Strangford area has a higher proportion of tourism businesses that, I am sure, will have received more investment than many of the other council areas that the Member mentioned. We are biased of course, but I believe that we have the most beautiful constituency in the whole of Northern Ireland. As a result, it has received many more visitors, which has seen our tourism product develop and grow over the last number of years. There are some figures that you can look at to show that it is not as good, but there are others that you can look at to show that other elements of the economy have received appropriate levels of support. I am happy to provide the Member with that detail.

Job Creation: Regional Targets

T5. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister for the Economy, after adding to the best wishes received by him on his new post, what plans he has to implement regional targets for job creation in areas of high unemployment such as Strabane and Derry in her constituency. (AQT 35/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Member touches on high levels of unemployment. That is of course a fact in some parts of Northern Ireland, particularly peripheral parts. Invest Northern Ireland, whatever the perception may be of its

track record in trying to bring investment to areas such as the Member's constituency, actually does have a good record of trying to bring investment and jobs to that constituency and others in the west of the Province. I cited some of those examples to Mr McPhillips earlier. I know that the Member is very fond of Strabane, and I met the huge investor Allstate, which has a presence there. When you have international companies of that size and stature seeing the merit in setting up in Strabane, that is a beacon for others to see the opportunities presented by Strabane and the skilled workforce that is there.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to be quick in asking her supplementary and the Minister to be quick in giving his response.

Ms Boyle: Given the recent job losses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, particularly in Derry, will the Minister undertake to come to the council to meet the north-west regional task force and hear its proposals for job creation and infrastructure?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I intend to visit the north-west, just as I intend to visit all parts of Northern Ireland. I am keen to work with anybody and everybody — the council, the Chamber of Commerce in Derry and others — to ensure that whatever help and support I can provide through my Department and its agencies to attract investment and increase jobs in the area will be provided. The Executive as a whole recognised the need to have a regionally balanced economy in the draft Programme for Government framework, and we need to follow through on that with a clear action plan for how we will deliver it.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Members may wish to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 01/16-21] be agreed. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Beattie: I wish the Minister well as he takes up his new undertaking to safeguard the finances of our country. I view him neither as a rogue nor a renegade, but I hope that he will listen. I hope that he will engage. I hope that he will be magnanimous to those who do not sit in government and accept, in the right spirit, any criticisms that we may have. I will aim not to be overtly critical, but criticism is not necessarily a bad thing. It can highlight issues and alternatives, and all you need do is look between the lines to see what those alternatives are. Criticism is not just about poking the finger — you have to drag out what you can get from it.

I will try to be quite frugal and direct while talking about the Budget. Any Budget will have a financial action that creates a financial reaction and effect: giving money to one Department will have an effect on other Departments. The DUP and Sinn Féin manifestos stated that they would give an extra £1 billion to the Department of Health over the next five years, and that will have an effect on other Departments. The important thing is to make it have a positive effect on other Departments by making sure that they work together. You can easily see that giving money to the Department of Health can have an effect on the Department for Communities and the Department of Education.

As a member of the Justice Committee, I will look at the Department of Justice, and I look forward to debating that at Committee on Thursday so that I can get into the finer detail. When I look at how the DUP and Sinn Féin have aligned the moneys for that Department's budget, I find it interesting that they have used the following three criteria when allocating to the different directorates:

“protecting frontline policing as far as possible and ensuring PSNI has adequate security funding; protecting other frontline areas across the Department as far as possible, with the aim of protecting outcomes for the public; and protecting the voluntary and community sector and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships as far as possible.”

So, what is possible? The non-ring-fenced resource DEL for the Department of Justice is reduced by 5.7%. The PSNI's part has only been reduced by 2%, but overall the figure is 5.7%. Is that an outcome-based approach, as described in the draft Programme for Government framework, or are we looking at a finance-driven effect? There is obviously a need for that because money is finite, but, before we have a Programme for Government and before we have decided what we want to achieve, we have divvied out the money. So the finance has come before the outcome in this case. With the Department of Justice, we are hoping, after we get this year's Budget through, that the next Budget will run for the following three years. That should realign and fix itself in the long term.

I have concerns that the underfunding of the Northern Ireland Prison Service of 2.9% will have a serious effect, as we continue with the separated prisoner regime, which invariably costs more money. I mentioned that before, and I mention it now because it was forced on us in 2003 by a direct rule Minister, and we have not yet had a chance to debate it. We are being held to account by a direct rule Minister from 2003, and we are paying for it. So I hope we have a chance to debate it and come up with a solution, whether that involves keeping the regime going and taking the additional cost or suspending it and moving forward, as we all hope to do.

I have concerns about the PSNI budget. Does it have resilience in the funding of policing in the present while looking after policing from the past. We all know about the ongoing issues with the Stakeknife investigation. That could cost £30 million, which will have an effect on the PSNI's budget.

Mostly, I am concerned that the Department of Justice's budget will fall seriously short if all the recommendations from the three-person panel are put in place. Thirteen of those recommendations fall directly to the Department of Justice, with a further 10 implying a justice input. Those include moving back to community policing, restorative justice initiatives, working with the Probation Service to prepare paramilitaries for their return to society and integration. Those are all good things — I have no issue with them — but they are all going to cost money. The £10 million that has been set aside to cover that is nowhere near enough. There needs to be more, and there needs to be more of a commitment. There we have the effect: if we have more of a commitment to that, somebody else is going to have to lose out. That is why we need to combine the effects. Every effort must be made by everyone in the House to try to unlock the £150 million that is available for the setting up of bodies to deal with the past. That is in everybody's interests, and we need to work together on it.

We need innovative ways of using our Budget better. Everybody is saying that you have to stand and offer different and innovative ways of doing things, and it is very difficult to do that when you stand here. Just by talking, maybe I imply that there are innovative ways. The PCSPs are resourced and paid for by the PSNI, yet communities have a big input in them. Why can PCSPs and the Department for Communities not work together in cross-departmental groupings to resource that particular strand of justice? Likewise, the Probation Board, working with the Department of Education and the Department of Health, should share resources and cost. We should advocate different Departments sharing costs and resources to have the same outcome.

I am not being overly critical of the Budget. I am trying to be constructive in what I say, but I am concerned. I am concerned about all the pressures on all the Departments.

I believe that, in its current form, some of those pressures are not sustainable.

I am also concerned that we, as a group of people, particularly the Government, are far too busy blaming the Tory Government for all our ills. Yes, of course, they are partly to blame, and yes, austerity is coming from them. I am not defending them in any shape or form, but we cannot keep looking back at the past and blaming it for what we want to do in the future. We need to come

up with a sustainable system, we need to come up with something that deals with all the issues and we need to use that money productively to help the people whom we all represent.

Mr Wells: I sat on the Finance Committee for several years with the incoming Finance Minister, and I noted his criticism of the then Finance Ministers, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton and Mr Storey. I took note of those criticisms. It is interesting that already he has broken one of his golden rules. This morning, he gave us the monitoring round figures, but for the first time ever, I think, in the history of the Assembly, he failed to provide us with the information on the pressures that the various Departments had made known to him, so we are left somewhat in the dark. Far be it from me to congratulate the Opposition, but I thought they were absolutely right to raise this as an issue, because how —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Wells: I would bottle that, because it is the first and last time it is going to happen. I can do it early in my career in this five-year term because it will be forgotten by the next election.

We were left with absolutely no idea of the pressures the various Departments are facing. We have no idea of the urgent bids that were made and how many of them were unavoidable. I do not want to quote his words back to him, but I would like to think he feels suitably chastened and will not dare do that again to the House. That is totally unacceptable. Similarly, I would like to think that he will not issue a statement and give us all less than an hour to digest such an important amount of information. Previous Finance Ministers from my party would not have dreamt of doing that because it would have been treating the House with total disdain. Maybe the lesson has been learnt. The other criticisms he made in the Finance Committee will, no doubt, come back to haunt him.

I was worried because he was hardly into office — I suppose you could say he hit the ground running; he might have been running in the wrong direction, but at least he hit the ground running — and was talking about borrowing money to meet the gap for essential services in Northern Ireland. The last thing that he wants written on his tombstone is, "Here lies the body of Minister Millar, the Minister who left his children and grandchildren with a huge debt that they will never repay". I know he is a regular visitor to the Irish Republic; he is up and down to the Dáil — the Irish Parliament, in English — on a very regular basis. Surely he must understand the calamity —

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Will the Member take a point?

Mr Wells: Yes.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have been to the Dáil once in your august company. I believe everyone knew you by name and was able to say hello. No one at all knew me. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: I am glad that comment was made in the early part of the mandate.

He knows the calamitous situation his counterpart in the Irish Republic is facing. I have not checked the recent statistics, but I understand that every man, woman and child in the Irish Republic owes the IMF and the European Central Bank €50,000. Every child born in the Irish Republic inherits that debt. That was because

his equivalent in the Republic tried to bridge the gap by borrowing money they could not afford to have lent to them. The result is that a vast proportion of the Irish Republic's income is spent on servicing that debt. At the moment, of course, interest rates are low —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): All this is fascinating, but it is not directly addressing the motion. I bring the Member back to that.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, that never stopped you in the past. *[Laughter.]* However, as I do not want to impugn the integrity of the Chair —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I trust that you are not being disrespectful to the Chair.

Mr Wells: I am not being disrespectful; I have the highest respect for the honourable Member. I am just saying that, if part of the Minister's plans in the Budget is to try to bridge the gap through borrowing, I urge him not to do so, because it will leave future generations with a debt that is unsustainable. Northern Ireland has at least got through the recession with a modicum of debt which is serviceable. I do not think that we should go any further.

3.45 pm

I return to the main subject, which is of course Health. I have had some experience of the Department of Health, albeit rather short. I applaud and agree with the commitment made by my party and his to bring about a £1 billion increase in funding for Health over the five-year period of this Assembly. That is welcome. It is very welcome that the two main parties have agreed to do that.

I accept what Mr Beattie says. We cannot say that we are going to fund Health to the tune of £200 million extra per year and not find it from somewhere. However, I know from the election that I have just fought that Health is the bread-and-butter issue, apart from Brexit. Of course, the Minister will look forward to spending the extra money that he will get under the Barnett consequential when we leave the European Union on 23 June. He can look forward to our hypothecated roughly 3% of that. It is extra money that he will receive to spend on essential services, and some of that can go towards Health. So there is some good news coming the Minister's way, when we get out of this machine — this institution which drains blood out of the coffers of the UK to the tune of over £10 billion per year. I reckon that our proportion of that is about £290 million, and that will be extremely helpful as he seeks to bridge these gaps.

However, there is absolutely no doubt that, if the health service is to continue to deliver the first-rate care that we enjoy, that is the right decision. One thing I learnt in my time at Health is that the rate of inflation in Health far outstrips that in the ordinary economy. When I was there, inflation in Health was running at between 4% and 5%. Inflation in the real economy, of course, was only between 0.5% and 1%. The health trusts implemented a series of efficiency savings, and I was full of admiration for how they dealt with those very difficult calculations. However, those efficiency savings eventually got to the stage where there were no inefficiencies from which to produce efficiencies. In other words, they had looked at all the issues where they felt that money could be saved, and they were getting down to rock bottom. Having forced the Department of Health to do that, and got a leaner and fitter health service, I think it incumbent on us to reward it by bringing about

a real-terms increase in Health funding. Despite all the problems that Health had inflicted on it last year, and under three DUP Ministers, its budget of £5 billion came in within 0.4%. That is an extraordinary performance: to land that spaceship of public expenditure on that postage stamp, and bring home a balanced budget. However, that is becoming more and more difficult.

I welcome the Minister's decision this morning to inject further money into Health but it must be a priority, over the next five years, to ensure that there is real-terms growth in health provision. That will have a knock-on effect on the economy generally, because 70% of health expenditure is wages and salaries. Therefore, the more money that we pump into health, the more employment we generate and the better for our economy generally. So it is not wasted money in that sense. Therefore, I welcome the Minister's commitment to that.

I do not welcome for one moment the Minister's commitment to further expenditure on the cross-border bodies. The cross-border bodies, frankly, are a wee bit of a sideline to the main expenditure Departments in Northern Ireland. Whilst they are a nice add-on, some of what they do is not the essential core services that are represented by health, education and employment. No doubt, that gives the Minister and his supporters a comfort blanket, so that he can say, "Look, I am upping the budgets for cross-border canal routes". That is all very interesting, but it is not a priority. The Minister has to focus solely on those issues which we know are going to be absolutely, desperately difficult to resolve over the next few years.

I am not wanting to be a prophet of doom. I will watch with great interest to see how someone from a party that has a Marxist-Leninist economic viewpoint runs a part of Her Majesty's realm. It will be very interesting to see how that happens. It is a first. Up to now, the Finance Department has been in relatively safe hands. Now we have this —

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He raises the issue of the Marxist-Leninist economic philosophy of our friends across the way. Does he also think it strange that a party that prides itself in its belief in national sovereignty should be so badly on the wrong side of the Brexit debate?

Mr Wells: When one reads the outpourings of his party about the European Union from, say, even 15 years ago, and sees the almost sycophantic relationship it has with Brussels and Strasbourg, one is surprised; but the good news is that the opinion polls indicate that he is going to get a very nasty surprise come Friday 24 June. I think that it is very clear where this country is going, and not a moment too soon. That will change his outlook, and he will have to adapt to the new situation which is that we are no longer going to be part of Europe. In the next two years, he will be directly involved in helping take the United Kingdom out of the European Union. I think he will find that a very interesting challenge, to put it mildly, but at least he will have about an extra £300 million a year to spend on essential services in Northern Ireland. That has to be a good thing.

So, we are watching very carefully. I am back on the Finance Committee, and I have taken a note of all that he has said. It will be interesting to see what difference there is between Mr Millar the Back-Bench Sinn Féin Finance Committee member and Mr Millar —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I remind the Member that Members and Ministers are entitled to be called by their chosen surname.

Mr Wells: — the Finance Minister. It will be interesting to see how he reacts when the boot is on the other foot.

Mr McAleer: I take this opportunity to welcome the Budget (No. 2) Bill that is before us. Speaking from an infrastructure perspective, I believe that the Bill has the potential to contribute to the Programme for Government objectives of improving transport connections and increasing the use of public transport and active travel. I also note and welcome the Minister's statement earlier that more than £20 million has been set aside to improve the roads infrastructure. That will be hugely welcomed, particularly in rural areas in the west — areas that I represent. I am conscious that this will be the topic of an Adjournment debate later this evening, so it is not something that I will delve into in any depth.

The Infrastructure Minister was at the Committee, last week. He made the point that the infrastructure projects that are in place, and which will be financed by the Budget, set the parameters for the next generation. They are not for just this year or next year; they are for the next generation. In fact, they will set the parameters for the next 20 to 30 years. The Budget (No. 2) Bill, which we are looking at today, sets out and maps out that trajectory for the time ahead.

In the west, some of which I represent through my constituency of West Tyrone — indeed, there are members from there around the House — we have been living with an infrastructural deficit that has stunted growth in the area. Last week, at the Infrastructure Committee, I made the point that the last train left Tyrone 50 years ago. I welcome the commitment in the Budget to major projects, such as the A5 and the A6, which have the potential to redress that historical imbalance. Of course, that feeds into one of the Programme for Government (PFG) strategic outcomes of trying to move towards regional balance.

I also welcome the commitment towards other strategic projects such as the Belfast and Derry hubs and, of course, Narrow Water. There is also a very welcome commitment to Waterways Ireland, which, I know, the Finance Minister spoke about earlier. He is very enthusiastic about that. There is also a commitment towards cycling and greenways. Indeed, the timing is opportune, given the fact that we are at the implementation stage of the DRD bicycle strategy, which you, Deputy Speaker, as the former Minister for Regional Development, very heartily endorsed and were involved in from its inception. All of this feeds into another PFG outcome of promoting healthy and active lifestyles. Good infrastructure is also vital for the economy and for achieving the other PFG outcome of achieving regional balance.

I welcome the Budget Bill. Again, I am speaking as the party's spokesperson on infrastructure. I know that the Finance Minister and Infrastructure Minister have been working very well together, and I am aware that the Infrastructure Minister has been looking very closely at not only how to use our block grant, but how to maximise the opportunities that lie within the EU by maximising drawdown for projects. The Minister is making a good start. He will be in Rotterdam, next week, at an important TEN-T conference, where he will be promoting,

encouraging and making sure that we get a fair slice of cake for regionally significant strategic projects here in the North.

In bringing my comments to a conclusion, I commend the Bill to the House. It sets the trajectory for the time ahead.

Mr Girvan: I speak, as a member of the Committee for Finance, in favour of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. There are a number of areas in which, I think, discussion would be to our benefit. We are working with an ever-decreasing Budget, irrespective of what anyone says. We had a number of years in which we were taking cuts to our block grant — cuts of almost £4 billion over the previous Assembly term. There were those who suggested a doomsday scenario. They said that everything would not balance and the country would be bankrupt. Well, we are still here. I appreciate that some people might have concerns about borrowing. I, too, have concern about applying too much debt, but I believe that debt that can be serviced and used to deliver savings or to prime the pump to help business to move forward is not necessarily bad debt.

I sit on the Infrastructure Committee as well. One of my concerns relates to the area where I live. In Ballyclare, we have a difficulty in that the town is hamstrung by traffic congestion. I know that I speak for my colleagues who represent the area. They would all say the same. A relief road was proposed for the town, and, as a consequence of funding difficulties, it was agreed that the road would be delivered by the private sector when a housing development was proposed. We have a Minister who says that he is willing to think outside the box and to work with others to come up with imaginative ways in which to fund such projects. I ask that we look imaginatively at reasons to move forward with investment, which will allow the release of development land, in order to bring jobs to our economy for development, to sustain schools and to create employment in the building sector and construction industry. Those are all areas that we need to focus on, and spend will be made there. Mechanisms are there that are used elsewhere, not only in Great Britain but in the rest of Europe.

Mr Aiken: Will the honourable Member give way?

Mr Girvan: Yes.

Mr Aiken: I fully echo the view of my fellow MLA from South Antrim. We need to look at more innovative forms of financing, particularly when going ahead with significant infrastructure projects. I ask the Finance Minister to look, with a degree of urgency, at how we can have partnership and partnership arrangements for future financing to enable us to get to that position.

Mr Girvan: I thank my colleague. He makes the very point that I wished to come on to. We have had engagement with those who wish to bring forward the project, and we believe that there is a mechanism to enter into a partnership deal and to claw back the money over the next 25 years without costing the public purse or our block grant a penny. Some of the European bank loan funds could be used to access that funding to move forward with the project.

Those are areas that we should be focusing on. The extra billion pounds for health is a necessity, and there is the commitment to and, already, the demonstrated delivery of additional moneys, as made in today's statement on the June monitoring round. The £67 billion — the £67 million, rather, although £67 billion might help — brings us up

to our £200 million commitment for the current financial year. I believe that additional moneys are required. Most important, however, is probably the reform that needs to take place not just in the delivery of our health budget but in the delivery of healthcare in the Province.

It relates to exactly the same thing in infrastructure when you have a pothole. You might spend thousands of pounds on claims dealing with that pothole when £200 might have fixed it.

4.00 pm

There is also a scenario in the health service where people from our Province are shipped across to England or down to Dublin. We put their families up in hotels and are pay exorbitant costs to get an operation done, but, if we were doing it properly and dealing with it correctly, it should be done here for better value for money, costing the Northern Ireland public purse less money. Those are areas that we need to focus on to ensure that we get the best bang for our buck.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. He has outlined some of the reforms that could take place so that we can save money and spend our resources more carefully. To that end, is it not more important to reform our public services and get better value for money, rather than going to the public, for example by imposing water charges and saying to them that they should pay up and give us more? Should we not spend the money that we have better rather than asking for more?

Mr Girvan: That is the very point: we need to bring forward reform of the delivery of services. Some people might have a fear that we are trying to sell off the whole public sector and get rid of it and have delivery by the private sector: that is not the case. We need to ensure that we get value for money from what we pay for. We need to ensure that services work efficiently.

I appreciate that each Department has delivered cuts over the last number of years. Each and every one of them had to take pain when the 3% cut was delivered in efficiencies year on year from 2011. We have shown that those cuts did not come without pain, but we now have to consolidate and move forward. That opportunity is there for us.

In future, I look to see that we can work together to deliver for the betterment of Northern Ireland. We must invest in our young people to ensure that those who go into further and higher education are not coming out of our universities with degrees that are not worth the paper they are written on. I do not mean that from an academic point of view; I am saying that people are coming out with degrees that do not have jobs identified with them. There needs to be more engagement on the delivery of higher education so that we have degree courses that are geared towards growing our economy and we ensure that the people who come out of our universities have the skills and ability to take up jobs that we can and should lead the world in. We have demonstrated that in the past and have every opportunity to do it in future.

I support the Bill; it is the way forward. I am keen to see that things go forward fairly quickly in this mandate. Some people had a doomsday scenario, but I appreciate that we are trying to hit the ground running and we have to get the Bill through before recess. I understand the time constraints, but it is interesting that, when you have people around the table who are willing to work and to deliver, you

can make it happen. That is what I want to see happening in future.

Mrs Barton: In rising to speak on the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill, I will make some comments on the mid-year Estimates in relation to the education budget for 2016-17. In doing so, I seek clarity about the budget and greater transparency within it. Many school principals are looking for answers when it comes to their budgets, about which they have already been notified by the Department of Education.

I listened with interest to the contribution made yesterday by the new Chair of the Education Committee, Mr McElduff. He noted that, overall, the resource and the capital budgets for education had increased. While acknowledging the challenges for schools, he appeared confident that the Executive would find more money, although he did not say from where. It turns out, indeed, that £5 million has been found from somewhere for the aggregated schools budget.

Reference was also made yesterday to a wish or a hope that an extra £20 million would be allocated to education in the June monitoring round. From this morning's statement, it appears that £30 million, not £20 million, has been found. We were told:

"There is considerable expectation that other money, perhaps in the region of £20 million, will be allocated to education in June monitoring, with £15 million for school budgets and, hopefully, £5 million for special educational needs." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p159, col 1].

That was the £20 million announced in February, before the election, by former Minister O'Dowd. I am really not sure why there was any doubt about that money.

My colleague Sandra Overend recently asked the new Minister:

"whether the additional £20 million for the Education budget announced on 10 February 2016 has been confirmed and allocated as part of the June monitoring round"

and also:

"whether the extra £15 million announced in February 2016 for the aggregated schools budget has been accounted for in the budgets disseminated to schools in March 2016."

The answer she received was:

"The 2016-17 resource budget was allocated on the basis that the £20 million funding commitment would be honoured in the 2016-17 June monitoring round. The £15 million for ASB was included in the 2016-17 budget allocations issued to schools in March. The outcome of the 2016-17 June monitoring round is not yet known."

As of 10.00 am, the outcome of the June monitoring round is known: £30 million for the Department, with £20 million for schools, £5 million for special needs and £5 million for the drawdown of school surpluses under the school end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme. The £15 million extra promised for the aggregated schools budget was included in the budgets that schools were notified of in March.

From the answer to Sandra's question, it seems that the £15 million extra for the aggregated schools budget — the money that goes to schools — had been accounted for in the March 2016 allocations. This morning, an extra £5 million has been found. The statement suggested £20 million for schools.

Is that £5 million enough? What is that when divided among all our schools? All MLAs must be aware of the concerns raised by school principals and boards of governors across the country. Their budgets have been squeezed, and boards of governors will be forced to declare staff redundancies. That can only mean bigger class sizes, with all the consequences that that will have for educational outcomes. Despite Mr McElduff's claim yesterday that all is rosy in the garden, that is not what I hear from those working in the education sector. The mixture of superannuation pay rises, National Insurance rises and inflationary increases means schools having to look at cuts in their budgets of some 8%, which is worse than most schools expected. Schools are past crisis point and are having to submit budget deficits, which is totally against their professional standards. Some are considering refusing to propose the cuts. The continual cuts over the last five years are taking their toll, not just on teachers and principals but on all angles of school life. The stress on those who have given their life to excellence in our education system is putting unacceptable pressure on professionals.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for giving way. She is absolutely right about the concerns that many principals and boards of governors have about school finances.

Would she agree with me that one of the ways in which we can solve this problem in the long term is to devolve more autonomy to schools and have more of the budget for schools going to them directly rather than being held centrally in the Department? That was a commitment that we made in our manifesto. I am sure that the Member will support us in that.

Mrs Barton: We also did. Thank you.

The budget difficulties have come completely out of the blue to boards of governors. They have had no time at all to prepare. Schools are actually using funds raised by their excellent parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to help to fund teachers and basic classroom activities. I see that in yesterday's 'Belfast Telegraph', Minister Weir said that he is "acutely aware" of the pressures on school budgets. He is quoted as having bid for extra cash in the June monitoring round. We now know that the extra cash turned out to be £5 million. Clearly, he has found either the money tree or cash down the side of the ministerial sofa, but is it enough to plug the school budgets gap? I sincerely doubt it.

That is short term. The longer-term issue is the structure of the Department of Education's budget. In reply to a question for written answer that I put down on the first day, the Education Minister confirmed that:

"The percentage of the Education budget allocated to the Aggregated Schools Budget as part of the opening 2016-17 budget process is 59.3%".

This fact has been a bone of contention for a number of years. It is something that the Minister's party pledged in its very brief manifesto to change. It stated that:

"The DUP wants to empower school Principals and Governors".

Indeed, we have heard that this afternoon. That, on the face of it, is a long way from the reply to another question for written answer that I received from the Minister last week, when he said that:

"It is my intention to give further consideration to the overall Education budget position before I consider what steps I may take to devolve more control of the budget to schools".

However, we shall see what emerges in the months to come. In the shorter term, we need clarity on the deficiency in the aggregated schools budget for 2016-17 as schools head towards the summer break in an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety.

Finally, higher and further education, which is now a responsibility of the new Department of Education, is an area that cannot be ignored any longer. As my colleague Mr Philip Smith said yesterday:

"budget allocations for our higher education institutions have been identified as a soft touch over recent years" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p154, col 1].

with their Government grant being reduced by 24% between 2010 and 2015 and no sign of a process to build a sustainable and equitable model to finance third-level education into the future. The mid-year Estimates give no answer to this question, but the issue cannot be put off by the Executive much longer.

To sum up: the budget for education remains a cause for real concern.

Ms Dillon (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity to speak today as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and to outline the views of the Committee. We received a briefing from officials on 9 June.

The Committee recognises the significant challenges faced by the newly established Department. Last week, we heard from the Department's permanent secretary that DAERA will face significant budgetary pressures and must manage a £12 million resource reduction. The Committee is aware that the Department is undergoing a significant change programme. We heard that it has an ambitious change programme to help it become more modern and digitally driven. The outcome of the voluntary exit scheme saw the departure of 318 full-time equivalent staff from the old DARD and 370 full-time equivalents from the new Department. According to the Department, that should save around £6.5 million a year, but, as a result, the Department has lost people with significant experience and expertise.

4.15 pm

The Department is also undertaking a major relocation programme that may lead to further changes and loss of corporate memory. DAERA is a very geographically diverse Department and has 70 different locations and offices, including 12 DAERA Direct offices. It has already moved its fisheries division to Downpatrick, Forest Service

will move to Enniskillen and Ballykelly will become the new corporate headquarters. The Committee has heard that those locations will also be reviewed. The Committee will look forward to scrutinising the review of DAERA's estate strategy to ensure that the Department makes optimal use of those locations, which, in turn, might make money available to manage its other pressures. Given that the Department's remit also includes rural affairs, I have already outlined my expectation with the Department that, notwithstanding the difficulties faced by staff as a result of the relocation programme, DAERA's offices should not all be located in the city.

It is imperative that the Department manages the programme efficiently and that it is fit for purpose. I have no doubt that members of the Committee will wish to scrutinise the implementation and delivery of the change programme as we move forward in the mandate.

I shall now outline other concerns and issues raised by members during the briefing with officials on the Main Estimates. On resource, the Committee is aware that the £215 million budget is net of the EU funds administered by DAERA, which is a significant element of the Department's work. Given the budgetary pressures facing the Department, the Committee sought a detailed breakdown of the £48 million income generated by the Department. DAERA's income capacity will be crucial to address the challenges ahead. The Committee will keep that under scrutiny and seek assurances from officials that money is allocated correctly and swiftly.

The Committee is aware that, following changes in Treasury guidelines on research and development, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) will benefit from the reclassification from resource to capital expenditure. The Committee welcomes that development. It accounts for some £0.8 million moving from resource to capital.

More than three quarters of the budget of the Department's veterinary service animal health group is allocated to tackling bovine TB in herds. That is a significant budgetary commitment from the Department. Around £12 million of that expenditure goes towards compensation costs alone. I am aware that was a priority for the previous Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and while the new Committee has yet to set its priorities, I have no doubt that bovine TB will feature as a major area of scrutiny.

Moving on to capital expenditure, the Committee noted that IT capital projects account for over 40% of the Department's overall capital allocation. The Committee sought assurances that, where there might be slippage in those projects, the Department has shovel-ready projects in the pipeline. It is something we will keep a watching brief on.

Members of the Committee also sought additional information on the modest £0.3 million expenditure on broadband and have sought clarification on where the money will be spent and the criteria for receiving it.

In conclusion, the Committee recognises the importance of its role in scrutinising the Department's expenditure and delivery of projects. I look forward to updating the Assembly in the future on budgetary debates about the work of the Committee on the matter.

As Sinn Féin spokesperson and an MLA for the large rural constituency of Mid Ulster, whilst again accepting that all our Departments are under budgetary constraints, I sincerely

hope that there will continue to be a focus on tackling rural deprivation and isolation. I ask that the Minister develop a strategy with the Economy Minister to tackle the lack of rural broadband provision. A proper strategy and joined-up working within government would surely ensure that broadband providers are held to account in a more efficient manner. It has been outlined today that not everything has to be tackled with money and that there are other ways of tackling things and coming up with strategies that do not necessarily incur budgetary constraints.

Without proper broadband, our rural children are being disadvantaged in their education, our rural businesses are less efficient and unable to grow and our farmers, who are being asked by DAERA to submit forms online are unable to do so. We have to tackle head-on the attitude that appears to exist that it is easier to move businesses out of rural areas.

My constituency of Mid Ulster has over 8,000 VAT-registered businesses — that is the greatest number of VAT-registered businesses outside Belfast city. We in central government need to support indigenous businesses and put a proper focus on this, as those businesses will be what sustain the rural economy. The reality is that, while FDI will be an economic driver in urban areas, indigenous businesses will be the economic driver in our rural areas.

I met a number of businesses from the east Tyrone area at a recent meeting organised by Dungannon Enterprise Centre. Their issue is that they are outgrowing their premises and cannot obtain larger premises in the local area. That may seem to be a good dilemma, but our fear is that we will lose those businesses to larger towns and cities. They do not want to move out of the rural area, and we do not want them to leave. I highlighted a number of these issues last week when I spoke in the PFG debate, and I will continue to champion our rural communities and businesses through the Committee structure and on the Floor of the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call Mr Richie McPhillips. As this is the first opportunity for Mr McPhillips to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr McPhillips: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. First of all, I begin by extending my best wishes to the Minister in his new role. I welcome the opportunity to make my maiden speech to the Assembly, and I do so as an MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Before I turn to the 2016-17 Budget, I take this opportunity to thank the people from across the community in Fermanagh and South Tyrone who have given me the opportunity to represent them in the Chamber and in the Assembly. As I said on the day of my election, I do not care where anybody goes to church on a Sunday; I am here to represent everyone for the benefit of all the community. I have no immediate SDLP predecessor; however, I wish to mention Mr Tommy Gallagher, who served the constituency with distinction for 13 years, and thank him for all that he did for the constituency.

The 2016-17 Budget, as outlined to the House earlier this year, is unique, as it is a one-year Budget put together in the aftermath of the Stormont House Agreement. This

Budget promises many things, but one of the major issues that it fails to deal with is investment and job creation in the west. Up to 2014, only 3.9% of Invest NI's funding went to my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That is despite the fact that the unemployment rate is sitting at 5% and almost a third of people are reliant on some sort of benefits. In this Budget, I do not see any attempt to redirect much-needed funding and investment back to the west. My constituency, and Fermanagh especially, does not even get the crumbs from the table. We are the poor relations, in my opinion, of the Six Counties.

However, it is not just job opportunities that are lacking in the west. One of the big disappointments in many rural areas across the North is the vexed question of no or poor broadband services. A failure to improve broadband services has severely impeded existing small and medium-sized enterprises from developing and has discouraged start-ups and enterprising activity. Many people are trying to run small businesses in places right across our constituency, from Belleek and Garrison at one end to Aughnacloy and Clogher, but the standard of broadband is extremely poor. In 2016, people in Belfast can boast about having download speeds of 200 megabytes, but there is no provision for those sorts of speeds in places like Fermanagh. We have seen broadband services in the likes of Lisnaskea and Enniskillen fall far below the standard required, and businesses and people there have not seen broadband improvement in years. In 2016, that is simply unacceptable. I have come to understand that the former Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment had been spending significant amounts of money to rectify the problem, but that has not reached Fermanagh and South Tyrone in any tangible way yet.

There is no doubt that the Infrastructure budget faces serious challenges. The average spend on our roads over the previous mandate was roughly £70 million. What is it this year? Twenty million pounds. I ask this question straight away: what is that going to do? One can only believe that a lot less will be done in the coming year. I can only imagine that rural constituencies such as mine will also be one of the first to fall foul of a budgetary decrease. I want to comment on our rural road infrastructure in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and the terrible state of the roads around Lisnaskea and Newtownbutler. We have been promised repairs after the flooding, and the much-needed Enniskillen bypass has yet to see the light of day despite ministerial announcements in the last year. I hope that these are not to be empty promises of proper investment and improvement, especially in the west. The theme of empty promises is not alien to the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

This Budget has many problems as well as Infrastructure. Last year, we witnessed a crisis in the farming sector, with many farmers teetering on the brink of existence. Farmers have been facing an income crisis and that has not yet been resolved. The new Minister needs to use all budgetary resources available to her to ensure the implementation of the rural development programme, including the farm business investment and agri-environment schemes, to ensure better access to finance for the farming industry and the payment of emergency assistance schemes for farmers affected by last year's flooding.

A potential exit from the European Union is adding further difficulties to the farming community as it faces possible

uncertainty over CAP payments and cross-border trade. It is important to remember that today's Budget and future multi-year Budgets are predicated on EU funding streams, and, with no viable funding alternative in place, a complete removal from the EU will have dramatic implications for future funding allocations.

The Education budget for 2016-17 comprises £1.9 billion, but there are cuts to student support, libraries, museums and public services across the North. The west will ultimately feel the brunt of those cuts. I met principals from schools across my constituency recently who have genuine concerns about their school budgets. This means fewer teachers, bigger class sizes and limited support for students with special educational needs. In fact, the changes to superannuation arrangements in the last mandate are adding further pressure to school budgets, with many schools in my constituency in financial difficulties and having to let staff go in order to balance the books. One member of a board of governors called me just last week to say that they were having to let one full-time teacher and two ancillary staff go because of the imposition of the superannuation scheme. This is a serious issue at present. How is this beneficial for our children and their futures?

In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the past 10 years have ushered in the closure of schools, post offices, rural banks and businesses. Health and social care services have also been dwindling, with seemingly more people being transferred from the South West Acute Hospital than are treated in it at this point in time. Fifteen-minute care packages have become the norm for the elderly and vulnerable, and, as we have learned recently, there has been a significant underspend in learning disability services, leaving many parents and families without the necessary help and support they need. Day-care centres, which are a necessary resource for rural communities, are being closed, leaving some of the most vulnerable and elderly people in isolated places like Rosslea and Garrison without that service. This is morally not right. A community that cannot look after its old and needy is failing them.

The people in my constituency are concerned about the gradual erosion of services; therefore, it is important that the issues raised are given appropriate consideration by the new Executive. The Budget before us today does not offer that support. It is a one-year Budget that will not restore economic balance or fairness between the west and the rest of the North.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): As this is Kellie Armstrong's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Ms Armstrong: I want to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Members and all colleagues for the warm welcome that I have been given by the Assembly. I also wish the Minister well in his new role. I would like to put on record that it is an honour and privilege to be appointed to represent the people of Strangford. I am immensely proud of the constituency that I have lived in all my life. Strangford is simply the most beautiful, warm and generous constituency, and I will use the privilege that, as this is my maiden speech, no one in the House can contradict me on that one.

I am committed to ensuring that only the best services are provided for my constituents. Therefore, it is appropriate that I give my maiden speech in the debate on the Budget (No. 2) Bill, which, after all, will determine the resources that will be spent on providing services to all our constituents in this financial year.

4.30 pm

I am very aware that I am following in the footsteps of my predecessor, Kieran McCarthy, who represented the Strangford constituency with exceptional ability and tenacity. Kieran was an outstanding Member of the Assembly, and I am sure that the House joins me in wishing him and his wife, Kathleen, a long and happy retirement. There are many happy miles of motoring left for Kieran to enjoy in his beloved Morris Minor and hours of playing with his growing number of grandchildren.

Kieran voted against the 2016-17 Budget when it was debated in the Assembly back in January because it missed an opportunity to take strategic decisions to look ahead to help resolve issues with the health service, education reform and the cost of a divided society. Today, I challenge the Finance Minister, as I do not believe that the Executive have got the balance right. He outlined his opposition to austerity, yet the Budget does not invest enough in front-line services that will help those who are impacted on by cuts.

Today, we have been presented with a Budget Bill that is letting down the community and voluntary sector. Today, two and half months into the financial year, there are community and voluntary sector organisations that have still not been told what financial support they will be working with in this financial year. That is an unacceptable norm. It is becoming an annual ritual for Departments to leave those organisations in limbo, with staff on notice of redundancy and without the ability to plan for sustainable services. There is no reason why Departments have to wait for this legislation before letting organisations know what financial support they will be getting, because the Assembly passed a Vote on Account in February that gave Departments the resources that they needed to make those commitments by the start of the financial year. I ask the Minister how he expects the Budget to deliver for our community when we are already letting down the very partners that we need to deliver services on the ground. Minister, I ask you to confirm whether you think that that makes good business sense or whether you agree with me that it is wholly unacceptable.

Today, we are presented with a Budget Bill that keeps spending a disproportionate amount of money on high-profile flagship projects such as the A5 and A6 roads, the Belfast rapid transit scheme, the Belfast transport hub, Desertcreat training college, the women and children's hospital at the Royal, and regional and subregional sports stadia. It is not that those things are not needed. My concern is that we cannot afford all those things at the same time while basic needs are not being met. Why is it acceptable to have an almost £1 billion backlog of roads maintenance? Should we not be dealing with the miles of potholes and crumbling rural roads rather than investing all the capital money in a handful of shiny new projects just because they give Ministers photo opportunities?

I have to ask this Finance Minister what has changed. When Simon Hamilton was Finance Minister, he stated

on several occasions that we could not afford to build the A5 and the A6 simultaneously, yet, here we are, both the A5 and the A6 are in the capital budget, at a time when expenditure on roads maintenance is at an all-time low. Even with the surprise announcement of an additional £5.3 million for roads maintenance and flood protection today, the expenditure on roads maintenance, coastal defences and flood protection is way below where it needs to be. When I was growing up, I was taught to look after what you have first. Therefore, if your roof was leaking, you replaced the broken slates. You did not spend all your money on a new conservatory. Our deteriorating roads and crumbling sea defences are the equivalents of a leaking roof. The small amounts of money that you have allocated today will not fix the problem.

The Budget does little to take forward the opportunity to remove silo-working. It does not force Departments to work together enough to improve the lives and well-being of the most vulnerable in our society. For example, in the Bill, Departments continue to cut investment for support for learning disability and autism services. I do not see any commitment in it to the £2 million that was promised by the previous Health Minister to help reduce waiting lists for autism diagnoses. Will the Minister confirm whether the £2 million for autism is in the Budget or in the additional money that was announced in the June monitoring round? In the past weeks, parents have contacted me to complain that waiting times are increasing and not decreasing.

At the same time, the Education Authority is moving to cut preschool nursery support for children with special needs. Multiple studies and reports confirm that early intervention makes a substantial and lifelong difference to children with learning disabilities. Diagnosis delays and the removal of early years support will only create higher costs for Health and Education in the long run. The lack of appropriate Budget planning means early years support is not being given the money that it needs to help children. Without that support, vulnerable children with learning disabilities are being left behind, not receiving the same level of investment as other children. Is this how we should be balancing our finances: by taking from the most vulnerable or by funding services dependent on the crumbs from the table given out during monitoring rounds?

My challenge to the Finance Minister and to the Executive is to treat the community and voluntary sector like a partner and to ensure that all letters of offer are supplied before the end of this month for this financial year, and that all future grants are confirmed before the start of each financial year; to review our commitment to major capital projects; to fix what we have first before embarking on long-term, high-cost photo-opportunity projects; and to invest in the most vulnerable in society. Cutting early years support may save one Department a few pounds now but in the long run will cost all Departments so much more and have a lifelong detrimental effect on people with learning disabilities.

I have listened over the past few weeks to various Ministers berate Members sitting in Opposition for not presenting solutions. This Budget does little to create solutions for the most vulnerable and isolated in our society. Alliance proffered solutions to Sinn Féin and the DUP through our five priorities. However, those parties chose to maintain division for their own purposes. If the Executive want to make a difference, it should work harder

to end the amount of money being wasted on division. Let us see real change through investment in building an integrated society, in jobs and skills and the economy, and to end all forms of paramilitarism.

This Budget actually places further pressures on our community by investing in headlines instead of front-line services.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I gently remind all Members that when a Member is making a speech, particularly a maiden speech, proper respect should be shown. Even in private conversations, Members should speak quietly.

Mrs Palmer: I commend Kellie on her maiden speech. She certainly echoes the thoughts of, I am sure, every Member.

At last week's Committee meeting, the Minister for Infrastructure said that we needed to be innovative and consider all options. I was delighted to hear him say that and assure him that, if he delivered on those promises, he would have my support. That is exactly what this Department needs. An approach that welcomes innovation and considers all options would mark a welcome departure from our experience of some previous Sinn Féin Ministers, where a blind adherence to ideology and party policy, regardless of the results, was the order of the day.

I appreciate that there is a need to operate within the budgets and to set priorities accordingly. The Department has a number of flagship projects that were shared with us at the Infrastructure Committee last week: the Belfast rapid transit project, the A5 and A6, and Narrow Water bridge. I am fully supportive of the Belfast rapid transit project, which has the potential to make a real difference to the lives of many who work and live in Belfast. With regard to the A5, however, I sound a note of caution to the Minister. The proposal that was shown to the Committee last week could only be described as a gold-plated design. It accounts for a significant proportion of the budget and has been around for quite some time. I cannot but wonder whether a more-streamlined proposal would better suit the new financial reality in which we find ourselves and still deliver improvements in road safety and journey times in a carriageway.

When I looked at the maps and the alignment of the new road to the existing road, I saw that we were bypassing bypasses, that we were avoiding —

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The urban strategies report 2014 said that the Belfast transit hub could:

“lead to greatly enhanced potential on a significant number of vacant sites in and around the hub”.

The vacant sites include communities such as Sandy Row. Does she agree that it is a lot more, and much more positive, than simply a “photo opportunity”, as it was described?

Mrs Palmer: I thank the Member for his intervention, although I am not sure what it has to do with my contribution.

I return to the maps. It looks like a gold-plated delivery. There are bypasses along that carriageway that are being bypassed instead of utilised. Brand new roundabouts are being bypassed. As you well know, Minister, there are

issues with land vesting and the PAC. There are a lot of major concerns here. I believe that, if there were a proper review of the A5, we could come to a fair Budget that would deliver the road without the extra expense, allowing the Minister to fund other areas.

Anyone who commutes to Belfast knows how badly we need investment in the transport infrastructure. At the risk of being accused of being a tad parochial, Minister, I would like to remind Members that virtually all traffic approaching Belfast from the south and west converges at Sprucefield in my constituency of Lagan Valley. Every morning, the traffic news bulletins tell of all the delays around Sprucefield, the Blaris intersection and the Westlink. In fact, I sat in traffic for nearly an hour this morning. For traffic approaching the city from the north, there are the often-quoted delays at the Nelson Street off-slip and the hill section of the M2, which is another bottleneck. There is no question that significant sums are required to address the issues at these locations. Perhaps, if the gold-plated A5 were reviewed, there may well be some funding in the Budget to look at the bottlenecks coming into the city of Belfast. There is no doubt that any improvements would benefit tens of thousands of commuters, not to mention freight travelling to the Port of Belfast and Larne, through reduced journey times. It is time to get moving on the York Street interchange project, and I look forward to Budget proposals to make that a reality.

On other budgetary priorities, Minister, we need to mention the A6, which should, having been identified as needed, be delivered fairly rapidly. Grass-cutting is an issue in constituencies all over Northern Ireland. I drove through Antrim to Lisburn and could barely see the roads for the 4-foot high grass along the main arterial route. It is an absolute disgrace. Perhaps the Minister would look carefully at projects in which communities could get involved. There could be some form of service-level agreements with community groups to maintain the grass in their area. That might assist with grass-cutting.

Whilst we are on the subject of infrastructure, we cannot ignore the state in which our electricity grid currently finds itself. I am well aware that it falls under the responsibility of the Department for the Economy, but there is no doubt in my mind that a Department that is titled “Infrastructure” must have more than a passing interest in this. Quite simply, the electricity grid cannot cope, and we now have a situation in which wind farms cannot link to it. We also have to grasp the nettle regarding the North/South interconnector. In addition, the Moyle interconnector has experienced problems since 2011 and currently operates at a reduced capacity.

You are always looking for suggestions, Minister, so I have a suggestion for what to do with any savings from the A5 project that your review might find. It is a suggestion that would provide a real boost to the Northern Ireland economy. It is long past the time that the relatively short distance between Belfast International Airport and the M2 was graced with a dual carriageway. Surely it is not too much to ask that the main point of entry and exit to Northern Ireland for air travellers should have its road access upgraded.

4.45 pm

I will touch on the Narrow Water bridge. From my time as a councillor and sitting on the monitoring committee

of SEUPB, I know that it was a peace-driven, cross-community, cross-Ireland, vanity project — and I say vanity project because when we look at all of the serious infrastructure neglect on our roads and elsewhere, this project should be in the back of the filing cabinet until such time as we can actually deal with it. You said yourself, in the Chamber this morning, that you wanted all Departments to look at their priorities and that if it was deemed that there were more important priorities, then you should deliver them. I put it to you, Minister, through the Chair, of course, that the gateway to the Shannon and the Lagan Canal Trust and their vision to open up those waterways is more important than sticking a bridge that would have no significance whatsoever across — I do not even know where it is, but I am sure that everybody else knows where the Narrow Water bridge is.

Minister, I commend you today. It is not that often that you get commended, but you looked favourably upon co-ownership and announced today the delivery of over £5 million, which is certainly welcome, to help to deliver social and affordable housing through that. However, I am concerned that, as you said, the housing associations have not bid or planned for the additional moneys. That is probably down to the planning constraints and the securing and development of land, but then the history of housing delivery, even given the current budget requirement, has been difficult. We heard earlier from the Minister of the new Department for Communities that it is a difficult scenario for housing, and it seemed to be the most topical issue for his Department. I will go one step further here and say, as you said in the Chamber, we should be getting the solution right for the Housing Executive to start building homes again. That will contribute to better infrastructure and create the growth and job opportunities to strengthen the economy.

I suggest that the loss of the block grant is more than compensated for by the borrowing to deliver improvements and new builds. It is wrong to describe this as a loss to the block grant, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive would have to compensate with a dowry to the centre, as a payment for the housing stock transfer. Glasgow Housing Association is a perfect model of excellence in managing this process. Staff leaving the public sector would create a reduction in public sector liability. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) looked at the model, and it is very doable, and I implore you to look at it. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive would need to increase its rental income by about 1% above inflation per annum for the next 15 years to address some of those issues. However, a Northern Ireland Housing Executive transfer saves the exchequer £200 million-plus per annum with a capital payoff for the housing stock transfer, so why would the Government not look at this option?

I know that there are other options, which I will not share with you today, but I would certainly like to meet with the Minister if he is like-minded in making sure that we move. I sat on the Housing Executive board for nearly eight years, and for five of those years it stagnated due to the lack of will in the Assembly to move housing forward. We are in a rut, and this is a serious issue. There are 40,000 people on the waiting list, and I believe that you are the right person to address that, Minister. I hope that will you look at it favourably.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I call Mr Gerry Mullan. As this is the first opportunity for him to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Mullan: Like two of the previous Members who spoke, Richie McPhillips and Kellie Armstrong, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's debate on the Budget. I do so as both the SDLP Member for East Derry and a member of the Finance Committee.

I am extremely proud to have been elected as a representative for East Derry. As this is my maiden speech, I begin by paying tribute to two former East Derry MLAs. Arthur Doherty, who sadly is no longer with us, was for me the quintessential gentleman and scholar whose passion for politics and the arts is the reason I am here today. For that, I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude. John Dallat also served the constituency of East Derry with distinction for many years, and I especially want to take a moment to commend him for the dignified way he represented the people of my constituency in what were some of the darkest days of our history. He did himself proud, he did his family proud and he did the SDLP proud, and I sincerely wish him and his wife, Anne, all the very best in his retirement.

My constituency has a fascinating history and some of the most stunning areas of natural beauty across this island. From the award-winning blue flag beaches of Benone to the stunning views of Binevenagh mountain, on top of which, by the way, now stands the famous Manannán Mac Lir statue. We have scenic river walks in the Roe Valley and the much loved promenades in Portstewart and Portrush. But the truth is that, in my constituency, it is not all great. We have watched our town centres deteriorate, with places like Dungiven and Coleraine practically unrecognisable. We have watched our communities decline, with young people leaving in their droves in search of greater economic opportunity, and we have seen vital public services withdrawn due to budgetary constraints. Local businesses face significant financial pressures, with high rates, poor broadband services and limited access to finance all hampering their ability to grow and prosper.

Against that backdrop, it is vital that we use all resources available to the House to ensure that we grow our economy and ensure that this is an attractive place to invest in. A key component of that has to be a properly trained and skilled workforce, but, in the last number of years, we have seen budget cuts in further and higher education, with 1,250 student places lost at Ulster University's Coleraine campus alone, and a total of 210 job losses. Those are cuts to modern language and science degrees that have dramatically disadvantaged my constituency as a place to invest in and have severely disadvantaged not only local students but students from right across the North and beyond. As we debate today's Budget, it is vital that the House begins to learn of the importance and value of higher education, especially in considering the planned introduction of corporation tax in 2018. In this year's Budget, I do not see any real evidence of that.

It is a sorry state of affairs that a Tory Chancellor has announced extra spend for the completion of the Coleraine enterprise centre. Coleraine will now be the only area in Northern Ireland to offer enhanced capital allowances to large capital-intensive projects that have the potential

to promote highly paid jobs and further investment in the area, but cuts to higher education mean that places like Coleraine will not reap the many rewards that an enterprise zone should bring.

Education is not the only area the Budget fails to deliver on. In the Justice budget, £17 million is allocated to capital projects. Surely one of those needs to be a new build for Magilligan prison, which has long fallen short of the standards required, with the current infrastructure outliving its useful life. It is now critical that we see a new build at the site to relieve pressure on staff and to allow prisoners a genuine opportunity for rehabilitation in a modern environment. A new-build capital project would also provide a welcome stimulus for the local construction industry, which has continued to struggle throughout the economic downturn.

It is fair to say that the delivery of capital projects was a key failure of the last Executive. After empty promises and undue delay, I welcome the renewed commitment to deliver the A6, as it will be the lifeline for many communities in East Derry and further afield. Funding for the A6 faces a substantial shortfall of £300 million, which will provide little comfort for places such as Dungiven. In the absence of a critical bypass, people there are faced with living in one of the most polluted and neglected towns on this island through no fault of their own. The funding announced for the A6 is but a small part of a mammoth task to be undertaken. I sincerely hope that the Executive come through on their promise and deliver the full A6 project — I repeat: the full A6 project — before the end of the mandate.

I will focus my final remarks on the health budget. Throughout my constituency, serious concerns have been raised by local staff, hospital users and the general population concerning the future of the Causeway Hospital. The Causeway Hospital provides a first-class and vital service for all living in the area, but A&E services, palliative care, midwifery and the hospital's relationship with Ulster University are all now at risk following various reviews and reports conducted in the last mandate. In the new mandate, it is vital that those local hospital services are not only retained but enhanced, especially as other primary and community care services have been left teetering on the brink of existence, leaving many patients with nowhere to go. Local GP provision is at breaking point. There is little out-of-hours service, and care packages, as you all know, have been stripped back to 15 minutes. That all leaves many patients in extremely vulnerable positions. That simply cannot continue.

I come back to the Budget. As the Executive work towards a new Programme for Government and multi-year Budget, it is important that these issues and the many more facing my constituency are dealt with. We cannot have any more empty promises, any further delays to capital projects or any further stripping of public services.

Mr F McCann: I welcome the opportunity to speak here today. I was going to be very brief, but — I said this at a Committee meeting last week — I cannot let the comments of Jenny Palmer pass without comment. It seems that she is against road-building everywhere except in her constituency. She does not want it in Narrow Water because she does not know where it is. She is trying to deny people west of the Bann a motorway that they have cried out for for years; she called it “gold-plated”. She said

that she supports the rapid transport, but I think that, last week, she wanted part of it to run through her constituency, which would have cost an extra fortune, all because of the bottleneck at Sprucefield. I had to remind people at the Committee last week that there is a bit of an anti-Belfast attitude. The reason there is a bottleneck is that everybody is going into Belfast to work. The constituency that I live in and others in Belfast have huge deprivation and high unemployment. They would be only too glad to take up the jobs of some of the constituents she talks about.

I will go on to what I was going to say; I have no doubt that I will pick up on that again. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Budget debate today. As in many other years, I urge the Finance Minister to prioritise funding for social housing. Year after year, we have been informed that we were reaching the Programme for Government figure for social housing provision. However, as I kept reminding people, the PFG figure was a minimal figure; it in no way allowed housing providers to keep pace with the growing waiting lists.

In fact, at the end of the last mandate, there were as many affordable houses acquired as social houses built. That imbalance did not take into consideration the relatively small number of applications for affordable houses. Co-ownership is estimated to be less than 1,000, but there are social housing waiting lists of 40,000 people, 20,000 of whom are in housing stress.

5.00 pm

The pressure continues to build on people who are on waiting lists, many of whom have languished in hostels for the homeless, some for as long as three or four years. I was speaking to young parents recently. The child of one young mother was born just before she moved into a hostel. Four years later, that young family is still in a hostel, though the child has started primary school. This is a terrible situation and an indictment of a system which has failed people.

The case I speak of is not an isolated one. In areas of high demand, such as Derry, north Belfast and west Belfast, waiting lists continue to grow. In many cases, families are living in overcrowded conditions under the same roof, a situation which is a throwback to the 1950s. In my constituency, 200 points would not get you a house. In some areas in my constituency, things are so bad that there is a waiting list to get into hostels, which is impacting on the mental and physical well-being of people. Not having a home impacts on education and employment and upsets family life.

If we are ever to move on as a society, we need to look after those who are most in need. Housing is one of the issues that needs to be tackled, and that can be done only by an injection of financial resources. Those resources have to be directed to where the problems exist and have to be allocated on the basis of need. To manage that, housing providers need to be encouraged to tap into other resources to build houses. We need to get the Housing Executive back to building houses. Its 88,000 houses could be used as a huge resource and could go a long way towards making an impact on the serious need that exists; but that can only be done if the commitment exists to make it happen. We all have to ensure that that commitment is there.

At some stage, we need to look at the warnings that are coming down the line. Things do not get easier for people, waiting lists are rising, and homelessness is a serious problem. Unless we start to tackle that, along with a number of other issues, we have lost the plot.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): As this is the first opportunity for Mr Harold McKee to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr McKee: It is an immense honour to have been elected to the Assembly as the Ulster Unionist Party Member for South Down. I am humbled that the electorate has endorsed me as its MLA.

Ulster Unionism has now returned to South Down after a hiatus. Although the previous Assembly election indeed saw an Ulster Unionist Party member elected — John McCallister, who supported me, and I him, in the campaigns of 2011 — his subsequent decision to leave the party meant that South Down had no Ulster Unionist Party representation from February 2013. The personal impact of that was that I fought three successful campaigns without any MLA support and, indeed, South Down has been without an Ulster Unionist Party MLA. I intend to ensure that it will be of huge benefit to have a functioning Ulster Unionist Party office opening very soon in South Down, and I am wholly committed to serving all the people of South Down and promoting the interests of South Down in this seat of government.

I was first elected to Newry and Mourne District Council in 2011, and again to Newry, Mourne and Down super-council in 2014. Last year, I topped the unionist poll for Westminster, and I felt deeply honoured to have received endorsement from so many in South Down. I come from a working-class background and have first-hand experience of many of the issues that concern local people. As a Christian, I have always used the Bible as my compass and endeavour to demonstrate clear standards of integrity, honesty and respect. I respect the right of everyone to hold their views, as I hope they respect my right to hold mine.

The Ulster Unionist Party always intended to play a proactive role in this Assembly, but our decision to move to formal Opposition owing to the vagueness of the Programme for Government provides an assurance to the Northern Ireland public of scrutiny and challenge to the Executive that was previously lacking. Of course, we can all be assured that, where they are robust, the processes and plans will be able to withstand that scrutiny. The public should therefore have renewed confidence in the structures of government in Northern Ireland as we move into this new era.

I am delighted to have been appointed Ulster Unionist Party spokesperson for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. As a Mourne man born and bred, I have a strong interest in the area's core industries: fishing, farming and construction. As many of you will know, south Down is a largely rural and typical farming area, with the largest fishing port in Northern Ireland. However, physical and infrastructural constraints are limiting the development of the fishing industry. There is a strong case to be made for the development of a new outer harbour, which would see potential financial gains in the region of £25 million-plus per annum. That is something that I intend to work on actively to progress.

As this is the Northern Ireland Year of Food and Drink, I feel strongly that we, as political representatives, should prioritise support for our local farming industry to ensure its survival. It is crucial at a time when incomes have plunged by more than 40%, from £312 million to £183 million. As a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I will do my utmost to promote that cause.

Another issue that directly impacts on my constituency is the proposed Narrow Water bridge project. Although it may benefit cross-border tourism, it will do nothing to reduce the volume of heavy goods vehicles that enter Newry city every day. The early introduction of the southern relief road would provide more tangible benefit for south Down by removing from Newry 600 daily lorry movements, which are creating traffic issues and polluting the air.

Roads have been mentioned. It is accepted that the condition of Northern Ireland roads is of vital importance to the economic and social well-being of the country. We are an export-focused economy. Most of our manufacturing business depends on excellent connectivity with our ports and airports in order to allow businesses to transport their products quickly and efficiently to their customers. Therefore, regardless of the result of the EU referendum vote on 23 June, there needs to be a clear plan for those core industries.

It is disappointing that the previous two Agriculture Ministers used their important role to pursue their own flawed political agenda. A perfect example is the proposed relocation of the old DARD headquarters to Ballykelly, despite some concerns. Costs for the project are growing significantly, with the recent estimates now in excess of £41 million, with over £10 million in this year's Budget alone. In addition, value for money for the project has never been demonstrated, and officials from several Departments have expressed deep concern. Even the former Finance Minister Sammy Wilson refused to sign off on the project, not least, I suspect, because only an outline business case was ever produced. In fact, the only option considered was to relocate to Ballykelly.

In reality, it was a process with a predetermined, Sinn Féin-favoured outcome. That is deeply concerning. If the costs of the project cannot be contained, it will be farmers and rural communities who will be left paying the price for years to come. I hope that the new Minister revisits the issue to ensure that value for money exists and that other possible locations, such as the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) offices in Coleraine, are at least considered. In addition, I would be grateful if the Finance Minister could advise on which of the old DOE and DARD headquarters is now the lead DAERA headquarters and whether DAERA's proposed headquarters in Ballykelly will include workstations previously located in DOE headquarters.

Another issue is the growing concern over new IT systems for the Northern Ireland animal and public health information system (APHIS). Although the allocation for this year was £2.7 million, the reality is that the estimated cost will climb sharply in the years after. I will be keeping a close eye on that over the coming years.

Finally, many farmers will be infuriated to learn that, whilst DARD continued to put obstacles in the way, it has allowed its own administration costs to spiral. The total cost of administration was £45 million last year compared with

£5 million less than five years ago. Whilst there is a broad consensus that the agriculture and fishing industry here is still faced with too much red tape and was forced to jump through too many hoops with previous Ministers, I do not believe that there has ever been a genuine willingness to tackle it. So I call on the Minister to consider what steps she can take to reduce the administrative burden on our farmers.

Mr Lunn: At the outset, I wish the Minister well in his unenviable task of trying to bridge the unbridgeable gaps here. There is no doubt about it: if we continue with the financial model that we have in this place, and we try to work within the Budget that we have, it is absolutely impossible. I will look forward with interest, as the months go on — I hope that it is not too many months — to see the outcome of the outcomes-based assessment of our draft Programme for Government framework. We will see where we go from there and whether it is possible. I believe that it is a model that has been used elsewhere; if you work backwards from that and decide where you want to be, well, OK, but the jury is out.

I am afraid that I might repeat one or two things that I said yesterday, but I think that a lot of people have done so, so I will not be embarrassed.

Like a lot of others, I will start off with education. I have just spent nine years on the Education Committee; I have now been released and placed on the Justice Committee. I must confess that, in those nine years, I did not see much of what I could call progress in any aspect of our education system. I certainly could not see it in the schools estate. I could see some improvement at the top end of our results spectrum, but not much at the bottom end. Apparently, we still have 70,000 empty desks in our schools. On that basis, we must have schools that we do not need.

We have schools operating out of Portakabins. I can think of one school that I visited not so long ago in Mr Girvan's area that is operating out of Portakabins that are 22 years old. They are not built to be occupied for 22 years. On one of the occasions that I was there, the previous Education Minister was there as well. He is a sizeable man, as we know, and was advised by the caretaker not to go into two of the buildings, because he would probably go through the floor. Other people, I must say, advised him to go into the same buildings for a different reason, but that is by the way.

We are maintaining schools that probably should be closed or, preferably, merged, but we are still having to pay money to maintain them. That is an unnecessary drain on our resources, and it is affecting our ability to proceed with capital builds in education. Some schools have been promised a new build, and the best that they can hope for is that they may have it in 10 years' time. That is how bad it is. I know that some are under way, but there has been a whole round, every year, of schools being added to the list of capital builds on a promise — the money is not there and will not be there unless we change the way we do business. So, again, the challenge for the Minister is to bring some of that about, although it is probably more to do with his ministerial colleagues than with him.

I could talk about area planning — I prefer to call it sectoral area planning, because that is what it has been so far. CCMS has gone its own sweet way, and I can hardly blame it, because nothing would have been done otherwise. It has made some progress with the rationalisation of its

estate. We have the, frankly, scandalous situation with special educational needs, which has been well referred to in the last few days. We have problems in early years and with the balance of funding between primary and secondary, but particularly with the highly formative first two or three years of a child's education, which are not being properly dealt with.

5.15 pm

We have a situation with the priorities for education — the STEM subjects, for a start — which is not being properly addressed. Funding for primary-school language projects has been cut — just done away with. Some primary schools are still trying to paddle their own canoe and do something about that using their own budget, restricted as it is. The necessity for a second language is well proven. It is essential that our children have a second language, in the same way as most children on the continent have English as a second language. It is formative, educational and good for children.

In the STEM sector, I could mention Sentinus, which, I believe, had its annual awards yesterday. Funding for Sentinus was cut and cut again by the previous Minister. I have some sympathy for him because he could not square the circle of funding. No Department can do that at the moment, so I will go back to my original point: you have to take serious decisions in some of these situations.

Look at teacher training, which one or two other Members mentioned today. If you look at the statistics for the output from all our institutions five years ago, you see that only slightly more than 60% of those graduate trainees have obtained a teaching post. Those figures come from the General Teaching Council (GTC). They are not even full-time posts. Teachers who qualify and manage to obtain one term's worth of full-time work are regarded by the GTC as being in employment and are counted in that figure. Nobody knows how many of them have gone into proper full-time work.

Of course, we also have the inconclusive scheme that was introduced in the last mandate to try to persuade some teachers to retire early and allow new graduates into the profession. We could not even agree about that. I presume that it is still there and still on the long finger, but somebody has to address it.

I will get off education and talk about infrastructure for a moment. I sat on the all-party construction industry group here for some years. The construction industry is on its knees, along with the quarry products and aggregates industries. They are suffering so badly that, eventually, they may well get to the point of no return. We have lost so many major employers in that sector, going right back to Patton and so on, that you just despair sometimes. Yet, we have the major construction projects that people are talking about, such as the A5 and the A6, which have now been promised. I do not envy Mr Hazzard his job because he has to try to deal with the promises made by his predecessor, Miss McIlveen, in a storming run-up to the last election, when, I think, she promised to reconstruct every road in Northern Ireland, if that was worth anything.

We will see where that goes, but let us consider the A6 in particular. I forget who mentioned Dungiven — perhaps it was Mr McAleer — but try telling the people of Dungiven that we are about to provide them with a bypass, and they

will look at you with the same cynical eye as they have done for the last 30 years. I can remember travelling up and down to Derry as a relatively young man in the 1970s, and people talked about a bypass for Dungiven then. That was in 1971, and here we are now, 45 years later, with still no date for it. There is no budget for it — where will the money come from? It is the same for the A5, although there is still the possibility of some help from the Southern Government.

In the Lisburn area, the famous Knockmore link is part of the infrastructure around Sprucefield that Mrs Palmer was talking about. It, too, has been promised, but promised for when? You could go on and on with this, but, in the meantime, our construction industry has been decimated.

People have talked about the Narrow Water bridge. There is an amazing number of views on it. I will make one point that has not been made: when the First Minister was Minister for tourism, she invested £7.5 million, I think, in the tourism industry in the Mourne. To do that and then to refuse to provide a link to other major tourist destinations in the area that happen to be on the wrong side of the border — Carlingford and Omeath — defies logic. At that time, it was going to cost the Assembly about £3 million, at an overall cost of £20-something million. Talk about looking a gift horse in the mouth. Well, the DUP managed to do it.

I will talk about housing briefly. The loan arrangement to housing associations was much mentioned yesterday. That is very welcome. Where does the money come from? The European Investment Bank. Those who advocate Brexit — it is so topical that I cannot resist talking about it — really need to look at that. Mr Girvan thought that we could still draw on money from the European Investment Bank if we went for Brexit. I query that, and I will tell you why in a moment.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: OK. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: Is it not a fact that, currently, the European Investment Bank has £8 billion of loans outside the EU and something of the order of £60 billion inside? Is it not a patent nonsense to suggest that the EIB does not service debt outside the EU?

Mr Lunn: I will come to that in a second.

Back in the day, I can remember Dr Paisley — God rest him — advocating it as DUP policy that we should milk the European cow for as much as we could get until it ran dry. The comment was repeated by the present Speaker — not you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I have figures that indicate something different. Ten per cent of the EIB's annual lending is outside the EU, primarily focused on developing economies in neighbouring regions. That hardly includes us. Over the last eight years, the EIB has provided €43 billion for long-term investment in the UK and £1 billion to all the European Free Trade Association countries combined; that is Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein. There has been €43 billion for us in the last eight years and £1 billion for the countries that Mr Allister and his like think we will join when we are still inside the European party but outside the loop. He called my comment nonsense. I will repeat the word: his figures are complete nonsense, as so much of the Brexit argument has been.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No, I will not. *[Laughter.]* I am tempted to keep it going and let him. Go on.

Mr Allister: If the Member had prepared his remarks a little better, he might have looked up the EIB website. If he had, he would have found a graphic illustrating the points that I made: £8 billion went outside the EU.

Mr Lunn: Maybe I will have a look at that. The figures that were given to me were completely different. It hardly makes —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I take the opportunity to gently remind the House to come back to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Mr Lunn: I apologise; I was sidetracked.

I will just say a few words about health. The health budget is half of what we spend. Our health service is clearly massively inefficient. That is not to say that it does not do great work; of course it does. Nurses, doctors, consultants — everybody involved in the health service — do their best to provide an excellent service for all our people. In a lot of ways, they are succeeding, but at what cost? I wonder when we will take the major decisions and pay attention to John Compton in 'Transforming Your Care', Sir Liam Donaldson's report and Professor Bengoa, in another report about to come before us. Is that going to lie on the same shelf as the other reports, or are we going to actually take action on it?

The Health Minister has a difficult job, but there are difficult decisions to be taken. I would make one comparison. If you look at the area of Strathclyde in Scotland, you see that it has about the same population as we have. It is rural plus urban. It has one major hospital. We have five in greater Belfast, and I include Lisburn. I do not say that you have to close them all, but there has to be a major rationalisation of the health service in this country or we will just continue to grapple with the unachievable and run out of money. That is not what any of us wants.

I am on the Justice Committee now. Let us talk about the Prison Service and the PSNI. Both have suffered major cuts. They are vital services. The Prison Service in this country is close to breaking point. Prison Service staff are close to breaking point. Everybody knows that. The level of absenteeism, stress-related problems and pressure that those people work under is intolerable. The service is still being starved of money through the Department of Justice, which itself has been starved of money for some years. We could say much the same about the PSNI. The demands on the PSNI budget are quite intolerable. Something will have to give. We could start talking about all the new demands that are coming along with Stakeknife and so on. It just cannot go on on that basis. We will see what the new Justice Minister can do to help you out, Minister, as you grapple with those problems. It is only a small matter, but I wait with interest to see whether she continues with the closure of courthouses across Northern Ireland. I absolutely think she should — including the one in Lisburn, before anybody asks. You have got to make savings where you can and try to square the circle.

I will finish with this: as I said yesterday, we need to work at eliminating duplication and waste — the waste caused by a divided society. I cannot stand here as an Alliance Member and not talk briefly about the costs of division

in this country. We need to consider revenue-raising opportunities. I think the Minister and I agree about this. He sometimes nods his head but does not smile. I think perhaps there may be some scope there. We have got to take the major decisions. We have got to organise what we are doing here. We can borrow judiciously in a controlled way, but let us not pretend that borrowing is some sort of silver bullet and we can borrow our way out of problems: we cannot. Again, borrowing at highly competitive rates from the European Investment Bank is one way to move forward. I have to disagree with Mr Allister: the priority for that bank is obviously to lend money within Europe. The figures that have been given to me bear that out big time.

I will leave it at that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know I have done the rounds there, but there are questions for the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. As there are still a number of Members to speak on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, it would seem an appropriate time for a short break. I therefore propose, by leave of the House, to have a 10-minute suspension. The sitting is, by leave, suspended until 5.40 pm, when the next speaker will be Steven Agnew.

The sitting was suspended at 5.29 pm.

The sitting resumed at 5.43 pm.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order, Members. We resume the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Agnew: We have to ask ourselves this: how does the Budget measure up against the promised outcomes and the new outcomes-based approach in the draft Programme for Government framework? How does what is effectively a 100%-cuts Budget lead to improvements in well-being? That is what we have. We are unique in these islands in that we put all the weight of austerity on cuts to public services. Despite the Minister's remarks earlier in concluding his speech on the June monitoring round, when he said that he would fight austerity at all levels, he comes to the House today asking us to pass legislation for an austerity Budget. I accept that the Minister is new to the post, and I welcome him to his new role. However, although the parties in government may have changed somewhat, the parties in power remain the same. This was always a DUP/Sinn Féin Budget, and those parties and their Ministers must take responsibility for it.

Whilst the Minister will rightly point to the impact of Tory cuts on our finances here in Northern Ireland — and he would receive my support in calling out the Tory Government — he cannot hide from the fact that the record of the last two successive Executives in Northern Ireland has been to use the limited powers we have to take money out of public services rather than to invest in them.

5.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd earlier made a case for greater fiscal autonomy for Northern Ireland, and I am not opposed to that in principle, but look at the practice of those parties in power. What have they done when we have had tax-varying powers?

First we lobbied for air passenger duty. To do what? To cut it; to abolish it on long-haul flights, with an impact in terms of cuts to public services. Our greatest tool is the rates; they were frozen for a number of years, and then frozen in real terms, again resulting in cuts to public services and seeing a freeze on the taxation of property at the expense of investment in public services. The champion cause of the last Executive was the gaining of powers to vary corporation tax. Again, to do what? To cut them; to give a subsidy to large businesses at a cost of £200 million per year to our public services.

Now the DUP, and I recall a response to something I raised with Mrs Foster in particular, take pride and say, "We are proud that Northern Ireland is a low-tax economy". And that is OK — that is their politics — but in doing so they must take pride in the fact that Northern Ireland has the longest waiting lists in the whole of the UK. I wonder how that approach measures up to indicator five:

"Improve the quality of the healthcare experience".

They must then take pride in the crisis within our education system, where school principals are struggling to provide teachers for all classes. Indeed, the additional pressures on resources of providing proper additional support for those with special educational needs is a consequence of our low-tax economy. Again, I question how that reconciles itself with indicator 13, "Improve the quality of education".

As a coalition partner, the Minister and Sinn Féin have to share in that pride and have to share in the blame. The maintenance of the cap on rates is effectively a rate relief for the wealthiest in our society.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member's giving way. The Member will know that in constituencies like mine — and indeed in constituencies like his own, in places like Bangor West, Ballyholme etc — there are lots of elderly people, getting on in years, and whilst they may be asset-wealthy in that they own a home, they are not cash-wealthy. The rates cap exists to protect vulnerable pensioners who, without it — he knows this as well as I do — would be pushed below the waterline and forced to sell their homes. Does he not accept that, for those people, the rates cap is an instrument for good?

Mr Agnew: The Member may well be aware — and should be aware, making that point — that before the rates cap we did have a deferral system for rates payment for people in exactly that position. It was rarely used, which suggests that the numbers of people in the situation he describes are low. Even if we accept it, there are also those in my constituency who are asset-poor and cash-poor, and they are subsidising the rates of those in homes worth over £400,000.

We have the bizarre situation — the unjustifiable situation — in which those in million-pound mansions have their rates subsidised by those in modest housing, and those living in the Kilcooley estate in my constituency subsidise the rates of those who own estates in Cultra. We cannot maintain a rates cap at a time when finances are so tight and cuts to public services so severe.

As a revenue-raising measure, this would be a modest step, but it would at least be symbolic that, first, this is an Executive prepared to ask those who can afford to pay more to pay more —

Ms Mallon: I appreciate the Member giving way. I am sure that a significant proportion of your constituency work involves dealing with housing cases, as does mine. You referred to crises in hospital waiting lists and in our education system. All of us here have constituents, individuals and families, who are homeless, who are living in substandard accommodation, who are waiting for basic and significant repairs, and who have disabilities and are waiting and waiting and waiting for adaptations to afford them the basic dignity of having access to a shower. Those constituents, whom we are trying to help, and the 40,000 households on the waiting list will want to know what is in the Budget for them.

The Member referenced revenue-raising powers. Earlier, the Minister's statement on the June monitoring round said that the Executive were short on ideas when it came to the allocation of the remaining £17.2 million of financial transactions capital. The SDLP has two ideas that it would like to share with the Minister. The first is the empty homes scheme, which would enable housing associations to draw down funding to purchase vacant and repossessed properties; the second is enabling them to access that money to build. We look forward to hearing, as I am sure you will —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I remind —

Ms Mallon: We would like to hear the Minister's views.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I remind Members that interventions should be short and to the point.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for her intervention. I am in the position of not having a time limit on my speech, so I have no problems with her intervention. She raised a serious point.

I mentioned the health and education crises, and housing is also a huge issue. As somebody who used to work in the homeless sector, I am aware of that. I worked in a hostel in west Belfast, and I remember people — most were young women with children — waiting for at least two years for housing. Those were people on the priority list, so, if you were seen as non-urgent or a non-priority, you could effectively forget about it. It is an area that we need to invest in, and we need to look at measures such as financial transactions capital and other ways of being creative and getting money into the system.

As I said, the Budget is without any revenue-raising measures. We are unique on these islands in not seeking to at least mitigate the cuts by asking those who can afford to pay more to pay more. The other benefit of raising or lifting the cap on rates would be to make our rating system somewhat more progressive. It is a property tax and a tax on wealth, but the cap ensures that it is regressive and, as I pointed out, that those at the lower end subsidise those in wealthy areas. It would at least give us a platform from which we could look at possible further measures for raising revenue. It would make the system progressive and give us options that we could debate sensibly and maturely on how we could bring in extra finances to invest in public services.

The other tax-varying power, of course, is corporation tax, which has been negotiated by the DUP and Sinn Féin in particular. It amazes me that we were the one region that was not content with the level of cuts handed down to us by the Tories.

We went to the Chancellor, collectively. The old five-party Executive asked, in unison, "Please can we have some more? Can we have more cuts, Mr Osborne? Can you give us power so that we can further slash our budgets because, clearly, you have not gone far enough?"

We still have a health service and more can be done. This is where, if we are going to talk about A Fresh Start, I would like to see a fresh start from this new Executive. We cannot afford to take a further £200 million a year out of our public services. It is estimated that we need our economy to grow by a third to make up for the tax receipts lost through such a cut, but that is not the agenda. When I was a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, I raised this point — I am not sure whether the Minister was at that meeting — and the economic advisory group pointed out, and was very clear, that we are not seeking to recoup that money. This is a permanent shift from public to private. Effectively, the group was saying that this is a permanent cut in our public services. I come back to the draft Programme for Government framework and ask this question: how will a permanent cut in our public services improve well-being?

Earlier, Patsy McGlone chided the Minister somewhat for the apparent discontent within Sinn Féin at the policy, the apparent challenge from within that was undermining the policy. There should be discontent. What worries me more is that there is not discontent within the SDLP. Why are

they so willing to support a policy that is going to see such a devastating cut to our public services?

The only cut we should be looking for is a cut in the waste in our system. I give, as an example, the recent EnergyWise consultation initiated by the Department for the Economy. That is looking at energy efficiency, something that I am very passionate about. On the surface, it is about cutting the wasted energy in houses by seeking to bring in income to invest in energy-efficiency schemes. The problem is that the EnergyWise scheme, if it goes ahead, will be added to the affordable warmth scheme, the boiler replacement scheme, winter fuel payments and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive energy-efficiency schemes, including the double glazing replacements. It is one of a plethora of piecemeal measures to tackle energy inefficiency in our society.

In the last mandate, we had an opportunity, another wasted opportunity, to seek to bring these things together under a one-stop shop under the green new deal. As somebody who gives advice to constituents who want to improve energy efficiency in their homes, I know that I have to ask them about their income, their tenancy, and I have to ask a plethora of questions to get to the bottom of which particular scheme they should be applying for. There is not a single number or a single operator for all these schemes. The one thing they have in common is that they are all publicly funded, but each Department has to do its own bit separately, and I question why that is. Given that it is all public money, why can it not be administered under one roof, saving money that could go into the scheme and into those households, rather than be wasted on systems, administrations and bureaucracy. Bring them together. If this is a fresh start, and we have this great new cooperative Government of two parties working in unison, let us bring our systems together, increase energy efficiency in our housing and increase the financial efficiency of those schemes.

Members will know of my interests around children's services and, in particular, early years provision. I make a similar plea regarding the budgets and investing in children's services. I was grateful to the last Assembly for passing the now Children's Services Co-operation Act. It calls for Departments to work collaboratively in delivering children's services.

6.00 pm

At the request of the Minister's predecessor, an amendment was made to the Bill to give the Department of Finance the power to put in the guidance for Departments to pool budgets. Take special educational needs and some of the wrangles we have seen in previous years about who should pay for services. For example, if somebody needs help with a health condition in a school setting, is it the Department of Health or the Department of Education that pays for it? We then get the wrangling back and forth. I know of one case that took two years to resolve with the intervention of the Children's Law Centre and legal action having to be taken. They were fighting over which pot of public money the service would come out of, while a child waited for two years to have full opportunity to access education. We need to pool those budgets, we need to stop those wrangles and we need to govern as one. I hope that the new outcomes approach will lead to more of that type of working.

I appreciate that we are not yet debating a longer-term Budget, but in meeting the indicators, I ask that we look longer-term at investing in early years. All the evidence shows that doing so will help us to meet a number of indicators in a much more cost-efficient way but, more importantly, in a way that will have a much more beneficial impact on children and families who receive the supports.

The cost of maintaining our current education system was highlighted in the recent review on the cost of division. At the top end, it could be up to almost £100 million to maintain our segregated system — money that is being wasted in keeping our children apart, rather than educating them together. Stephen Farry highlighted the inefficiency of empty desks. There were opportunities to address that through area-based planning, had we taken an integrated approach. Instead, when we saw two schools in an area that were under capacity, rather than bringing them together as one school, we said, "Let's maintain two schools, perhaps in one building or even on two campuses, with some sharing of facilities".

I note that Professor Alan Smith from the UNESCO Centre at Ulster University estimated that the cost of a shared education system is greater than that of our current system. Previously, when I spoke on this, I sort of said that the one advantage shared education has is that it will reduce costs but it won't reduce divisions in our society. I am alarmed to hear that it might not even reduce costs.

We have the opportunity to move towards greater integration and children sharing not just classrooms but experiences. I think we should, in this mandate, make much more progress on that, from a financial point of view and also for societal benefit.

If we are serious about improving well-being, we must invest in our public services and we must invest in our children. I encourage the Minister to look at areas of waste, including those I highlighted, to consider ways of raising revenue for investment and always with a mind to doing so in a progressive manner, ensuring that those who can afford to pay more do so. We do not need a three-month consultation, Minister, to tell us that cutting public services will be detrimental to our well-being and contradict the approach outlined in the draft Programme for Government framework.

Mr Attwood: I apologise to the Minister and the House for being absent without leave during this long debate. I hope not to detain the House too long with my contribution — too long. *[Laughter.]* I will start by acknowledging Mr Trevor Lunn. It is many a long day in the House — and you have been here a long time, Mr Kennedy — when a Member takes an intervention, not least from Mr Allister, and the only reply to his response is for Mr Allister to repeat his initial question. In that moment, you got an insight into the debate on Europe. Mr Allister put forward a proposition, and it was Mr Lunn who immediately and comprehensively rebutted that proposition. The only thing that somebody who will be voting to get out of Europe could do was to repeat the proposition that had been rebutted.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. There are two in one; that is a good start. That was a very powerful —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I listened rather intently to that Brexit debate; more intently than I

thought I would. We are not debating Brexit at this stage. This is the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Attwood: I will give way to the Member, then.

Mr Allister: We are not really meant to use graphics, but would the Member like to look at the website of the EIB and see the graphic that I quoted, which shows €8 billion of EIB expenditure outside the EU? Mr Lunn's point was that there is no expenditure outside the EU and that, if you leave the EU, you forfeit any right to claim any money from the EIB. Wrong. He was wrong then, and he is still wrong. The Member is now perpetuating that inaccuracy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I exhort all Members to return to the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Mr Attwood, you have an additional half an hour. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Attwood: I will respond to that very promptly. Of course, that is not what Mr Lunn said. Hansard will have recorded the fact that Mr Lunn acknowledged that money was going to places outside the European Union. He made the point that it was developing countries —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: — because that is part of the European project. If we have best practice and good learning in Europe, let us try to help those countries that are struggling as they emerge from whatever situations.

Mr Stalford: In the interests of accuracy, would the Member —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order.

Mr Attwood: I think that the Deputy Speaker is going to put me in my place very shortly if I do not move on. I tend to accept all interventions; that has been my practice. I am prepared to accept that one, but I think that I might be ruled out of order.

Mr Stalford: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I have to stress it this time — I am getting a little bit more worked up about this — that we need to return to the Budget (No. 2) Bill debate both in main contributions and interventions.

Mr Stalford: This does relate to the Budget (No. 2) Bill, in that it was said during a debate on it. What Mr Lunn actually referred to were developing countries and neighbouring regions. We are not a developing country but, after Brexit, we will be a neighbouring region.

Mr Attwood: We will be competing for a tiny bit of the EIB pie. If 90% goes to EU members and 10% is spread towards neighbouring and developing countries, you can imagine how much of that money we are going to get. In the very moment when the Ulster University is able to relocate — into a very ugly building, I have to say, and I have had that argument with the Ulster University — rightly, in a strategic move to rebuild the north side of the city of Belfast, where there are enormous opportunities — and I would love to have a conversation with the Minister in that regard — and is able to draw down hundreds of millions of pounds from Europe, and when housing associations are about to draw down hundreds of millions of pounds from Europe, we are saying, "Let us compete for a bit of the pie rather than all of the pie."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order —

Mr Attwood: With that, I will move on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I bring the Member back to his remarks on the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. I have been tolerant, and that tolerance is beginning to stretch.

Mr Attwood: I stand corrected.

Going back to Mr Agnew's point, he asked why the SDLP is not shifting ground — those were not the words he used — on corporation tax. Hansard will confirm, especially since the Stormont House Agreement, the repeated points of reference and warnings that we have put down in the Chamber. On at least three occasions, it was me who put them down. The reason I make that point is to go back to the Budget debate and the narrative around corporation tax and to ask the Minister a question.

Apparently, there has been some dispute between the DUP and Sinn Féin about whether a corporation tax deal has been signed off. The DUP's view is that there is a date and a rate and that therefore the matter is concluded, but the Minister's point is that there is still business to be done. As is the nature of the DUP and Sinn Féin, they are both right and both wrong. Let me put on record again what I have said in the Chamber, on three different occasions, about where we are in respect of corporation tax. There is a reason why they are both right and both wrong. The DUP is transparently wrong, because it is one of the custodians of the Stormont House Agreement, as is Sinn Féin, and the financial annex to the agreement — this is the point that the Minister might want to address because he is going to be the main man in the room with the Treasury in respect of all of this — states that the legislation, which has now been passed, will also include a commencement clause. So the DUP believes that there is a rate and date and that that has all been signed off, but London does not see it that way, because they say, and no doubt they wrote these words:

"The legislation to devolve corporation tax will also include a commencement clause. The powers will only be commenced from April 2017, subject to the Executive demonstrating that its finances are on a sustainable footing for the long term including successfully implementing measures in this agreement and subsequent reform measures."

The section concludes:

"An implementation plan for the delivery of the commitments made must also be agreed with the Government and this will include the efficiency measures needed to put Executive finances on a sustainable basis for the future."

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. I am not surprised that the Member is on her feet, because it is much more than date and rate: those who are most loyal and faithful to the Stormont House Agreement have to live with the consequences of those words. The consequences of those words, when it comes to the devolution of corporation tax, is that this Executive, a two-party-rule Executive, have to agree with London the terms beyond the date and rate, including reform measures. I will give way to the Member.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I find it incredible that the Member, once again, wants to do Northern Ireland down by trying to create absolutely unnecessary uncertainty in relation to

the date and the rate. It is absolutely clear, and I refer the Member to many statements by the deputy First Minister on this matter, that the date and the rate are agreed. That is the proposition that Invest NI, the Department for the Economy and many others are putting out there to make Northern Ireland work, grow our economy and provide jobs for the many thousands of young people whom we want to stay here, work here and contribute to our economy. What is not agreed is the changing position of the UK-wide corporation tax rate. So the exact amount to be paid is dependent on that. Of course there are details that will be dependent on those external variables, but it is very clear that the date and rate have been agreed.

Mr Attwood: My observation on that remark, and everybody will have heard it, is that it was valiant but weak. Valiant but weak because I did not dispute that the date and rate are an issue any longer.

Did anyone in the Chamber hear me say anything about date and rate? I referred to the reform measures that Stormont House states explicitly have to be agreed with the British Government for them to activate their commencement power in respect of devolution. If you do not understand that, with all due respect to you through the Chair, it is a huge lack of understanding. That is what the DUP and Sinn Féin have loyally been signing up to since the Christmas of Stormont House.

6.15 pm

What is the corroboration of that? Mr Agnew will recall — I have read this into the record on a number of occasions in the Chamber — the exchange between Mark Durkan MP and a senior Treasury official at the Committee that interrogated the legislation on the devolution of corporation tax. It should set alarm bells ringing for those who claim that the deal is done on corporation tax. Mr Durkan said:

“There is some concern, not just because of the experience on welfare reform, where the block grant was fined unless the Assembly passed a Bill that it otherwise would not have wanted to pass ... will the Minister assure us that the judgment that is made on budget sustainability in a couple of years’ time will not hinge on the Treasury saying to the Executive, for instance, ‘You do not have a sustainable budget unless you introduce water charges’”.

Do you know what the Minister replied? He said:

“my approach to looking at the finances of the Northern Ireland Executive as a whole, in their totality, is that they need to be on a sustainable footing ... in terms of how the Treasury will view that in future, I would not go beyond the wording set out in the Stormont House agreement.”

He would not go beyond the wording of the Stormont House Agreement, which was, “You will agree to our reform measures if you want me to commence the power to devolve corporation tax”. That is why the DUP is in a false place on that. It is clear that there is an enormous negotiation yet to do. That is why I encourage the Minister in those negotiations in that regard. However, this is where Sinn Féin is both right and wrong: what else does Stormont House say about the devolution of corporation tax? In the paragraph on corporation tax, it says:

“The block grant will be adjusted to reflect the corporation tax revenues foregone by the UK Government due to both direct and behavioural effects”.

It adds — this is the challenge for the Minister because he has, quite rightly, made it an issue of negotiation with the London Government — that the UK Government will look at direct and behavioural effects but:

“will not take into account second round effects on other taxes.”

The Minister said that, as part of his negotiation with the Treasury — I think that he indicated that he wrote to the Treasury in this regard — he wanted second-round effects on other taxes to be part of the negotiation. The London Government have said explicitly in Stormont House, which the DUP and Sinn Féin say that they are loyal to, that second-round effects on other taxes are not part of the negotiation. I hope that the Minister is successful in making that part of the negotiation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I encourage the Member to return to the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Attwood: I have a good —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. The Bill addresses the resources for the year ending 31 March 2017. Not included in that are corporation tax or Brexit.

Mr Attwood: I will conclude those remarks now, but corporation tax was weaved in and out by Mr Lunn most recently. The Minister is negotiating on something that London have said explicitly in Stormont House that they will not negotiate on, and the DUP and Sinn Féin have both said that they are loyal to Stormont House. Sinn Féin is not loyal to Stormont House when it comes to that issue. Explain that, Minister.

I will move on to deal with childcare. I read the Minister’s reply to the debate yesterday on the Supply resolution. The one thing that he did not reply to, or certainly not in any detail, was the contention that we put to the Minister that, in this financial year — it therefore very much touches on the Budget that we are discussing — if it were the case that the Minister of Education came forward with a proposition to increase childcare for three- and four-year-olds to 20 hours a week, costing about £15 million according to the Minister of Education, would the Minister of Finance be inclined to support it? I think that those figures are right because we have had them confirmed to us.

I ask that question because, in the debate last week on the motion on childcare, which was passed unanimously by the House, the Education Minister said that the Barnett consequentials from the London Government’s commitment to roll out extra childcare support, starting in September 2017, had come across to the Northern Ireland Budget line. He added, subject to what the Minister of Finance says and what Hansard records, that they had come across in an “unhypothecated” way, which is the practice. The Barnett consequentials do not come across ring-fenced.

My question therefore to the Finance Minister is this: have there been Barnett consequentials from the proposed uplift from London as a result of the delivery of increased childcare provision for three- and four-year-olds in England? Have the Barnett consequentials come across? I

would be a wee bit surprised if they have done in advance of the money being allocated in London, because that scheme does not start until September 2017. However, I would like to know whether they have come across. If they have come across, what was the amount of money? If an amount of money has come across, what is it being spent on, if it is not being spent on childcare?

I return to my question to the Minister of Finance. If the Minister of Education comes forward with a proposition in this financial year to increase free childcare provision for three- and four-year-olds to 20 hours a week, will he be able to find that money, just as he has, in a welcome way, been able to find some money for in-year pressures for school budgets? We need to have an answer because there seems to be some tension between money that seems to have come across, subject to what the Minister might say, and the fact that it does not seem to have been spent on childcare. I think that is a fair question in the week that is in it, when the Assembly unanimously passed a motion that stated that, whatever about the how, why and when, it wanted to see more money spent on childcare within the life of this year's Budget.

I ask the Minister a second question, arising from the adjusted Budget that we now have for this year. The Budget has been adjusted, as of today, for this year, with the additional provision going to schools. I might be corrected on this as well, because I only got wind of it in the corridors, but we picked up this afternoon that the Minister of Education might not be giving a briefing to the Education Committee tomorrow on what June monitoring might mean for our schools budget. The Minister talked about new moneys going to our schools, and that is very welcome, but the definition of what it will be spent on is, as we speak, somewhat unclear.

If it is the case that the Committee may not be briefed tomorrow about what might have happened today, can the Finance Minister brief the Assembly about the uplift in the Education budget that now impacts on the overall Budget for the year and, in particular, on whether those moneys are going to be allocated to help schools with the in-year pressures that they have around employers' contributions, National Insurance and cost-of-living increases? I ask the question to make a general point. The Minister will be aware that — again, I am subject to correction — the reason why the pressure has, in one argument, come in-year for our schools is that the Treasury is now saying that any adjustments in employers' contributions, National Insurance and cost-of-living increases have to be paid by Departments.

If that is a pressure in the school system, which it clearly is, will further pressures now arise in respect of every other head of spend by Departments when it comes to salaries and wages? Are we facing a replay of what has happened in our schools across the life of our public sector and Civil Service in the North? I would like to hear what the Minister has to say today, or, if he is not in a position to answer those questions today, afterwards. We need to create certainty on whether something is coming from London or has come already — we saw it in the Department of Education budget line — that we will see in the hospital budget line, the public-sector budget line and across a whole lot of other budget lines that touch on salaries and wages. Should we anticipate that?

That was one of the reasons why I asked the question yesterday — the Minister responded to it — about the potential of the Minister being required, under Fresh Start legislation, to come to the House with a statement, at the insistence of the London Government, on any budgetary changes that might arise for whatever reasons. My sense is that bad news is coming and that it is coming independently of what happens on Thursday week in respect of the European budget.

The Minister's statement today — it adjusted the overall budget line for the year — made new allocations to welfare mitigation and the giving of advice. I welcome those, but I have to say to the Minister that he really is misguided if he holds to the argument, in respect of all that and the budget lines that have now been created, that he made yesterday in the Chamber. Talking about where money should be spent and where to find new money, he said about putting more into welfare mitigation and where it should come from:

"That is the missing element again and again today".
— [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p190, col 1].

It is as if the SDLP had not been making an argument about all of that for the last couple of years. It was not Sinn Féin and the DUP that tabled amendments in the Chamber that tried to put into law some of the things that the Minister has put into practice through today's Budget allocations and further to the Budget for 2016-17. Today, the Minister allocated moneys to the advice sector that will change the Department for Communities baseline in this year's Budget — rightly so. However, would it not have been a position of greater strength to take the advice of the advice sector, which wanted to put into law a right to independent advice on welfare? The experience of so many in London, Birmingham and Edinburgh — across Britain — is that, because they have not had a right to independent advice, they have gone into a reformed welfare system with inequality of arms. All the resources and powers are in the hands of DWP and not in the hands of the individual claimant. Would it not have been a stronger position to put all of that into law as an independent right to statutory advice on welfare?

When the Minister says that this is the missing element — putting more into welfare mitigation but not saying where it should come from — it is a false argument, because the SDLP put forward reams of proposals in the Chamber through legislation and in negotiations on welfare. In the Fresh Start negotiations, we put in a 14-page document on welfare mitigation — 14 pages — that I shared with the DUP and Sinn Féin. I gave it to Minister Storey, who then shared it with the DUP and Sinn Féin. We have yet to see any document from that time about what the DUP and Sinn Féin were proposing, not just on welfare but on anything.

6.30 pm

The SDLP put in 13 documents, in real time, in response to the real situation in the negotiations across the issues in 'A Fresh Start', and we shared some of those documents with the other parties. The Alliance Party shared documents with us, but the DUP and Sinn Féin did not share documents with anybody until they published 'A Fresh Start' half an hour before the Executive meeting at which we were asked to endorse it. I am not taking any lectures from any Minister about the good authority of the SDLP when it comes to these issues, including

proposals on welfare mitigation. If they had listened to us when we proposed those in law in January and February of last year, the welfare situation would be in a position of strength. If you look at Eileen Evason's proposals, you can see not just the SDLP's thinking but that of other parties; you can see the streams of thinking through those proposals from those who gave advice in that matter, and that included the SDLP. I could go on and on in relation to all those matters.

It is welcome that the Minister has provided additional money for the independent advice sector today that will change the budget line over the course of the year. However, where are we in respect of the second element of Eileen Evason's recommendations around financial capability, namely the need to address food poverty in Northern Ireland? The Minister and the Department for Communities seem to have taken forward some of the work in respect of independent advice — I welcome that, even though there is no statutory right to independent advice — but I would like to hear whether anything further is coming in respect of food poverty.

In that regard, I refer the Minister to appendix 5 of Eileen Evason's proposals, where she has two pages of documentation about what interventions on food poverty might look like, including a spend of £50,000 this year, rising to £675,000 in year 4, with 11 sites facilitating distribution to those who are food-poor. While we would not want it to be like that, that is the reality of life for growing numbers of our citizens and communities. There was a budget line in that regard, Minister: £50,000 in year 1, £350,000 in year 2, £575,000 in year 3 and £675,000 in year 4, totalling £1.65 million. I acknowledge what is now happening in respect of the independent advice sector, but I would like to hear more from the Minister. He is probably waiting to do that, and I acknowledge that this is probably going to be in his reply. He would probably like to hear more from the Department for Communities, and, hopefully, progress will be made in that regard in the next monitoring round, if not earlier.

There are two further issues that I wish to deal with. One is the issue of welfare reform in general, which is now emblazoned, if you like, across the Budget (No.2) Bill because of the financial interventions to deal with the punitive actions of London. I want to put to the Minister again today what he did not seem to respond to yesterday, which is the consequences of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, which has now received Royal Assent and is the legislation that governs the social security aspects of welfare reform and work in this part of the world. I would remind the Minister that, on a certain date in November last year, he voted for the legislative consent motion (LCM). He voted with his colleagues in the DUP for the LCM that transferred and surrendered welfare powers from this place to London. Those who negotiated the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent Northern Ireland Act 1998 made a point and a virtue of trying to maximise the devolution of powers at that time.

One of the ways of doing that was to have, unlike Wales and Scotland, devolution of welfare and social security legislation. That was abandoned in the course of an afternoon.

The point I want to make to the Minister is this: as he concluded his statement last night, he said that he was opposed to austerity. I put it to the Minister yesterday, and

I put it to him again today: is austerity not reducing the benefit cap to £20,000 for people in Northern Ireland? That is what Sinn Féin and the DUP signed up to in the legislation. Is austerity not a freeze on social security benefits and tax credit amounts for four years? That is what the DUP and Sinn Féin signed up to in November last year. Is austerity not the London Government changing support for mortgage interest into a loan, which then becomes a charge on the property of the people who take the loan? Is that not austerity the same as all the other measures — the social security measures — that are now part of the social security regime in this part of Ireland? When the Minister rightly rages against austerity, will he confirm that all those interventions are austerity and that the DUP and Sinn Féin signed up to it?

Will the Minister comment on what I thought was a brazen remark from the Minister for Communities in his first Question Time? When he was asked, "Was there any mitigation of any of the social security measures that are now part of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016?", he said, "No, there is not". All these measures are now part of the experience of our citizens in Northern Ireland: freezes on welfare for four years; the ability of London to unilaterally change the benefit cap when the Chancellor thinks national economic circumstances — whatever that means — merit it; and all the rest, including the most punitive proposals on ESA. That is austerity in capital letters. Do not let anyone pretend otherwise. Let everybody in Northern Ireland know it, for all the welcome mitigation, which is more than for any part of Britain, as we acknowledge. The authors of the proposals are many and multiple. I acknowledge all those people, not least Eileen Evason and her team, and the advice and other organisations that informed her thinking. Let us not pretend, however, that we are all raging against austerity and not actually doing austerity, even to the point of handing over powers to an austerity Government to impose their austerity on people who suffer the burdens of austerity. A little honesty about that might be a bit helpful and move things on.

I want to conclude. Mr Lunn was not in earlier. I will not go back over it, but I acknowledge the very skilful and understated way he spoke. That is his nature: all his speeches are understated, but they are all very telling and forensic in their political points, and we saw the evidence of that a short while ago.

One of the Minister's most curious and inviting remarks — I hope the Committee or parties have the opportunity to explore this further with the Minister — was «What are we going to do about housing finance?». There was some reference to that — I have it in my notes somewhere, but I will not find it now, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister made a point yesterday about the Alliance Party, and I could make some comments about the Alliance Party and about the ups and downs and toing and froing that you have had over the last six months on Budget votes. You abstain; you vote for; you vote against; then you stop money going to Supply resolution. It is a right muddle, but I am not even going to indulge in that. To borrow a phrase from Ms Bradshaw yesterday, it is mystifying, but we will move on from that.

The point I want to make to the Minister is this: we have the papers to prove where we have tried to put forward discerning and crafted interventions to the Programme for Government or on welfare or whatever it might be. The

issue of housing is really one of the great challenges of this mandate. I think that the Minister, to be fair to him, is beginning to think laterally and imaginatively in that regard. Whilst I ask him to confirm that he endorses austerity, I confirm that he seems to be endorsing a lateral approach to housing. In that regard, we got the money from the European Investment Bank to allow Choice and Apex to build 4,700 houses, but the need is for about 12,000 houses over the next five years. I think that the Minister will be very aware of that. We need to get back to the levels that were being built when, to be fair to us, Margaret Ritchie and I were housing Ministers. Mr McCartney is giggling, but these are the facts: in recent years, the budget line for housing is down to 1,500 or less. In those four years, the budget line for housing was 2,000 or more. In the year that I was housing Minister, there were 2,300 new-build starts. Those are facts; you cannot really dispute them.

Mr McCartney: Where did you get the money from?

Mr Attwood: The point was that we negotiated hard for the money. We did it in a context where we were reducing discreetly the grant aid that was going to the housing associations so that they had to rely on some of their own resources. The investment bank is a very welcome thing, not just for the university or housing but for other opportunities going forward. I think that the Minister is thinking about where else he can go in that regard. That is why any imaginative thinking that might come out of DOF in that regard will have the rug pulled from under its feet by what might happen on 23 June.

These are my questions, because there might be a bit more of a crafted approach. Will there be the match funding to enable Choice and Apex to build those 4,700 houses? The European money is predicated on the fact that there will be match funding or at least substantial grant aid. I think that the grant aid might have gone up in the last couple of years. Will there be that funding? That is a strategic decision. That is an outcomes-based approach to housing in the Programme for Government that has to be front and centre in the Budget and PFG when they come back here later this year. How then will we move beyond 4,700 to 11,700? That is what we will have to do. This goes back to real-time issues in the Budget.

If you speak to the housing associations and bodies, they will tell you that they are scrambling for land and that a lot of the new build now is on small sites, whereas they need to scale up and have big sites. Yet it is my understanding that the work that the Strategic Investment Board was doing on an audit of public land in the North, which has been going on for three or four years, has been passed back to the Department of Finance to take forward. The Minister might want to confirm what is now happening in the Department of Finance in regard to a land audit to identify where there can be social and affordable housing, not land for private developers, even though Choice and Apex may do some private development themselves. Where will they get the land? They might have the money from the European Investment Bank and they might get match funding from government, but they cannot build unless they have the land. I do not know what happened to the work that the SIB was meant to be doing, but it has now gone back to the Finance Department. Maybe something is about to mature, and land release could happen. We would like to hear that. In that regard, I ask the Minister —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way —

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Agnew: — just in case he is moving on from his point on housing. He is a former Minister, and I remember asking his predecessor Margaret Ritchie — if I have got the order right — about the developer's contribution back at the time. Does he remember that, and is he aware of any progress on that issue?

Mr Attwood: This sums up the last Government. When I was in the Department for Social Development, I argued for a developer contribution, and the planning Minister blocked it. Then, when I was planning Minister, I argued for a developer contribution, and the housing Minister blocked it. You can join up the dots in that regard.

We made the argument and, on both occasions, a DUP Minister, but in different Ministries, blocked it. We need to go back to that.

There are other initiatives as well. That is why the Minister's comment on housing and housing funding — I think that there was a reference to the Housing Executive — was either just a warm phrase or the words were pregnant with something. Maybe he could explain, not today but some time.

I remember when I was housing Minister, I would come to the House and make statements on housing issues. When a lot of stuff was happening around the Housing Executive — it was not good stuff — that did not take away one iota from the huge contribution of that body over the last 50 years. When there was bad stuff going on in the Housing Executive, I came and gave a statement to the House in that regard. When I was housing Minister, I had a fundamental review to try to protect the legacy and future of the Housing Executive while recognising that it was time for radical reform, including the terms for the separation of housing from other functions. However, that work got derailed by DUP Ministers who were trying to play politics with the Housing Executive rather than deal with the housing crisis in the North.

6.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I ask the Member to return to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. Biographical detail, interesting though it is, is not at this stage an important feature of the debate.

Mr Attwood: You are right. The Minister might want to touch on that. He may not want to explore it in great detail — well, he might — but it is an area where, in protecting the legacy of the Housing Executive, its integrity and its future, you can do things, and it will be useful to consider that.

I want to conclude, if I could, with a comment in respect of the Budget and the PFG and the shallow narrative that is about the place and was referred to yesterday by somebody in relation to our approach to the PFG. We opposed 'A Fresh Start'. We voted against 'A Fresh Start', and this goes back to comments made by Mr Lyttle, Ms Bradshaw and Dr Farry yesterday. This will be my concluding remark. Were we not wise to endorse the good in Stormont House and try to rework the bad? As I said in my opening remarks, look at the sword that London has hanging over this place in respect of corporation tax: "You

will do it on our terms or you might not do it at all". Watch that one.

We opposed Stormont House where it needed to be opposed and supported it where it needed to be supported, and we voted against 'A Fresh Start'. Then there were discussions around the Programme for Government where we sent people in with a watching brief, and the document that came out said that there was no political endorsement. Meanwhile — this is the point that the Alliance Party needs to face up to — we were telling organisation after organisation to get their proposals in not just to the parties and Ministers but to the officials in OFMDFM who were responsible for the PFG. If you go and check, you will find that quite a number of organisations put on record with officials and elsewhere in OFMDFM — now the Executive Office — proposals in respect of the PFG negotiation. We believe that the PFG negotiation which informed this Budget — I will finish now —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I remind the Member that this is not the PFG; this is the Budget.

Mr Attwood: I will conclude now. That was meant to be a proper 14-day negotiation. This is my final remark. The one thing that surprises me about the Alliance Party is that even it thought the PFG negotiation was meant to be more than it was. Why would you put in your proposals to beef up the PFG framework if you did not think that that negotiation was meant to be something more than what we ended up with, which was the DUP and Sinn Féin telling all the other parties, "It is government on our terms. Take it or leave it". Were we not right not to take it?

Mr E McCann: I will deal with a couple of preliminary matters. I do not have as much to say as Mr Attwood. Let me put it another way: I will not speak for as long as Mr Attwood.

What slightly puzzles me about all of this is that, of course, all the proposals in and components of the Budget slot into the Programme for Government; otherwise, they would have no meaning at all. I am worried about the way in which we are going to measure these things. I am worried about this new scheme called — what is it again? — "outcome-based", which is very popular these days in certain circles. It really is the thing among those who want to be fashionable about the way in which they approach these matters. The idea is that you define what the outcome will be, and then you have things for measuring how you approach it.

We are told that there is experimental evidence that it works and makes things better. Over and over again, we have been told that some states in the United States have adopted it, as well as Scotland and Finland. What I have not heard and what I would like to hear is some reference to specific items of policy that they can say have been better realised than they would have been under any other system. I do not believe that they can do that. If they could do it, we would have heard it. What measures? In which states in the United States? What has improved in Scotland? What difference has it made to austerity in Scotland or even to the ameliorating measures in Scotland? Tell us that, and then you will have made a case for it. I think that it is dodgy.

Let me give you an example of how this might work, and then I will show you how this is a practical example. Let us imagine that the desired outcome is that everybody

deemed to be in need of or entitled to visits from home care workers in the North should get them. That is a terrific outcome to desire. How would you measure it? Here is a way of measuring it: you calculate the number of people receiving care in that way, and then you look at the number last year and see whether it has improved. It sounds simple, does it not? It sounds obvious. It is anything but.

Imagine a scenario in which thousands of people in receipt of a 30-minute visit every day — not a lot, is it? — are told one fine day, "Sorry, things are tight and budgets are down, so you are now getting 15 minutes a day". You could, through that exercise, say, "We can do twice as many people at 15 minutes than we can do at 30 minutes". If the measurement is the number of people in receipt of that care and those services, you can produce a figure that says that we are doing twice as well now as we did beforehand, but you are doing exactly the same. Could that happen? I think that it could, and one of the reasons that I think that is that it is happening now. Care packages and care visits are being cut back at the same time as we are being told that the statistics will show us that things are as fine as ever they were. One of the reasons that I bring that up, and this is to do more directly with the Budget and not just the way in which the Programme for Government is framed —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I gently remind the Member that this is not a debate on the Programme for Government but a debate on the Budget. I ask him to remember that.

Mr E McCann: OK. One matter that, I am sure you will agree, falls within the Budget is the funding. There are references here to the funding of various aspects of our life — our social, economic and political life. The whole idea of the reduction in corporation tax is relevant to what we are talking about here, because it is relevant to the amount of money that is calculated or forecast to be available for fulfilling all the functions of government. Of course that is relevant, but it is also nonsense. It has been talked about around here, and it is accepted that it will boost the private sector and that our Budget situation will be easier because we will have a booming private sector, tax receipts and all the rest of it. In fact, what will happen here, which will have a devastating effect on budgets — I am talking about the Budget — is that shedloads of money will be shovelled into the coffers of major multinational companies. That money will not then be available for the day-to-day spending that ordinary people need, whatever that is: £200 million or £300 million.

At the same time, note the reference in the Budget to the money that will be necessary to pay off people in the public sector. We are borrowing money to destroy jobs at the same time as we talk about boosting employment and getting proper jobs. The effect is that, while we talk about job creation, we are indulging in job destruction. We have people being paid off.

Incidentally, the philosophy behind that is, "Private sector good; public sector bad". The public sector is all these staid, fuddy-duddy, superannuated, feather-bedded people producing nothing while the private sector is slim and dynamic and roaring forward. What a load of old nonsense. Look around the world at the private sector and the market system: the public sector is a model of efficiency compared to the private sector. That is our big problem when we talk about job creation and about how

the Budget will relate to creating jobs. The reason that we talk about this is that the private sector has failed Northern Ireland. It is the private sector that has not provided jobs, so the state has to move in and subsidise it, and, while subsidising the private sector, we take jobs away from the public sector.

Loads of people in Derry, for example, and in Newry, west Belfast and north Belfast — I do not want to be accused of concentrating only on Derry, but that is the place I know, so that is the one that I will talk about. Half my time in the last couple of months has been spent talking to public-sector workers and their unions about the threat to jobs and the number of people living under acute anxiety because they do not know what will happen in the future. Will the offer be, “You can have a transfer to Belfast or take redundancy.”? I am talking about reality here and about people who gathered last night so that I could talk to them and try, as best I could, to advise them. None of that will be dealt with in the Budget outlined here. In fact, the Budget will make all these things worse.

We could raise more money locally; there is no question about it. I want to deal with whether we should lift the cap on rates. Somebody pointed out — I forget who it was — and it is commonly pointed out that this will catch people who are asset-rich but cash-poor. There are a lot of people in that situation, mainly older people who have houses that are now worth loads of money. Here is one way of handling it: link the rates to ability to pay and to wealth. There is no question that that can be done. That will deal with the question of somebody who is 70 or 80 years old and living in a house that is suddenly worth £1.5 million but they only have a pension. Link the two together. Why is that never suggested? I will tell you why it is never suggested: because that would hit people in the upper echelons of the earning range and we do not do that, do we? We live in a society in the North in which the kingpins of casino capitalism are pursued and bowed down to all the time while we say, “Here is more money. How much profit are you making? How much corporation tax do you think you will have to pay?”. It is OK saying that we will alleviate it. They are the people who are feather-bedded. Casino capitalism is feather-bedded in the North and elsewhere. The richer you are, the softer the bed you get to lie on in this society. I think that the Minister may well agree with some of the things that I am saying, but he is constrained by the system that he is operating —

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Can I stop you mid flow and ask you to take a point?

Mr E McCann: Absolutely.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: My mother still fixes my collar at the back, but I do not know if that is a collar that you are leaving up deliberately, Eamonn. The person who you heard speaking about lifting the rates cap may have been my good self, because we have been speaking to the Committee about it. There are those perils in it, and it is not our intention to catch people who are cash-poor but asset-rich. I agree with you entirely — it may be the only time tonight — that there is work for all of us to do in trying to raise extra money. I think that Steven Agnew said this earlier: the people at the bottom should not be subsidising the people at the top. We have work to do on that. We cannot do it overnight, but I think that we can do it in the next 12 months. Apologies for interrupting.

Mr E McCann: There is no need to apologise. I welcome that, and, if we can move towards a situation —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Order. I remind Ministers as well as Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

7.00 pm

Mr E McCann: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will bring my remarks to a close.

I welcome what the Minister just said. I hope that, if I have to make a contribution to that discussion — I would welcome the opportunity — the outcome-based result will be a system that raises more money for local spending and one that gets and harvests that money in a fair way that does not bear down disproportionately on poor people.

Ideology is hardly ever discussed in politics, but it is relevant to the Budget, to all spending and to all tax-raising powers. It used to be that we had two ideologies: one was orange, one was green and “never the twain shall meet.” Now, perhaps, we have two ideologies: one is to do with a socialist ideology — you can have that in as broad terms as you like — and the other is to do with a capitalist ideology that is based on the interests of the system and the market, and letting the market rip through every aspect of our daily lives and all the rest of it.

Sometimes, the old ideologies in this part of the world led to constitutional crises, did they not? People ran around saying, “We have to avoid this crisis” or, after the crisis developed, “We have to solve this crisis”. How about this for a constitutional crisis? Run it up to the wire. When they talk about imposing austerity, and the Treasury says, “There is not another penny”, stand up to them and say, “Go to hell. We are not accepting that”. We do that on all sorts of other things. We did it on policing. We did it on decommissioning. We did it on loads of things. We said, “We do not care what the British Government says. Do your worst — we are not budging”.

Would it not be wonderful to have a constitutional crisis in Northern Ireland that had nothing to do with an orange versus green dynamic but had to do with being anti-austerity and the rights and interests of the people at the bottom in society. I tell you what, if that happened and there was a constitutional crisis because of the refusal of the Executive to implement austerity, among the other outcomes would be this: it would electrify millions of people across the water in Scotland, in Wales and in England — in the industrial heartlands of England — that we had taken on that fight.

We can give a lead; we have done it before. People in Ireland, and in the North of Ireland, can give a lead and light a beacon for others to follow in the fight against austerity instead of — Alex Attwood is right about this — introducing and implementing an austerity Budget in ways that we cannot precisely measure but which we know will disproportionately affect, and affect badly, the people least able to take the hit that is coming their way. Thanks very much.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Thank you, Mr McCann. I am advised that, apparently, you can tell the Government to go to hell, but you cannot tell other Members to go to that place, which is interesting.

Mr E McCann: Say that again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): No. You can read it in Hansard.

Mr Allister: The debate was at risk of becoming predictable and a little boring, and then Mr McCann spoke. I am sure that it was a timely reminder to Sinn Féin of their oft-forgotten socialist credentials. I do not know whether it was a reminder to the Minister — I am not sure just how much he ever espoused the socialist credentials — but I am sure that it was a reminder to the Back Benches of the socialist credentials that they once espoused, or seemed to, before they joined, or became, the establishment. It was, not least from that point of view, an interesting intervention.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

There was another interesting intervention when we were debating these financial matters this time last year. That intervention came from the current Finance Minister, who was then, I suppose, a mere Back-Bencher. Uninhibited by the burden of office, he was able to speak freely, and he declared to the House:

“I am not here to carry water for English Ministers.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 105, p333, col 2].

Ms Ní Chuilín: Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: What a difference a year makes, because that is precisely what the Finance Minister is doing today. He is carrying the water of austerity through this House. He does not want to face that or admit to that, but the very Bill that we are discussing tells us that. If you pick up this Bill, and pick up last year's Bill, which became the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, and compare them, you will soon discover just how much water of austerity is oozing from this Bill.

Clause 1(1) sets out the figure for the Consolidated Fund. It tells us it is just shy of £8 billion. What was it last year in the Act that was passed? It was £350 million more, so this Bill cuts, courtesy of this Sinn Féin Minister, £350 million out of the Consolidated Fund. If you then go to schedule 2 to the Bill and look what it does in respect of resources, the amounts of resources authorised for use and amounts of accruing resources that may be used in the year ending 31 March 2017, it tells us that the cumulative figure is £8,693,000,000. What was it last year? It was £9,004,000,000 — another cut, this time of £311 million.

So, the Minister deceives himself and, perhaps, hopes that others will likewise be deceived with this pretence that he is not here to carry water for English Ministers and is here to fight, not implement, austerity. It is patently obvious that this legislation is doing the very thing that he avows not to do. He tries to kick up a whole storm of dust to try to cover the fact that this is exactly what he does, so he finds nice, flowery, effective language about fighting austerity, finding resources elsewhere and making sure that no one loses out, but he still brings a Bill to this House that has cuts in it of £600 million.

So, away with this nonsense that this Sinn Féin Minister is not in the business of cuts. Of course he is. The Bill speaks loud and clear to that.

I said that a year had made a big difference. Also, it has made a big difference for the DUP. Indeed, two months has made a big difference, because for years we were

told that you could not trust Sinn Féin with the Finance portfolio. Indeed, two months ago, Arlene Foster was telling us of the great divergence between her vision and the vision of her partner Martin McGuinness and how he would take us in the wrong direction. Now, of course, when the election is safely over and the gullible for whom that sort of language was designed have swallowed it, it is back to business.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Agnew: I am sure the Member will recall as well the statement from the then Finance Minister that she had to remain in post while other Ministers vacated theirs for fear of “rogue Ministers” taking over. Does the Member interpret that as a suggestion that, in the First Minister's view, we now have a “rogue Minister” in place for the next five years?

Mr Allister: That was the statement of convenience at the moment it was required, but it is quite clear that all this talk saying, “We can't trust Sinn Féin with the Finance Department” has evaporated as the price of office.

Mrs Little Pengelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Ah — indeed.

Mrs Little Pengelly: This is just a short intervention simply to clarify this: are the Member and Mr Agnew aware that the Budget (No. 2) Bill has been agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive, which DUP Ministers are members of? This is not something being proposed by the Minister; it is being proposed by the Executive.

Mr Allister: That did not bring much light, because that is pretty obvious. The point is that that which was unacceptable, anathema and beyond the pale is now, as the price of the joint office, more than acceptable. Suddenly, those for whom gatekeepers were required and who could not be trusted can now be bestowed with that wonderful office of looking after the purse strings. Of course, all the past rhetoric from the DUP Benches has been closed down, except that someone forgot to tell Mr Wells.

Mr Wells made two pretty catastrophic mistakes in the rule book of nua DUP today. He forgot to show due deference to his dear leader because he forgot that she ever was Finance Minister, never mind that she was so important that she was the gatekeeper. He then forgot that you are not meant any longer to attack Sinn Féin and that you are meant to cover up for them and excuse them — “We are all in this together”. As Mrs Pengelly says, “It is our Budget too.” Gone are the days of Sammy Wilson when he used to —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to return the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Allister: Yes. Many's a time in the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill did we hear Mr Sammy Wilson talk about the economic illiteracy of Sinn Féin. *[Laughter.]* Many's a time.

We are in this wonderful place tonight, where to cloak the reality of what he is doing, the Finance Minister draws on this mantra of attacking austerity, while all the time he is carrying the water of austerity. Those who used to think he and his colleagues unfit now sing dumb when it comes to criticism on all these matters. Yet, there are some things that are irrepensible.

7.15 pm

The flagship economic policy of this Executive is the reduction in corporation tax. Mr Attwood very effectively set out the dichotomy between the approaches of the two parties. One embraces the language that says, "Date, rate, set, deal done, job done, it's over," and one, in the words of the Minister yesterday, asks itself rhetorically:

"Have the negotiations on that best deal started? No, they have not." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p186, col 2].

Conor Murphy said:

"What is on the table is not good enough." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p184, col 1].

It is pretty clear, despite all the sticking plasters, that that key flagship policy is fraying at the edges, pulled in one way by one partner and interpreted and pulled in the other way by the other partner. Indeed, there is nothing but absolute confusion reigning as to whether there is a memorandum of understanding. The Minister told the Committee last week that there was not, then his official said, "Well, there is a sort of one, but it's not really one." So whether there is or there is not is a bit of a mystery.

What are the mechanics for working out the ups and downs of corporation tax? As Mr Attwood pointed out, the Stormont House Agreement has some things to say about the British Government's position, and they are reiterated in the Fresh Start Agreement. At paragraph 6.2, the UK Government make it clear that, even when it comes to the ex-post review of the costs of the devolution of corporation tax, four years after the implementation of a devolved rate, which, on present reckoning, will be about 2022 if it does not move yet again:

"This review will consider the extent of behavioural costs (but not second round effects)".

The very sort of topic that the Minister would have us believe is not settled is settled. It is settled in the Fresh Start Agreement that he signed up to, in which the British Government could not be clearer that, even in the review in four years' time, second-round effects are out of consideration. So there needs to be a lot more clarity and honesty with the watching public as to the position on corporation tax. We have a First Minister and a deputy First Minister jetting round the world and selling corporation tax as if it were a done deal, yet back here we have the Finance Minister telling us, "Not at all. No done deal. Negotiations haven't even started on the affordability issue." As several of the Sinn Féin Back-Benchers have pointed out, only if it is demonstrably affordable will it ever happen.

Who is fooling whom on this central flagship policy? Of course, we have heard nothing from the DUP on this subject because it does not want to rock the boat. The Minister has been given a bit of a leash to talk as he talks. Eventually, some day, perhaps the issue will have to be faced.

There are other interesting issues that we have heard very little about. Mr Philip Smith made reference to them in the early parts of this debate. Fresh Start sets up an independent fiscal council. Will the Minister tell us whether its terms of reference, which have to be agreed with the Treasury, have been agreed? Are there any appointments to the independent fiscal council? Will he expound its

relationship with the Office for Budget Responsibility and HM Treasury? Who has the veto on the terms of reference of the independent fiscal council? What, under its terms of reference, is it going to do?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to return to the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Debate about future spending plans beyond the current financial year is outside the scope of the Bill.

Mr Allister: Of course, Fresh Start did not tell us when the independent fiscal council was going to be set up. I am enquiring whether it has been set up. If it has, it would govern the Bill. Fresh Start simply says:

"The UK Government welcomes the Executive's plans to establish an Independent Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland. The Council will prepare an annual assessment of the Executive's revenue streams and spending proposals and how these allow the Executive to balance their budget; and prepare a further annual report on the sustainability of the Executive's public finances".

Under the cycle of this Budget, will there be prepared by the independent fiscal council a report on the sustainability of the Executive's public finances? Will that part of Fresh Start be implemented up to and including April 2017, or when is that going to kick in? We are entitled to know when that is going to happen.

Could the Minister also shed light —

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. I want to return him to the issue of corporation tax. Does he recall issuing a press statement on 13 December 2005 — it is available on the archive of jimallister.org — in which he said:

"corporation tax in an area like Northern Ireland should be radically reduced as a means of stimulating investment and thereby moving us away from over-dependence on the public sector"?

Mr Allister: I do. The critical point that the Member made no reference to was that that predated the Azores judgement, which changed everything as far as corporation tax is concerned. It introduced the imperative that you must deduct from the block grant that which is lost in corporation tax. It was an entirely different animal at an entirely different time. However, in this debate, although it is a matter of record that I think that it is folly in these circumstances to go for fiscal distinction from the rest of the United Kingdom, I have not discussed the merits of corporation tax. I accept that it is a flagship policy of the Executive, and I have been asking questions around that.

Returning to the independent fiscal council for Northern Ireland, has it been set up? When is it going to be set up? Are its terms of reference agreed? Is it going to do a report on the sustainability of public finances? All of those are informed by issues in this Budget debate. The point that I was getting to before I was taken back to corporation tax was that Fresh Start says:

"The UK Government will legislate ... to ensure that the Assembly cannot consider spending plans which exceed the Block Grant allocated by the Treasury or the NIE's borrowing limits, where planned spending relies on those funding sources."

Can the Minister tell us where the discussions about that are? Are they impacting on this Bill? Will legislation yet to be passed by the UK Government impact on the spending plans articulated in the Bill? If not, when is the expectation that that will happen?

I turn to the subject of borrowing. Mr Wells very effectively dealt with the issue and raised the alarm as to the folly of simply thinking that we can spend, spend, spend and borrow, borrow, borrow, with no thought for tomorrow or for whoever has to pay it back. The starting point in reality is that every penny borrowed has to be paid back, and out of our DEL. Therefore, the interest charges diminish that which we have available to us.

The Minister seems to be so attracted to this random, cavalier attitude to borrowing. The very first utterance that one can discern he made publicly after becoming Minister was that he was in the business of wanting to stretch the flexibilities on borrowing. Who is he going to borrow from? The arrangements are quite clear. You can borrow only from the National Loans Fund, and that then increases the national debt. There is no other mechanism open to this Executive to borrow. Is that what he wants to do? He already has an inflated ceiling for borrowing of £3 billion. Is he wanting to increase that, and, if so, to how much? I think that we are entitled to know from a Minister who is bringing a Budget what his borrowing ambitions are. If he has a borrowing ceiling of £3 billion, and he thinks that that is not enough, are we not entitled to know what he thinks will be enough? Of course, we are already the most borrowed part of the United Kingdom. This small Administration have borrowings of £2.1 billion, yet we have a Minister at the helm who wants to borrow more.

We really have a lot of doublethink here. We have a Minister who brings a Budget Bill with £600 million of cuts in it, which include some self-imposed cuts — the approximate £100 million this year that has been shaved off the block grant to pay for welfare mitigations. It is not all Westminster's fault in that sense. Then, as it were, to cover the cuts, he talks blandly about borrowing. Borrowing what from whom when? I think that this House is entitled to know. Then, when the steam runs out of borrowing, he will say that we need more fiscal powers.

The Minister, as I understand him, is a great enthusiast for the Belfast Agreement. That agreement is implemented by the 1998 Act, and schedule 2 to that Act is very clear that taxation is an excepted matter. It is beyond the reach, happily, of the Minister. Only in special-permission circumstances can an Executive raise any taxes. It is in the financial guidance that the Department operates under that the presumption is that any taxes raised go to the Treasury. How the Minister thinks that he is going to unstitch the very clear, established constitutional devolution arrangements on taxation is really beyond me. Instead of a lot of the flannel and pretence, we really need some straight answers to all those things.

7.30 pm

I will finish on a point that I first raised at the beginning of today's business: the procedures used in respect of this. In my naivety, I always assumed that monitoring rounds, which change the opening balance, as it were, on the books, could occur only after the opening balance had been established, and the tradition was that it was established by the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Once you had established the opening position, you could then legitimately change that through the monitoring round. Before we ever established the opening position, the House was told — not asked to agree; the House was told — that the opening position was being changed by the monitoring round. I really am surprised that departmental officials, who seemed to have, for years, followed the precedent that you pass the Budget (No. 2) Bill, establish the opening figures and then move to your monitoring announcements, gave advice — if they gave advice — that, in fact, you could reverse that order. That does surprise me. I am also somewhat surprised that the Business Office thought that that was an appropriate way to go.

The overriding message of that, from the fact that a Committee is due to meet tomorrow to get a briefing on what will happen in the monitoring round when it has already happened, is the contempt shown for the processes of the House. Therefore, I think that it starts off the whole budgetary arrangement on very much the wrong foot, in terms of any transparency and cooperation with the House, that we are told, in the arrogant words and manner in which we were told, that this, effectively, is joined-up government at work. "Whether you like it or not, this is how it is going to be. We will not even tell you what the bids were, because who are you? You are only MLAs, and why would you need to know that? We know, and that is enough." That, Mr Speaker, is not good enough.

Mr Carroll: I am sure that you are aware that there are many figures in the Budget Bill, and figures are important. One of the key facets of modern-day politics — or, rather, one of the chief deficiencies of modern-day politics — is that politicians and Governments tend to use figures to bamboozle people, to distract them and to deflect, through statistical noise, the real agenda. I have to say, and I do not say this lightly, that one thing that I have learned in my short time in the Assembly is that there are lies, damned lies, and Executive figures. I say that because behind every one of these figures are the lives of people and the lifeblood of our communities; behind every one of these figures are people's jobs and the services that people need and rely on, day in, day out. So when we look past the statistical noise in the Bill, we have to ask ourselves this: what effect will these figures have on the lives of ordinary, everyday people?

Take, for example, today's announcement that there will be a reallocation of £30 million to Education, £5 million of which is due to go to special educational needs. If this was indeed extra money — if it was indeed an extra £30 million — it would be welcome. Of course, however, we know that the previous Minister of Education said that, in 2016-17, there would be a £72 million cut in the Education budget. So, the truth is that there is not £30 million extra in this Budget; there is £42 million less for Education. I repeat the point that there has been a cut of £42 million in Education.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will, yes.

Mr Agnew: I am sure that it will be of interest to the Member that the £30 million in question was itself raided from welfare mitigation measures during the last Assembly mandate.

Mr Carroll: Absolutely, and I thank the Member for his point.

Every day, I am contacted by distressed parents who have nowhere to go and are worried about their children's education. It is a disgrace and a travesty to those affected by it, and it is a shame on the House for allowing it to continue. Given the way that these figures have been presented, can we really say that we are being honest with parents, honest with teachers and honest with classroom assistants about the scale of the cuts that are coming?

The Minister of Finance, in his opening speech today, asked — without any manners, mind you — whether those of us who sit in this section of the Chamber could hear him. He should apologise for that comment and withdraw it. We can hear loud and clear, Minister. Given that you can hear, Minister, we ask you this question: can you and the Executive be honest with those in the education sector and in the community and voluntary sector? Can you say that these figures mean that cuts and more cuts will be bestowed upon on them and that the Assembly has failed them? Will he ask the Executive whether they will be honest and tell the people who elected them that these figures mean that they will face more austerity and more cuts?

Let us set aside the figures for now. I want to ask the Minister whether he will commit to being honest about the cuts that are coming. Will he and the Executive at least have the decency to warn those on the receiving end of the cuts how deep they will go? The very least that he can do for those who pay our wages and the wages of the Executive is to be honest with them. Tell the teachers, tell the classroom assistants and tell the workers about the cuts that are on the way and how deep they will be.

If the Executive are really prepared to stop austerity, they should be honest to those who are on the receiving end of it. They should be honest and say that the Executive have failed to stop austerity. Give those people a chance to organise against them and prepare to fight back. Give them a chance to do what the Executive have failed to do: stop austerity.

Mr Robinson: As an elected DUP Member for East Londonderry, I support Second Stage. I appreciate that, from Department to Department, it is not perfect because of Budget constraints, but we must all remember that, in 2010, the Tory Government took £4 billion from the Northern Ireland block grant, which left a massive hole in our finances. Successive Finance Ministers have been left with the fairly onerous task of trying to plug the financial gap.

Hopefully, the monitoring round will go some way towards helping Departments, including the Education Department and the Department for Infrastructure, which deals with roads, with the upkeep of vital services. From a health point of view, the Health Minister needs to look urgently at out-of-hours provision in my constituency. A service that should be available until 11.00 pm each night closes, on occasions, at 8.00 pm or 9.00 pm, leaving the Limavady area without GP cover. I would like to think that the long-awaited A6 road project, encompassing a bypass around Dungiven and the much-needed Greystone Road junction roundabout in Limavady, where quite a few road accidents have taken place, will be built.

I was amazed to hear Mr Harold McKee, the Ulster Unionist, criticise the Executive's decision to relocate the DARD headquarters to Ballykelly in my East Londonderry constituency. I remind Mr McKee and the Ulster Unionist Party that this site was gifted by the Ministry of Defence

(MOD) to the Stormont Executive and that the move will create hundreds of much-needed jobs. In line with the Bain report, these jobs will be created in an area of the Province's north-west that has lost hundreds of jobs, including those from Daintifyt, Desmond's, Seagate and the army camp itself. The relocation is coupled with the sale of the remainder of the site, where, hopefully, hundreds of essential and much-needed jobs will be created.

Without sounding too critical of a unionist, fellow MLA and his party, if an Ulster Unionist MLA had been recently elected in East Londonderry, I wonder whether the UUP would be making the same comments regarding the relocation of the Agriculture Department's headquarters. Or have they now forgotten about the north-west economy? I certainly am glad that my DUP colleagues and I supported the potential creation of much-needed jobs in the north-west.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I want to start by apologising to Eamonn McCann. I made a remark earlier that was wrong. I said that he could not hear or did not hear; but he was not here yesterday, so I will repeat what I said, which was that I do not believe that any of us, Government or opposition parties, accept the Westminster Government's claim that we are all in this together. He may have heard me talk about the "togetherness" of the Executive. That is, as they say in Irish, *Ní neart go cur le chéile* — there is unity in strength or together we have strength. However, there was a reference to Mr Cameron yesterday.

It may be appropriate to start at the end, because I know that Mr McCann has a long journey home — maybe he has started it — as has Mr Allister. Let us start at the end, and then, if we have time, we can catch up with all our other colleagues, many of whom made their maiden speech.

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le gach duine a labhair le linn na díospóireachta inniu. Tá sé riachtanach tuairimí agus tiomantais gach Comhalta a chluinstin. My message for both our colleagues from People Before Profit is that the figures are important. I started the day — it seems a long time ago now — by announcing £175 million extra for front-line services, for tourism, the economy and further education. What we have to do, and this is my message to everyone in the House who is against austerity — I was being generous there, as I am not sure that everyone is — is mobilise, stand firm and be very cognisant that we have not stopped the juggernaut from London. The austerity ideologues in London have not been stopped in their tracks. We do know this, however: when we united with one voice, we managed to halt the progress of the juggernaut.

I am very conscious, again, of what the Anglican bishops of England said, which was that austerity is unacceptable because it places the greatest burdens of the recovery on those with the narrowest shoulders. Let us hold firm to that. I am not terribly given to ideology. I was accused today of being a Marxist-Leninist, amongst other things, but I am in favour of social justice, and if that is an ideology, then I pin my colours to that particular mast. That is what I stand for. The money that we made available today —

Mr E McCann: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I will.

Mr E McCann: I just want to reassure the Minister that there are people on the opposition side of the House who would not accuse him of Marxism. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I am happy to leave that appellation to others.

We believe that we need to stand against austerity because we have roots and a connection with those who come to us every day in our constituencies, who meet us in the streets, who we canvassed at election time. They are getting it hard and realise that it is tough out there, that there is too much unemployment and that, while the figures are improving, they are not improving fast enough. They know that, while we have made significant investments, the pace of change has not been radical enough.

We stand, for example, with the parents of children who are waiting to be tested for autism. We stand with those who are on hospital waiting lists. We stand with those in working-class communities, like Tiger's Bay, New Lodge, Ardoyne or Ballymurphy, right across Belfast and in the Creggan in Derry, who are trying to change their lives and want government support to do that. I say to everyone that we have a choice to make here. We can come to make statements or to support deeds. Today, we had deeds; in this Budget we have deeds.

I thank the Members, Chairs and Deputy Chairs who have contributed to the debate. It is wonderful, as Finance Minister, to hear so many views.

It is also not only illuminating but inspiring that you can start a debate about borrowing. Some people say, "We should sit on our hands. There is nothing we can do. Wrap up and go home". I have started a debate about borrowing, and all the different factors have been brought in. Some are in favour and some have innovative ideas, but everyone is saying, "Let us try and match the scale of the ambition of our people". As I said yesterday, the NI Science Park has a £100 million plan on the table. Of course, that includes the North West Regional Science Park, which unites Derry and Letterkenny. What are we to say to them about that £100 million plan? "It is nothing to do with us. We are sitting on our hands. Go somewhere else"? That certainly is not my concept. My concept is that we work with all our partners who are trying to build this community and create jobs and we find ways. We have the genius, imagination and innovation to find ways to grow the funding pie. That is the challenge. Other ideas were put forward today that we need to explore in the time ahead.

7.45 pm

I thank the Committee for allowing us to move swiftly with the Budget today. I thank the Committee Chair for her comments at the start of the debate, which was a long time ago. She has promised not only to be constructive but to scrutinise the activities of the Finance Minister. I look forward to that.

Philip Smith, who responded to my opening remarks, made a number of points, some he also made yesterday and some that, I think, were carried on from the debate on the June monitoring round. It is my conviction that, whatever about the ideology of the Ulster Unionist Party and its views on austerity, I will leave it to the Ulster Unionist Party to say whether it is against austerity. We will not go into the history of that argument again now —

Mr Lyons: Go on.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: No, we will not, because Christopher will ask to make a point and interrupt me.

What I will say is that you are questioning the commitment of the government parties to put funding where it is needed to make sure that our front-line services not only survive but thrive and that our young people have access to university. Let us go through some of the numbers under 'A Fresh Start'. I know that Mr Carroll has some concerns about numbers, but they are important because they change lives. Under 'A Fresh Start', we set aside £32 million for security funding to be allocated to the Department of Justice to relieve pressures there; £10 million for tackling paramilitary activity, which Mr Agnew brought up; £25 million for fraud and error to the Department for Communities; £75 million to the Department for Communities for mitigating measures of which we are very proud; and £60 million set aside for tax credits. That is why we received that back, Mr Agnew; it was not rated. Mrs Evason has given us that back.

Mr Smith also suggested that we reclassify the NIHE to allow it to borrow. Mrs Palmer brought that up as well. There will be hurdles to clear, but if you, like me, believe that we have to be imaginative in how we grow the funding pie, you will find me an ally in that work. Last week, I thought you did not want any borrowing: "There is nothing we can do, so let us sit on our hands". This week, you are suggesting that maybe we should look at that and that now maybe we should allow the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to borrow and build, which I introduced yesterday. Certainly, I am up for that if the Housing Executive is. It has played a key role here over 50 — almost 60 — years.

Let us look at what the Minister for Communities comes forward with. It is an interesting post to be the Minister of Finance, but I am not the Minister for Health, Communities, the Economy and AERA as well. For answers to many of the questions that were brought up, you need to go to those Ministers. Mr Attwood, for example, brought up the education budget and what was going into childcare. That is an issue for Peter Weir; I am not going to micromanage his budget. What I am saying is that today I got him extra financial firepower — I know that that is a term that Mr Allister particularly likes — for his budget, and I hope he will make positive changes with that money.

This is one of the great conundrums. The Alliance Party is in favour of closing a number of things — Mrs Armstrong suggests that we close down most of the flagship projects, but we will get to that — but the Ulster Unionist Party will not tell us how it will move even one line in the Budget. I think it was Mr Nesbitt who said yesterday that there were 323 or 338 pages. Surely in there somewhere is an item of expenditure in the Budget that you disagree with and can say, "We want to take that out and put this in". If that is your view, that is opposition; that is an alternative. In fact, all we received today was, "You should do this", "You should do that", "There is a problem with this" and "There is a problem with that".

You know, doing problems is relatively easy; it is doing the solutions. The Alliance Party proposed some solutions today. I am not saying that I agree with them; in fact, I disagree with the flagship projects being closed down. Mr Smith said, "We challenged the Executive over their

administration costs”, but of course the Civil Service and my Department have just led the largest ever restructuring through voluntary redundancy. People have left with a good package and with dignity. That has led to a 17% decrease in staff in my Department. The VES is delivering savings to our pay bill. You say that you want to see money going into services: this is how we make it happen.

Mr McCann mentioned the pressures on working-class people. The magic for me is that we need to get more money into the north-west. We have reduced 12 Departments to nine. I do not think that anyone can argue that you need as many staff for nine Departments as you need for 12. If some people go with dignity and a good package and we take that money and put it into the Free Derry Museum, the Siege Museum in Derry or additional cross-border activity that creates jobs, I do not think that any of us can argue against that. When Mr Smith points out that he thinks the administration cost is still too high, he needs to understand a little more about the pain that has been taken.

Can we do more as a people to be more effective and efficient? I am sure we can. What I will say to Mr Smith is this: “You have made a number of points today. My door is open.” — I have said this to many Members about visiting their constituency — “Bring forward proposals that can deliver change”. That is particularly important in respect of the health service. Everyone is united that they welcome the additional money today that brought it up to £200 million extra this year. Everyone is also united in saying that money is not the only solution or the solution, so we need to back the Bengoa plan. If Mr Smith has proposals around health or wants to give his support for the Bengoa report, I look forward to seeing that in the time ahead. As I said, we need to depoliticise the health issue if we are going to make real progress.

Mr Smith and Mr Allister mentioned the fiscal council. The terms of reference for the operation of the fiscal council have been agreed. A process is now under way, and it will conclude in the next few weeks.

Mr Farry talked about skills, apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy. I, too, am opposed very much to the fact that London came in over your head to impose that apprenticeship levy. It is much better when our Ministers have control over these matters, rather than letting London conduct a raid on our economy. While he focused on skills, he also mentioned health. What he said yesterday was “Would it not be wonderful if we did not need a billion?”. You are right: it would be wonderful if we did not need a billion. That would really take cooperation on health unprecedented in these islands, but we travel in hope. Perhaps, we will see that. He and the Alliance Party are not afraid to talk about raising the rate. They are opposed, as I understand it, to the rates cap, as are some of our other colleagues tonight. There has to be discussion around those issues, but as for Stranmillis College and St Mary’s University College — those two wonderful beacons of education in the city of Belfast with their store of knowledge and erudition — those we will defend in the time ahead.

As we have a more mature discussion around the regional rate, there are points to be made. We have raised it in line with inflation. I am not in favour of it being raised by more than that, but that is what we call a mature discussion about how we can grow the funding pie in the time ahead.

Some people say that it is not new money when you honour a commitment, but, if you go to the pub tonight and someone says, “I am going to give you £50 next week”, you do not have it until next week, and, if they give you it next week, you are doing well. That is what happened. The Minister was not in the pub with the former Minister for the Economy, but he made a commitment. The Minister of Finance said, “We will try and find that extra money for skills”, and we found it today. Be under no illusions: it was found today. It is money that could have gone to other services and other matters.

Dr Farry: We have spent it already.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: It is not spent just yet, but there are plans to spend it.

My colleague Patsy McGlone may have hit the high road home by this stage. Tá sé anseo go fóill. Níl sé ag gabháil a thacú leis an Bhúiséad. Tá suim ar leith aige i gcúram páistí agus a bheith ag cuidiú leo, agus sílim gurb é sin an rún atá againn uilig. Labhair sé ar Brexit. Mar Aire, tá cosc orm labhairt ar Brexit, ach sílim go bhfuil muid ar an leathanach chéadna.

As a Minister, I say to Patsy McGlone that I think we are on the same page on Brexit, but I will not comment on Brexit while I have my ministerial hat on. He referred, as many Members did, to corporation tax. Let us remember why we are in favour of reducing corporation tax: to create thousands of jobs and, in particular, to get a step change in areas that, since the 1920s, have never enjoyed full employment or a strong economy. It is our view that, if we can have the same rate of tax as pertains in the South of Ireland, where the Green Party, of course, backed a 12.5% corporation tax rate, we can see a transformation and an uplift in the number of jobs created. Those jobs are our only interest. It is our intention to have many corporations and companies here of all sizes, which will then increase the tax take, because it is not just about foreign direct investment.

This morning, I wrote to Mr Osborne. I think that I still have the good wishes of everyone here in the negotiations ahead. Some people are indicating that I should throw in the towel and accept whatever is on the table. I have never been in a negotiation like that. A negotiation involves going in and asserting your case. You put your best case, which you will argue for and gather and garner support for. If people speak with one voice, I will be able to say that everyone in the House believes that I should fight for the best deal. That is certainly a card to play, and I believe that that is the case. I am confident — I heard Mr Lunn earlier saying, “Don’t despair” — that we will make that deal. We have the rate and date set, and we will, in 2018, introduce a corporation tax that it is achievable and affordable. Wish me well in those negotiations. Remember, however, that our great friends in Scotland settled the income tax negotiation only about a month before the election was called — actually, they were in the throes of the election — so we cannot expect an announcement immediately. We hope that, once the negotiation is concluded, we will move to the commencement clause and move forward positively.

Ms Hanna has a wonderful statement out about Marlene. I had not seen it; I thought that only young people said that, but, of course, you are much younger than me. Under the heading, “Hanna: Monitoring round sees funding bonanza for Marlene”, it states:

“Deputy Chairperson of the Finance Committee Claire Hanna MLA has responded to the June Monitoring Round which was introduced in the Assembly today. Ms Hanna criticised the Finance Minister for the allocation of £26.2million to the Executive Office as well as the lack of time given to other parties ... Even after the Joint First Ministers dropped almost all duties from their bloated department, the Finance Minister has included a £26.2million increase ... In the short time we had to study the document, we spotted a £24.9million discrepancy between two sets of figures quoted. This may be easily explainable but the Minister failed to resolve the issue”.

Let us take —

Ms Hanna: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I will give way before I finish, but let me finish my point.

Let us take a breath here. Let us make sure, if we are going to go out all guns blazing attacking a £175 million monitoring round, that we get our facts right. That is the way to do business. We are not going to agree. There is an Opposition, and there are government parties.

The supposed discrepancy between the two sets of figures is, in fact, not a discrepancy at all. The figures that Ms Hanna refers to were the resources available to the Executive and the amount allocated. If Ms Hanna had read to the end of the statement or listened to my comments, she would have realised that the supposed discrepancy was in the level of overcommitment that the Executive had agreed was prudent. The £24.9 million she referred to, made up of a £13.5 million resource DEL and an £11.4 million capital DEL allocation, is clearly stated on page 10 of the statement. There is a further point — I know that this is a sore point because I have had to defend the Executive Office several times here — that Ms Hanna makes about how I am providing £27.2 million to the Executive — in fact, it is £26.2 million, but that is irrelevant. This is not funding for the Executive Office; it is to get money into communities. This is going out the door from the Executive, and it is going on things like Delivering Social Change and a shared future. In fact, today, you insisted that I read through the whole list of where the money is going. I give way.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Member for giving way. You will see from Hansard and from our website that, 20 minutes after we were given the figures, I asked for clarity on the difference between the figures.

If it was so simple, perhaps you could have responded to me at the time when I asked for clarity. You did not. You clearly found the discrepancy on your lunch break.

8.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to make all her comments through the Chair.

Ms Hanna: Certainly. I asked for clarity because it underlines the point that this Government are doing their business behind closed doors. You bypassed us on the paramilitary report and you bypassed us on this, and, if you give people 20 minutes' notice to peruse 37 pages of figures, we are entitled to ask for some clarity.

Regarding the second figure, you will see that it was correct in the tweet at £27.2 million. With SIF, nobody is criticising the fact that money is going to social change; we are criticising the fact that it is a slush fund for invited guests only and that it is not open, on an equal footing, to all organisations. *[Interruption.]* You say that money is getting out; it was not getting out for four years until the month before the election.

Mr Speaker: The Member asked for an intervention. The Member is not entitled to make a speech during an intervention.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: That is a fairly generous giving way. Maybe we will get through this speech and all get home. There is an old saying, “When you are in a hole, stop digging”. I suggest that, when we read out statements, if anybody here does not understand something, come up to the office and we will sort it out that day. If you cannot get it sorted out that day, issue the press statement, but do not rush to the laptop; it is always a mistake.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. This is now, I think, the fourth time since I have been elected to the Chamber that a fellow Member for the Belfast South constituency has effectively questioned the character of the social investment fund. When she uses words like “slush fund”, does she realise that she is maligning the character of the groups that were the beneficiaries of it? She is saying that community groups in her own constituency were the beneficiaries of a slush fund.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to address all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Stalford: She should withdraw that remark and apologise.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: We will perhaps have one point per person, and everyone may go home happy. John O’Dowd mentioned the apprenticeship levy. This is the only point that you are getting, Mr O’Dowd. It is clear to all of us that what is raised in the apprenticeship levy must be returned in full to our local economy, and I will make that point as strongly as possible to our counterparts in London. It was part of the austerity agenda, in my view, when they came over the head of Stephen Farry to impose and lift the apprenticeship levy.

Mr Beattie was critical of the Budget, but, again, there were no alternatives. He had real concerns about justice and about the expenditure on justice. I will not micro-manage Claire Sugden’s budget. What would you do differently, Mr Beattie? That is the question, and that is what we need to find out in the time ahead. You might say, “Here is the Budget. We would take £100 million out of education and put it into health or we would take £100 out of tourism and put it wherever”. We need to see those alternatives. Mr Beattie pledged his opposition to Tory austerity, but then, I think, hedged that one. I go back to the point that the people behind the austerity agenda here did not even get 10,000 votes across 18 constituencies. Let us remember that they have no representatives in the House, and I hope that they have no proxy representatives either. Mr Beattie also highlighted the paramilitary panel. That work is being taken forward, and, of course, we provided £10 million for it.

I move on to my dear friend Jim Wells. I have been spending the last week telling everyone not to call me

“Minister” but to call me “Máirtín”; I am telling Jim to call me “Minister”, not “Máirtín”. *[Laughter.]* He makes points about the streamlined and efficient manner in which we introduce June monitoring. We will have that discussion in the time ahead. We wanted to get work done and wanted to put our best foot forward. We did that today. Committees and Committee Chairs should feel free to have the discussion about how we manage this streamlined, efficient, fast-moving Executive. It is incumbent upon us to do that. I have no fear of that. If Mr Wells wants to lead that charge, he is welcome to. No one ever suggested borrowing to serve our overruns and costs. We have started a debate about how we may grow the funding, and part of that, of course, will be borrowing. I will leave Mr Wells, even though he made more points than that.

Mr McAleer is very concerned about the amount of money placed into the roads infrastructure, as was Mr Kennedy earlier. Those from rural constituencies are particularly concerned about that, as is Mrs Palmer. The Member welcomed the investment that the Budget Bill represents for the roads infrastructure, particularly with a commitment, as you would expect with Mr McAleer, to the A5 and A6 roads. He raised concerns about the standard of road maintenance, as did some of our colleagues in the DUP. I agree it is crucial that we invest in maintaining our roads infrastructure, and I am aware of the concerns, particularly for people in rural areas. The opening position for capital investment in structural maintenance in 2016-17 is some £26 million of capital, and the additional £20 million that I announced this morning will allow the Infrastructure Minister to allocate further investment in structural maintenance as well as other road projects. I saw someone involved in construction commenting on the monitoring round with a brevity that we would envy. He put a “thumbs up” and a “full marks” in emojis, as I believe you call them, and I think that sums up our commitment to roads.

Mr Girvan asked about innovative ways — can we do something different? He has a landlocked site that would provide housing for hundreds of people in his constituency. I am keen to be innovative as well. Why would we not put people to work on a project if all it requires is a new way of thinking? You have asked what can be done in the time ahead. Can we form partnerships? I am a fan of what Belfast City Council has done. It has made a partnership with McAleer and Rushe to take over the old ‘Belfast Telegraph’ building and create a dynamic, vibrant cultural quarter in a part of the city that has been underserved in recent years. Let us talk about doing things differently in the short time ahead.

Mrs Barton had real concerns about education. Mr Weir had the great, good fortune not to be here at all — oh, he is here now. He had the great good fortune not to be here for the whole debate, but Mrs Barton’s comments are very pertinent and relevant. I hope, Minister Weir, you will address those concerns in the time ahead. She has said that all is not rosy in the garden, and I think we all accept that. There are real pressures, and I know you will welcome the extra money today, but much more needs to be done. Mrs Barton mentioned special educational needs, and, from our conversations, I think that is a priority for you as well.

The Chair of the AERA Committee, Linda Dillon, expressed concerns about how she can ensure that rural communities and farmers get the investment they need

and are not left to the side. That is our commitment as well. I know a new Minister is in post, but it is my commitment, as Finance Minister, to provide DAERA with the money it needs to make a real difference. Mrs Dillon mentioned broadband — it came up several times — and it is an issue. We are telling people that we have 100% coverage. Sadly, in many rural areas, that is a myth.

I want to congratulate Richie McPhillips on his maiden speech. He rightly said that the west has not had its fair share. It is my intention, as Finance Minister, to do everything I can to ensure it is treated in an equitable fashion. Last Friday I deliberately went to Enniskillen because I want to make it clear that being west of the Bann is important to me. We need to make sure that the opportunities in every area are seized and that everyone shares in the peace dividend. He makes strong points about the cuts we have had to make in many areas of society due to the cuts from London. We need to find out in the time ahead whether we can do better. I am happy to do more for Fermanagh and South Tyrone in the time ahead. It would not be appropriate to say anything more about that in a maiden speech.

Mrs Armstrong made one of the most exciting contributions of the day. It was, I believe, her maiden speech as well, and from the wonderful, beautiful constituency of Strangford, she asked for more investment in front-line services. To give her her due, she knows where to get the money. She is not going to build Casement Park, because Windsor and Ravenhill are already built. She is not going to build the women and children’s hospital. She is not going to build the A5 or the A6, and she wants to stop the Belfast rapid transit. That is fair enough, because Strangford is a long way from the A5 and the A6. That is an alternative. I would be very keen to take those ideas on board, but maybe we can temper some of them, and certainly I do not consider the women and children’s hospital to be a shiny new project.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister give way briefly?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Yes.

Mr McElduff: Minister, is it any wonder that the Alliance Party is not doing particularly well west of the Bann in Tyrone or Fermanagh? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I will not comment on that.

Let us be clear: the seven flagship projects are affordable, and they are very important to us. Before and during the election, people asked us for delivery. We have identified seven projects, which are ambitious. They are not, in my view, just photo opportunities. They will change lives, and they are crucial investments in infrastructure. The Strangford ferry is due to be completed this summer, and I have been watching the conundrum of the Portaferry aquarium over many years. I am committed to making sure that we deliver the flagship projects. It will not be easy. They are bold and ambitious targets, but we are doing well and will continue to do well in the time ahead.

Mrs Armstrong brought up a quick point about community organisations and contracts. I also find that unacceptable. We need to make sure that we prevent that happening. People should not have to wait until the eleventh hour to have contracts of employment renewed.

I thank Mrs Palmer for her service over many years to the community. She is an exemplary public servant. She

also had some ideas or some boats that will not, I am afraid, be floating. In particular, I am a fan of the Narrow Water bridge. I know that it is a long way from Lisburn, but I think that it will unlock the potential of Warrenpoint, Carlingford, Omeath and Newry, so I support it. On traffic issues, the one area that we can agree on is the need to make progress on the Lagan canal. Whatever about the A5, which you want to stop, and whatever about the traffic going past Sprucefield, which Mr Kennedy may have been able to help with in a previous life, we can make common cause on the Ulster canal, and certainly on the Lagan canal with its 27 miles and 28 locks or 28 miles and 27 locks. I am delighted that Belfast City Council is to spend the first money on the canal system for probably 30 years, when it replaces the Stranmillis weir. I am not sure about stopping the A5 — even for you, Mrs Palmer — but I think that we can work on many other issues. I intend to visit Narrow Water, and we might change your mind. You are very welcome to join me on that visit.

Gerry Mullan, from the great and beautiful constituency of East Derry, made strong points about investment and trying to create an infrastructure and an ecosystem that encourage investment. He talked about the enterprise zone, and I would like to find out more about that. Its cheerleader was our dear friend Gregory Campbell, who has moved on to a greater reward in the House of Commons. We need to see what the benefits of the enterprise zone are, if any, because Mr Mullan is right: it comes from London rather than from this House. I know that Mr Mullan had concerns about the A6 and the A5, but I am convinced that we will deliver both projects.

Trevor Lunn said that there was no money for the A6. We will deliver the A6. The Executive's Budget for 2016-17 allocated £258 million from 2016-17 to 2020-21 to improve that corridor. That will enable construction of the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme to commence this autumn, and I know that that will be very welcome to some of my colleagues who come in from Dungiven and the west in the morning. I think that the Member expressed some concern about whether we could make all of the capital investment. I do not know whether he said "I despair" or "I don't despair". I think that he said, "don't despair", and we will go with that. Rather than despairing about our ambitious capital investment, we will deliver it. I look forward to hearing more from the Alliance Party on what its alternatives will look like in the time ahead, whether they be water charges, increases in tuition fees, prescription charges, rates increases or whatever else.

Fra McCann asked that we prioritise funding for social housing, and Nichola Mallon made that point as well. Fra McCann is a legend when it comes to defending social housing and arguing for more housing, and the point has been made in the House over recent days that housing is an absolute priority for us all.

I congratulate Harold McKee from South Down, who made a number of wide-ranging comments. They were wide-ranging, but there were no suggestions or concrete proposals for what he would do differently. That is fair enough; it is early days. I hope that the UUP, perhaps before the summer break, will come up with an alternative Budget for the time ahead.

Mr McKee said that he is a Christian and:

"I have always used the Bible as my compass".

I am not a person of faith, but I have great admiration for Christians, so I preach the gospel of social justice when I can. The people whom I admire most are those who preach the gospel without using words, and I look forward to working very positively with Mr McKee in the time ahead.

8.15 pm

Steven Agnew from North Down was heard from again, but it was the wrong debate. This is not the Programme for Government Budget debate; that will come later in the autumn and I look forward to locking horns with you on that one.

My colleague, Ms Nichola Mallon, proposed that we get financial transactions capital and use it to make empty homes habitable again. She challenged me to take that idea on board. We need that sort of creative and innovative thinking, but it is not really that innovative and creative because we are actually doing it at the minute and have allocated financial transactions capital to the empty homes scheme. We need to be a little more creative, and my door is open in that regard.

That almost brings me to the end, but I want to mention Alec Attwood. It is difficult to know where to start. I want to be fair to everyone. I think there were seven questions last night and 15 questions today. There is a wonderful saying that I hear often from the Derry business man, Garvan O'Doherty: "Smart boy wanted. Last boy too smart". By and large, the Fresh Start Agreement and the Stormont House negotiations are in the past. What our constituents are concerned about is today and the future. I ask everyone to get onto the same page as the government parties because we are standing in the present but looking confidently to the future. If anyone really wants to rehearse the Stormont House negotiations or go over the Fresh Start negotiations, then not during this time, if at all possible, or, at the very least, not in every debate.

I am committed to supporting childcare. There are no Barnett consequential yet; there cannot be, as the money has not been allocated, so it cannot be among the money allocated today. We need to do more to support Eileen Evason. The commitment of the government parties and, perhaps, all parties in the House is to support the proposals she comes forward with within the funding envelope we have given her. If she needs more, we look forward to her coming back and asking for it. At this stage, Mrs Evason is doing an absolutely wonderful job. All of us who understand, meet and know the hardships being experienced by those who are homeless and those who are hungry should make sure that we continue to back her efforts to ease the worst effects of the welfare assault on the most vulnerable. I say that because the Presbyterian International Meeting Point on the Lisburn Road is the type of programme that we need to support. It is an oasis of welcome, tolerance and diversity where people with few financial means can come and be fed at lunchtime and find company, solidarity and solace from the Presbyterian Church and from many other people who live in the area. We need to support the Trussell Trust. Food banks always create a dilemma: you really want to have a city that does not have them, but you admire people like the Trussell Trust or the Common Grounds Café who step up to the mark. It is particularly the Protestant Churches that are providing food banks and sustenance to the hungry in a way that also affords them dignity. I think, in particular, of the Rosemary

Presbyterian Church on the Antrim Road and the food bank that it runs, which I have visited. It is inspiring. The commitment, generosity, giving and, if you wish, the approach taken by those people of preaching the gospel without words is something that we should all emulate.

We will enter the negotiations around corporation tax confidently. Mr Attwood should not over-read anything; I know that I have his support. We have read and my officials have read the Fresh Start Agreement. We will go into the negotiations knowing that they will be tough. I also know that we have the support of everyone in the House, certainly in the government parties, in making sure we get the very best deal.

Have we finished with Trevor Lunn yet? No. You make strong points about eliminating waste. I cannot believe that any of us would like to have waste occur in a system and money spent on it because we know the urgent need out there of the many groups we work with. You talk about the cost of division. That also distresses me, and it is something we have to tackle as well. I think we are on common ground on that. How we approach those things is another day's work. I got your quote right: you said, "Don't despair". I would say more than "Don't despair"; I would say, "Have confidence. Have confidence". We are a Government — I think this applies to some of the opposition parties as well — with a common purpose, and for the first time in quite a while you can see the difference that is making in the morale of the community, the spirit of our constituents and our desire as a House to get things done, and I think we will continue to do that.

I want to finish with Mr Allister. The Department of Finance has these wonderfully talented, superintelligent civil servants because sometimes figures and finances are a bit difficult. Anybody who has to balance a budget at home, never mind a business and never mind a Government, knows that. Finances are a bit tough. Let me say this to Mr Allister: the figures he quoted are off the wall. There is no reduction in capital and no reduction in resource in the 2016-17 Budget. In fact, the good news that I am happy to send to the can't-do corner is that pages 20 and 21 of the published Budget document show that our resource DEL — the money we spend on services — and capital DEL increased in cash terms compared with 2015-16.

We started with a good news story in the monitoring round that we had found £170 million, and we managed to turn it around quickly to get it on to the front line to make a difference and a change. The even better news, which Mr Allister reminds me of, is that the money in the 2016-17 Budget is more than the money in the 2015-16 Budget.

A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leat. I say to all Members — people whom I agreed with or did not agree with — that my door is open. I am keen to visit all those constituencies to see the problems on the ground. I am not the Minister for Communities, Health or the Economy, but I am keen to understand and be sympathetic when those Ministers come forward.

I could continue debating the issues, but I will draw my remarks to a close. I hope I have responded to as many issues as possible. I am confident that our Departments will exercise sound financial management in the time ahead with the resources from the Budget. I, therefore, respectfully ask Members to support the Bill, thereby

authorising spending on public services by Departments in 2016-17 beyond the provision of the Vote on Account passed by the Assembly in February.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I advise the House that, as this is a Budget Bill, it requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 46; Noes 32.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist:

Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Girvan, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stafford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McAleer and Mr Robinson.

NOES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mrs S Bradley, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Hanna, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Mr Mullan.

Unionist:

Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr McKee, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Other

Mr Agnew, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs S Bradley and Mr Smith.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>[59.0%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>[65.6%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>[67.6%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 01/16-21] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: As we move to the Adjournment debate, I ask Members who are intent on leaving the Chamber to do so quietly.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

Rural Roads: West Tyrone

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. All other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes.

Mr McElduff: When the new Assembly term started, it was my determination to submit to the Business Office early on an Adjournment topic request along the lines of the condition of rural roads in West Tyrone. West Tyrone is mentioned because that is the constituency that I represent. I am sure that the poor condition of some rural roads extends beyond West Tyrone, but, of course, this is a constituency-related debate. I walked to the Business Office and submitted a request for an Adjournment debate on this very topic, even before Minister Hazzard was appointed and d'Hondt was rolled out. I did that so soon because, in the recent Assembly election campaign — I am not really talking about elections; I am talking about weeks of talking and listening to people and, in many cases, being on country roads — people said to me that the big issues were rural roads and rural broadband. If I am to be an effective MLA for West Tyrone, joined by other effective MLAs for West Tyrone, we have to address those issues, so the condition of rural roads in West Tyrone is this evening's topic.

I appreciate the presence of the new Minister for Infrastructure, Chris Hazzard. At the outset, I am very pleased at his stated commitment to the macro-project: the A5. That is not what is under the microscope here today at all. Nor is the A32, although we need great connectivity between, for example, Omagh and Enniskillen in respect of hospitals etc. What I am talking about here are essentially C-class roads and others. They are not necessarily A- or B-class roads, although in some cases there are defects and problems that need to be remedied in those as well. My emphasis is on rural roads. I have to say that there is serious frustration and annoyance — a feeling of hopelessness, even — on the part of rural residents who are expected to tolerate large, crater-style potholes in C-class roads, for example, for what seems an inordinate length of time.

In the corridors of this Building, earlier in the evening, a Hansard staff member asked me whether they were going to have to listen closely this evening for all kinds of rural roads and townlands. I will try to spare them that, but, at the same time, rural people matter. The point that I am making is that this issue is more about people than roads. It is about rural people mattering; rural people and rural roads matter.

Let me give you just a few examples, not too many, because I know that there is a good distribution of Assembly Members here, in geographical terms, in relation to West Tyrone and beyond, who feel strongly about the condition of rural roads. For example, I was contacted by a lady who resides at Devesky Road, Carrickmore, who, for close on six months now, has not seen the remedying of a large crater-style pothole on her road. I was on my way home about 10 days ago, and I travelled

on a country road off the main Ballygawley to Dungannon section, via Barnaghs Road. At one large pothole, I took off my shoe and placed it in the middle of the pothole and took a wee photograph for scale. My shoe is size 7, not 9 or 10. You could hardly see the shoe in the pothole because it was of such dimensions. At Gleneeny Road, maybe half the road had eroded away. In a similar state are Cashel Road, Greencastle; Mulnafye Road, close to where Declan McAleer MLA does his thing and resides in the Loughmacrory area; and the Garvallah Road. I will not give many more examples, but I am talking about C-class roads where there seems to be almost a sense of abandonment.

There is a human side to this; it is more about people than roads. People have to go to work and school. They want to socialise and mix. They want to do business and go to the shops. They pay taxes and rates, and they are fed up hearing: "We cover 80% of the traffic by attending to 20% of the network." We do not like to hear things like that, in respect of gritting in the winter or whatever. There is an 80/20 rule that always seems to work against those of us in rural communities.

Last winter was very bad, and roads were not adequately repaired. Verges were not maintained and gullies were not cleaned out. Street lighting and related issues of community safety arose. In Omagh alone, in places like O'Kane Park and Castleview, where there is a large number of elderly residents, people saw street lighting taken out, disassembled and removed.

The reason why I speak about the issue in this manner is because I get it in the neck from constituents, and I am sure that other MLAs and councillors do as well. Some people think that I work for the Roads Service. Older men, especially over 60 and 65 years, have a memory of local councils, pre-1973, maintaining the roads. They think that I am a councillor, not an MLA, and they want to know why I am not fixing the roads. I told one gentleman that I had tabled a request for a debate in Stormont about rural roads, but I think that I lost him because he was not really interested in the debate. He was interested in when his road was going to be fixed. I can understand that.

Some time ago, I met the divisional roads manager, Conor Loughrey, with one of his senior colleagues, section engineer, Harold Henry. I was accompanied by a number of party colleague councillors.

We did what we should do: we brought with us a list of local roads on which problems were not being properly remedied within a relatively short period. We expressed exasperation at the length of time that it seems to take to repair a pothole. These potholes get larger. Of course, there is a ritual of surrounding them with different colours of lines and markings — yellow markings and yellow lines or, sometimes, blue markings and blue lines.

8.45 pm

I am told that cyclical inspections happen less frequently now. I understand that there is a very difficult financial context involved and — I say this to the Minister through the Speaker — I am aware of the financial constraints imposed by the Westminster Government on the Department, but we need something to break. We need something to happen. I am pleased to note that, in today's monitoring round announcement, there is additional money

for road maintenance, and so there should be. People are reporting damage to their vehicles, and I believe that the number of claims for liability has gone up.

What I am looking for is a determined effort on the part of the Minister to achieve more resource funding for rural roads. I am a big supporter of the A5. When we lobby for the A5 to be expedited and completed, that is stuff for the big room, but there needs to be room for this debate as well. There needs to be room for a case to be made for better maintenance than there has been in the recent past. I know that the business of financial constraints is part of the reason for that, but roads have to be brought up to the requisite standard. What is the maintenance backlog? Does the Minister see any hope of substantive improvements? Does he intend to use future monitoring rounds to address the problem? Those are some of the issues that I want to bring to the Minister's attention in my submission to the debate.

I know that the Minister has a busy diary, but I invite him to come to West Tyrone to view some of the C-class roads that I am talking about. That would take an hour, say, with the roads being in close proximity of each other. I have to say, genuinely, that I am not questioning local management. I am not questioning the determination of people such as Leo Owens, Harold Henry or any of the people whom I have become used to lobbying and whom we ring to bring to their attention another defect or road issue. However, they need to be supported with greater resource funding.

It is a very serious issue. I am not lightening up on this one. I am not making light of rural townland names and their intricacies, because all those people matter. If I say, "Outside Greencastle, in the townland of Binnafreaghan", it sounds poetic, but those people pay rates, they pay taxes, they go to work, they go to school, they socialise, and they expect a better return on their investment in respect of the maintenance of rural roads.

Mr T Buchanan: At the outset, I commend the Member for bringing the issue to the Floor. He talked about two issues that he gets it in the ear about: roads and broadband. They are the very same issues that we get it in the ear about. It is interesting to note that there is an Adjournment debate next week on rural broadband in West Tyrone. West Tyrone is getting a good hearing in the House, and let us hope that it makes a difference.

The Member said that it was not really about roads; it was about people. That is absolutely correct; it is about people, but this is what affects the people, because the rural roads affect almost all our constituents in West Tyrone. Not only does it affect them, it affects me because, over this past number of months, my mailbox has been overflowing with issues regarding roads, especially rural roads, in West Tyrone. Those of us who represent it will know that it is a constituency with one of the largest land masses represented in the House. Therefore, it has one of the largest networks of roads among the constituencies represented here.

For example, in West Tyrone, there are 113 km of A-class roads, 415 km of B-class roads, 749 km of C-class roads and 2,006 km of what are known as unclassified roads. So there are only 528 km of what we would call the "Rolls-Royce" roads — the A- and B-class roads. Those roads are in reasonably good shape, but when we look

at the other roads, the ones that service isolated rural communities, that is where the problems lie. Something like 2,800 km of those roads in rural areas serve the agricultural community, the business community and other community organisations that are doing great work. Organisations that care for elderly people have to get to their homes every day to look after them and to ensure that they can stay in their own homes. Rural dwellers and all those types of people are being affected. Therefore, it is good that the condition of these roads is being highlighted in the Assembly this evening.

The repair and maintenance of these roads has, over the last few years, I believe, been left behind in the wake of other major road projects. While we need those major projects, and we lobby for them, we must always remember that we cannot leave these other roads behind, because they feed right into the isolated rural communities. Sometimes, the people on the ground say that these roads are the Cinderella of roads funding. It is no reflection on the employees or the management in the area, but it seems that the budget programme for the maintenance and repair of rural roads has been continually reduced over the years. That is something that needs to be considered, and we should seek to put more finances into that to address the problems.

Checking for defects on minor roads used to take place on a three-monthly basis, then it was moved to a six-monthly basis and now it is done every 12 months. In West Tyrone, we are standing back and watching the fabric of the minor roads network crumbling in front of our eyes, and it raises concerns. We fully understand the tight budget constraints that Departments are under, but this is something that, I believe, needs to be given consideration.

Recently, I had an engineer out on site to look at a few areas in West Tyrone. When we were driving from one area to the next, I stopped on the road where there was quite a big pothole. The engineer got out and looked at it and said that he would send me an email about it. Here is what he said:

"I have been informed by my authorities that, due to budgetary considerations, the only bitmac work that can be authorised on rural roads is the repair of surface defects greater than four inches deep."

This pothole was large but it was only about two and a half inches deep. He was saying that their instructions were that, unless it was four inches deep, it was not to be filled. That is causing concern because, as the old proverb says, "A stitch in time saves nine". If we do not do something soon about the condition of the rural roads, I believe that we are going to find ourselves with serious problems.

I will read an extract from an email from another constituent. It states:

"For the last number of years, the road our house is situated on has been neglected by DRD. It has got into such a bad state that we are finding everyday tasks impossible; for example, taking kids for a walk or driving down the road. The road has a grassy strip and is full of potholes. A few months ago Roads Service came on site and was only able to fill 150 potholes, which did not cover half of the road and nowhere near to where we are currently living. We pay our rates in full every year and recently were told by the waste

management centre in Omagh that our road was no longer a proper road fit for purpose, is detrimental to the bin lorries and therefore no more trips will be made on the road to collect the bins."

That is probably one of the more difficult cases, but it gives some indication of the problems that we are facing with the rural roads network in West Tyrone.

As I said earlier, I understand that budgets are tight, but I appeal to the Minister that he look at some sort of funding programme for the maintenance and repair of rural roads. In his job as Minister, I appeal to him to look at that and to ensure that we get proper funding in place to bring our rural roads network up to the proper standard again.

Mr McCrossan: I take the opportunity to congratulate the Minister on his recent elevation and also to thank my constituency colleague Barry McElduff for bringing forward this Adjournment debate.

Before dealing specifically with West Tyrone, I welcome the Finance Minister's extra £25 million for the Department for Infrastructure. However, I would like to point out that, last week, we heard that the cost of repairing Northern Ireland's crumbling roads has reached a staggering £1 billion. That £1 billion is only to bring our roads up to the requisite standard. It will not give us pristine roads. An extra £25 million in the June monitoring road is merely a drop in the wider ocean of this huge problem.

In the past week, we have also learnt that the Department for Infrastructure's budget will be cut by 9%, and I can only imagine that rural constituencies, such as West Tyrone, will be the first to fall foul of such a budgetary decrease. I call on the Minister, and I am glad that he has stayed to respond to the debate, to outline the nature of the cuts and how they will impact on the roads maintenance budget, especially in the west.

I am a strong proponent of green energy and the use of public transport, but public transport across my constituency is not at a level that is required for our people. We have no railway service, and buses do not serve many of our rural communities, at least not consistently enough. The people of West Tyrone are thus heavily reliant on their own transport for work and to access health services, hospitals, education facilities, banks and post offices. Access to those services can be a big challenge, and it is vital that the communities have the proper roads infrastructure in place to accommodate such need.

There is growing anger and frustration among local people about the decline in the state of the road network. They are angry that the issue does not get the attention that it deserves from the Executive. Nearly every day, my constituents, like Mr McElduff and his Sinn Féin colleagues', as well as Ross and Tom's, are telling me, "We pay our rates and road tax like everybody else, so why are the roads in such a terrible condition in West Tyrone, and why are we being ignored?" In West Tyrone, it is well known, given that we are a border constituency, that Donegal's roads are quite terrible, and I have heard many comparisons of late suggesting that our roads are very similar, if not worse in certain parts, to those of our neighbouring county.

On a more serious note, unrepaired potholes can cause serious damage to many cars on our roads. Last year, it is understood that there were 600 claims made against

the Department for Regional Development for damage to vehicles caused by the state of rural roads, almost 200 of which came from the west of the Province, which is a testament to the state of our roads and what gave rise to Mr McElduff's debate. In the previous mandate, I tabled a question for written answer to the Minister on the number of potholes reported and filled in across West Tyrone. The figures are stark. In 2013, 96% of road surface defects were corrected. In 2014, this figure dropped to 87%. In 2015, the figure dropped significantly to 63%. If that is not evidence of the blatant neglect of our roads, nothing is.

9.00 pm

Every single week, we receive complaints from constituents in our offices about their cars hitting potholes or other road surface defects from places like Gortin, Fintona, Plumbridge and Castlederg right across to Victoria Bridge, Newtownstewart, Ballymagorry, Artigarvan and as far as Garvaghy. People come to me with photographs of crater-like potholes, as referred to by Mr McElduff, right across the constituency. I have to ask why successive Ministers have let our roads get into such a terrible state. I know that budgets are constrained, but when you travel from Belfast to Bangor or along the Ards peninsula, you see that the roads are nearly pristine in comparison with ours. It almost highlights the level of neglect in rural constituencies such as my own.

The last point that I want to focus on is deaths on the roads. A report conducted this year by 'Detail Data' revealed that a staggering 74% of road deaths occur on rural roads. This includes drivers, pedestrians, motorcyclists, passengers and cyclists; practically anyone who lives in a rural constituency. A number of issues arise here, such as the provision of street lighting, whether more crash barriers are needed and enforcement of rural speed limits. Too many people, especially young people, are losing their lives on rural roads.

To conclude my remarks, it is important that the Assembly invests properly in rural roads infrastructure in West Tyrone. It is not just about ensuring that potholes are filled, but that the most dangerous roads — those that are turning on corners and those that have not got sufficient signage or barriers on corners — also receive the attention that is required from the Department. An example, if I am going to be very local and parochial, is the Ballee Road in Strabane, where you are going along the old Strabane glen. Michaela Boyle will be familiar with this road. The road almost goes off like a cliff. It is a very narrow road, so when two cars meet, one has to pull in. On a dark night, it is very difficult to tell, especially if you are a stranger, that there is no actual banking there, and you could end up going over the ditch to quite a height. I arranged to meet Roads Service officials on numerous occasions. They told me on countless occasions that it was not their responsibility because it was privately owned property, but there was a verge there that could have accommodated the concern of the people who brought it to our attention.

I will finish by saying basically that too many vehicles are being damaged unnecessarily as a result of these roads. It is something that frustrates everybody, because many homes now have possibly three cars, particularly in rural constituencies, where they depend on their own transport. It is one of the biggest concerns, next to rural broadband. I welcome that debate next week because it

is a very real issue that has been highlighted right across the constituency in recent weeks and months. I thank the Minister for listening to the remarks. Hopefully, his Department will do what it can to accommodate them.

Mr McAleer: I want to take the opportunity to commend my colleague Barry McEduff for tabling the Adjournment topic, the Minister for coming here and, indeed, all the MLAs for taking part.

High-quality infrastructure is absolutely essential for economic growth and competitiveness, but also for safety on the roads. Quite a lot of airtime is passed in the Chamber on the high-profile projects — the flagship projects, like the A5 and A6 — but, as has been quite rightly stated here, the local road network is just as important to the quality of life of people who live in rural areas. We represent a constituency that is very rural, from the top of the Sperrins right down to the Donegal border and across into neighbouring counties. It is very rural and isolated. Roads are a huge issue.

Barry is quite right: when we were out on the campaign trail, the state of rural roads was the biggest issue by a country mile. The number of complaints that were raised about the state of rural roads was endless. Quite rightly, the issue of broadband was raised a lot as well. I commend Tom Buchanan of the West Tyrone constituency for tabling an Adjournment topic on that for next week. Both of those issues, along with many other things, combine to create a sense of being disconnected and a sense of isolation in rural areas. I think that we all got that very overwhelming sense when we were out and about recently, and we get it all the time in our constituency offices.

I know that that is shared not just in West Tyrone but throughout. When the Minister came to the Infrastructure Committee last Wednesday, he heard very loud and clear from MLAs across the Six Counties that that was a big issue.

As I said, public safety and cars are one thing, but health is also a very big issue. I live in the village of Loughmacrory, which is right in the middle of Tyrone. It is over 40 miles to the nearest acute hospital on country roads, apart from the A32 and the A505, and you would really struggle if you were in an ambulance and had to get quickly to the hospital in Enniskillen, which is the closest acute hospital. It is important that we have good roads for our health and safety.

In fairness to the Minister, he has not been in the job long; he has been in it for only a few weeks. He came to the Committee last week and listened intently. Daniel raised the backlog, and the Snaith report identified a backlog in road maintenance. We need to start somewhere, and it was good to note today that an allocation has been made to road maintenance — £5.3 million — and of the £22.9 million allocated a good bit of it has been identified for road improvements. That is good news. It is important that the Minister looks at roads from a planned, strategic point of view. We learned, as many other members of the Committee will know, from the House of Commons report that reactive patching costs ten times as much as planned maintenance. It is important that the Minister and his officials take that on board and put the spotlight on rural roads.

To conclude, I commend Barry for securing the debate. It is great to see Members here from West Tyrone and throughout the constituency, along with the Minister and officials. It is important that we shine the spotlight on a very serious issue that affects a lot of people in West

Tyrone and beyond. I hope and am convinced that the Minister has got the message loud and clear in the time that he has been in office, and I hope that he will put a focus on addressing this serious issue in the time ahead.

Ms Boyle: I take the opportunity to thank my party colleague Barry McEduff for bringing this Adjournment debate on rural roads in West Tyrone to the House today. At the outset, I also take the opportunity to thank Roads Service officials in my area of Strabane for the good work that they continue to carry out on our roads year on year to make them safe for travelling on. They do that in all weathers and in all conditions. I thank them for the recent work they have carried out on my behalf and on behalf of constituents who have put their concerns to me about issues that range from removing signs that obstruct entrances to their homes and cause a nuisance to traffic calming and upgrading footpaths. I want to pay particular thanks to Sam Young and Geoff McGillian from my area, who have worked with me on many issues. Recently, we had issues on the Melmount Road to do with St Mary's school crossing, and they worked tirelessly to come to some resolution.

Like others, I thank the Minister for his statement today. He has pledged funding for the A5 and A6 to progress. He also said that he would continue to work with Departments and councils on road infrastructure and funding where it is necessary.

As an elected representative, I know that my office, like others, is at times inundated with calls about a range of issues, and most of them have been aired here today. However, potholes are an issue that we get all the time, particularly the ones that have existed for long periods after heavy rain and adverse weather conditions. In rural areas like Aghabrack, Aghyaran, Killen, Ardstraw, Glebe and Clady, all the complaints come through my office. Some potholes exist for long periods and are never fixed, and some are fixed. After extensive lobbying, some are fixed and some are not, and you are still going back to issues.

It has been said here today too that, at times, roads in rural areas hamper school buses, the emergency services, door-to-door services and transport for the elderly — all that day-to-day business. I know that some school buses will not go down a road because of the condition or the narrowness of it. I suppose that that is to be expected: there is nothing that you can do about the narrowness of a road, but you can about its condition.

I want to mention Newtown Stewart, which is located along the River Strule and is adjacent to the Owenkillew river. It is situated at the foot of Bessy Bell Mountain, is overlooked by the glorious landmark of Harry Avery's Castle and is a gateway to the Sperrins. However, if you travel along the roads there, you will see that there is underinvestment in that part of my area. If we want to attract tourism to the Sperrins gateway, we have to look at how we can invest further in the road infrastructure around it. Many towns and villages have developed over time and have a distinctive character. I think of Sion Mills, and, if you will allow me to stray a little, Mr Speaker, I want to take the opportunity to thank the emergency services who attended a fire at the mill at the weekend. I commend them for the work that they did in trying to retain the mill. We need to work collectively to keep the character of our villages, and the upkeep of our roads and footpaths is important in doing that.

If you travel from Gortin to Plumbridge, you will see that there is potential growth there. There has been growth for local businesses and the wide-ranging community facilities there, but, again, rural areas like that need proper road infrastructure to sustain businesses in the area. I know people who have travelled in the opposite direction and added extra miles to their journey to avoid potholes in rural areas. That is detrimental to small businesses in rural areas, because they are bypassing the local shop and going elsewhere just to avoid potholes.

When I was out canvassing recently, I was made aware of an incident involving a family whose daughter was getting married. The bride's wedding car could not come up to the house because of the state of the road, and she had to walk to the end of the road to get into the car. That is not acceptable in this day and age.

One of the biggest issues in rural areas is school buses not being able to pick up children because of the condition of the road. We have signage that is covered by overgrown bushes, which causes confusion and is hazardous. I travel the roads to Castlederg, Donemana and Artigarvan, and there is still some signage blighted by overgrown hedges there. That is a danger because people do not see the miles-per-hour or whatever signage. I also want to say that, following sustained representations from my office and others, the weed-spraying programme will now start in Strabane next Monday. I commend the local authorities —

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Boyle: I will.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Member agree with me that another huge issue that came up whilst we were canvassing and that comes up when speaking generally to constituents who come in is the condition of the roads and the access to homes in the winter, particularly for people in very rural areas like Cranagh, for instance. It is important to state it on the record during the debate that people there are almost entirely cut off from schools, health services — everything. There is a huge concern about the maintenance of roads in the winter, and we must ensure that they are accessible.

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

Ms Boyle: I conclude by inviting the Minister to my area, in particular Clady, which, despite being a small village, has heavy articulated lorries driving through it. We have asked previous Ministers to reduce the tonnage of the lorries that go through the village. I invite the Minister to the area to see for himself the problems there.

9.15 pm

Mrs Palmer: First, I apologise to the House for the absence of Mr Hussey, who has had to leave. I see Mr McElduff breathe a sigh of relief, but I am afraid that Mr Hussey has prepared a speech that he has asked me to deliver on his behalf. I am led to believe that Narrow Water bridge is not in West Tyrone, so that will clear that matter up. The delivery of this speech will be difficult because, obviously, I do not have a Tyrone accent, and I do not have the charm and the width — sorry, the wit — that Mr Hussey has. It is well said that he wrote this.

I will begin by paraphrasing the late Reverend W F Marshall, the bard of Tyrone. If he were alive today, he might have written the following ode. My apologies to the

residents of Drumlister. I am sure that you will know where that is; I do not. The ode goes:

“When driving in Drumlister, the roads are very odd.

In the middle of the road, you can see a great green sod.

There's crayturs in the fields and there are craters on the roads.

If I lose another tyre, I'll tear up the highway code.”

Mr Hussey has suggested that he may take to the pen when his political career eventually ends, but I do hope not.

He goes on to say that it was once said that there was more tar in a cigarette than there was on the roads in Donegal. There are some who believe that that claim to fame can now be passed on to County Tyrone. During the election campaign, Mr Hussey and many of the West Tyrone MLAs travelled on many of the rural roads in Tyrone. He has asked me to identify one example and that is the Garvallah Road, Seskinore, on the outskirts of the town. The pothole that he was asked to see was so deep that he decided to place a resident's youngest daughter — not a shoe — into it. It came up over her ankles. You will be glad to know that the pothole was filled. Well, actually, it was half-filled; maybe the budget cuts only provided half a bucket of tar. As seeing is believing, he included the photographs in his speech of the pothole and the pothole with the child.

The old A5 that used to travel into Omagh along the Dublin Road into the county of Tyrone is now virtually down to the base level. As you drive along it, you believe that you have four flat tyres because of the condition of the road. The road, too, has been virtually abandoned. Perhaps, in the not too distant future, we will hear how much money has been spent on compensating drivers for damaged tyres and vehicles and how much compensation was refused because the offending hole was protected by a spray of yellow paint.

In conclusion, I thank Mr McElduff for bringing this matter to the House this evening. Prior to my party leaving the Executive, the Finance Minister continued to raid the DRD budget and deliberately allowed the roads in rural areas to downgrade to the point where they are virtually tracks. In the previous debate, many were sidetracked at every opportunity. You do not have a clue what a sidetrack is unless you have travelled the rural roads of West Tyrone. We will get the roads back up to the standard or all bets are off in favour of the A5. Yes, it will pour millions of pounds into Tyrone to upgrade an A-class road, but what about the future of our B- and C-class roads?

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for bringing forward the debate tonight. You may be looking at me and wondering why a Member for Strangford is talking about West Tyrone, but, as somebody who has delivered rural transport for almost 20 years and has family members in Fintona, I know the roads very well.

All roads are connections that enable us to live our lives and, as such, facilitate economic growth, but I have calls of complaints not just about potholes but about the harm being caused to people in wheelchairs who are travelling on rural buses because of the rocking backwards and forwards. I can say that it is causing isolation because

people are deciding to no longer travel because it causes them pain and distress. It is quite frightening for them to be at the back of a bus. I invite the Minister to pick any of the rural community transport partnerships that he funds and see what it is like sitting in a wheelchair in the back of one of those buses. Please do.

As others have said, there has been consistent underinvestment in rural roads, and that is restraining growth in West Tyrone and across Northern Ireland. I am a rural dweller in Strangford, and I wish that I knew the Ards peninsula roads that the Member was driving on because mine has grass up the middle of it.

Members have called on the Minister to invest in rural roads, especially in the maintenance programme, and I agree completely with that. However, we might want to consider something further: is it time for the creation of a regional infrastructure panel-type group to identify the most important long-term infrastructural needs of West Tyrone and Northern Ireland? It could examine the associated costs and use that evidence to create a single strategic plan for infrastructure, as was talked about by the House of Commons Select Committee. We know that patching costs 10 times as much as a strategic or planned maintenance schedule. We could then use that plan to source additional funding from the EU — I will not talk about Brexit, thank you. I also believe that many rural roads are shovel-ready today and that, should money become available at short notice, we could be straight in there.

I am concerned that the regional development strategy talks about the integration of land use and transportation to improve safety and reduce congestion and the need for car journeys. As a rural dweller, I know that I could not live in a rural area without a car. The regional development strategy also talks about an attractive and prosperous rural area based on a balanced and integrated approach to the development of town, village and countryside. That is OK, but what happens when you do not have footpaths or street lights, there is grass growing up the middle of the road and you are getting complaints from people that they cannot get out of their road because their sight line is limited by four-foot high weeds?

I was grateful to the Minister when he came to the Committee for Infrastructure and recognised that there is an issue with road maintenance. There is an opportunity going forward with this debate and the other investment that we have heard about today to consider a better and more strategic way forward for road maintenance.

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure): I start by congratulating the Member for West Tyrone, Barry McElduff, for securing the debate. He promised me that he had tabled it before I came into post, so I am happy to believe him on that. I concur with many tonight that it was a prominent issue during the last election. As someone who represents a rural constituency, South Down, I am only too aware of a lot of the issues, especially connectivity in rural areas and rural isolation. I have a lot of sympathy with the concerns that have been raised, and it is something that I want to take forward as I look into the post.

A network of some 23,000 kilometres of B, C and U roads connects our rural communities. Often, they are colloquially termed “rural roads”. In starting my response, I should explain that the West Tyrone constituency, as many here will know, lies within Transport NI’s western division.

It comprises all of Omagh, from within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, and Strabane, from within the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. My Department is responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the road network and delivering services through capital and resource-funded programmes.

I turn first to capital programmes. Capital structural maintenance programmes, such as resurfacing, surface dressing and drainage activities, provide good value interventions that protect the long-term integrity of the road network. Structural maintenance is an excellent example of what was referred to earlier as “A stitch in time saves nine”, as early intervention prevents long-term degradation of the network. The current structural maintenance budget for the western division of Transport NI is £17 million, which will deliver significant road improvements in 2016-17 in the division, including large parts of West Tyrone. That is significantly better than the starting position in 2015-16 and an investment that will make a difference to those rural communities. It is also an investment that will be welcomed by the local quarrying industry. It will deliver over 400 kilometres of surface dressing on the rural network in West Tyrone over the summer months, together with a number of resurfacing schemes.

Members can be assured that I will work with Executive Colleagues to enhance structural maintenance funding during this year in order to invest further in structural maintenance for roads in rural areas. I am pleased that the Finance Minister has announced additional funding for road maintenance in the June monitoring round today. That was very welcome.

I turn now to resource funding, which covers the delivery of day-to-day maintenance services, such as pothole repairs, grass cutting, gully emptying, street lighting repairs, the winter service and bridge maintenance, which have all featured in the debate this evening. As Members will be well aware, the Department faced budgetary pressures on resource funding in previous years. Those pressures have been present since August 2014, and, since then, the Department has been unable to provide normal levels of routine maintenance. At present, grass verges, for example, are cut only once.

Only the highest-priority potholes — those greater than 100 mm deep — are being repaired on rural low-traffic roads. Following today’s announcement by the Finance Minister of additional road maintenance funding in June monitoring, I have asked officials to immediately enhance grass cutting, gully emptying and the repair of potholes right across the North.

There is no doubt that reduced levels of maintenance have had a negative impact on the network, and this is now being seen in West Tyrone and other areas. The majority of routine maintenance services are currently being provided by in-house operations and maintenance staff. The pressures on resource funding have led to some positive new approaches to road maintenance within Transport NI to improve efficiency; for example, we now have the new NI Direct online system, where members of the public can report issues online. Transport NI has also been working with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council on the Don’t Mow, Let it Grow initiative to promote biodiversity in areas where grass cutting is not seen as essential. On the engineering side, more and more shorter machine-laid resurfacing schemes are being implemented

to target problem areas, and new deferred-set materials are being used by operations and maintenance staff for emergency pothole repairs.

I concur with the Member for Strangford on the roads on the peninsula, having often gone from Kircubbin to Newtownards. A message probably to get out is that we have an issue in a lot of our rural communities; it is not unique to West Tyrone. There are areas of south Down and right across the North where it is true. You mentioned some innovative initiatives that I am more than happy to come back to you and talk about. No doubt your experience in community transport is vital in discovering and putting together some of those ideas.

As we go forward, budgets will remain tight, so we must show innovation and look at community-style initiatives. Engineering solutions will be the way we get around this. I think there is an appetite for doing that and an appetite from the public to give us a bit of space to allow us to develop that sort of approach.

I am fully aware of the issues being raised by rural communities on the number of potholes and the lack of grass cutting and maintenance of gullies and drainage. I recognise the concerns that Members have raised here today, and I hope that the outcome of the June monitoring will go a long way to addressing some of those concerns. As Minister for Infrastructure, I want to support rural communities. As Mr McElduff said at the outset, this is more about people than about roads. My Department's responsibilities, linking directly to the Programme for Government around connectivity, are about tackling rural isolation. Talking about connectivity between rural communities is so relevant.

I assure all Members here this evening that Altamuskin, Aghyaran and Binnafreaghan are just as important to me and the Government as Belfast and Bangor. It is a message that should go out to the people of West Tyrone, and, hopefully over the next five years, they will see that in action.

Adjourned at 9.27 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Members, at the start of today's business, I want to inform the House that I wrote to the Speaker of the House of Commons last week to express our sorrow at the tragic murder of Jo Cox MP. I have asked him to pass the condolences of the Assembly to her parliamentary colleagues but particularly to her family, who have experienced a heartbreaking loss.

In this place, we have too much history of elected representatives from all sides of the Chamber being subject to threat or attack, but that makes it no easier to understand Jo Cox's murder. At a time of deep cynicism with politics across the Western World, Jo Cox will now shine out as a model of the role that we value as elected representatives: to be devoted to working with our constituents as we seek to improve our society on their behalf.

It should be of immense pride to Jo Cox's family that the tributes to her have demonstrated clearly that she was held in high esteem across the political spectrum. At a time when bitter and negative political debate is often more likely to dominate the airwaves, the tributes to her are a reminder of the fact that respect, good working relationships and friendships do exist in politics regardless of there being different parties holding different political views. Perhaps we all need to reflect on why it takes such a tragedy to remind our society of that.

As Speaker of the Assembly, I want to underline that it is for all of us to defend the important democratic right of elected representatives everywhere to engage with their constituents on the ground despite the personal risks and challenges that it may present. However, for today, let us recognise that a family has lost a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother. I know that I speak on behalf of the whole Chamber when I say that our thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of Jo Cox MP as they grieve.

Matter of the Day

Jo Cox MP

Mr Speaker: Mr David Ford has been given leave to make a statement on the death of Jo Cox MP, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members will have three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has been completed.

Mr Ford: Last Thursday, we were all shattered to hear the news that, in the early afternoon, a Member of Parliament had been attacked and then, in that rather sombre statement from the police, that she had died. It is right this morning that, as MPs prepare for an almost unprecedented sitting at Westminster, those of us in this democratically elected Chamber take time to pay our tribute to Jo Cox, the MP for Batley and Spennings. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the remarks that you have already made about the letter that you have written on behalf of us all to the Speaker of the House of Commons. I am sure that that action will be endorsed by everybody here today.

Of course, Jo Cox was much more than an MP. As you have just said, she was a much-loved daughter, sister, wife, mother and friend, and her death has clearly touched a very wide circle in her constituency and far beyond. The circumstances of the death are well known and do not need to be rehearsed in detail: a Member of Parliament shot and stabbed outside a library where she regularly held a constituency surgery, meeting the needs of her constituents. That is the norm for public representatives in every part of the UK.

What has emerged since that tragedy is that Jo Cox was a very exceptional person. Although she had entered Parliament only last year, she had already established a very strong reputation and made a very considerable impression on her fellow MPs through her courage, compassion and commitment. That came following a route to Westminster that was not the easy route taken by some, of working for the party and then inheriting a safe seat. She had a substantial career, in which she worked on behalf of some of the world's poorest people in her capacity for Oxfam, where she campaigned on Syria and worked with people in Sudan, and she had a very significant effect on public opinion and on the formation of public policy. I believe that she then showed all that is best in politics. It was her wish and desire to serve her own neighbours: the people of the constituency in which she lived, where she had her roots and where she had been

brought up. That perhaps made her more approachable than some MPs, but it may also, tragically, have made her more vulnerable.

Too many public representatives are subject to a tide of vilification for the work that they do, and it seems to be an issue that particularly affects women in public life, who are subjected to torrents of abuse from men who feel that they have some sort of right to spew out hatred. We need to recognise what has happened in this context.

Finally, let us remember the words of her husband when he paid tribute and said:

“She would have wanted two things above all else to happen now, one that our precious children are bathed in love and two, that we all unite to fight against the hatred that killed her.”

That would be a real, living tribute to her.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): This is a very sad day for politics in the United Kingdom. I join others in thanking you, Mr Speaker, for the action that you have already taken in conveying to the Speaker of the House of Commons our deepest sympathy to her colleagues there.

The murder of Jo Cox was shocking. It was undoubtedly a tragic event that will live long in the memory. Thankfully, the murder of a Member of Parliament is a rare event, but we feel the loss all the more because of that. Outside of the murders carried out by Irish republicans in connection with the Troubles in Northern Ireland, this was the first murder of a Member of Parliament since 1812. Perhaps nowhere more than in Northern Ireland, we on all sides of the House understand the pain of the loss of a colleague, whether as Members of the Westminster Parliament, the old Stormont Parliament or those more broadly involved in politics in Northern Ireland. Although the threat to those involved in politics here is not what it once was, we must all still remain vigilant. However, we must never close our doors to those who elect us or become detached from those who send us here.

Last Thursday was a dark day for politics because it was an attack on the whole democratic process, but, of course, it was, above all, a tragedy for Jo Cox’s family and close friends. We especially remember her husband Brendan and her two young children.

I did not know Jo Cox personally, but it is clear from the many tributes to her and from talking to some of my Westminster parliamentary colleagues that she was a remarkable individual and was going to have a very strong, maybe even exceptional, career. Our prayers and sympathy go out to all those who knew Jo Cox personally in the difficult days that lie ahead.

Jo’s murder serves as a timely reminder to all of us involved in politics that, despite the differences that we may have on one issue or another, there are values that are shared across the political spectrum and that we must never lose that thing that unites us. That was something very clear that came from her husband.

We owe it to her and to ourselves to conduct ourselves in a manner that is consistent with the best traditions of democracy. That does not mean that we should not argue or differ, but it does mean that we should do so in a more respectful tone than is sometimes the case. When I took over as First Minister, I made a call for us to do politics

differently. We have made progress, but let this event help us to redouble our efforts in Northern Ireland.

On this day, let us remember the words of President Kennedy that civility is not a sign of weakness and remember that this dreadful event can bring a new civility to politics and not just for a few days. It can be seen as a new start in how politics is done.

Mr McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): First, Mr Speaker, I thank you for giving us the opportunity to say a few words on the terrible murder of Jo Cox. I also thank you for writing, on behalf of all of us, to the Speaker of the House of Commons, expressing our deepest sympathies and condolences to her colleagues at Westminster.

Obviously, in the first instance, when a terrible event like this happens, we think of the family. We think of her husband Brendan, her two children, her parents, her sister and the wider family circle. I am sure the deepest sympathies and condolences of all Members go out to them at this tragic time. I also extend sympathy to the Labour Party, to her party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and all those in the Labour Party who had huge respect for Jo.

She obviously was an exceptional person, and to be killed in the way that she was killed was a total contradiction to the goodness and energy that she displayed through her work for some of the most underprivileged people, not just in her constituency but throughout the world. She was an internationalist, she was a feminist and she worked at the coalface with Oxfam with many people who had suffered as a result of conflict. For her to be killed in this way is absolutely terrible.

I also thank you for referring to the fact that, in our own circumstances over many years, elected representatives from parties on all sides of this House also lost their lives. That was the case for my party more than any other party in this Assembly.

All of this has to serve to inspire all of us to ensure, particularly given what we came through during the conflict here, that we continue to work together with a positive and constructive spirit and in a spirit of generosity with each other to ensure that we continue to move forward and be an example, as we have been, to those involved in the resolution of many conflict situations throughout the world.

This has been a very tragic event, but it is quite clear that the outpouring of grief, respect and sympathy for Jo Cox and her family shows that love will win out over hate in the end.

12.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I did not know Jo Cox. I would not pretend to have known much about her work as a Member of Parliament or previously with NGOs and on causes, but it is impossible not to be deeply impressed by what one has read and heard about that work from the many tributes and obituaries since Thursday’s terrible, terrible events. That said, this is, first and foremost, a personal and family tragedy. As with the other speakers, my thoughts and prayers are with the two young girls and her husband, Brendan, whose words were so swift, so assured and so inspiring that it was difficult not to think of Gordon Wilson in the aftermath of the Enniskillen bombing.

As well as being a personal and family tragedy, it was an attack on democracy. It would be remiss not to remember those who have lost their life as democrats in this country.

Jo Cox was the first female MP, as I understand it, to be murdered. Robert Bradford, of course, was the first Northern Irish MP to be murdered during the Troubles. In November 1981, he was doing what Jo Cox was trying to do last Thursday: serving his constituents by holding a surgery in a community centre in Finaghy in Belfast. He was gunned down, along with, I believe, a council worker from that community centre who was also murdered on that very black day. Of course, he was not the only Ulster Unionist to die, but no party has a monopoly on the death of elected politicians during our Troubles. Sadly, we know only too well what it is like to see others attack the democratic process.

The best thing we can do to honour the memory of Jo Cox is to reaffirm ourselves to exclusively peaceful means and to recognise that, in a democracy, you will hear things you do not want to hear and see things you maybe do not want to see but the way to fix that is not through violence or murder but through persuasion, debate, belief in your cause and promoting it in an exclusively democratic manner.

Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I thank you for contacting the Speaker at Westminster. I totally affirm the sentiment and condolences that you have expressed on our behalf.

Mr Eastwood: I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for the action you took to send our condolences to the Westminster Parliament. I add my condolences and those of my party and send them to Jo Cox's family, friends, constituents and party. I think we have all been moved by the manner of her death but, I think, even more so by the way in which she lived her life. Jo Cox was an internationalist, a human rights defender and a loud and determined advocate and voice for the voiceless. I think the best legacy she could ever have hoped to leave would be a whole new generation of people inspired to care about and campaign for the rights of the downtrodden.

It was sad this morning to listen on RTÉ radio to Mairead McGuinness and Joan Burton talking about the online and sometimes physical abuse that many of our colleagues across this island and across these islands — many of them women — have had to suffer from online trolls. I think of Máiría Cahill and other people who, every morning, wake up to a tirade of abuse. If there is anything we should do as a result of the murder, we should put our face against that type of activity. Nobody in our society who puts their name and puts themselves forward to do public good and to represent their constituents should have to face that level of abuse. All of us in the House need to send out that message very clearly today. I wish and hope that Jo Cox's family are able to find some comfort in the outpouring of support they have received in the last number of days.

Ms Bailey: Like others in the Chamber, I did not have the privilege of knowing Jo Cox, but I have listened over the past few days and heard about her legacy and the work she carried out. I feel inspired that people such as Jo Cox put themselves forward for public life and that they can come forward and see value in every human being. I extend the deepest condolences of the Green Party to Jo's family, particularly to her husband Brendan and her two young children, who have shown tremendous strength and bravery in the face of such horror.

Jo was brutally murdered in her constituency while carrying out her duties on Thursday, and it was a direct attack on democracy. We, in Northern Ireland, are no strangers to such actions and intimidation, and I am glad that so many people are standing up in sympathy with Jo's family and expressing condolence along with everyone in Westminster. There has been talk about the reasons why this has happened, but we should all be aware and, for today, take a lead from Jo's family and focus on that which unites us and not that which divides us.

Mr Carroll: I offer our sympathy and solidarity to Jo Cox's family on her tragic killing. There has been an outpouring of grief across these islands at the tragedy. There has also been a big outpouring of grief and sympathy from people in Gaza and Palestine, a cause that Jo Cox firmly supported, and among those campaigning for Syrian refugees. Jo was a friend of refugees and campaigned in support of those who are fleeing war, poverty and destruction. It is important and appropriate on this day — World Refugee Day — to remember and commend the important campaigning work done by Jo in the field. As Jo's husband said after her tragic killing, we need to unite against hate, and her death shows the dangers of hatred and the dangers of the far right and those linked to far-right and fascist organisations. It is a reminder to us about the job that we still have to do to combat fear and racism and the challenges that we face in combating those who want to whip up fear and hatred against migrants and refugees.

Mr Allister: This was a chilling and a gruesome murder that has robbed our nation of what appears to have been a very able and blossoming parliamentarian, and our nation will be the poorer for that. It is an assault on the democratic process, and, as a component of that, here in this part of the kingdom, we feel that too. Above all, this is the loss of a loving mother to two small children aged five and three, the same ages as my own grandchildren, and I can well imagine the unspeakable devastation of the loss of their mother. Whatever else we think of, I am sure that each of us is thinking, first and foremost, of a grieving husband and bereft children at the hands of wickedness.

Mr Nesbitt referred to the fact that we have empathy from our experience of having an MP from our own shores gunned down doing the same public service as Jo Cox. Robert Bradford, while serving his constituents at a surgery, was brutally cut down by gunmen who have never been brought to justice. I trust that all who today empathise and express sympathy about Jo Cox have done all that they can to bring to justice the murderers of Robert Bradford. Some, in the past, have saluted and glorified in such terror. Last Thursday's events are a salient reminder of how wrong that road is. I trust that there will emerge from this a respect for human life that, hitherto, some have not had and that this will not be a brutal killing that is misused, as some journalists have misused it, for political purposes.

This is a tragedy beyond measure for Parliament and for family, and it should not be exploited beyond that.

Mr Lyttle: I first learned of the brutal murder of Jo Cox from my wife. She spoke to me as a spouse with some experience of intimidation and threat. Perhaps because I learned of it, first, from my wife, first and foremost in my thoughts have been Jo's husband, Brendan, and her children and family, and they will continue to be foremost in my thoughts and prayers at this time.

It is clear that Jo Cox was a brave and courageous woman, dearly loved by her husband, children, family and colleagues. She was passionate about her family, her constituents and the values for which she stood: tolerance, inclusion, social and international justice and compassion over hate. It is clear that she dedicated her life to the now urgent challenge of extinguishing hate-inflaming myth-making in our community, particularly around the issue of immigration. I heard it said this week that we have to be inspired by her courageous and compassionate life rather than intimidated by the evil and hate that caused her death. It was an attack on not only Jo, but her values and representative democracy, and we, therefore, have to heed the courageous and dignified call of her husband, Brendan, to unite against hate in her memory.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next items on the Order Paper are motions regarding Committee membership. As with similar motions, they will be treated as business motions, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Jennifer McCann replace Ms Caitríona Ruane as a member of the Committee for Education. — [Ms Ni Chuilín.]

Resolved:

That Mr Pat Sheehan replace Mr Barry McElduff as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr Barry McElduff replace Mr Pat Sheehan as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Ms Ni Chuilín.]

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Executive Office that it wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council (BIC) summit that was held in Glasgow on 17 June.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Mr Speaker, in accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the twenty-sixth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which took place in the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Glasgow, on Friday 17 June 2016. The deputy First Minister, junior Minister Fearon and I attended the summit, and they have agreed that I make this statement on their behalf.

The Scottish Government hosted the summit, and the heads of delegations were welcomed by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD; the UK Government delegation was led by the Rt Hon David Mundell MP, Secretary of State for Scotland; the Welsh Government delegation was led by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Carwyn Jones AM; the Isle of Man Government delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Hon Allan Bell MHK; the Government of Jersey delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Senator Ian Gorst; and the Government of Guernsey by the Chief Minister, Deputy Gavin St Pier.

The British-Irish Council plays a unique and important role in developing and furthering links between its member Administrations. It provides a forum for exchange of information and collaboration on matters of mutual interest, and it fosters positive, practical relationships across these islands.

At the beginning of the meeting, the Council observed a minute's silence following the death of Jo Cox, MP for Batley and Spen, and offered condolences to her family.

The Council reflected on recent elections across a number of member Administrations and discussed how the Council could continue to promote cooperation on issues of mutual interest, such as economic progress in member Administrations, education and closing the attainment gap, housing and healthcare.

The Council also noted there might be scope for new areas of cooperation based on emerging priorities across these islands. The Council discussed the forthcoming referendum on the UK's membership of the EU.

12.30 pm

Ministers with particular responsibility for unpaid carers met in advance of the summit to consider a detailed paper prepared by the Council's social inclusion work sector. The discussion was then taken forward by heads of administration. The Council acknowledged that carers are an integral part of society, caring for family, friends and neighbours affected by physical or mental illness, disability, frailty or substance misuse. The Council noted that whilst caring can be a positive and rewarding experience, high-intensity caring in particular can result in poor carer mental health and physical difficulties. Across member Administrations, carers policy sits within a wider context of tackling economic, health and social inequalities and, with regard to young carers, within the holistic, child-at-the-centre approach. The Council reflected on the

benefits of preventative approaches rather than crisis-led responses, as well as greater integration of services at a local level.

The Council agreed that further action is required to support carers. Member Administrations committed themselves to working together in order to further their knowledge and understanding of good practice in supporting carers, especially with regard to young carers and older carers; carer identification; and telecare, telehealth and assistive technology. Member Administrations will work with partners in the statutory and third sectors, in communities and in academia to take forward this agenda. The work sector paper will be published on the BIC website.

The Scottish Government updated members on the work which has been done to take forward the ongoing review of the council's work. The Council agreed to examine further whether there are common policy objectives in emerging and established programmes for government across member Administrations and whether there is scope for further collaboration. The Council also agreed to the introduction of a task-and-finish approach to the work of the current BIC work sectors, to ensure continued relevance, and endorsed the forward work plan agreed by the collaborative spatial planning work sector. Work on the review will now be progressed by the Welsh Government in advance of the next summit.

The Council noted the Secretariat's end of year report and agreed a new Council communications plan for the period 2016-18. It welcomed the publication of the BIC annual report 2015. Finally, the Council noted that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Welsh Government.

Mr Nesbitt: The First Minister has already made clear she is for doing things differently and yet this statement seems as light on detail as any previous BIC statement, with bland commitments to discussing areas of mutual interest like the economy, education, housing and healthcare. Can the Minister detail any actual initiative which will benefit the people of Northern Ireland, or — given, as she said, this is a forum for the exchange of information — did the delegation learn anything new?

Mrs Foster: We absolutely did. I thought it was a very interesting agenda, and actually the BIC has been reformed in so far as we are doing things in a different way now. The Ministers directly involved have a pre-discussion on the particular area of issue, and then they bring that discussion to the full meeting. That happened on this occasion in relation to carers. I am sure that the deputy First Minister and Minister Fearon will agree that it was a very worthwhile discussion where we actually learnt about what was going on in the different member Administrations in terms of valuing unpaid carers in society. For example, in Scotland they have a young carers festival, which I think is something we should very much look at. They also have an older-carers parliament where older carers can voice their concerns and deal with the difficulties they face on a day and daily basis.

We learnt, for example, from the Chief Minister in Guernsey that they are using the postal service on their island to knock on the doors of elderly people and to call with them while they are delivering postal communications. The Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, Mr Allan Bell, gave a lot of detail about what they are doing to deal with those

carers who have left caring — in other words, the person that they were caring for has passed on or has gone into an institution — and how they deal with the grief and the isolation of no longer being the main carer for that person. It was a very good engagement in relation to that principal piece of work that was carried on, and I very much look forward to the next summit in Wales.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for her BIC statement. Will she elaborate on what business was discussed around the member Administration priorities?

Mrs Foster: There was quite a good, free-flowing conversation about where the different Administrations find themselves at the moment. A lot of the Administrations had just been returned at their election and, like us, are in the midst of forming their Programme for Government and looking at where the priorities should be. Others, such as the Isle of Man, are coming towards the end of their Administration, so they were able to share some of the issues that have challenged them. For us, it is very strange to look at the Isle of Man, because it has an unemployment rate of 1.3% and finds it difficult to find people for jobs. They are looking for people to come in to take jobs, and they have an elderly population. It is very interesting to hear about the different challenges that attach themselves to different parts of the British-Irish Council and to hear from Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man in the British-Irish Council because, otherwise, we would not hear from those Administrations. It is good to have those links.

Mr Lynch: The First Minister spoke about carers. Was any area of collaboration identified in the social inclusion meeting on the important work of carers?

Mrs Foster: The group will take forward work in the whole new area of using new technologies, particularly in telehealth and tele-care. We could get really involved in that, given our position on telehealth and tele-care and some of the very good work that has been carried out, particularly in the Belfast Trust. We need to look at how we can support young carers and the carers of older people, including older carers. It appears that there are more and more older carers in our society, sometimes caring for adult children with learning disabilities. Those people have very particular needs because they have great concerns about what will happen if they pass away before their children. We need to look at that as well. A good deal of discussion took place on the issue, and we look forward to those matters being taken forward.

Mr Attwood: Has any thought been given to convening the next meeting of the BIC earlier rather than later, in the event that, this Thursday, there is a vote to leave the European Union, not least because of the likely outcome, which is that the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will vote to remain? Do you see a role for the BIC in the deeply unfortunate scenario of the United Kingdom deciding to leave the European Union?

Mrs Foster: I am neither a prophet nor a daughter of a prophet in any way, and I will not say which way any member Administration will vote on membership of the European Union. We had a conversation about it, and, as I said, the next scheduled meeting is to take place in Wales. Ordinarily, that would take place in the autumn of this year, but were it to be the case that the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, we may well come together

sooner to have discussions in relation to the British-Irish Council.

I find the British-Irish Council a very useful forum in which to have discussions at a higher level than, perhaps, we do ordinarily. It is a very useful forum to bring together not only all the constituent parts of the United Kingdom but, of course, Ireland and the islands. The answer is yes: we will come together sooner rather than later were it to be the case that the vote is to leave the European Union.

Dr Farry: My question is also on Europe. Given that the First Minister is the only leader or co-leader of any devolved Administration in these islands who advocates a Brexit, will she relay whether concerns were expressed by the Scottish or Welsh First Ministers or an Taoiseach about the implications of a Brexit for collaboration between the regions of the British Isles, particularly the creation of some type of border for people or goods on the island of Ireland or between the island of Ireland and Great Britain or the effect on investment decisions arising from the distortion of the single market?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure how many questions I have to answer from that one question. We had a very respectful and civil discussion on the European Union referendum. People understood that there were those of us in the room — I was not alone — who held a different view from that of the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and of the Taoiseach. As I say, we had a very respectful discussion, but we recognised — this, I think, is one of the Member's questions — that the British-Irish Council is a useful forum in which to come together in the event of a "Leave" vote to have further discussions about our relationships. As I said, that will take place sooner than the scheduled meeting, which was to have been in the autumn.

Mr Logan: My question was on whether any mention was made of how the British-Irish Council would respond to the outcome of the referendum on the European Union, and I thank the First Minister for her conclusive answers. She answered Members' questions on that topic very well.

Mr McElduff: I note that the British-Irish Council is examining common policy objectives in emerging and established programmes for government. There is also cooperation in areas of work such as education and closing the attainment gap. Will the First Minister elaborate on that area of work?

Mrs Foster: One of the key priorities for the First Minister of Scotland in her current Administration is closing the educational attainment gap, so much so that she has appointed former Finance Minister John Swinney as Education Minister. That is, obviously, a very good appointment, and I have a lot of respect for John Swinney in that job. We had a good discussion, and the First Minister shared what she believes needs to happen to close the gap in educational attainment, and we contributed on the issue. She made the point that it is important that head teachers are given some authority in their schools, which I strongly agree with. When there is a strong, effective and good head teacher, there is a good school. She believes that that is the way forward.

We were able to talk about our early intervention programmes that have been initiated. In particular, the deputy First Minister referred to the literacy and numeracy programmes that we rolled out through OFMDFM. I talked about the early nurturing schemes that we brought

forward, which help children who are perhaps in homes that need a bit of extra help to get them ready for school so that, when they then go to school, they are ready to learn. We were able to contribute, and we can have good, strong conversations on the issue, particularly with the Government of Scotland.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the First Minister for her answer on how the British-Irish Council is dealing with the urgent priorities of each member Administration. Does she agree that having willing Governments, cooperating without threat or coercion, is precisely the sort of model that we should be looking for in the future? Our pro-European friends could learn from such a model.

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. As I said, we were able to contribute on all the issues that we discussed around the table. I thought that it was a good and open discussion and, as I said, it was respectful. When eight delegations are together from the different parts, we will take different views on issues. However, the key to all this is to have respect for each other's views and to listen to what is going on in each Administration to see whether we can learn or indeed take away points for our own Administration.

12.45 pm

Ms Mallon: Can the First Minister provide, or lodge in the Library, an update on the work of the BIC housing subgroup and its forward work programme? Can she provide details of other priorities that might be taken forward that are referred to in her statement but not detailed?

Mrs Foster: Yes, absolutely. The housing work stream is proceeding well. This is one of the work streams where we take the lead. We take the lead on collaborative spatial planning, housing and transport. The housing work stream is proceeding well with a clear focus on policy challenges of interest across all the Administrations, namely housing supply and indeed housing's role in wider regeneration efforts. The reason why it is not detailed in the statement is because we have decided to focus in on a particular area at each summit. This summit was looking in particular at carers' issues. I think that it worked very well. I think that the next summit — I stand to be corrected — will deal with collaborative spatial planning. Each of the summits will take forward each of those issues in turn. I think that it is working very well.

Mr Allister: In the discussion on the referendum, I am sure that it was not lost on the First Minister that three of the Governments at the table represent territories outside the EU, yet all the Governments at the table are members of the common travel area. Did she therefore draw attention to that fact in order to debunk the myth that, if we were outside the EU and liberated from its shackles, we would lose the common travel area, when patently there are countries already outside it that continue to enjoy it?

Mrs Foster: As I say, there was a very good discussion around the European referendum. Tellingly, I thought some of the most interesting contributions — probably because I had not heard them up until then — came from the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey. Each island had a different perspective as to how, if we were to leave the European Union, that would impact on them in particular. The Isle of Man, to be completely open and frank with you, was very concerned about a "Leave" vote. They believed that it

would have a very great impact on the Isle of Man because of the way in which they operate within this system to get their United Kingdom money. Ian Gorst from Jersey was very interesting. He was very clear that it was a decision for the United Kingdom and that whatever happened, they would respond accordingly, work with it and deal with the issues. Again, Gavin St Pier from Guernsey was very keen, obviously and understandably, that he protected the interests under protocol 3 after next week's, as it was last Friday, referendum.

There were differing views on how the European referendum would impact on each of the Administrations, but they, like me, believe that, whatever happens this week and whatever is the democratic will of the people of the United Kingdom, we will all have to deal with the issues in front of us. As I said at that meeting, we in Northern Ireland have come through a difficult period, particularly last year, and we are determined that we will continue on the route that we are currently on, which is to build a strong, prosperous Northern Ireland. Those who say that the peace process will be damaged by leaving the European Union are wrong because it is a matter for people here in Northern Ireland to continue to build peace and have a strong Northern Ireland.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, to move the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group eight clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

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

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

The uprating order is an annual order that provides for the uprating of specified social security benefits from April each year. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is required to review annually the level of benefits in relation to the general level of prices. Where the general level is greater at the end of the period under review, benefits are increased by at least that percentage. Apart from 2014-15 and 2015-16, when the uprating of certain working-age benefits was limited to 1% because of the economic climate at that time, the level of uprating is mainly based on the increase in the consumer price index (CPI) at the end of the previous September. That is the measure of price inflation considered most appropriate for this purpose by the Westminster Government.

There is no perfect measure of inflation. However, CPI is the headline measure of inflation in the United Kingdom and is considered to be less volatile than RPI. Some commentators consider that it better reflects the inflation experience of pensioners and benefit recipients. Uprating by CPI ensures that, at the very least, benefit levels maintain their value against inflation.

The consumer price index for the 12-month period to the end of September 2015 showed a negative growth rate at -0.1%. That rate means that price-indexed benefits have retained their value in relation to the general level of prices. Therefore, the Secretary of State has determined that these benefit rates will remain unchanged for 2016-17.

When the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions makes an uprating order under section 150 or 150A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, my Department is empowered to make a corresponding order. I stress that there is no power to increase benefits by a different or greater percentage to that provided for in the order made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Turning to those rates that are in the uprating order, let me say that the Westminster Government gave a commitment that the basic state pension will be uprated in line with the triple-lock guarantee; that is, by the highest of the growth in earnings, the growth in prices or 2.5%. The average weekly earnings statistics for the quarter ending July 2015 showed an annual growth in earnings of 2.9%. Therefore, the basic state pension is increased by 2.9% to £119.30 per week, which is a weekly increase of £3.35 — the biggest real-terms increase of the basic state pension since 2001.

The pension credit standard minimum guarantee, that is, the means-tested threshold below which pensioner income need not fall, also rises in line with average earnings at 2.9%. The single-person threshold of this safety-net benefit has risen by £4.40 to £155.60 a week — the biggest real-terms increase since its introduction. For couples, the increase is £6.70, taking their new total to £237.55 a week. As a result of the uprating order, we will be spending an additional £79 million on social security in 2016-17 — money that will go into the local economy.

I appreciate that many of us would like to do more, but as I have already stated, my Department is empowered to increase the rates of benefits only to the same extent as those payable in Great Britain.

I am sure that all Members will wish to ensure that pensioners in Northern Ireland can continue to receive these new increased rates of state pension and that the poorest pensioners are protected. I am sure that Members will, therefore, join me in supporting the order.

Mr Eastwood (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2016 and the subsequent statutory rule were considered by the former Committee for Social Development. As the order now falls under the remit of the Committee for Communities, the Committee, at its meeting on 16 June, agreed that it was content for me, as Chairperson, to speak on the motion.

As mentioned, the Committee for Social Development first considered the Department's proposal to make the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2016 at its meeting of 18 February 2016 and was content for the rule to be made. When the statutory rule was subsequently brought before the Committee on 10 March, the Committee was content, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, to recommend that it be confirmed by the Assembly. The Examiner has not identified any issues with the rule.

As the Minister indicated, the order is already in operation, and, today, we are simply being asked to approve it. The order is one of a series of statutory rules relating to the annual uprating package for rates of social security benefits, pensions and allowances. The Department has advised that it has no power to deviate from the rates and amounts specified in the order made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I recommend that the order be approved by the Assembly.

Ms Gildernew: I concur with the Chair of the Committee for Communities. I also make the point that, given the fact that pensioners are on a fixed-rate income, they sometimes find it very difficult to deal with changes to costs that they cannot avoid. I am thinking, particularly, of the cost of fuel and of their vulnerability to fuel poverty. We welcome the fact that these benefits are being increased, but we will keep a very close eye on how pensioners are coping and whether they are able to manage, given that costs are outside their control and that they do not have any kind of financial flexibility.

Mr Beggs: I wish to say a few words on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. This is part of an annual exercise, and there is very little change to our social security benefits in the annual process year to year. It is important that we make increases and adjustments to maintain parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, but the reality is that we cannot afford any other changes that would fall upon our limited block grant.

On some of the entitlements affected, I too welcome the 2.9% increase indicated by the Minister in the basic state pension and the increase in state pension credit. I know that many vulnerable pensioners will greatly benefit from that little bit of additional money. It is particularly welcome in the context of the consumer prices index showing a negative growth rate of -0.1%. Of course, that means that many of the contributory and non-contributory benefits

will not be increased in 2016-17, because they have maintained their value in relation to prices.

We are discussing the motion in the context of gross disposable household income in Northern Ireland being the smallest, or worst, in the United Kingdom. We are receiving, on average, 81.5% of UK average earnings, and I have no doubt that that is not unconnected to the over-reliance on social security in many parts of Northern Ireland. We need a safety net and parity in welfare payments, but, above all, we need economic growth to take more of our people out of welfare and into work.

In our role of providing constructive opposition, the Ulster Unionist Party indicates its support for this confirmatory resolution.

Mr Givan: I thank Members for their contributions. I also thank the previous Chair, Mr Maskey, for it was his Committee that considered the issue in the previous mandate. I thank it for the way in which it engaged on the issue at the time.

Obviously, there is support for the proposal that has been brought forward. The Deputy Chair of the Committee, Ms Gildernew, raised an important issue about poverty among pensioners and the lack of flexibility they have to be able to respond to issues that affect them but which are beyond their control.

That is why the Department has been taking forward a strategy called Supporting People, which is maximising income through the uptake of benefits. That has been a success. We want to make sure that people who are entitled to the various strands of support receive that. The Department will take that forward because we want to make sure that our pensioners and, indeed, other vulnerable people who are in receipt of welfare support get the benefits that they are entitled to. We want to have greater focus on getting that information to people so that we can help to tackle the issues that they face.

1.00 pm

I trust that addresses the issues, and I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Landlord Registration Scheme

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Mr Maskey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Communities to review urgently the landlord registration scheme to ensure that it can both cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.

I rise to commend the motion to the Assembly and to accept formally the amendment tabled by the Alliance Party. I apologise on behalf of my colleague Fra McCann, who was to speak on this but is unwell. It is nothing too serious, thankfully. There is nothing to report in that regard, but, nevertheless, he was due to speak today. Most Members will now well understand that Fra McCann has had a singular focus on the provision of housing, particularly social housing, for people right across our society for many, many years. He regrets that he cannot be here to speak to this motion directly.

I remind Members that, as far back as 2007, Fra McCann tabled a motion in the House to have a landlord registration scheme introduced, and that was passed with the support of all Members and all parties. That was appropriate, and it was good that it happened, but it took a further seven years before the scheme for registration was agreed through legislation by the Assembly, with 25 February 2015 the cut-off date for complete registration. However, many of us will have thought at the time that it was important to have robust legislation in place to underpin the scheme. The Minister at the time, on balance, thought that a light-touch approach would be more appropriate, and time will tell how effective that will be. Of course, many of us argued that we need robust legislation to tackle poor quality of housing standards and the lack of accountability that was very evident in that sector. The balance, of course, was to not impose an overly bureaucratic burden on landlords, many of whom own a very small number of properties. In many cases, it is one or two houses. At the time, the then Minister felt that it was appropriate to have the balance with a light touch. As I said, the effect of that remains to be seen.

We have tabled the motion again because, in the last period of time, we have had some conflicting figures. It is important that I remind the House that, in written responses in the last mandate, on 25 February 2015, we were advised that 37,000 landlords had registered providing details of 72,000 tenancies. In another written answer, in March that year, the figures were that 35,000 landlords were registered providing details of 77,000 properties.

In February, we had a record that 33,000 landlords had registered, providing details of 70,000 tenancies. We were then given a further report on 1 March 2016, which stated:

“over 46,000 landlords have registered with the Landlord Registration Scheme and provided details of over 97,500 private tenancies.”

It is therefore estimated, using figures from the 2011 census and the house condition survey, that 98% of private tenancies have registered with the scheme. That would obviously be very good and an important and fairly high figure, but it is important for the Minister to endeavour to get us as up-to-date figures as he can. Clearly, there are some considerable inaccuracies in at least three of those previous questions and the responses to them.

The private rented sector obviously leads the way numerically, in volume, in the provision of social rented accommodation over the Housing Executive and housing associations, which, between them, have 135,000 dwellings, including family, sheltered and supported housing. In that context, given the sheer volume of people who are reliant on the private rented sector, it is important to get accurate figures. It would also be interesting if the Minister could, if you like, try to bottom out how many people have not registered over the last 16 months or so — in other words, how many have not complied with the deadline — and, if any landlords have not complied, what action, if any, has been taken. The same obviously also applies to the tenancy deposit scheme. As many Members will know — the Minister will certainly know, and the Department will be well aware of it — the Assembly took forward those two pieces of legislation in an attempt precisely to protect those who live in the private rented sector and, given the essential importance of the private rented sector, to make sure that people will not be at the mercy of some poor landlords.

As representatives, most of us will have worked with landlords and tenants over the years and know that the vast majority of landlords are very professional and provide very good accommodation. Of course, as in every walk of life, there are others who are less professional. There are some who are much less scrupulous, and some people are therefore forced to live in housing that is certainly not up to standard. Therefore, we want the Minister to have an urgent review of the effectiveness of the landlord registration scheme to ensure that people are protected if they are living in unfit accommodation. Many of us will understand that there still too many people — there should not be any — who live in accommodation that is unfit in this day and age. Of course, we remind ourselves that the sector is in receipt of somewhere in the region of £300 million-plus. That was the last figure in 2013-14, and it is a huge amount of public money that is paid out by way of housing benefit to a sector that, very often, is not as regulated as it should be.

I commend the last Minister, Department and Assembly for passing the HMO legislation, which is, in a way, related. Clearly, it dealt with the whole question of the need to have proper regulation and proper accountability to ensure that landlords and tenants are protected against those among them who are less than professional. The reason why we are more than content to adopt the Alliance Party amendment is that it has included letting agents, which was a concept that was embraced in the HMO legislation.

It is also important to recognise that the former Department for Social Development, now the Department of Communities, is taking forward an overall review of the

private rented sector. Given the sheer volume of houses and homes provided by that sector, it is essential that we start off the mandate with the very clear signalled intention of making sure that there is enough social housing provided for people by the Housing Executive, housing associations and, of course, the private rented sector, and that it is going to pertain long into the future. It is essential that the sector is fully and robustly legislated for and regulated. That will protect both landlords and, of course, tenants, far too many of whom, as I said, are living in unfit accommodation in this day and age.

I take the opportunity to commend this morning what I consider to be a brave intervention by Sandra Moore from the Welcome Organisation and Kerry Anthony from Depaul, who have tried to address the issues of begging in the street and homelessness.

All of us are keen to make sure that not one citizen is affected by homelessness or has to endure that condition, but it was a brave intervention, because it might not always seem the most popular thing to say. It may even jar with many of us who, when we see people on the street, think that they are, of course, vulnerable. If you listened to the interview with Sandra and Kerry, you know that, given their background, history and work experience, they are very sympathetic to the needs of vulnerable people. More importantly, they are professionals and experts in the field, and they draw attention to the issue in this day and age.

As I said on behalf of Sinn Féin, at the start of this mandate, we need to give a clear signal that housing and the well-being of tenants are important to all Members. We need to make sure that we provide adequate social housing in urban and rural communities, that those homes are fit for modern living and that all tenants, whether from the Housing Executive, housing associations or the private rented sector, are protected. We also need to make sure that landlords are protected from less-than-scrupulous tenants, because this can cut two ways.

On that basis, I commend the motion and thank the Alliance Party for tabling its amendment, which can only help. I urge Members to show their support for the concept of robust regulation, and I ask the Minister to take forward an early and urgent review of the effectiveness of the landlord registration scheme.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move the following amendment:

Delete all after "scheme" and insert

"and to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants."

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak again on this important issue today. I thank Mr Maskey for his indication of support for the Alliance Party amendment, and, through him, I pass on our best wishes to Fra McCann, who is not feeling too well. I commend Mr Maskey for the work that he did as Chair of the then Social Development Committee, which dealt with this and many similar issues, and the way in which the whole Committee and Assembly came together to deal with these matters of robust regulation.

Today, I am standing in for my party colleague Naomi Long. I am sure that at least the Minister will be delighted to know that she is in France, preparing to cheer on the Northern Ireland football team. I welcome the opportunity

to contribute to the debate on the motion, in conjunction with the amendment that we propose. As I said, I am delighted that the mover of the motion is willing to take the amendment on board.

The landlord registration scheme was an important first step in bringing about protections in a fast-developing sector. Since the introduction of the scheme in 2014, recent figures suggest — although perhaps some of those figures are in dispute, and it would be helpful if the Minister could clarify them — that 46,000 landlords have registered, and we possess details of 100,000 rented properties across Northern Ireland. Before 2014, 100,000 homes were being rented in Northern Ireland, with little knowledge of who the landlords were, what their function was besides being a homeowner and agent, or, more importantly, what their responsibilities or lack of responsibilities to tenants were — all of which we should expect from a good landlord.

It is on the last point that I have a personal connection to the motion and I am sure that many others in the Chamber do as well. I remember constituents coming into my office and telling me about the appalling conditions of properties that they were renting through a private landlord: the damp, the failure of heating systems, the ill health of their children — all the things that caused great concern to me and to many constituents across Northern Ireland who were living in properties that were in significant disrepair and had landlords who would not engage with tenants unless the rent was overdue.

At this stage, the landlord registration scheme has increased tenant confidence, introduced accountability and transparency, and ensured that landlords cannot shirk their responsibilities. The scheme is and must be praised for bringing hidden landlords into the open for the first time.

1.15 pm

Today's motion takes a further step by calling on the Minister for Communities to review the scheme. That is vital, given recent statistics, which show that the rented sector will increase massively, with home ownership falling to 60% within the next 10 years. That reality, combined with the failure of the last Executive to build a sufficient number of homes for our rising population and a property market that prices out first-time buyers with exorbitant initial deposits, has fostered what is known as "Generation Rent". We need to ensure that tenants are protected by reinforcing regulation, the legislation and the rules. This desire was contained in our manifesto, which stated that we would support the introduction of legislation to improve the regulation of the private rented sector.

The amendment that Paula Bradshaw and I have brought today widens a positive motion through including the regulation of letting agencies. That is important, given the meteoric rise of the private rental market. It has been observed that a number of letting agencies are using the unregulated nature of the sector to fabricate fees and now treat a vital sector as a moneymaking scheme. A recent study by Housing Rights found that the basic initial checks, which take a few seconds on the computer, can incur a charge of up to £100. The Alliance Party feels that this is unjust and unfair, and we believe that our amendment will help to tackle a practice that preys on people in desperation and treats them as victims rather than as clients in a

modern and progressive society, where the renting of property is something that we should be able to laud.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member recall evidence given by some letting agents to the Social Development Committee when examining the Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill? They indicated that all that they did was let the property, while others had a maintenance role. Do you agree that there needs to be a clear distinction of responsibilities so that everyone knows their responsibility moving forward, rather than have a situation in which we have those who simply let and walk away?

Mr Dickson: I entirely agree with the Member's intervention. It is vital that the tenant knows exactly where the lines of responsibility lie and that that responsibility be clearly set out in appropriate agreements.

I endorse the motion due to the positive impact that, I believe, it will have on tenants who currently have to live in an unregulated environment. The landlord registration scheme is a positive first step, but we must now encourage the Minister to take the next step. The amendment, alongside the Sinn Féin motion, will take us forward in this important area.

Mr Bell: This is an important motion, and I am happy to speak in support of both it and the amendment, which reflects what we want here, which is proportionality and a reasonable way forward. There is always a necessary balance to be struck between the landlord and the tenant — I should declare an interest as a landlord, Mr Speaker — and, as we look towards regulations, we want to protect both the tenant and the landlord, who in many cases provides a vital service. I refer to what Mr Dickson said earlier about the consultation by Housing Rights and consultations in Dungannon, Coleraine and Belfast.

It is important to look at the reasons that people rent. For 10%, it is flexibility. They are not going to put down permanent roots, be that for family or employment reasons. For 11% — this is the challenge for us — the waiting list for social housing is simply too long. We have heard good news in recent weeks from some of our social housing associations, which have thought outside the box, and we encourage them to see how investment can be brought in. The big sector in the survey — a third of our people — is those who simply cannot afford accommodation.

That group made up one third of the respondents. It is important that we look to good practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We have the Private Rented Housing (Scotland) Act 2011, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and the Renters' Rights Bill in England.

In my constituency office, tenants often speak to me about the affordability of the sector and the difficulty in getting repairs done. I have major concerns about landlords who are acting irresponsibly. Without breaking any confidences, I know of single parents in my constituency whom we have referred on to the environmental health office at Ards and North Down Borough Council. If the environmental health office accepts that the accommodation does not meet the necessary standards, it puts recommendations in place. One would have thought that, when that happens, the private landlord immediately acts to get the necessary

repairs in place. Often, and I am sure I am not alone, I find in my constituency surgeries that, even when the council's environmental health office has acted and explained what needs to be done, there then begins a process, with them saying, "We do not need to do it that way; let me get a different plumber or joiner, or get in someone different", because the landlord reckons they can solve this problem, for example, just by putting in a dehumidifier. This is an actual experience, without breaching anybody's confidence, where a single parent with several children is unable to use her own bedroom in her own home. We go into a process of almost interminable delay while these negotiations go backwards and forwards. The three critical areas that we need to address are affordability, repairs and standards.

In conclusion, we want to see a proportional response from the Minister. It is the first opportunity that I have had to welcome him to his post. We want to see a balanced approach that looks towards effective regulation and protects the tenant and the necessary sector, the private rented sector.

Mr Beggs: I just want to pick up on some of the comments of the Member who spoke last. I, too, support the view that there needs to be balance in what happens. I declare an interest in this subject, to the degree that my son is a student renter of accommodation and my dad is a landlord. I see the issue from both sides.

Where exactly are we with this in Northern Ireland? What is our housing situation? We need to be careful, as we go forward, how we impact on tenants — we need to ensure that we bring about improvements — but also that we do not contribute to homelessness.

Our population is growing, and the average size of households is becoming smaller. It is estimated that we need over 11,000 new houses a year just to maintain stability. The Housing Executive has indicated that it needs 1,500 new houses; perhaps that has gone up to 2,000 homes, given the economic situations. The private sector has been building 4,500 houses a year. That means that we have a gap. There is a shortage of houses. How is it going to be filled? Will the Executive produce the money to do it? If they are, where the funds? I pose this question: are we going to be reliant on the private sector to help those who are facing homelessness today? We need to make sure that the decisions we make do not worsen the situation so that more people become homeless. We may have great intentions, but I argue that we need to take great care in bringing about changes.

Will any proposals address rogue landlords? That is the key issue on which I will judge any proposal, not on the amount of bureaucracy and cost for the nine out of 10 good landlords, where there are good relationships between landlord and tenant. What we do not need are additional costs that will be passed to the landlord and on to the tenant. We do not need bureaucracy; we need action where it is actually needed.

There have been a number of changes in the housing situation in recent times. We have had the new deposit scheme requirement for new purchasers, so fewer people have been buying houses. Recently, there have been changes to HMRC taxation rules. Some of those who invested may get cold feet. We have introduced a landlord registration scheme for houses in multiple occupancy.

I participated in that, and I am well aware of the need for it and am fully supportive of it. We have our landlord registration scheme and tenancy deposit scheme.

As I said, the vast majority of the relationships are good. Indeed, a 2012 survey showed that 88% of tenants were fairly or very satisfied with repairs and 8% were fairly or very dissatisfied. Like others, I come across constituency cases where I feel that landlords are not carrying out their duty. I commend the actions of the Housing Rights Service and councils' environmental health officers for their actions in trying to bring to account those who are not responding to need. One of the ideas floated in some of the surveys that the Department has carried out is for an arbitration service where there are disputes. Instead of dealing with everybody, we may just need a system to deal with a dispute. Some 87% of tenants supported the creation of an arbitration service. I think that that has some merit going forward.

There is a small number of disreputable landlords who knowingly flout the law, and we need to make sure that we address them. I noticed that, in Scotland, comments have included those saying it is unnecessarily cumbersome and requires a large amount of data, yet it would not even assist landlords with tenants who were misusing their property or were in rent arrears or even advise them when they had left the property so that repossession could occur. We need to make sure that we have balance as we go forward. I noticed that Shelter Scotland indicated in 2009 that, after three years, it was failing to weed out the minority of bad landlords.

I reiterate what I am saying: we need a system that will deal with the offenders and those who are not carrying out their responsibility to tenants, rather than have additional costs that will ramp up bureaucracy. Let us deal with the problem, not create another bureaucratic system.

Ms Mallon: I support the motion and the amendment. I also pass on my good wishes to Fra McCann. Fra is a steadfast campaigner on homelessness, and his contributions on the issue are always honest, passionate and worth a listen. I also declare an interest as the owner of a house that is out for rent.

In recent times, I have had the very humbling experience of listening to Father Peter McVerry. Father Peter is a campaigner on this issue in Dublin. He works at the coalface, but he is also vociferous in challenging government and landlords to responsibly and urgently address the issue. Peter very powerfully makes the case that there are five fundamental human rights: the right to food; an education; healthcare; work; and a home. I believe that all the evidence is there to show that the home is the anchor that holds other aspects of your life together. The distress and negative consequences that flow from not having a home are felt in families and households right across Northern Ireland, not least in my constituency of North Belfast. It is certainly a serious problem that requires serious and urgent action.

The private rented sector has an important part to play in providing quality, affordable and sustainable housing solutions. Successive studies and surveys, including the house condition survey, have shown that, generally speaking, the Northern Ireland private rented sector works reasonably well, with high reported levels of tenant satisfaction. Those findings are to be welcomed. However, as many of us also know — Members testified to this during

the debate — a number of tenants do not find themselves in the situation of having a responsible and active landlord. In fact, many are faced with an unresponsive, or in the worst cases a neglectful, landlord. I have visited constituents in homes with a growing list of outstanding repairs. I have visited a home where the landlord has refused permission for minor adaptations needed for the health and well-being of a child. Sadly, like other Members, there are similar cases I could recall in the debate.

1.30 pm

It is important that we acknowledge that the vast majority of landlords are good and responsible and provide a high level of service, but it is equally important to acknowledge that a minority do not provide the same level of service. The challenge for government is to create a system that increases standards while protecting tenant and landlord and without adversely affecting the majority of tenancies that are working. The landlord registration scheme implemented last year is a useful step. It allows us to capture data and gather knowledge, and its publication enhances accountability. The circulars that are sent to landlords, advising them of their rights and responsibilities, are also helpful. However, registration is not regulation, and it is right that the departmental review of the role and regulation of the private rented sector is under way and that it is looking at licensing, accreditation, security of tenure and affordability. I urge the Minister to ensure that, following the review, swift and timely action is taken.

It is important to remember that a high-quality and affordable private rented sector is part of the answer to resolving the acute housing shortage that we face, but it will only be successful in addressing the challenge if it is accompanied and supported by other housing solutions. That requires building more social and affordable homes, particularly in areas of high demand. It requires investment in and access to early intervention and prevention support to help stop people finding themselves homeless in the first place. It also means supporting people to live in their home through programmes like Supporting People and Housing First, alongside targeted support to the most vulnerable, including on-street access to mental health and addiction recovery services. It also requires the reform of the common selection scheme, with allocation based on objective need at its heart.

While that list is not exhaustive, those measures combined will go a long way to addressing our housing crisis. Ending homelessness is achievable; it is doable. It just requires the political will to achieve it.

Mr Stalford: In my constituency, as, I am sure, we will hear later from Paula Bradshaw, housing is probably the biggest issue that people come to their Assembly Member about. In starting a discussion about this, it is important to consider some basic first principles. The first thing is that there are 48,000 landlords, the huge majority of whom are small landlords who hold one, two or maybe three properties. Those individuals are making a contribution towards meeting housing need, as has already been said. The reason measures such as those we are discussing today are necessary and should be built on — we all have experience of this — is that, when you suggest to a constituent that they consider the private rented sector, rather than Housing Executive accommodation, 99 out of 100 will back away, afraid of that prospect. There are

reasons for that. I welcome the fact that we have embarked on a review, and it is important that we are looking at taking it forward into the future. I hope it will allow us to close the gap that exists in people's perceptions between social housing and the private rented sector. People should have the same confidence that a private landlord will repair their property or ensure that their home is maintained as tenants have in the Housing Executive. That is why I think that some of the measures undertaken by the successor Department to DSD are welcome. In protecting tenants' rights, for example, the tenancy deposit scheme secured 66,000 deposits totalling £37 million. This is real money that people put down as a deposit on a home. They are entitled to have it back, and, through the scheme that was introduced, we have been able to ensure that that is the case.

The Private Tenancies Order details the responsibility that landlords have to their tenants and to the local authority. It is important that we increase awareness and education around that, particularly amongst tenants, so that they know the responsibilities of their landlords to them. There may indeed be a role for local government to take on. I cannot help notice that there are plenty of Belfast people who want to contribute to the debate. In the city, we have seen what was our council taking the lead on lots of issues and increasing public awareness of them. This is one area where local government has a role: increasing people's awareness of their rights if they are in the private rented sector.

The Department is in the process — I am sure that we will hear more from the Minister on this — of reviewing the progress that has been made in this area, and I welcome that. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are talking about a sector that accounts for more than 100,000 properties throughout Northern Ireland, so it is in everyone's interest — landlord and tenant alike — that we set in place rules and regulations that allow the full potential of those 100,000 properties to be exploited for the purpose of solving or at least making a contribution to solving the problem of housing, which is very real in constituencies like mine and Nichola Mallon's.

All of us want to create a system where people are treated fairly and are not exploited whilst maintaining the rights that people have over their property. I am not a landlord, but I understand that, if people own property, we cannot tie them in red tape either. This is a delicate but important area of public policy, and it is essential for all our constituents that we strike the right balance between protecting people and protecting the rights of landlords.

I have one final point. I am a South Belfast representative, and we have seen there what happens when landlords get it wrong.

Ms Gildernew: I am delighted to speak in the debate. I also send my best wishes to Fra, who absolutely lives and breathes this stuff and is very sorry that he cannot be here.

Back at the formation of the Housing Executive around 45 years ago as a result of the eviction in Caledon in 1968, a points system was developed in an attempt to prioritise housing need and ensure that people in the highest need got housed. The Housing Executive has done an amazing job over the past 45 years, but unfortunately it has not been able to build in recent decades. As a result, we have an acute housing shortage, which Members have talked about today.

There was rapid growth between 2006 and 2011 and an investor-led housing boom during those peak years. In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, particularly in and around Dungannon, where there are lots of manufacturing and food processing jobs, the need for houses took off to such an extent that the Housing Executive and the housing associations could never keep up. We need the private rented sector to meet that need, but that is not to say that there does not need to be regulation. I welcome the fact that we have landlord certification. I welcome our motion and Alliance's amendment to it. As Alex said, the light touch that was applied originally is probably not robust enough.

I welcome the fact that an energy performance certificate is needed. A house has to be energy-efficient, which is hugely important, especially when you see the level of fuel poverty that exists, not just among vulnerable families. It is fairly prevalent at every level, so we need the energy performance certificate —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Ms Gildernew: I will keep an eye on the time. Come back to me in a minute or two.

I welcome the fact that we have the energy performance certificate, but I cannot understand why we do not have an unfitness certificate. That was talked about, and there was a decision to prioritise the properties in the poorest condition with a date being kept under review. Unfortunately, we can see the dampness in many new builds as we walk past them, and we know that those houses are not necessarily well ventilated or dry. We also know about the problems that come from that. If you live in a property that has a problem with damp, it is in your clothes and is on you. It is hard to live an active and full life if you are embarrassed by the state of your house and what that entails. Probably more seriously, there is proof of the link between inadequate housing and the risk of ill health and disability. There are also links to poor mental health, lower educational attainment, unemployment and poverty. We recognise that there is a need for a quality standard in our private rented sector to ensure that landlords meet the needs of the people to whom they rent properties.

I also recognise how hard it is at times to get a house. I supported a family recently in a marital break-up, where the mother lived with the children in the family home and the father could not get a house for love or money in the town that he was from. He did not have anywhere near enough points to get onto the social housing ladder; the private rented sector was his only option. I disagree with comments made by Christopher Stalford: cost is a prohibitive factor for a lot of people going into private rented, especially if you are in full-time work on the minimum wage and are not entitled to top-up benefits. The gentleman whom I am talking about could not get a house that his children wanted to visit him in. That is so sad. We are talking about a man in a marriage break-up whose children did not want to visit him in the temporary accommodation that he lived in. We worked hard to get him a house that his children would call home as well and where he was able to fulfil his duties as a dad. He loves his children; he wanted them to be able to spend part of the week with him. That was very difficult for him.

I will give way very quickly —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. She made the point about energy performance certificates. I simply wanted to ask her — I think, from what she said, that she will agree — whether, now that we know the level of energy inefficiency in our housing stock, we should require minimum energy efficiency standards for letting.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Gildernew: It all has to be kept under review. Obviously, we have to have proper regulation. Energy is such an important thing. If you spend more than 50% of your income on heating your home, there are other areas that you absolutely cannot afford to cover. We have to ensure that all the certifications and regulations are robust and meet the needs of our families and people living in the private rented sector.

Ms Bailey: For most of my life, I have lived as a tenant in the private rented sector. I want to make sure that the House is aware that regulation is so badly needed in that sector. There is no standard for tenants: the heating, insulation, conditions and decor that come with a house is very haphazard. I have lived with my two children as a single mother — we have heard an example given today — in the private rented sector. I have paid extortionately high rents. I have paid letting fees just to apply for houses. I have lived with more than half my income going on trying to heat through electric bar heating in the private rented sector, as well. I have lived with damp and in very bad conditions.

I have also been made homeless. My children and I ended up in a hostel through no fault of our own; it was simply because the landlord wanted to change the contract. I did not know my rights at the time. I was given notice to quit, and I thought that I had to quit, so I did. I left myself homeless through not knowing my rights. I spent four months with my children in a hostel on the Ormeau Road, not because I was a bad tenant but because I did not know my rights. There was no single point of contact to find out what my rights or options were. When I put that in a letter to the then Social Development Minister, her response was that she was glad to see that the system was working properly.

1.45 pm

We have a lot to do to acknowledge what happens in the private rental sector in Northern Ireland. The latest figures show that 21% — just over a fifth — of our population live in private rental accommodation. While the landlord registration scheme was, absolutely, a good first step, it was a first step that we need to move far from. The tenancy deposit scheme still does not give adequate protections. It contains a time bar loophole: after six months, tenants can no longer apply to get their deposit back. In my experience of living in the private rental sector, I never got my full deposit back.

We highly recommend that the Minister, in looking at what we need by way of tighter regulation of letting fees, consider following in the footsteps of Scotland, where letting fees were made illegal in 2012. In Northern Ireland, people can face letting fees of anything from £30 to £120 a time, and then they have to pay a month's rent in advance. On top of the deposit, that is a huge cost, little of which ever comes back to the tenant. There is a huge body of work to do in bringing the tenancy deposit scheme, the letting fees and the regulation of landlords together into

one piece that we can all use to help tenants, who make up, I repeat, one fifth of the population in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, I remind the House that we have until 2.00 pm, when we will break for Question Time.

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. It is my duty to respond to specific points. If I do not cover something in my general comments, I will certainly come back to Members in writing. It is worth noting that the contributions of Members are incredibly well informed. They are testimony to the work that MLAs do in their constituencies. We all have a significant caseload of constituents who need support in housing, and the contributions made today reflect that MLAs are in touch with their community and are active, particularly in trying to help the most vulnerable. We have heard the stories from Members. Ms Bailey's personal story is one that will resonate with people. She speaks powerfully about that and will, I have no doubt, make a powerful contribution to the issue as we consider it in the future.

Let me wish Fra McCann all the best. He is one of the MLAs who very quickly came into the Department, wanting to meet me to talk about housing. I have no doubt that he will have a particular interest in this, as he has had for a number of years. He brings a lot of experience that I want to utilise in addressing the issues that we need to face.

I welcome the opportunity to respond formally to the motion, which calls on me:

“to review urgently the Landlord Registration Scheme to ensure that it can both cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants”,

and the amendment:

“to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.”

Before I talk about the scheme that has been in operation since 25 February 2014, let me provide some background on why the landlord registration scheme was introduced. In recognition of the growth of the private rented sector, the Department developed 'Building Sound Foundations – A Strategy for the Private Rented Sector' for consultation in 2009. The key focus of the strategy was to support the development of a healthy private rented sector in Northern Ireland. The two key, main changes introduced as a result were landlord registration and tenancy deposit.

With landlord registration, it was recognised that there was a lack of basic information surrounding the composition of the private rented sector that made it difficult for councils to fulfil their regulatory role of monitoring and ensuring compliance with the law. There was no central capture of data on the numbers, location or portfolio size of private landlords, although local knowledge may have been built up over time. Private landlords tended to operate across council boundaries, and, as the knowledge collected on an individual council basis was not held centrally, the information was not used to best effect to regulate the sector. The absence of centrally held and accurate data about the private rented sector contributed to a lack of confidence, perceived respectability and accountability. In addition, councils tended to react only when complaints or

difficulties were brought to their attention, rather than in a proactive way through education and awareness, as well as enforcement when necessary.

The majority of respondents to the 2009 consultation provided overwhelming support for a mandatory Northern Ireland register of landlords. Most respondents felt that it should be proportionate, light-touch, not intrusive and inexpensive in order to minimise the burden on landlords. Councils advised that such a register should have inbuilt data protection to allow relevant information to be used to facilitate good information sharing, better tenancy management and enforcement as necessary but should be restricted to designated bodies to protect landlords' personal information.

When the landlord registration regulations were proceeding through the Assembly, it was made clear that a register of landlords was very much a first step to making improvements to the sector. The scheme gave councils the information that they needed to be proactive in ensuring that a private landlord adhered to the law already in place, and there were no regulatory functions or powers attached to the scheme.

The scheme has been very successful in what it was set up to do: to have a register of landlords with details of their properties. Currently, over 48,000 landlords are registered with the scheme, and over 100,000 private rented properties are registered. The private rented sector is characterised by a lot of small landlords who own one or two properties. Members raised that issue. The current figure is 101,000 private rented properties registered. On average, 400 properties a month are being registered. Clearly, more houses are being registered, but more need to be registered, given that it is compulsory for landlords to do that.

Landlords also get help when they register. On registration, they receive a landlord registration toolkit, which provides vital information and advice on landlords' responsibilities when renting out properties. My Department also issues quarterly newsletters to registered landlords making them aware of any changes that may impact on their letting of properties and other general information that may be of use to them.

As part of the drive to inform and professionalise the sector, the Department is part-funding the level 2 award in letting and managing residential property delivered by the Chartered Institute of Housing. The purpose of the course is to make private landlords more knowledgeable and better qualified and, in the process, to enhance the entire private rented sector of the industry. The funding for the course is over the next three years.

Prospective and current tenants are also helped. They can check whether a landlord is registered or whether the property that they are thinking of renting with the scheme is registered. That enables them to make a choice when considering renting in the private rented sector as to whether they want to live in an unregistered property.

My Department is carrying out an evaluation of the scheme that will help inform the forthcoming review of the role and regulation of the private rented sector.

I turn briefly to the other main change introduced as part of Building Sound Foundations: the tenancy deposit scheme. The scheme was introduced on 1 April 2013, and its purpose was to put in place arrangements that would

safeguard a tenant's deposit and provide a means to allow disputes between landlords and tenants on such deposits to be dealt with independently and speedily at no direct cost to either party. Previously, the only available option to a tenant in attempting to get a deposit back was to take a landlord to the small claims court.

It was clear that the establishment of a tenancy deposit scheme would provide specific support for more vulnerable individuals and families and would help to ensure that they are able to access private rented accommodation when necessary. The scheme provides an effective means of managing the deposit arrangements and of giving tenants and landlords real encouragement to behave properly and look after a property, as well as facilitating disputes when they arise without additional costs to either party. In the three years since the introduction of the scheme, up until 31 March this year, 10,305 landlords/agents have protected 65,658 deposits, amounting to almost £36.6 million.

The HMO Bill was passed in the Assembly earlier this year and received Royal Assent in May. The Bill recognises the higher risks of living in an HMO with a more robust regulatory system that introduces a mandatory licensing scheme that will ensure higher physical and management standards for houses in multiple occupation accommodation.

We need to have a balance across the broader private rented sector between the need to protect tenants and to encourage a vibrant and effective sector in Northern Ireland. That is at the heart of the current review of the role and regulation of the private rented sector. The aim of the review is to consider the current and potential future role of the sector and assess the effectiveness of current regulation, identifying where improvements can be made to help make the private rented sector a more attractive housing option.

In November 2015, the Department launched a discussion paper for consultation for the first stage of the review. The paper did not contain any firm proposals for change; rather it invited views from those living and working in the private rented sector. A total of 85 responses were received, and the Department conducted a further survey of tenants, which received over 1,000 responses. A number of themes have emerged from the consultation for further consideration and analysis. They include the need to look at the case for introducing a licensing scheme for all private landlords; protecting tenants from fees charged specifically by letting agents; addressing the inconsistencies in letting fees and the services provided to landlords and tenants by letting agents; considering whether letting agents need to be regulated, although this may be for the Department for the Economy to consider under consumer legislation; considering the need for an independent dispute resolution or advice service, including a mediation service; concerns around the current eviction process, in that it is costly, lengthy and not fit for purpose; the support available for vulnerable tenants living in the private rented sector; improving awareness among landlords and tenants of their roles and responsibilities; and the view expressed by landlords that grants for improvements would incentivise the sector and help upgrade the housing stock.

Some of the positives that came out of the private rented sector tenants' survey included the fact that 98% of tenants had a written tenancy agreement and over 80% had a

positive relationship with their landlord. The main issues that tenants commented on included the affordability of rents, the handling of repairs and the standard of some accommodation.

When the discussion paper was issued, the Department gave a commitment that it would issue a consultation document by the autumn of this year with clear proposals on the way forward. The Department will use a similar process to the discussion paper, engaging with representatives from the sector in the first instance to further discuss the findings of the discussion paper and gather evidence to make recommendations for change. Over the next number of years, I want to focus on improving the regulatory framework in a targeted way and maximise all opportunities to improve the quality of the private rented sector, making the private rented sector a more attractive housing option for a wider range of households.

I will now address specific points raised by some Members. Mr Stewart Dickson and Ms Gildernew asked about issues related to the fitness of properties. There are existing powers under the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 for councils to ensure that properties are fit. This is an area that we are examining as part of the review of the private rented sector as well as conducting a review of the current fitness standard.

Mr Maskey asked about the number of landlords not registered. I alluded to the point that, currently, on average 400 houses a month are being registered. The latest condition survey indicated that there were 125,000 private rented properties, so Members can do the maths. Currently, there are 101,000 registered properties, and we believe that there are 125,000, so there is an issue that needs to be addressed. Councils have powers to impose fixed penalties on non-compliant landlords, and there is specific information on that.

I undertake to correspond directly with Members on some of the other points that have been raised. I conclude by thanking the Members concerned for tabling the motion. It is an important issue that affects all of us, and we need to get the policy right going forward. I will undertake that review, and I will have concrete proposals in the autumn that we will put out for consultation and that, I believe, will have a positive impact in addressing a lot of the issues that Members have raised today.

Mr Speaker: This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next to speak will be Paula Bradshaw.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time.

Pork Farmers: West Tyrone

1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how her Department is supporting pork farmers in West Tyrone. (AQO 61/16-21)

Mr McCrossan: I, too, congratulate the Minister on her elevation to her new role.

Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am aware of the difficulties facing pig farmers right across Northern Ireland, including West Tyrone, as a result of depressed pork prices. Whilst the factors contributing to depressed prices are outside DAERA's control, my Department will continue to work to build the resilience, efficiency and competitiveness of the sector and to help farmers cope with future market volatility. To that end, my Department is working to facilitate access for our pig sector to key third country markets for pork exports, including China and Australia.

I am aware that many farm businesses are experiencing cash flow issues during this period of low returns. I have written to the local banks and financial institutions to arrange a number of meetings over the coming weeks to discuss what further measures the banks, together with my Department, can take to assist the industry during this difficult trading period. I also intend to meet the two main pork processing companies in the near future.

My Department is continuing to support the pig sector through the provision of education, training and research to improve efficiency and sustainability. We will continue to make the most of measures through the new rural development programme to help ensure that farmers are better equipped to meet the challenges ahead.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. Can she also outline what her Department has been doing to secure access to new trade markets and, in particular, update us on the discussions with Australia and China? Pork producers are really keen that the Chinese market be opened up.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, he is absolutely right that pork producers and processors are looking for access to those markets. Securing access to markets in the likes of Australia and China remains a top priority for my Department. It is hoped that securing access to new trade markets such as those in China and Australia would mean greater returns for the pig sector and would help to mitigate the effects on producers of future price fluctuations. Therefore, securing

approval to export may help to mitigate the impact of other market forces.

My Department awaits a response from China on the remedial actions our pork processors have taken following the inspection in April 2015. I spoke with the Chinese consul general to Northern Ireland, Madam Wang, quite recently. She has been incredibly helpful. I am waiting for a response via her offices. My Department also hosted Australian inspectors in April 2016, and we await their written report later this year.

As you would expect, my officials are also working closely with the industry to make it aware of the opportunities available to those markets already open for export.

Mr T Buchanan: I commend the Minister in her new role and wish her well in the future. Can she inform the House what Europe is doing, if anything, to help the hard-pressed pork sector here in Northern Ireland?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I suppose I will leave it up to him whether he believes it to be enough. The Commission's main tool for stabilising the pig-meat sector in times of crisis is the provision of private storage aid, which provides aid to processors to assist in the costs of storing pig meat that is surplus to demand. In response to the difficult market situation, the Commission offered a private storage aid scheme for pig meat in January this year, with local processors receiving approval to place 195 tons into storage under the scheme. Overall, the EU scheme removed over 90,000 tons of pork products from the market at a cost of nearly €28 million.

Whilst pig prices here are still around 12% below 2015 prices, at 106p per kilo, they have risen by 5p per kilo over the last couple of months. An improvement in prices has been seen across Europe, and I hope that it continues. The Commission has stated that it continues to monitor market conditions in the sector and has indicated that it will consider the possible introduction of a new private storage aid scheme for pig meat at an appropriate time.

In March 2016, the Commission set up a new export group called the meat market observatory as part of the package of support measures for the sector. The group is scheduled to meet for the first time on 15 July. The Commission has also set up an agricultural markets task force, which is looking at the functioning of agricultural markets and the farmers' position in the food supply chain. I am pleased that we have a local representative — Dr David Dobbin — on the task force.

Northern Ireland also receives European funding for the rural development programme 2014-2020, and there will be opportunities for the pig industry to avail itself of support through the new farm business improvement scheme (FBIS), which includes a package of measures to support sustainable growth in the farming sector. The FBIS business development groups and farm family key skills measures have already been launched, and, subject to necessary approvals, the FBIS capital scheme will be rolled out next.

Mr McAleer: Does the Minister have any plans to expand and develop the links that have been made in China as regards the pork industry?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. We are still waiting for a response from China in relation to remedial actions for the pork sector. Any opportunities that

there are and that may open up in future will be explored, and I will be very keen to work alongside DEFRA and others in relation to that.

Deciduous Woodland

2. Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how her Department plans to increase deciduous woodland locally. (AQO 62/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: As the Member is aware, it takes a considerable time to grow a forest. Forests now cover 8% of Northern Ireland, from almost nothing at the beginning of the last century, and the area of forest is slowly increasing.

The Department has two schemes. The first is delivered by Forest Service, which plans to reopen the forest expansion scheme in July 2016 and aims to plant woodlands of five hectares or more. The first tranche of the scheme received applications for over 330 hectares of new woodland. We issued offers for over 250 hectares and have received claims for 184 hectares, including 108 hectares of deciduous broadleaf woodland. The second scheme is managed by the Department to support the planting of smaller native broadleaf woodlands and will open as part of the environmental farming scheme.

While I was at the Armagh County Agricultural Show in the very beautiful Gosford Forest Park, I had the opportunity to speak to a very enthusiastic forestry consultant who specialises in indigenous trees and to hear of the schemes she has been delivering alongside local farmers. Northern Ireland's forests and woodlands are an important resource. I plan to visit a number of forests and sawmill businesses over the summer to understand how deciduous and conifer forests contribute to economic development, as well as improving our environment and providing places to visit.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Steven Agnew.

Mr Agnew: Thank you —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, my mistake. I call Jim Wells for a supplementary question. I will then call Steven Agnew.

Mr Wells: And I will go and rebuild my life. I welcome the Minister's answer. Does she feel that the range of policies that are in position in DAERA are sufficient to meet the need for increased deciduous woodland planting in Northern Ireland?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The rural development programme budget is sufficient to pay for 1,800 hectares of new planting, and I hope that landowners will respond positively to the new scheme, which allows for up to 100% of eligible costs. If demand increases above expectations, I will review the funding that is being made available for that.

I am aware that the rates of grant and funding available through forestry schemes are not the only factors that landowners take into account. However, this is a good opportunity for those thinking about diversifying away from farming to consider.

Mr Chambers: Would the Minister support a target for increasing woodland cover being included in the Programme for Government, as was the case previously but which was noticeably absent from the last one?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The 2006 forest strategy identified a long-term aim to increase woodland cover to 12% of the land area by 2050. That was to provide people in Northern Ireland with access to the same level of forestry benefits as elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The forestry chapter in the rural development programme aims to create a further 1,800 hectares of woodland by 2020, as I outlined. That will make a small but positive contribution towards our aim of 12% woodland cover. Obviously, we will look at that as we move forward and as the Programme for Government is consulted on.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister provide an update on the proposed transfer of Cairn Wood to Forest Service? Is she today in a position to guarantee that public access will be retained?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. As he is aware, Forest Service currently manages the trees at Ballysallagh Forest, most of which are on land owned by Northern Ireland Water, and access to water and land around the reservoir currently remains a matter for Northern Ireland Water. In the last mandate when I was the Regional Development Minister, the Member and I spoke on several occasions about the sale of the site. Indeed, I know that he is keen to retain public access to the site, and that was key to those discussions. My colleague Gordon Dunne was particularly helpful following discussions that he had with Forest Service in opening up further discussions with it.

At this stage, Forest Service is considering a positive business case for the transfer of land to my Department's ownership, but there are still some key issues to be resolved. Forest Service is clearly the best organisation to manage the trees, but it needs Ards and North Down Borough Council, or a partner of equivalent standing, to take responsibility for managing public access, which was of primary concern at the time of the proposed sale and, indeed, was reinforced by councillors and MLAs at that time. I am aware that Forest Service has written to the council, and the council is looking at that at the moment.

Mr Lyttle: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment as well, and I thank her for the update on Cairn Wood. Is she willing to meet me about the developments on that particular issue?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I have met him before, and I am willing to meet any Member on any issue relating to anything in my Department, so, of course, that is not a problem.

DARD HQ: Ballykelly

3. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the business continuity risks involved in the relocation of her departmental headquarters to Ballykelly. (AQO 63/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: Executive agreement to proceed with the relocation to Ballykelly is already in place, and the contract for construction has been awarded to J H Turkington and Sons. As I progress with the plans however, I am acutely aware of the importance of business continuity and the need to have plans in place that take account of retaining crucial skills and corporate knowledge. That is particularly so given the potential scale of staff turnover both in and out of my Department over the coming years. I am currently

considering a detailed staffing plan that sets out which posts will relocate to Ballykelly and when they will relocate. To ensure any risk to business continuity is effectively managed, my intention is to phase the transition of posts so that the skills and corporate knowledge needed can be preserved. That approach will mainly see corporate service support posts move first by December 2017. The skills required for those posts are of a generalist nature and are available throughout the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

A balance certainly needs to be found between relocating posts from Belfast to Ballykelly alongside retaining key skills and corporate knowledge. In taking the move to Ballykelly forward, I want to reflect further on the plans at this stage to see what best suits the long-term needs of my Department, whilst ensuring that the new site at Ballykelly is a success and provides opportunities for people who live in the north-west of Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

Dr Farry: I welcome the Minister to her new post. She will be aware that her permanent secretary said to the relevant Committee that it could take until 2029 — yes, you heard me right — for this move to be completed. Bearing in mind that it will cost the public sector money, what assessment is the Minister making of the risk to business continuity and the service that her Department provides to a whole range of stakeholders? Is she prepared to give the House a guarantee that there will not be any impact from this costly move?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question and note his concerns. I have said that there are risks associated with it, particularly around the loss of skills and corporate knowledge, and I am very keen to ensure that that is not to the detriment of my Department. I am considering various options around the transition, and I note that there may be opportunities to broaden the remit of Ballykelly, but I maybe need to have those discussions with Executive colleagues and see whether there are any plans to broaden this out to the wider Civil Service to give further opportunities for those living in the north-west to work in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Mr Swann: I welcome the Minister to her new post. Minister, some of your party members have been mischievous about our party's stance on Ballykelly, and it has been purely on the financial side rather than disingenuous to our reflection in the north-west. Can the Minister explain why her Department did not look at the DVA offices in Coleraine as a viable alternative?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. At this stage, I am not aware whether that was discounted or not or at what stage, but I am happy to look at that. As we stand at the moment, we are moving forward with the construction of that site and are looking to make best use of it.

Mr Robinson: Coming from the constituency of East Londonderry, I obviously welcome the development at Ballykelly. Can the Minister remind the House of the benefits of the scheme?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The relocation of a Civil Service departmental headquarters was one of the recommendations in the independent review of policy on location of public-sector jobs. The proposed relocation will stimulate the local economy through increased local spending; provision of high-quality

and high-value public-sector jobs; and potentially jobs associated with the construction and ongoing servicing of a new building. The relocation will also help to share wealth across the economy and contribute to better-balanced economic growth by commencing to address disparities in the distribution of public-sector jobs in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lynch: The Minister talked about the scale of the transition. Does she have any confirmed timetable?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. The building design construction consultant was appointed in January 2016, planning approval was in February 2016 and we appointed the contractor in March 2016. Construction will start in September this year, and the handover of the building will be in 2017. It is hoped that the first people to use that building will do so in January 2018.

Mr Mullan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Can she provide details on the number of people in her Department who have taken up voluntary exit rather than relocate to Ballykelly, and detail what amount of money that might cost?

Miss McIlveen: At this point, I can only give the Member a very general overview of that, but the relocation will see approximately 600 posts move, which represents about 20% of the total departmental staffing of 3,000. An HR strategy is in place which will provide the overall direction for the people element of relocation and details the detailed work completed so far. As far as possible, no one will be forced to move to Ballykelly. If it is being inferred that people perhaps took voluntary exit because they did not wish to move, I will say that it has been made quite clear throughout the process that no one will be forced to move.

I have had conversations with a number of people in and around that.

While the majority of the current headquarters staff do not wish to relocate, expressions of interest have been gained via surveys across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Those show that there is significant interest in taking up posts in Ballykelly.

Bovine TB: Food Production

4. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for her assessment of the impact of bovine tuberculosis on food production. (AQO 64/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: As you are aware, bovine TB is a complex disease and the costliest animal health problem in Northern Ireland. Total programme costs amount to some £27 million to taxpayers and £10 million of compliance costs to farmers. The programme receives around £4 million of funding from the EU each year.

Cattle herds are tested at least annually, and animals that respond positively to the skin test are removed to slaughter, with compensation paid at full market value. In 2015, DARD slaughtered 12,130 animals as a result of TB. That included reactors, negative in contacts and interferon gamma positive-only cattle. I should stress that, at any time, even at current disease levels, around 93% of herds are free from the restrictions associated with TB and open for trading purposes.

I am aware that food production is impacted when a herd has a TB breakdown. Associated losses include the

consequential loss of milk and beef production etc when animals are slaughtered prematurely as reactors before the optimum time. In addition, there can be temporary production losses: for example, a drop in milk yield or weight gain as a result of increased testing in a breakdown herd. While that impacts on individual farmers, I stress that the overall programme protects our ability to trade. The value of milk production is some £480 million annually, and the value of the beef sector is around £394 million annually.

It is our aim to eradicate TB from Northern Ireland, but that will be a long-term strategy and industry support will be essential

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for her response and wish her well in her role. TB will be one of the biggest challenges moving forward, and there has been no significant improvement over the last 30 years. Minister, you have the TB partnership working group, and I assume that it will look at the full extent of TB and, therefore, that our efforts will not be restricted to the bovine population but extend to the wildlife population in seeking to identify a means of better dealing with TB and driving those figures down towards what they are in the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, Scotland.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his questions. As he said, an industry-led strategic partnership group was established in 2014 to develop a comprehensive and practical long-term TB eradication strategy and implementation action plan to progressively reduce TB levels in cattle here and, ultimately, eradicate the disease from the cattle population in Northern Ireland. The group comprises a chair, four independent members and two DARD ex officio members. The aim is to reduce TB disease levels and costs by the greatest degree in the shortest time using the least resource.

The group is reviewing evidence in preparation for the production of its TB eradication strategy and subsequent implementation action plan. Although the group was tasked to provide a TB strategy and plan to us by December 2015, the work has proved more complex than originally envisaged. In addition, it wishes to obtain an independent socio-economic analysis of its emerging recommendations before finalising the strategy.

I am disappointed that the work will not be concluded more quickly. It is important that the group has considered all the issues to ensure that a robust and well-considered strategy is produced. I can give a commitment to Members that the issue will be prioritised by me to try to reduce disease levels in the cattle and wildlife population.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister tell us how many incidents of bovine TB there have been this year, how that compares to previous years and whether there has been an increase or decrease?

Miss McIlveen: I do not have the exact figures but, in 2015, 12,130 animals were slaughtered as a result of TB. I can get the exact figures for the Member and provide those to her.

Mr McGlone: According to the media reports yesterday, there are limited amounts of available vaccine to eradicate or limit TB. Has the Minister made further inquiries about the amounts available and has the Department ruled out the possibility of a cull of badgers to deal with the prevalence of TB?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware that there is a global shortage of human and badger BCG vaccine. This has affected supplies in 2016. You will be aware that we use this through the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) programme in the Banbridge area. I can confirm that, in 2015, DAERA had sufficient badger BCG vaccine for the second year of the TVR projects. In the first and second years of the research, we used the Danish strain of BCG vaccine to vaccinate caught badgers. The current supply of that is unable to fulfill any order for the vaccine in 2016 and there has been an indication that stocks are low. The Welsh Government and DEFRA have suspended their vaccination programmes. However, we have been able to source a limited supply of expired badger BCG Danish vaccine from the Welsh Government for use in our TVR project for 2016. This will provide us with continuity for the research as it progresses into the third year. My officials are in the process of organising a stakeholder event with farmers in the TVR area to update them on the development.

I have not had a conversation with my officials about a cull.

Mrs Barton: We have had a disastrous approach to tackling TB from previous Ministers. Today, will you state exactly how you intend to improve on that. You talked about a vaccine. Is there anything else?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief in her response because we are nearing the time for topicals.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. As I have stated, the TB strategic partnership group will be coming back to me in the autumn with recommendations that we hope to look at and move forward on. The TVR programme is ongoing. At the end of this, in addressing this problem, I want to have healthy cattle and badgers and a healthy ecosystem.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time and declare my interest as part-owner of a small herd of cattle and land on which a badger sett stands. What lessons have she and her officials learned from the failure of the cull in England, where, according to Owen Paterson, the badgers moved the goalposts.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister give a very brief response?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. As he will have heard in my response to the previous Member, I have not had a discussion with officials about a cull. At the moment, the focus has been on the recommendations that are likely to come forward from the group and the TVR project.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Dump: Mobuoy Road, Campsie

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after wishing her well in her new role and acknowledging that she will face some difficult issues, to provide an update on how one such issue that is close to his heart and his home, the illegal "super dump" at Mobuoy Road in Campsie, is being dealt with now. (AQT 41/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. He has been very close to this because of where he lives and through his previous role. Of most concern is the protection of the River Faughan, which forms the western boundary of the site and is designated as an area of special scientific interest and a special area of conservation.

2.30 pm

The key priorities for the Department are to protect the water quality and the public water supply in the river and to ensure that any site clean-up provides value for money. The size and complexity of the Mobuoy waste site means that its remediation will not be a quick fix. Three feasible remediation options have been shortlisted, namely excavation and disposal, containment and on-site treatment, with preliminary costs ranging from £20 million to £140 million. Work is ongoing to detail the options further, and I expect a full report of the remediation options for my consideration in December 2016. In the meantime, I have tasked my officials to ensure short-term measures are in place to protect the environment and human health.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has been successful in securing £400,000 to launch phase 1 of a small business research initiative (SBRI) competition, in partnership with Innovate UK, to stimulate the development of innovative remediation treatments for waste illegally deposited at Mobuoy Road and mitigation of its impact on the surrounding environment. The project has received £400,000 from the Northern Ireland Executive's pilot SBRI challenge fund. The outcomes of the competition will further inform the remediation strategy for the Mobuoy site.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that update. I commend the work of those NIEA officials who have been left literally to clean up a mess made by criminals but made easy by the actions or inactions of Departments in the past. Could the Minister give me an assurance that she will seek to find the funding necessary for a public inquiry into the situation at Mobuoy either from her departmental budget or with the help of her Executive colleagues?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware of the Mills report and the number of recommendations that were made in relation to that. Work has been ongoing to address the recommendations of that report. The activity is subject to ongoing criminal proceedings. The previous Executive did consider suggestions for a public inquiry, but, due to those ongoing actions highlighted, the undefined resource implications did not conclude agreement on a public inquiry before the end of the last mandate. As far as I understand, those reasons still stand. I would need to see the outworkings of the criminal proceedings before we would make any decision.

EU Referendum: Rural Community

T2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether she has a view on the EU referendum debate and to state how the rural community should vote on Thursday. (AQT 42/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. Unlike some other parties, the Democratic Unionist Party has a clear line with regards to this week's referendum. We are Eurosceptic and believe that Northern Ireland is better

off out of Europe. Over the last four weekends, I have been to rural shows throughout Northern Ireland. I have been to shows in Ballymena, Ballymoney, Armagh and, most recently, Saintfield. It is clear from the majority of our farmers and, in particular, our fishermen that they are tired of the red tape and bureaucracy that is coming from Europe. They are tired of having to jump hurdles to get a diminishing amount of funding. Europe is doing little to help to support many of the hard-pressed sectors to survive the current downturn.

I am confident that Northern Ireland farming will survive outside Europe. The “Remain” and “Leave” camps have accepted that there will be support available to UK farmers outside of Europe. I am confident that there will be the free movement of goods between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and that other countries from outside the EU will look to take the high-quality produce coming from our farms, our seas and our processors.

I do accept that there are many unanswered questions if we leave the EU, but there are as many, if not more, unanswered questions if we remain. Nobody knows how much funding will come into Northern Ireland after 2019 or what rules will be connected to that funding. There is only one guarantee I can give the House this afternoon: as the new Minister, regardless of whether we are in or out of Europe, I will guarantee that I will defend the interests of Northern Ireland, whether in Brussels or in London. I will work to ensure that Northern Ireland farmers and fishermen can survive and grow after this week's referendum.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. Can she give the House a reassurance that farmers will still receive their single farm payment this year, irrespective of what way the vote goes on Thursday?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I have picked up some concerns that, if the UK votes to leave, farmers may not receive their single farm payment this autumn. This, I have no doubt, is part of the confusion and some of the misinformation that has been associated with the referendum campaign. If the UK votes to leave Europe this week, we will enter a period of negotiations between the EU and the UK that will take at least two years. That will decide how the UK leaves and over what period. As I said, I am confident that farmers will continue to receive support regardless of the outcome of the referendum debate.

Oil Spill: Port of Larne

T3. **Ms Seeley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after wishing her all the best in her new role, for an update on her Department's actions following the oil spill on the east Antrim coast, caused by a business in Larne, on Saturday 11 June. (AQT 43/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: NIEA was notified by the Larne assistant harbour master of a heavy sheen of oil in the water at the Port of Larne at 8.55 am on Saturday 11 June. He also stated that a pungent smell had been noted very late on the Friday night and that the fire brigade had been called out but that nothing had been seen on the water. On receipt of the report, NIEA staff were tasked to the area to investigate. Caterpillar NI Ltd contacted the water pollution hotline at 11.43 am on Saturday 11 June to report

that storage tanks within its factory located on the Old Glenarm Road had overflowed and that red diesel had made its way into the site's surface water drainage system. Surface water drainage from the site is discharged into the Irish Sea through a sea outfall. Caterpillar was unable to confirm at that time the quantity of fuel that had been lost or when the discharge happened. Subsequently, Caterpillar NI released a press statement saying it had lost 40,000 litres of red diesel on Saturday 11 June and it regretted the mistake and was working to address the consequences. The company also stated that it had employed environmental contractors. My Department lifted statutory samples that weekend, and, over the next few days, a representative of the company will be interviewed under caution with a view to prosecution.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister for her response. What measures does she intend to take to prevent incidents of this sort reoccurring?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. Obviously, this is something that my Department is very keen to ensure does not happen again. We will work alongside companies and the agriculture sector to educate and inform them, but, at the same time, I think we need to set an example and ensure that those who pollute our waterways are prosecuted.

Brexit: Payment of Farm Subsidies

T4. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on what basis she can give the commitment, as referenced in today's 'News Letter', that, in the event of Brexit, farm subsidies will be paid by the UK Treasury. (AQT 44/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. Of course, we have no guarantees that we will get the same amount of subsidy from the EU post-2019. The direction of travel, as she will be aware, is towards a flat payment across Europe, which would disadvantage Northern Ireland farmers in comparison with those in eastern Europe. Of course, where we are, there are no guarantees being inside or outside Europe, but we can be sure, from remarks made by the Prime Minister, that UK farmers will be looked after.

Ms Bradshaw: Does the Minister recognise that the UK Government do not place the same priority on supporting rural communities and farms as we do here in Northern Ireland? I ask you this: how can you be confident that they would get the same level of support from the UK Government, who have different priorities?

Miss McIlveen: Over the last number of years, there has been an over-reliance on European moneys coming through. I think that we will all have to re-prioritise, and I certainly do not think that we can ignore the fact that one in four of our businesses is employed in agriculture, forestry or fishing. It is for all of us to make sure that we make the best case for our farmers when we are negotiating with the Treasury.

Challenge Fund

T5. **Mrs S Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for her assessment of the challenge fund. (AQT 45/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: The challenge fund has been a very positive initiative. It was brought forward as a result of the carrier-bag levy revenue, which is over £4.6 million. From 2011, almost 600 environmental projects have been completed across Northern Ireland, and the fund has enabled schools, communities and all at grass-roots level to become engaged in enhancing a shared environment through the delivery of local environmental projects. The projects are a diverse range and include helping wildlife, creating green space, providing learning experiences and cleaning up the local environment. It has been a very positive fund.

Mrs S Bradley: Given the Minister's positive response, is it her intention to commit to funding the challenge fund for years ahead?

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for her question. As she is aware, the former Department of the Environment did not launch a 2016-17 fund prior to the formation of my Department. However, I have noted the success of it and intend to review the estimated 2016-17 carrier-bag levy income against existing commitments. It is something that I will look positively on, although I cannot guarantee anything at this stage.

Coupled Payments/Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

T6. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after congratulating her and wishing her well in her new role, whether she intends to implement the recommendations of the consultation carried out by the former Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which were to top-slice the basic payment scheme to fund either coupled payments or areas of natural constraint. (AQT 46/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his question. I have listened carefully to the views of farming stakeholders. There was little support from them to use funding from pillar 1 to operate a future areas of natural constraint (ANCs) scheme, either by top-slicing or by transferring moneys to pillar 2. I do not believe there are any convincing arguments to introduce coupled support schemes in Northern Ireland during the current CAP period. Therefore, I do not intend to top-slice the basic payment scheme to fund either coupled payments or an areas of natural constraint scheme under pillar 1 of the CAP. Furthermore, I do not intend to introduce a pillar 1 to pillar 2 transfer to fund an areas of natural constraint scheme in pillar 2 under the rural development programme.

On support for ANCs, the options are not new moneys but would operate by redistributing pillar 1 moneys from the disadvantaged area and lowland to the severely disadvantaged area, reinforcing the existing redistribution in that direction, arising from the move to a flat-rate payment scheme.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. It will be welcome news to many farmers that there will be no further additional cuts to the basic payments in order to fund other schemes. Has she ruled out any future support payments to farmers in the severely disadvantaged area?

Miss McIlveen: I recognise that support payments, including pillar 1 support, are important sources of income

on farms in the severely disadvantaged area. I am still considering options, but, given the pressures on the budget of my Department and the Executive's Budget, providing any additional support will be challenging. I cannot ignore long-term value for money nor indeed the redistribution of pillar 1 moneys, which is occurring as a result of the transition to flat-rate support in pillar 1.

LEADER Programme: Update

T7. **Mr Logan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the LEADER programme and how it will benefit rural businesses. (AQT 47/16-21)

Miss McIlveen: LEADER is delivered by the local action groups (LAGs) through the rural business investment scheme. It can support rural microbusinesses and small businesses with capital grants to start up new businesses or expand existing ones. The key driver is to create new jobs and help expand the rural economy. Applicants must attend a funding workshop in their area, at which the application process will be explained to them. They can then submit an expression of interest to their LAG. If deemed eligible, they will be invited to submit an application for grants at the appropriate time.

2.45 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry that there will not be time for a supplementary.

Finance

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Fáilte romhat a Aire, go dtí do chéad Tráth na gCeist. I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time.

Corporation Tax

1. **Mr Smith** asked the Minister of Finance when the Executive will decide whether the reduction of corporation tax is affordable. (AQO 75/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-Leas Cheann Comhairle agus a Philip. Philip, you and I had this dance on my card previously, but it always a good sign when someone comes back for another dance late in proceedings. No doubt we will continue this discussion around corporation tax into the future.

I am absolutely confident that a corporation tax rate of 12.5% from April 2018 is affordable, and I am pleased that we are making good progress towards that goal. My Department has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Treasury and HMRC to put the administrative preparations in place. I have written to the British Chancellor, Mr Osborne, seeking to increase the pace of discussions on the deduction to the block grant. I intend to get the best deal possible for all the people we represent, no matter where they come from, and to minimise the cost to the block grant. Over the summer, the Executive will prepare a multi-year Budget with resource DEL plans to 2019-2020. It is planned to present a draft Budget to the Assembly in the autumn, which will reflect estimated costs for a corporation tax rate of 12.5% from April 2018.

Having combed over this issue in the last week, a couple of things are clear to me. One is that the vast majority in the House is resolved to deliver on corporation tax. A date and rate has been set. The vast majority is confident and has faith in my ability to lead our top negotiation team with the Chancellor to make sure that we do not come short on the deal that the reduction to the block grant is as small as we can make it. I hope and trust that I have the good wishes and goodwill of every Member of the House in that onerous task.

Mr Smith: I thank the Minister for his answer. No doubt we will dance on this issue again. The Minister has previously said that the corporation tax reduction cannot be confirmed until the secondary benefits have been negotiated with the Treasury. Was this crucial detail not confirmed in the so-called Fresh Start Agreement because the wool was pulled over the Executive's eyes or because the Executive genuinely dropped the ball?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I hark back to Trevor Lunn: do not despair. I say this to the Opposition: have faith. I am confident that we will stay absolutely resolute in faith with the Fresh Start Agreement and the Stormont House Agreement. I am confident that we will deliver to the House and our people a deal on corporation tax that is fair and proportionate. I am also confident that, when we enter negotiations, those will be tough. When you see the agenda being led by Mr Osborne and his colleagues, you know that they are ruthless when it comes to matters monetary and will fight to get the best deal for London. However, I can assure you that I will fight to get the best deal for Ballymena, Ballymurphy, Fermanagh and Derry.

In your original question, you asked when we would decide that the deal has been cut. We play our cards close to our chest, but I am highly confident that we will get a deal that I will be proud and pleased to bring to the House.

Ms Hanna: Sorry for cutting in on this dance. It is worrying that, every time we have gone into these negotiations, we have come out with something a little bit weaker. Does the Minister agree that having a well-trained and well-skilled workforce is essential to capitalise on the benefits of low corporation tax? Does he agree that, to achieve this, reinstating investment in higher education should be a priority?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Gabhaimse buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a ceist. I thank the Member for her question. I agree with her that what we are trying to do is deliver high-value jobs. High-value jobs require a skilled workforce. My discussions with both vice chancellors have been very active over recent weeks. We are all on the same page that corporation tax cannot succeed alone. We need to deliver the infrastructure. You know the resources that we have put into infrastructure and our commitment in capital budgets, but we also need to sort out skills and education.

In the monitoring round, I made a good start to that. I showed our resolve and determination, but we need to make sure that the jobs that we bring in are life-changing jobs, sustainable jobs, best-in-class jobs. For that to happen, we need to get behind the two main universities — there are more than two universities, of course — which want to deliver those top-class graduates.

Mr McKay: The Minister will not need reminding that the Treasury often operates as a law unto itself, so I

welcome his commitment to fight ferociously for the best deal possible — a fair deal for our Assembly. Can he not only outline the negotiation up until we get the 12.5% but remind the House what we will have once we secure a fair deal on corporation tax?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I am aware that the Member's constituency has been dealt more hammer blows with the closure of major manufacturers in recent years in a planned closure, so I know that his interest in corporation tax is fuelled by only one issue, and it is the only reason we want to reduce the rate of corporation tax: to create thousands of jobs. While the figures are there — over 30,000 new jobs by 2030 — we should reduce it to the individual. Last Friday, I met a young man called Thomas at the bottom of the Shankill who was seeking work. This morning, I met young graduates who were starting work at PwC down at the Waterfront. For every young person to whom we can offer a job — a well-paid, sustainable job — rather than offering them what was the emigrant boat and is now the aeroplane to Canada or Australia, I say to the Member that, yes, we think it will increase output by at least 8.5%. Yes, we think it will be a dramatic step change, but we should reduce it to the individual — every person to whom we will be able to give the dignity of employment because we have reduced corporation tax.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I welcome the clarity given by the Minister on the certainty around corporation tax. Northern Ireland certainly needs a game-changer, and I think that this is a real opportunity to change the game for the better for so many of our young people. That certainty was hard fought for and hard won, but does the Minister agree that, when negotiations on the secondary effects continue, it is important that the rest of the Executive is out selling the prospect to businesses to come to Northern Ireland, to ensure that it becomes the game-changer that it has the potential to be?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: One thing that the Member touches on is that this is not a spectator sport; there is a role for every politician, business leader and community leader to show the proposition that we offer to investors and indigenous companies who want to invest further. As we move forward and bring our best game to the negotiations with Treasury, I am confident that the points that you make about the bright future that we envisage for all our people are put front and centre. The Treasury has to understand that a prosperous society here will mean that we do not have to go back to Treasury and ask it to support the many projects that we wish to fund from our corporation tax resources in the time ahead. I am confident that, while there will be a reduction in the block grant at the start, we will attract more companies and investment here over a number of years, and the take from corporation tax will rise from the base that it will be at when it is first reduced.

Mr Allister: Last week, the Minister's officials told the Finance Committee that the latest calculations showed that, in the first year, the reduction to the block grant could be £270 million: is that affordable?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: That is actually the Treasury calculation. We are now going into negotiations with our colleagues in Treasury, and we will decide what is affordable for our people and what is fair and proportionate. I am not going to negotiate in this room, but everyone, including the Treasury, knows that I will seek the very best deal. Officials have, of course, presented the modelling done

by Treasury, but I would like the support of everyone here in challenging everything that the Treasury brings to the table. Let us challenge it robustly, because the alternative is to sit on our hands and say that we cannot do better and we might as well go home. That is not my intention in the assertive and positive negotiations that we will have with Treasury in the time ahead.

Fiscal Powers

2. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to expand the Executive's fiscal powers. (AQO 76/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabhail leis an Chomhalta as an cheist a chuir sé. My starting point is that I believe that Members of the Assembly are best placed to make decisions in the interest of the people who elect us. It is no secret that I have said that I would like this Government to have more fiscal levers under our control.

The transfer of corporation tax powers, which we have just discussed, sets an important precedent, and I hope that it will spur us on to taking greater control of our destiny. I hark back to that. Everything that we do — *[Interruption.]* Dia leat. Bless you. Everything that we do to try to take further powers is done because I believe in Members of the House. I believe in their genius, their ability and their talent to make the right decisions for the electorate when they control these fiscal levers. Any day of the week, I would rather put my faith in the Members of this House than in the Treasury.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: How does the Minister's desire to achieve additional fiscal powers correspond with his party's decision last year to hand our welfare powers back to Westminster?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: My apologies: I should have called Ian Milne for a supplementary. Will you hold that question? I call Ian Milne for a supplementary.

Mr Milne: Fadhb ar bith, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a dhéanamh leis an Aire as na freagraí sin go dtí seo, agus ba mhaith liom mo chomhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis as a phost nua.

I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Also, congratulations on your new job; I wish you well for the future. No doubt, the Minister will be aware of the current VAT rate of 20%, which is holding back our tourism potential. As a Mid Ulster MLA, I am aware of our tourism potential, with the Seamus Heaney centre, for example, in Bellaghy and lots of other local attractions. What is the Minister's view of the impact of the VAT on our hospitality and tourism sectors?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh as an cheist a chur. I admire the Member for standing up for his rights and making sure that he got his supplementary in, despite the ruling of the Chair.

Ba mhaith liom cuireadh a fháil cuairt a thabhairt ar Dhoire theas. Ar ndóigh is fada an bhaint atá agam leis an cheantar sin. I look forward to visiting the Member's constituency. As he knows, I have very strong south Derry roots, and I look forward in particular to visiting the Seamus Heaney centre.

The VAT rate of 20% is a tax on tourism and a burden on hospitality. If you want to see how to do it right, you can see what they did down south, where they reduced the hospitality rate to 9%. Tourism has created more jobs south of the border in the last four years than any other sector. Unfortunately, European rules — I hope that they are still there on Friday — do not allow a state to have a different rate of VAT within a region. That said, it is my intention that we should control all these levers. There is no greater example of flexibility than that applied by the sovereign Government in Dublin to secure the recovery of tourism.

I have no doubt that the Seamus Heaney centre will be a huge success, and I wish the hospitality sector in south Derry every success. If there is anything I can do to help that, you can be assured of my support.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I now call Robbie Butler and thank him for his patience.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. Now that the Minister has had time to prepare his answer, I will have to think of a different question. No, I will stick with the first one, if the Minister does not mind. How does his desire to achieve additional fiscal powers correspond with his party's decision last year to hand our welfare powers back to Westminster?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Thank you for not changing the question. I am not sure whether I should pull my punches — maybe I will not — given that the Ulster Unionist Party joined forces with the Conservatives at the 2010 election that ushered in this awful era of austerity. "Austerity" is just a bland word for hardships for ordinary people. As the bishops of England said, it places the heaviest burdens on those with the narrowest shoulders.

The Ulster Unionist Party should be very wary of getting into that particular scrap.

3.00 pm

Whatever tactics were used by the House to ensure that we protected the most vulnerable, I endorse them. We have managed to put in place the most generous mitigation package in these islands for those on welfare benefits, for the disabled and for those who would have been faced with the bedroom tax. You can be sure that, when it comes to dealing with the Treasury, it knows that, when it faces this Government, it faces a strong adversary.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. On fiscal powers, I appreciate that VAT came about because we entered the EEC back in the 1970s. Mention was made of a reduction in our VAT level. Another tax that was brought in was air passenger duty (APD), which was really brought about only to deal with a green tax on our airlines. If we exit Europe, will you support the doing-away with VAT and APD?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabhail leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his mischievous question. As Minister, I am not allowed to speak on Brexit, so I will not. However, as an individual, I have told you where I would like to be and what I hope to wake up to on Friday morning.

If you really believe — I suspect that you do not — that the Tories introduced air passenger duty to protect the environment, you came up the Lagan in a bubble. The Greens were in favour of air passenger duty, because they

did want to stop the damage to the environment from the burning of petrol, and so on. Whatever they think, it is clear that the Tories introduced a tax that is OK for London — it has not taken anything from Heathrow's advance — but that is clearly an imposition on us. Air passenger duty is one of the taxes that we would look quite differently at if we could control it, but, of course, to all these things there is a cost.

Irish Government Engagement

3. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Finance what engagement he has had with the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in the Irish Government. (AQO 77/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Buíochas arís leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I recently met Eoghan Murphy TD, the Minister of State for Financial Services, eGovernment and Public Procurement, and I have arranged to meet Minister Michael Noonan this Wednesday in Dublin. I have also been in correspondence with Paschal Donohoe, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and I anticipate meeting him in the near future.

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Thank you, Minister, for your answers. What is on the agenda for your meetings with the Minister? I assume that you will meet him after the Brexit vote, which may or may not change the agenda for the meeting. There are certainly major issues of common concern and opportunity between the two jurisdictions. Will you outline what your agenda will be?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: You are tempting me to speak about Brexit. I am going to resist that. I am meeting the Minister on Wednesday morning. He will ask me how it is going, and I will tell him that it is going well. We will confine ourselves to that.

I was trying to think desperately of something in your constituency, Mr O'Dowd, that is on the agenda, but you can be sure that the Narrow Water bridge will be on the agenda, as will the pledge to fund the A5. I stand to be corrected, but I think that it was €400 million originally. We have reduced considerably from that. I think that we are down to €75 million maximum from the Irish Government. The Ulster canal is certainly a project on the agenda, as is Waterways Ireland and the cross-border bodies. The real issue is not one of asking Minister Noonan what he can do for us but what we can do together to improve the lives of all the people whom we represent. It is about cross-border cooperation between Finance Ministers. Broader than that, in concert with ministerial colleagues, it is about how we can work together for the common good. As part of that, in speaking with Minister Noonan shortly after my election, I said that I am a big advocate of the Belfast to Dublin economic corridor. That passes through Newry, which is not in your constituency either.

It is a getting-to-know-you meeting. I hope to work very closely with Minister Noonan, Minister Donohoe and Minister of State Murphy in the time ahead.

Mrs S Bradley: I certainly welcome the Minister's answers, thus far, particularly his reference to the Narrow Water bridge, which I am delighted to hear about. Will the Minister elaborate on that? Given that such a commitment has been expressed in the House and with the Southern Government, are we at a level of discussions at which we can start to debate timelines etc?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for her question. I have been in Newry, and I was at the Narrow Water bridge site last Friday, with the Principal Deputy Speaker. Before I answer the question, I will say that I think there is great potential in Newry, reaching down as far as Rostrevor, and it seems to me that it is untapped potential. It also seems that the example and exemplary progress of First Derivatives, under Brian Conlon's leadership, shows us what can be achieved in that part of the world. Take it, first, that I am an ally for any attempts in that constituency to improve people's lives and build prosperity.

In terms of the Narrow Water bridge, the Member may be aware that a report will go to the North/South Ministerial Council in July — I think it is 7 July, but I am not sure if we have nailed down a date yet. That report will reflect back on the Fresh Start Agreement, which references the Narrow Water bridge, and it will talk about the great potential that it has to boost tourism and to be a cross-border, cross-community link that will transform the way that tourists and visitors will view that part of the world, as well as being an enormous asset for local people.

I hope that when we get that report, we can get the pledges of support that were there previously. I am sure it was distressing for the Member, as it was for all of us, that that fell. In my view, that project should have gone ahead. European money was there, local council money was there and both Governments were on board. I think it is a matter of great regret that it fell, but if I can do anything to resuscitate — that may be the word — the project, the Member can be sure that I will do so. I was heartened by the visit on Friday. Gerry Adams was there as well, as was the cross-border committee. It seems to me that people have been waiting for a long time, and to deliver the bridge would be a great peace dividend for that area.

Equal Pay

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on how he plans to address the issue of equal pay for PSNI, Department of Justice and Northern Ireland Office personnel. (AQO 78/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have been briefed by my officials on this issue, and I am aware of the difficulties involved in attempting to resolve the problem. It is a longstanding issue, as the Member knows, because there was correspondence from you on it a considerable time ago, and it is an issue that will require due consideration.

Resolution of the issue will be difficult, as it has been established in court that NIO and PSNI staff have no legal entitlement to the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement. It would require significant funding, and, given the already challenging departmental budgets, it is unclear where the money would come from. Any resolution would undoubtedly have to take account of the repercussive risk that other groups will demand similar treatment, as well as the serious risk of undermining the original equal pay settlement, both of which would, of course, require even more funding. I know that it is an issue that the Member has worked very hard on, but I do not think that I can bring him a positive answer today for the reasons that I have outlined.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his response, so far. The Minister will be well aware of the people concerned and their concerns that they appear to have been

overlooked and, in fact, forgotten by the Assembly. You mentioned in your response a figure. Can you tell me what the figure may be?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have much sympathy with those who are affected. You are right: they had no part in ending up in the situation that they ended up in. While I do not want to go for one figure, I have to say that if we go down this avenue, there is no saying where it will end, because the original Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement may unravel, and there may be other groups who say they were also left out. So, it becomes a particularly fractious and difficult issue. I will resist putting a figure on it, but if you contact me after this, I am willing to ask officials to discuss the issues with you.

Let me say what Minister Sammy Wilson said in response to you in 2013. I know that Mr Wilson is here today, and he will be delighted that I am quoting him. He said:

"The arguments put forward by those lobbying on this issue do not change the fact that the position in terms of eligibility has been clear from the outset of the equal pay settlement and this has now been upheld in the County Court, which found that the settlement applied only to periods of service in the 11 NICS departments and did not apply to bodies such as the NIO and PANI/PSNI, who had lawfully received delegation for pay matters, which was still in effect during the relevant time period. No legal liability has been established upon which to base any rationale to approve payment of the settlement to PSNI staff." [Official Report, Bound Volume 85, pWA148].

I am sorry I cannot be more positive today on the issue for the Member.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his responses thus far. I also welcome him to his first Question Time. Given, Minister, that you are only a short time in your post, have you had or do you intend to have any discussions with personnel on this matter, given that these are serious concerns about equal pay?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have not made it to Strabane yet. I did sneak into Derry, but I have not made it to Strabane. Of course, I have not been invited yet, but I hope to be in that part of the constituency as well.

This is a very difficult and fraught issue. Members know how tight money is, and they know that, within budgets, there are enormous pressures. Whatever Committee you are on or Department you are in, you know that we are fighting against a reducing resource budget between now and 2020. It is down 4-5%. We face enormous pressures. I have every sympathy for the issue. I had a full meeting of our top team on the issue at 8.00 am last Tuesday. It was on my desk, and it came up on the doorsteps that I canvassed, and I am sure it came up on the doorsteps that Ms Boyle canvassed. I do not see an easy way through this because I cannot imagine where we will get the money from. If we did get the money, we would open a Pandora's box of claims. I have great sympathy for those affected, but I do not see an easy way through.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that we are working with what is not a bottomless pit of money. Irrespective of whether there is a legal issue, there is a point where there is a moral understanding. A number of these individuals were not aware that, because they were under the Civil Service

based in Westminster and not the Northern Ireland Civil Service, there was a difficulty. I think there is a moral understanding about those who were contracted out, maybe working in other Departments, who have lost out dramatically because of this. There needs to be some understanding that we will attempt to do something. I am asking the Minister about the moral perspective.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: The only thing I think I can say is that that, again, increases my sympathy. There is a moral obligation, but, unfortunately, sometimes a moral obligation cannot be monetised. I will say this: I have not made a decision. You can understand from the things I am saying that I think it would be very difficult to find any way to find the money to make the settlement when there is no legal obligation and it could open up a Pandora's box of further claims. The only thing I think I can say to Mr Girvan is this: I have not made a decision, but I will make an early decision. As Mr Hussey pointed out, the issue has been around since 2013 and before that. So, I hope to make an early decision, but I have not made a decision yet.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Christopher Stalford is not in his place. I call Catherine Seeley.

Block Grant: Cuts

6. **Ms Seeley** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any discussions he has had with the British Treasury in relation to cuts to the block grant. (AQO 80/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have already had an initial discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, where I expressed my strong opposition to the austerity agenda. As Members may be aware and as I just mentioned, we are facing a real-terms reduction of 4-5% in our resource DEL by 2019-2020. On top of this, I also indicated my desire, in talking with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, to have a working relationship. I think that is important. We may be on different sides in many arguments, but I think we also have to have a working and productive relationship. I have no doubt that, in the short time ahead, we will intensify our negotiations not only with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury but with Chancellor Osborne. A letter went off to Chancellor Osborne last week about corporation tax, but that also covers other issues I had written to him about. I think it is very important that we have a productive and fruitful relationship not only with Minister Noonan and his colleagues in Dublin but with our colleagues in Wales and Scotland, as well as with Treasury.

It is early days, but I hope there will be very regular contact. I also hope to make sure that I represent robustly everyone who votes for the Members gathered here today.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister for his response. This is my first opportunity to wish him well in his new role. What was discussed in meetings with the Finance Ministers of Scotland and Wales?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to make his answer very brief because we have to move to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Mr Ó Muilleoir: We discussed a little bit of football in Wales, although it did not go well for them. They avoided talking about football in Scotland. The Finance Minister of Scotland, Derek Mackay, asked for a regular working

relationship, as did Mark Drakeford, the Finance Minister of Wales. This was the big point; together, we represent 10 million people, so when we make a point to the Treasury about raiding our coffers or not being fair and proportionate, we speak for 10 million people.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Budgetary Decisions

T1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance, after declaring an interest as having been a fire officer up until last month, whether he shares his party's previously stated position that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service should be reclassified as a front-line service for budgetary decisions. (AQT 51/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: It is a case of moving out of the frying pan and into the fire. You are welcome here. Of course, we had one of the most evocative moments of the last Assembly mandate when the firefighters came here and we saw what a real lobby looks like. I do not have the full details of that issue, but you can take it that we consider the Fire Service to be vital to our society. It is a service that we stand behind. I am happy for the Minister of Health, who is also responsible for the Fire Service, to come forward with proposals. You can be sure that they will receive a sympathetic ear.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for that considerate response. Earlier this year, and while I was still in the Fire Service, the Assembly passed a Ulster Unionist motion calling for the Executive not to risk public safety or the lives of my former comrades. Will he give a commitment to work with the Fire and Rescue Service along with the Fire Brigades Union in the run-up to the next Budget?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Absolutely. That was on the day that I was referring to, and we voted in favour of that motion. It shows you the strength of a very powerful lobby when 100 firefighters arrive at the Assembly. We are usually tremendously supportive of what they ask for and that remains a priority for me. It is not my Department, and budgets are under pressure, but you can take it from me that the Fire Service is an integral, vital and key part of everything we do. I know that you will be a strong advocate for our firefighters in the time ahead.

Arm's-length Bodies: Rationalisation

T2. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the rationalisation of the arm's-length bodies, especially following the reduction in the number of Departments. (AQT 52/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: The rationalisation of the arm's-length bodies and our commitment to reform them has formed an early part of the briefings I have received. For what it is worth, it was a commitment in Sinn Féin's manifesto before the election as well. There is no one in the House who believes that we could not do a better job of rationalising the arm's-length bodies. At this stage, I have no particular recommendations to make. Of course, many of those arm's-length bodies do not come under my Department but report to other bodies. However, if we can find a way to deliver the same level of service or improve it with a

more mainstreamed delivery system, I think the Member would support that. While respecting the independence of the arm's-length bodies — I believe that every one of them fulfils a vital role — I am open, as are some of the agencies themselves, to looking at ways of getting a bigger bang for our buck.

Let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let us make sure that we advance in a way that includes and values everyone and recognises the contribution of those arm's-length bodies in the past and in future.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for his response. However, given the emphasis that the 2011 Budget placed on this rationalisation only for nothing to happen in reality, can he explain whether the Budget review group is now, effectively, dead in the water?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I have not been here since 2011, so you cannot visit all the sins of my fathers and mothers upon me. Nevertheless, I take the point that there has been much promise and not enough action. It is a live issue; do not consider it moribund or dormant. It is an issue to which we will return and it is an issue on which all Members of the House, including you, will have input to make and I look forward to that. There is work to be done and 2011-16 in my view, has been too long, but I know that the Executive are committed to making progress on this. Now that we have moved, as the Member said, from 12 to nine Departments, it is an apposite time.

Business Rates: SMEs

T3. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to review the small business rate relief scheme to allow it to be more accessible to SMEs, given that he will be aware that increasing business rates for small businesses is a major concern in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency. (AQT 53/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his question. He has voiced concerns about the grass-roots retail economy in Fermanagh in particular, and the pressures that it is under. He can be assured that I share those concerns. It is my intention to give as much help as possible to small businesses.

We have had a review of small business rates, and we are now in a larger review of the entire rating system. I have been meeting with my officials on this. I would like to bring forward proposals which are perhaps a little bit bolder. He will be aware that I recently met the chief executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and he pointed out a site beside Brewster Park which has been empty for 20 years and talked about a productive economic asset being lost. Of course, it does not come under rates at all.

I am happy to give the Member this assurance: without small businesses and small to medium-sized enterprises we do not have an economy, so we need to have prosperous main streets, prosperous towns and prosperous cities. The "spray and pray" approach of business rate relief for small businesses is not making enough difference. With the Member's permission, I hope to bring forward proposals that will be more focused.

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister also confirm whether, as part of the proposals of reform for non-domestic rates, he will impose rates on charity shops?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for the supplementary. It is not my intention to impose rates on charity shops. I am aware of the difficulty it presents to us when a landlord who may be unscrupulous and who does not want to pay half rates — there is 50% relief on empty premises — so he or she decides to put a charity in and therefore avoids the rate obligation while charging the charity rent. There is a problem in some of our busiest commercial main streets, and we need to prevent landlords from doing that.

I have met the charities, and I think that it is going to be part of a wider review. I met the NI Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) on Friday, and this was one of the topics. Most charities want to make a contribution. They make their contribution through the wider charitable works but, at the same time, we need to make sure that our high streets prosper. I am sure the Member has a view on this. Is there a time when we say that five charity shops on a street is enough, or can there be six or seven? In my constituency of South Belfast sometimes traders say that the balance is wrong because people are saying we cannot shop here. On the other hand, every one of those charities makes a great contribution. I look forward to hearing the Member's views on that matter in the time ahead.

NAMA: Micheál Martin's Comments

T4. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister of Finance whether he is aware of a speech made by Micheál Martin in the Dáil last Wednesday, stating that there was something rotten in the state of Denmark and that evidence would likely emerge in relation to the sale of the NAMA loan portfolio, and, if so, does he agree with Deputy Martin that the nothing-to-see attitude from Governments is no longer tenable. (AQT 54/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I did not catch all of Micheál Martin's speech but, as I am sure the Member is aware, his Government were deeply involved in the issues, problems and crash which led to the setting up of NAMA and left us with this mess — this corrosive mess — which has been NAMA, the NAMA loan book and Project Eagle.

The pledge I give her is that my Department will release all the information we can to her. I view the NAMA scandal as an abomination. The public is entitled to know if anyone benefited from the misery of so many people — many people caught in negative equity, and many people who did lose properties.

In the time ahead, whether it is Micheál Martin or anyone else, I think that I can say, as we have said previously, that the Irish Government need to do more. There have been calls for a legislative commission of inquiry. I think that we really need that. Those of us in the Department of Finance and other bodies here will do our best to provide the information. I really do think that it is time for the Irish Government to do more. I hope that that happens in the time ahead. I presume that that is what former Minister Martin was speaking about.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. Can he outline what information his Department will release in response to the request from the Committee for Finance to release previously redacted or withheld information?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Yes, I can. You will see later today, I hope, when the papers go out to the Finance Committee that

I will honour my pledge; I will release all the information that I have in my Department relating to NAMA. As I said, whatever side of the table I am at, I am on the same side as the Committee. My pledge remains the same that any information that is relevant to the NAMA inquiry should be released to the Committee. Today, I have gone back, as I promised, looked at the documents that had been released previously and removed redactions that were there. There were very few minor redactions which the Committee did not ask for; for example, relating to bank employees who were worried about their jobs. I have removed redactions. I hope that you receive those fresh papers later today.

There has been an attempt to prevent me from releasing one piece of information. I repeat my pledge to you at Committee: I am resolved to release that piece of information to you as well, regardless of that attempt, which we take seriously — we need to take counsel over the next 24 hours — because I believe that it is also in the public interest.

EU Money: Northern Ireland Share

T5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance to confirm that Northern Ireland's share of EU money is decreasing year on year. (AQT 55/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I think that this is a loaded question. Funny — I read the figures this morning, and they are staggering. The Peace, INTERREG and RDF moneys that have come in to this part of the world are absolutely staggering. I think that there has been almost €2 billion in Peace money. INTERREG money is up around €1.2 billion. I know that the Member has great faith in Westminster. I am not entirely sure why. If I were a betting man, I would not bet on our friends in the Treasury being as generous post-Brexit if that were to happen — please God, it does not — as they are letting on.

Yes, the Peace programme is coming to an end. I think that 2021 will see the end of Peace IV. We need to double down and go back to Europe — post-Friday if circumstances are permitting — and say that, in fact, now is the time to reinforce your commitment rather than decreasing your commitment to building peace and prosperity here.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister, but I am not so sure whether I got an answer. Given that the UK Government pay in the region of £20 billion into Europe each year and that, year on year, our funding from Europe is reduced, can the Minister understand why support for leaving Europe is growing?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I am very respectful of anyone who wants to vote to leave on Thursday, but, for the life of me, I cannot understand how anyone in this part of the world would vote to leave, because, for the last 15 years, I have heard politicians from all sides of the House say that foreign direct investment should come here not only because we have great and talented people but because we are a gateway to Europe. In fact, in my view, our future prosperity and success in business — in particular, the foreign direct investment that we wish to attract through corporation tax — is predicated upon our membership of the European Union. You are making me talk about Brexit, which I forswore not to do.

European Funding

T6. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Finance, while continuing the European theme, to outline the possibility of using projects such as the Narrow Water bridge, which is an excellent example of peace and reconciliation, to lever in additional European funding, plus other examples where European funding would make a project viable. (AQT 56/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist, a Charál. Sílim go dtuigeann tú cé chomh tábhachtach agus atá tacaíocht na hEorpa don obair atá ar bun againn. I think that the Member understands the key importance of Europe's support for everything that we are trying to do here in building peace and prosperity. It is an apposite time on Friday. We have an opportunity to go back to Europe and say, "This is how you have to win the hearts and minds of people even more so; by reinforcing your commitment to the peace process."

The European project was born out of a wish to see an end to war. I think that that is one reason why the European Union understood the importance of our peace process. They got it, and they responded generously. I hope that, in the time ahead, not just in Narrow Water but in many other projects, including entrepreneurial projects, research and innovation and life sciences, we will continue to have strong support from our European colleagues.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Tá brón orm, a Charál, níl go leor ama againn don supplementary. Members may take their ease while we change the top Table. That ends Question Time.

3.30 pm

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

Private Members' Business

Landlord Registration Scheme

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Communities to review urgently the landlord registration scheme to ensure that it can both cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants. — [Mr Maskey.]

Which amendment was:

Delete all after "scheme" and insert

"and to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants." — [Mr Dickson.]

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for all the contributions agreeing to accept the Alliance Party amendment. In many cases, when individuals or families seek to rent a residential property, it is due to a change in their personal circumstances. It may be a positive move relating to a new job in a new town, but it can be due to a breakdown in family relationships, redundancy, or, like many cases in South Belfast, as Christopher Stalford highlighted, people arriving from other parts of the world with basic English and little knowledge of our laws and their protections.

In the latter cases, the people involved will be incredibly vulnerable, as referenced by Nichola Mallon, and anxious to secure a safe place to live as soon as possible. This insecurity leaves them susceptible to accepting living conditions and contractual agreements that people negotiating from a position of strength would not even consider.

In circumstances in which letting agents broker rental agreements, we in the Alliance Party feel that they have an important role to play in protecting the tenant. As Alex Maskey pointed out, letting agents operating in the sector are aware of the good landlords and the unscrupulous ones — the ones who provide safe, clean accommodation; and those who disregard the needs of their tenants, with a fixation only on profit-making.

The amendment would positively govern the duty of care to tenants and, as Roy Beggs pointed out, provide clear lines of responsibility for repairs, for example. We also know of cases in which the letting agents do not act with total consideration for their tenants. We heard from Clare Bailey that administration and upfront fees can be very expensive and without justification. As Michelle Gildernew said, that can lead to tenants having to choose in the first month whether to pay the fees or feed their family.

The amendment is not anti-business. The inclusion of the clause is also to regulate letting agents. It will bring about an equitable and balanced structure, as articulated by Jonathan Bell, between the basic needs of the tenant to secure shelter and the commercial needs of the landlord and the business.

We often hear about cleaning up business practice. The amendment, in the context of the full motion, will show that the Assembly is on the side of the people, on the side of good practice and on the side of fairness in society.

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I am absolutely delighted that, given that it is so early in the mandate, we have business in the Assembly for which there seems to be cross-party support, albeit that there are some differences coming from different positions. Some Members placed more emphasis on issues that they deal with in their constituency than others. The Alliance Party amendment strengthens the motion. We are keen to look at that, because, at the end of the day, this is about providing protection and making sure that the duty of care is honoured and respected.

Alex Maskey laid out very clearly at the start that, in 2007 — I remember this, because I sat on the Social Development Committee at the time — we were quite concerned about the fact that there were not any mandatory regulations, particularly for landlords. At that time — this was certainly my opinion, although Alex possibly did not articulate it — when I used to hear the Department talk about light-touch approaches to mandatory registration, I thought that that meant looking after landlords rather than protecting the needs of citizens and those people sleeping on settees, which, in my constituency, affected three generations. I was completely baffled by that, and even more so when I found out that the legislation was not brought forward until seven years later. I understand why it takes a long time for legislation to come in, but it should not take seven years. That is why we have called for a review. Alex touched on the point about conflicting figures throughout the period, and although, in his contribution, the Minister — this debate is my first opportunity in the Chamber to thank and welcome him — clarified some of those figures, I suspect that they will change, given the fact that the private rented sector is in such demand because of the appalling nature of our housing waiting lists, which are set to get worse. I therefore think that we need to look at ways in which to tackle the issue.

Alex Maskey pointed out that vast sums of public money go into the private rented sector. Our opinion is that the more regulation and reviews that there are, the better. I have spoken to many landlords in my North Belfast constituency, and I know that South Belfast — Christopher Stalford and Paula Bradshaw know this, too — and North Belfast are probably the two most high-demand areas in the city for private rented sector housing. I certainly know that South Belfast has the highest number of HMOs.

From our point of view, vast sums of public money are going into the private sector, and we need to make sure that public money is being protected. More importantly, what came out of this debate is the fact that some of the conditions that people endure in the private rented sector are completely unacceptable. I think that everyone across the House said that.

Stewart Dickson touched on the fact that we do not want to be over-bureaucratic. The same issues kept coming up in different contributions. The first was about making sure that this is not over-bureaucratic. The second was about making sure that the review provides a good outcome rather than be seen as another process with no outcome. No one wants that, particularly people on housing waiting lists and tenants living in private rented houses that are, frankly, not fit for human habitation. The third issue was

the whole matter of letting agents and the need to reinforce legislation.

By calling for a review, we are giving the Department an opportunity not only to listen to what has been said in this debate but to come back to the Committee in particular with some suggestions about how it is going to be done.

One thing I was very heartened about was what Jonathan Bell, Roy Beggs, Nichola Mallon and others said, which was interesting. I would like to say that I have no interest to declare. I do not own a house, and I am not a landlord, but, like many other people, I know what it is like to sleep on someone's sofa, what it is like to be in a hostel and what it is like to move from pillar to post. None of us wants that happening on our watch. I have to say that the private rented sector has begun to respond to some of the demands, and I believe that those responses came about only because of the pressure from government. Pressure has to come, and it has to be consistent and applied consistently.

Michelle Gildernew is a rural MLA. She tells us that in every Committee meeting, and she told us again today. As a city girl, I accept that there are acute needs in rural constituencies, and the housing stock needs to be looked at. With industries such as manufacturing growing in Dungannon and other areas, the demand for private lets has increased. When demand increases, there are landlords — I know that, in my constituency, unscrupulous landlords are in the minority — who will overcrowd houses, ignore health and safety, as well as some of the issues that Jonathan Bell raised, do everything that other people would find abhorrent and bring in as many people as possible to get as much rent as possible. Therefore, we need to ensure that, first, we try to fulfil, as best we can, our duty of care, which every MLA mentioned, and, secondly, that letting agents and landlords reach the best standards possible.

This is probably where some of us will disagree, although not enough to divide the House. The minimum standards, for me, are making sure that there is proper health and safety; that accommodation is properly furnished; that the landlord does not have the ability to hike up the rent whenever he or she feels like it; and that they fulfil their statutory obligations in terms of rent books, conditions and all the rest.

The landlord registration scheme was mentioned, and it demonstrates that, when statutory instruments are used to enhance the rights and entitlements of people, they work. The difficulty that we have at times is that the pressure is taken off, and, when the pressure is taken off, poor and vulnerable people usually feel the brunt of that. None of us wants that.

We also need to look at the housing waiting list. I understand that a lot of people are very loyal to the Housing Executive, particularly those who remember why it was put in place in the first instance, but, as a public housing authority, it is a public landlord as well. This is really around mandatory registration with private landlords: if even half the standards were set in the private sector that are set in the social sector, we would be going some way, but that is still not good enough.

Looking at the review, the Minister's officials, I am sure, will have quickly taken down a list of things that were mentioned. We need to give the Department the space to

address some of those. As the Minister said, every MLA who spoke, regardless of their experience in the Chamber and that, is a seasoned activist, campaigner or lobbyist or has, as a neighbour, lived beside people in the private rented sector. They will know what it is like — to talk about Clare's experience — to see a family moved out at 10.00 pm on a Friday because a landlord has put them out. They will know what it is like when people have been given less than 28 days' notice to quit. They will know what it is like when the landlord decides, "You are not getting your full deposit" and makes up some erroneous reason for it. People are pushed into massive poverty traps.

Michelle Gildernew and others mentioned the impact of poor housing on health. That cannot be overestimated. It is massive, and the way in which the private rented sector has gone in the past is that it is costing people to live there because they have no choice. We need to create opportunities so that people have choices that they can afford and that will not push them further and deeper into poverty and, indeed, further and deeper into the interest of loan sharks. I have seen that in my constituency. You grow up hearing stories of the tick men coming to the door, but that has become accepted as inevitable. I do not think that any of us will accept that that is inevitable, and I do not think that any of us ever should. The motion and the amendment not only will have a good outcome but will send a clear message out that the new Minister, the new Department and the MLAs in the new mandate collectively want to make sure that we have the backs of those in the private rented sector.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Communities to review urgently the landlord registration scheme and to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.

Electoral Offices: Proposed Closure

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): 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 it and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

3.45 pm

Mr T Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the proposals from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to close regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh; believes that this will damage democracy in Northern Ireland, lead to fewer people on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in local schools and communities; and calls on the Secretary of State, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to retain and fund adequately all regional offices currently under threat of closure.

I will speak solely to the motion. I note the amendment that has been selected, but, at the outset, I inform the House that we will not support it. We do not believe that the Executive should pursue the transfer of functions of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland; we would rather work with the NIO in a bid to keep the offices open and ensure they are properly and adequately funded.

The proposed closure of the regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh has caused widespread concern among not only the unions and employees but all shades of political persuasion across Northern Ireland. Proposals to centralise the six regional offices in Belfast at a time when we are already witnessing decreasing turnouts at elections in Northern Ireland simply do not make sense. With a turnout of 62.3% in 2007 down to 54.7% in 2011 and, most recently, 54.2% in 2016, the proposals will further damage democracy and lead to fewer people being on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in our schools and communities.

For many of the electorate in rural communities, the regional offices are their first point of contact. Whether it is the elderly, the young, the disabled, first-time voters or those with literacy problems — whatever it is — the regional electoral offices are their first point of contact when they require help filling in their registration forms, need electoral identity cards or have any other difficulties or problems they need resolved. That face-to-face contact with staff is invaluable, and losing it will have detrimental consequences for the electoral process right across Northern Ireland.

I know there is an aim to pursue online registration. While I have no difficulty with that pursuit, in isolation from the regional offices it will fail to deliver, given the ongoing infrastructure problems with broadband throughout our rural areas and the many people who simply will not utilise

the online services. Such a system will be successful only if it is run in conjunction with the electoral offices.

The regional offices also provide an excellent service in our schools encouraging our youth to register and providing them with electoral identity cards. The question that is, quite rightly, being asked is this: if the regional offices close, who will promote the register and provide the outreach services in and around our schools to instil confidence in the electoral system in our younger generation?

In looking through the 2015-18 Electoral Office for Northern Ireland corporate plan, I noted that its mission statement is:

"To ensure public confidence in the efficiency and integrity of voter registration and election processes in Northern Ireland."

Yet it has to be said that the very proposals it is pursuing propose to do the very opposite to that. The regional offices are the anchor of the electoral system in Northern Ireland. If we take a ship and remove the anchor from it, it will go all over the place and probably, at the end of the day, sink. If we do not keep the regional offices, the anchor of electoral services in Northern Ireland, there is no doubt that they will diminish and sink.

Looking at the risk assessment in the corporate plan, I can see that the potential risks are extremely worrying. I know that only the potential risks have been flagged up, but, with the introduction of the new online registration system, there is a potential risk that the associated technical or operational problems could lead to a loss of public confidence or to an electoral register that is inaccurate or not comprehensive. That could lead to reputational damage and a loss of public confidence.

To go on to resources, the risk is that the electoral register will not be comprehensive or accurate, resulting in the recommendation for a full canvass and a further demand on resources. Inadequate staffing could result in statutory deadlines not being met, elections not run successfully and reputational damage to the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

Again, when we look at service delivery, there is the risk of being unable to deliver an effective service to the public, loss of public confidence and so forth. We know that this is only the potential risk but let us weigh it against what happened in England. When they introduced online registration, 800,000 voters were lost. That causes each one of us grave concern, and it raises concerns for the future of the electoral system in Northern Ireland should they continue to pursue the proposals that we have before us. That is why we are calling on the Secretary of State and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to reconsider these proposals and adequately fund the regional offices in Northern Ireland.

It is disappointing, but, I suppose, not surprising, that these proposals have been put forward, with the closure of at least two, if not three, offices imminent, prior to a consultation process and without any discussion with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and little or no discussion with the local councils as to how they could accommodate the offices and how this system could be funded if it were within the local council areas. That, in itself, is an absolute disgrace.

We call on the Secretary of State and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to withdraw the proposals, rethink their position and enter into discussions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and local councils in the areas to see how this matter can be properly funded and, perhaps, placed within the setting of local councils and still continue to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

I urge the Chamber to support the motion.

Mr McKay: I beg to move the following amendment:

Delete all after "calls" and insert

"on the Executive to pursue the transfer of the functions of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, including appropriate funding, to ensure local accountability for the provision of electoral services."

I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing it to the House. I am moving the amendment on behalf of Sinn Féin.

I think that all 108 Members received a letter from NIPSA concerning the action that has been taken. The letter also highlights the lack of accountability regarding local politicians. I think it refers to the unaccountability of the NIO and the Chief Electoral Officer. That is why we have put forward an amendment that, at the end of the day, this is a decision that we should be taking. We should be taking a decision that safeguards this service, especially for rural communities, which are going to be acutely impacted by the decision to close these offices.

A couple of weeks ago, I stood on the picket line in Ballymena with the local workers of that electoral office. I did so along with other MLAs from all the parties locally, so we are unanimously opposed to the decision there. But, we are all 108 locally elected politicians who are powerless to do anything about this. That is why we should see these small — I have to say they are small — but significant functions being transferred to Belfast. If you look at the responsibilities that we have in education, policing, justice and housing, we all work together and make decisions in those areas. Locally, there would have been a lot of issues about decisions in those areas 10, 20 or 30 years ago. In that context, surely, setting up an independent but accountable electoral service should not be an issue, and I do not believe that it is. We have shown in recent times how mature an Assembly and Executive we can be. We should move forward with confidence and take on more powers to ensure that we protect local services and workers.

Look at the list of offices to be impacted: Ballymena, Banbridge, Omagh, Derry, Newtownabbey and Newtownards. If all those were to close, it would leave a huge gap in rural constituencies. There would also be an impact on older people. There has been much discussion by the Electoral Office of online registration and doing things through the Internet. A lot of older people, and some younger people, would rather do things by pen and paper. They would rather go to their local office to seek advice on how to fill out the form, which can be quite intimidating to some of us as well, and secure that very basic right to vote. The same applies to the request for photographic identification.

In recent years, it has become harder and harder to secure your vote. In that context, it does not make sense that support to secure the vote is withdrawn from those on the ground when they need it more than ever. I am sure

that most people picked up anecdotes when canvassing in the recent election. When I was in Carey on the far north coast of Antrim outside Ballycastle, I spoke to a man who was coming 100. He was going down to the local school at Barnish to place his vote and said that he had photographic ID on his disability badge. Of course, it was not acceptable, and, although he tried, he did not get his vote. There are so many cases like that of people losing their vote unnecessarily. If all these decisions roll out, where would that man go for help with photographic ID to ensure that he is on the register? He may have to go to Belfast from Carey. He did not have a computer in the house. That shows the barriers for certain electors in our constituencies. These are all big questions that need to be answered first. We should not put the cart before the horse.

In four months' time — in October — the Electoral Office plans to close the Ballymena office. It will be yet another closure for Ballymena town, and the Electoral Office is simply allowing the lease to lapse. I have contacted Graham Shields, the chief executive, as have all the local MLAs, and he replied that:

"It would not have been sensible to enter into a new lease in Ballymena in light of plans for the introduction of digital registration."

He said:

"I would encourage you to participate in the public consultation exercise when it is launched in the autumn of 2016."

Why would anybody representing North Antrim participate in the consultation when the office is effectively already closed? The decision, it is quite clear, has already been made. The lease is being allowed to lapse, and I believe that the Electoral Office, for its own reasons, has agreed that the service should be centralised towards Belfast and Newtownabbey, initially. That is the shape of things to come.

The electoral office in Ballymena has served the people of North Antrim and Mid Ulster for many years. They have worked diligently and proactively. They have provided advice and support not only to the voters and those on the ground but to us as candidates, party workers and directors of elections. They have provided an absolutely fantastic service for many years.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. It was before his time, but this is not the first time that we have suffered in North Antrim from proposals by the Electoral Office.

The electoral office in Ballymoney was closed and moved to Ballymena, so we have seen a gradual withdrawal. I concur with the Member's comments on the staff in Ballymena. Does he also recognise that this is yet another issue that has affected North Antrim for the second time? The first time, an office was removed from Ballymoney.

4.00 pm

Mr McKay: I concur absolutely. I remember the Ballymoney office. I was in it, so I have been about for a long time. Ballymoney is a case in point. We have seen the impact that there has been on Ballymoney of job closures and the withdrawal of services like the electoral office. The impact is still being felt there. Unfortunately, what we

see in Ballymena is almost a mirror image of what has happened in Ballymoney over the past 10 to 15 years.

The Electoral Office has done a fantastic job. It has provided a fantastic service across all the constituencies and, quite simply, it does not deserve to be treated like this. If the Electoral Office is to have a consultation, let us have a fair one. Let us not make any decisions beforehand. Of course, Electoral Office workers in the rural constituencies, in all the offices that are outlined for closure, were proactive in their work. They did the outreach to schools and they set up photographic ID clinics in the many villages and hamlets across the rural constituencies. All that is absolutely essential. You have places like north Antrim, Tyrone and Fermanagh where Belfast seems very far away. We see the acute need for those services to continue for the time ahead.

To conclude, I agree with the proposers of the motion that the NIO and the Chief Electoral Officer need to reconsider these proposals, but we also need to step up to the plate. This decision, as regards local offices, will affect local workers and have a huge impact on local democracy. I believe that the people who should be making the decision about this need to be local politicians.

Mr Swann: I apologise for going back to North Antrim, because that constituency is represented by the last Member to speak and an earlier contributor. However, it is the state of the electoral office in Ballymena. Support has been shown by all the parties for the local office and the work that it does. One of the things that we have to concentrate on is the fact that the office is being closed while the consultation is ongoing and only starting. So to us in North Antrim, Mid Ulster and even that certain section of East Londonderry that uses the Ballymena office the decision has already been made.

In his opening comments, Mr Buchanan referred to the input of local councils. Let me put it on record that Mid and East Antrim Borough Council worked to try to facilitate a continual presence. It made offers of premises to the Electoral Office to enable it to retain a presence in Ballymena while the consultation was ongoing. That work was invaluable, and I hope that it bears fruit. I am not prepared to give up on it already.

One of the reasons the Electoral Office has put forward to support its ability to close regional offices is registration online and what a great success that will be. Members have already mentioned the invaluable face-to-face service that people rely on. We have just witnessed, in the last week, the complete collapse of online registration in England and Wales, due to people trying to register for the Brexit campaign that is coming forward. We in Northern Ireland should learn that lesson. We have an excellent facility in place that relies on and supports the face-to-face service that we need to provide, plus an online facility that could be provided and enhanced. We in Northern Ireland cannot forget the independent work of the Electoral Office. That is why we cannot support the amendment: it relies on independence. Its work relies not so much on who gets on the electoral register, but the work that it does to ensure that the people who are on it should be on it, and that the register is not abused or misused.

In the last monitoring round, the Finance Minister allocated £5.3 million to the Electoral Office for the running of the last Assembly elections. I know that we have no ministerial

response but surely, given the call in the motion and from the House today, some moneys could be found to retain the presence of those offices, at least while the consultation is ongoing, to allow the democratic process to take place.

I would like to thank the staff who work in the Ballymena office for the work that they do and congratulate them on it. Although we have seen pickets and reduced labour, I know that the staff there have made sure that everything is in place. They have gone the extra mile to make sure that no service fails while they are there. However, look at those staff as individuals and the relocation that is offered. Ballymena office staff are being offered temporary relocation to Mallusk for a short period until the Mallusk office is closed, when they would be transferred to Belfast. There is no doubt that this is about a centralisation of our electoral offices. Look at the decision on a personal level: a Ballymena family who have already lost two breadwinners due to the job losses at Michelin will now have to face another job loss because of the decisions of the Electoral Office. Look at the impact that it will have, yet again, on Ballymena.

The House, in its last session, passed a Rural Needs Act that specifically aimed to make sure that our rural population and our rural towns and villages are not adversely affected by decisions. The Northern Ireland Office should look to its responsibilities and duties under that Act. We will support the motion but, unfortunately, not the amendment.

Mr McCrossan: I support the motion. This is a very important issue across Northern Ireland, but it affects my constituency directly, which is the reason why I am speaking about it. It is somewhat ironic, given that we face probably the biggest decision of a generation this Thursday, that we are in the Chamber to discuss the closure of electoral offices. The SDLP stands full square behind the staff of these offices. It is vital that the Chamber also shows that support and solidarity in opposing these punitive and anti-democratic budget cuts.

It is important to remember that, over the last six years, electoral offices have already faced a reduction of 25% in their operating budgets. The new proposals by the NIO amount to a further 17% reduction. These cuts have already impacted the services available for rural communities such as my constituency. Yet again, the further cuts and the closures of electoral offices are not in Belfast but spread across many towns that serve rural areas. This, in itself, will have ramifications for local populations and rural communities.

The budget cuts proposed are mainly due to the upcoming introduction of an online registration system, as Members who spoke previously said. What consideration has been given to the quality of broadband services in rural areas? What consideration has been given to the fact that, as mentioned, in my constituency and others, there are many people, especially our older population, who do not have access to a computer and are not computer literate? How are they supposed to register or receive advice if there are no regional offices? The question of whether the Northern Ireland Office proposals were subject to rural proofing legislation also has to be asked.

The proposals put forward are to have a centralised office in Belfast with a helpline for anybody who has

any difficulties with the registration process. However, I know at first hand, as I am sure other Members do, how invaluable the human interaction in these offices has been and continues to be. The advice given on, for example, having the right documents in order or having the registration form properly completed has proven valuable when we, as Members, are assisting constituents with getting on to the voting register. As Mr Buchanan and others said, voting numbers are dropping year in and year out. We need to be doing more to encourage people to register to vote and to use their right to vote. This will be a disincentive and put many people off, particularly those in rural communities.

It is important to remember that the Omagh office in my constituency serves West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I am sure that my colleague Mr McPhillips, who also feels very strongly about the issue, will agree with me that it serves our constituencies very well. Martin Fox and his staff in the Omagh Area Electoral Office — I met and joined them during the industrial action — provide a first-class service for the people of my constituency and the neighbouring constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That service is now at risk as these proposals will lead to the loss of four full-time staff.

The last thing that West Tyrone, or any other rural community for that matter, needs at this time is further job losses or redundancies, and certainly a further reduction in rural services. It is not all just voter registration and nomination papers that the electoral offices deal with. The Omagh electoral office serves the wider community through its outreach programme every year. Representatives visit 25 schools across the constituency, ensuring that our young people are properly informed and prepared for registering to vote for the first time. They also stress to them the importance of using their vote. It is my concern that that important outreach programme and the linking-up with many secondary schools in West Tyrone and across many other constituencies will be completely hampered under the proposed new arrangements.

In the long term, it is vital that all options be considered; for example, how the regional offices can be facilitated and, indeed, linked to local councils. I know that the Omagh office is situated close to our local council buildings, and consideration must be given to how we can use the premises to house services for constituents, including services provided by the electoral offices.

The SDLP will not be supporting today's amendment proposed by Sinn Féin. We will be supporting the motion. The amendment calls for the devolution of electoral powers to Northern Ireland where this Assembly would dictate its own fate. For obvious reasons, we will not support the amendment, but we will call on the Secretary of State and the NIO to reconsider the decision and ensure that the local service is protected and remains across Northern Ireland.

To conclude, the cuts would dramatically impact on the democratic rights of my constituents and others.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCrossan: Issues that specifically surround rural areas have not been thoroughly considered, and outreach programmes for our young people would be severely hampered.

Mr Ford: There is no doubt, particularly coming just a few weeks after the Assembly election, that there will be considerable support in the Chamber for the work that is done by the staff of local electoral offices. We all have a relationship with our local office and tend to get to know the staff over a period of years, although I do recall an occasion five years ago when I called into the Newtownabbey electoral office and a temporary member of staff looked at me and asked me whether I had a connection with any of the political parties, so it is not perhaps always that clear. I am, however, happy to say that the permanent staff know me, possibly rather too well.

In that context, we can also welcome the work that they have done on issues such as registration and election running. I have certainly cooperated with them to ensure that all schools in South Antrim take the opportunity to see that those who are of rising voting age get the chance to register and are encouraged in that direction. We have seen good work being done by electoral offices, but we also need to be realistic and acknowledge that just because something has worked well does not necessarily mean that the current pattern will continue to work well.

I have concerns about the way in which the proposals have been put forward. It is absolutely clear that we have not seen any detailed strategic planning. We have seen an instant response and ad hoc decisions taken to deal with financial problems without proper consultation and without proper consideration of what the best way to provide electoral services might be. It might well be that we do not need the network of offices that we currently have, if arrangements were made for partnerships with local councils, or if arrangements were made for registration events to be run in consultation with citizens advice bureaux or other organisations within the community.

Just because the existing pattern of offices has worked up to now does not necessarily mean that that is the right way. What concerns me is the fact that we are being presented with a scheme for closures that is being implemented, in some cases, without any consultation and a system that is being put forward without any real consideration of how to maintain the local contacts. They may not need a permanent office, but they do require some sort of local activity and some opportunity for the work to go on. There is no doubt that, when we switched to individual registration a few years ago, we saw a reduction of numbers on the electoral register. We need to ensure that we work hard to get the numbers as consistently high as they should be, because, sadly, I know from experience that it is much easier to ensure that somebody is removed from the electoral register when the person dies, which, of course, is the right thing to do, than it is to get somebody new who has moved into an area on the register.

The call in the motion to retain and fund adequately all regional offices currently under threat is unrealistic. I think of the comment made by Mr Swann, which was that we should not be doing this until we have worked out the long-term future and know more about what the need is, but that is not what the motion states.

4.15 pm

I fear that there is mixed language in the amendment. The functions of the Electoral Office comprise administrative functions and legal duties that it discharges on behalf of the Northern Ireland Office, which has responsibility for

running elections in Northern Ireland. I am not sure how you transfer the administrative functions away from the NIO, when the NIO will retain the full legal and legislative functions for ensuring that elections in Northern Ireland are run properly. There is a mix-up in the way the amendment is phrased, which means that it is simply unworkable.

We have to be realistic in this Assembly. It is too easy to assume that we can continue to provide the pattern of services that we have been used to across a range of issues without giving any consideration to the realities of the difficult public finances we live with. Frankly, I am not sure how we are going to face up to the difficult decisions around health that will probably be required when Professor Bengoa reports if we cannot face up to the reality that we cannot simply react with a knee-jerk and protect the complete pattern of electoral services that we have. Yes, we need to ensure we have some proper plans for the future, and we need to ensure that we maintain local engagement, but to suggest that that is done simply by making no change whatsoever is unrealistic. We should be insisting on a genuine and meaningful consultation on the way that services will be delivered in the future, on the proper way of ensuring contacts with local communities and on the proper way of ensuring that online registration, as we move towards it, is carried out in a meaningful way. That does not mean that we can continue to pretend that we can provide services without any change whatsoever.

Mr Anderson: I welcome this opportunity to speak on this very important matter for people across Northern Ireland. My colleagues and I brought this motion before the House, because we recognise the important role that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland plays in our democracy.

We are deeply concerned about the current proposals, which, if implemented, would see the closure of regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards, Omagh and Banbridge, which is located in my constituency of Upper Bann. We have witnessed electoral offices having to deal with a 25% reduction in budgets over the past six years, with an additional 17% reduction proposed for 2020.

I am fully aware of the important role that the electoral office in Banbridge plays in democracy and political procedures. The office has four full-time staff and nine part-time employees, who provide a key link for the public when they are doing things such as vote registration and receiving and submitting postal and proxy vote applications. They have also carried out a range of registration and electoral ID events, which have focused on enhancing the number of people on the electoral register.

I commend the regional electoral office for getting in contact with places of education to encourage the younger generation to become registered so that they can fully participate in elections by exercising their democratic right to vote. Activities carried out by my regional electoral office in Banbridge are replicated across the other regional offices.

Mr Dunne: Will the Member give way?

Mr Anderson: OK.

Mr Dunne: Does the Member agree that the proposed closure of the electoral offices — including the one in Newtownards, which services 170,000 people, does an excellent job and provides a good and friendly service —

will have a very negative effect? We have also lost the annual canvass. Do you agree that this will undermine the integrity of the electoral registration system?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Anderson: Thank you. I thank my colleague for that intervention. I agree with everything that he said: we cannot allow any further erosion through the proposals that they are bringing forward, which will further damage the electoral process. I agree with his comments.

Significant focus has been put on increasing the use of technology to carry out online electoral registration. Whilst I welcome the fact that there are some positives from adopting that approach, it has to be recognised that there are other points to consider. Whilst we have seen enhanced rural broadband provision recently, we still face many challenges as we seek to enhance provision across Northern Ireland. It also has to be noted that a number of people would find it difficult to secure access to such technologies and therefore successfully complete registration in this way.

I therefore firmly believe that the complete centralisation of Electoral Office functions is not the way forward.

In the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland's business plan for 2015-16 it is stated:

"EONI is committed to the continuous improvement, not only of the services it provides to the public and other stakeholders, but also of the leadership, support and development opportunities available to its staff."

If the proposed closure of regional electoral offices takes place, I, as a political representative, am fearful that democracy could be damaged, because the Electoral Office would simply no longer be able to play a key role in our communities. Moreover, it is highly likely that a significant number of staff would lose their employment. That tends to contradict the statement taken from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland's business plan 2015-16.

We must all recognise that the staff in our regional electoral offices do work of significant importance not just at election time but throughout the year. We have to understand that, if many of the Electoral Office services are centralised in Belfast, engagement with the wider Northern Ireland public would be severely impacted. We all want to see more and more people engaging with the political process and exercising their vote. By closing our regional electoral offices, we will only be further hindered in our efforts to encourage voter registration and political engagement. If the closures take place, I firmly believe that democracy in Northern Ireland will be dealt a severe blow. That cannot be allowed to happen, as no one benefits from democracy being damaged. I support the motion and encourage everyone in the Chamber to support it too.

Ms Boyle: In speaking on the amendment, I will say that, as a party, we feel strongly that electoral services and provision should be close to the people and communities here, particularly in rural areas like Omagh, Strabane, Fermanagh and south Tyrone. The proposal to close six regional electoral offices should not and cannot go ahead. That is a message that we need to send clearly today to the NIO. To those who suggest that the proposal is to move to a high-technology online voter registration

system let me say that it will not work. It will not work in my area, and it will not work in areas of West Tyrone where, in this day and age, we still do not have proper broadband infrastructure or the modern technology that the proposal talks about.

The Member who moved the motion, Mr Buchanan, is bringing an Adjournment debate to the House tomorrow on the lack of broadband services in West Tyrone. That raises this question: how will that be for people getting registered online? It will not happen in my area. People are already being disenfranchised in West Tyrone and in Fermanagh and South Tyrone because they do not have proper broadband services, and that puts their fundamental right to vote at stake. I have been an elected representative since 2010. My office and those of others in the Chamber have worked well with Omagh's chief electoral officer, Martin Fox, and his staff, who provide an excellent service and not just at election time, as they provide an all-year-round service. To take away that service locally will have devastating consequences for democracy.

The right to vote, as has been said, is a fundamental human right, but there remains a lot of people out there who are continually disenfranchised by not being registered to vote. They include minority groups, young people, homeless people, people who are disabled and many others who lack access to a vote for a variety of reasons, including poverty, illiteracy, not understanding the electoral process or fearing it. However, one way of combating disenfranchisement is the growth of staff in our electoral offices and having staff with expertise in the area reassuring the public and giving them face-to-face contact with the information they need and help with filling out forms and getting electoral ID. That is what the Omagh electoral office does, as I said, day in, day out. Accepting my party's amendment, which calls on the Executive to pursue the transfer of functions of the Electoral Office, ensuring funding and accountability will help the staff in the Electoral Office to do that very process of helping people with forms etc.

As stated by others, the electoral offices have had a reduction in their budgets over the last six years, and a further 17% is proposed by 2020. This has been done by stealth over a number of years. I want to speak about the office in Omagh. West Tyrone has had its fair share of cuts and job losses in the public sector, and we already feel vulnerable. The people in West Tyrone and in Fermanagh and South Tyrone are extremely angry and annoyed at this. Recently, I stood with Martin Fox and his staff and other members of my party, when they held their picket outside their offices. People are extremely angry and concerned about the service being lost to their area. In Strabane, there is a proposal to lose the courthouse. I am glad to say that a judicial review (JR) has been brought forward by the legal profession on that matter, and I fully support that and hope they are successful. How many more services have to be eroded from our constituency?

NIPSA and the unions are also calling on management to conduct a full accommodation review to consider options to co-locate electoral offices and council offices. That is an option we should explore.

Mr McAleer: Will the Member give way?

Ms Boyle: Yes, I will.

Mr McAleer: Does the Member agree that it is highly unlikely that any of the proposals have been rural proofed and that, in light of the recent passing of the Rural Needs Act, they should be reconsidered?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right: as far as I am aware, the proposal has not been rural proofed. That is something that we also need to explore regarding, in particular, the closure in Omagh.

Your vote is your voice, and it is every citizen's right to have a say in their future and in how their country is governed. It seems personal when a body like the NIO tries to take away that right, which is exactly what will happen. I believe it is discrimination against the person. A healthy democracy ensures that all members of the public have equal access to the political process and if this proposal goes ahead —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Boyle: — I believe that the NIO is putting obstacles in the way of people's right to vote.

Mr Robinson: The motion is similar to the removal of the DVA office in Coleraine and the proposed closure of the courthouse in Limavady. More jobs being removed from the regions of Northern Ireland is unacceptable and will see a reduction in the already stretched services that constituencies receive. We must remember that the decisions have been taken without any proper or full consultation, which is absolutely undemocratic.

I can testify to the importance and value of the regional offices, especially during election time. A local office has local knowledge and relationships with parties that can prove invaluable. To remove that service would be a false economy and would limit the value of the Electoral Office in Northern Ireland. I appreciate the service, advice and support that the Londonderry office gives to me and my staff, and I am sure that many other MLAs and elected representatives will provide testimony to the value of the regional offices. My East Londonderry colleagues and I have often organised registration events with the regional office, and that close working relationship could be lost by having a centralised office in Belfast. I commend the staff who work in the Londonderry office; they all provide a very good service.

I want to see more people on the register and voting: that, I believe, will be undermined by centralising the service — something that the Bain report was opposed to. Will the Minister guarantee that the registration work being done with schools will continue? Hopefully, that is an important means of engaging our young people in the democratic process.

The motion calls on the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland:

“to retain and fund adequately all regional offices”.

I wholeheartedly support that view. Democracy has to begin at a local level. Therefore, regional offices that understand the regions they cover are essential. I wholeheartedly support the motion as proposed by my colleagues.

4.30 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I rise to support the motion but not the amendment and, in doing so, apologise for missing the start of this important debate. It is important, because we are talking about an institution whose key functions include voter registration and the accurate return of election results. We expect it to do that informed by a set of values, including accuracy, impartiality, professionalism, efficiency and, dare I say when, sometimes, tetchy candidates are prowling the halls waiting for the declarations, by displaying endless patience and courtesy. Have we any issues with the Electoral Office in those regards? Perhaps we could test its delivery against performance, as reported by the Chief Electoral Officer in his latest annual report for 2014-15, in which he makes reference to no fewer than 22 targets and development objectives. The only failures — there were only a couple — were reported against third-party failure and, therefore, beyond the control of the Electoral Office. Maybe we could benchmark that against the performance of the last Executive and their failures with regard to the social investment fund, childcare —

Mr Storey: You should speak to Danny Kennedy.

Mr Nesbitt: —and the development of Maze/Long Kesh, which is nothing to do with Danny Kennedy, as the Member will well know.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind Members to address their comments through the Chair, please.

Mr Nesbitt: Certainly, Mr Deputy Speaker. Through the Chair, I ask the man speaking from a sedentary position to check his facts.

The number one target amongst the 22 related to getting more electors onto the electoral rota, and they succeeded in spades, with a five-figure sum. So, I think that they are doing a pretty good job, which raises the question, “Why change?”. It is something the Northern Ireland Office is not very forthcoming about. I stood with my colleague Philip Smith in Newtownards, a couple of weeks ago, in support of the staff of the Newtownards office. They reported a huge lack of information flow from the NIO about why it wanted to change. One thing that was made clear was that we do things differently from Great Britain. If that is the argument, surely we should pack up the devolved institutions and go back to direct rule from Westminster. That is no argument.

The second question is, “Will people travel to Belfast to register to vote?”. It is hard enough to get them to Newtownards. Then, the argument is, “Perhaps they will go online”. The anecdotal evidence from England is that they need more staff because people are filling in their online forms inaccurately and need staff to contact them to point out the inaccuracies and walk them through completing the forms. As we have heard from other Members, Internet access is a huge issue in parts of Northern Ireland, particularly the rural parts. So, we are effectively, de facto, potentially disenfranchising a large section of our people.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. He is highlighting that we should ask the question, “What is the problem with our current system?”. We do not have enough young people registering. A solution is online registration, but to switch wholly to that, and solving one problem, do

we not risk creating a new one for older people and rural people?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: The Member has a point: online registration is fine if you have the facilities and the capacity to do it. So, we need to have broadband access right across Northern Ireland. We also have to take into account the fact that some people might not want to do it. I understand that the PSNI's firearms and explosives branch, for example, wants future licences for firearms to be exclusively online. This may, potentially, exclude people, whose enjoyment comes from having firearms, from that sport. It should be a choice, not something that is compulsory.

Of course, the question, "Is this all about saving money?" has been raised. Let us look at the 2014-15 returns. The Electoral Office is a £2.3 million business. More than half of that money goes on the staff — basic pay, overtime, employers' national insurance and accrued superannuation and the rest. We are told that there are no plans for redundancies at this stage. The Ards staff have been told that they will be invited to travel to Belfast. So, where are the savings? It is not in that half of the pie.

Will it be in telecommunications, printing, stationery and postage? The latter three add up to £200,000 a year. Will it be in premises? Premises are only just more expensive than printing, stationery and postage at £243,000, which includes headquarters, and the figures are not disaggregated to tell us about Ards and the other subregional centres that are under threat.

What is clear is that, if there are savings, they are small beer, but at a huge risk. Target 1, which I mentioned, saw 15,993 more electors on the December 2014 register than in the previous year. Without clarity from the Northern Ireland Office, the savings from the proposed closures could be as little as £1 for every new registered voter. The risk, of course, is that, under a new regime, you get no new voters, and the electoral roll not only ceases to grow but starts to shrink.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Nesbitt: Let us keep it impartial, professional, efficient and cost-effective, but above all let us make it easy for voters to register and exercise their democratic right.

Ms Archibald: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion and the amendment tabled by my colleagues and me. It is important that we have local accountability for the administration of elections in the North, which could be achieved by bringing the functions of the electoral offices under the control of the Executive.

At a time when we seek to devolve more powers to local government to improve delivery and accountability at a local level, it seems a contradiction to be seeking to centralise the services of the electoral offices. The reasons for and benefits of decentralised public services are well known: improved efficiency and effectiveness by having services delivered by regional managers. This, of course, depends on the professional ability of those managers, and I am sure that many of us in the Chamber would undoubtedly speak highly of the quality professional service that we receive from our local electoral offices,

which benefit from years of experience in delivering their services.

On the other hand, centralised services such as those being proposed are often criticised for rigidity in procedures, longer decision-making times and a lack of ability to adapt to local situations and needs. As much as any other public service, electoral services should be delivered at a local level. The ability of individuals to exercise their democratic rights in exercising their right to vote could be undermined by the closure of local electoral offices.

Although I am certainly in favour of making use of technology to improve and streamline services and service delivery, this should ultimately go hand in hand with human resources. Some services — Members have already touched on this — currently delivered by electoral offices at a local level could not be delivered online, for example the processing of photo ID applications at a local office. It is not reasonable to expect individuals from right across the North to travel to Belfast to access this service. It is vital that, no matter what, the Electoral Office maintains its connection with local communities and schools to ensure that individuals are, in fact, able to obtain IDs and postal proxy votes and registrations as required.

There is no substitute, however, for a local office that gives individuals a personal service. My party colleague Mr McKay has already given an example, but I will give another. On election day in May this year, I was contacted at around 7.00 pm by a constituent who told me that her husband's postal vote had not arrived. Despite being an elderly gentleman in poor health, he had gone along to the polling station to vote, but was told that he could not vote because he was on the postal list. I contacted the Electoral Office and was informed that his postal vote had definitely been sent out. To cut a long story short, over the next hour it transpired that the gentleman's postal vote had gone to his son's house, which is right next door to his own house, and they had the same name. I contacted the Electoral Office again and was told that it would not be accepted at the polling station but could be hand delivered to our local electoral office in Derry. That is exactly what the gentleman did. He exercised his democratic right to vote, and it is unlikely that that would have been the case if the only electoral office in the North was in Belfast.

In conclusion, I encourage everyone to respond to the consultation once it opens and to put forward the arguments for maintaining local electoral offices. I am happy to speak in support of the motion and the amendment, and urge all Members to do the same.

Mr Irwin: Like many Members, I am concerned by the proposal to close electoral offices across the Province. As someone who operates a busy constituency office, I know that our love of elections in Northern Ireland means that having an electoral office within a suitable distance is vital. I have found it very useful, especially when constituents wish to register to vote or change their address. They have the convenient option of travelling a few miles to Banbridge in order to speak directly to an Electoral Office staff member. That has been a tremendous benefit to people who, for example, wish to obtain an electoral identity card. They can do so at their local electoral office, where their picture can be taken free of charge.

Mr E McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Irwin: I will, yes.

Mr E McCann: Does the Member agree that a one-off opportunity for the Electoral Office workers to press home their point with the British authorities will arise this Thursday and Friday, when they will be expected to work late into the night to deliver the verdict on the European referendum? Were they to decide — I urge them from this place so to decide — to take industrial action on that day, would that not do more to bring attention to the validity of their case than anything that might be said or done in the House? A nil-all result in the European referendum would be a big win for the Electoral Office workers and for all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute added to his speaking time.

Mr Irwin: OK, and the Member has made his point.

It is also useful that proving address or identity details can be done in an electoral office setting to save sending important documents by post and being without the documentation for a time prior to its return. This is made possible only by having an electoral office in the locality and face-to-face contact with Electoral Office staff.

We are all aware of the many deadlines that exist in the run-up to an election and how confusing this can be for the public. It is when deadlines are drawing to a close that the local electoral office really proves its value. I can only imagine the sheer number of people who will be left without a vote in circumstances when they have, for one reason or another, left registration or applying for a postal vote to the last minute. I fear that a trip for someone in Newtownhamilton to the central electoral office in Belfast with, perhaps, a registration form, particularly if that person is working or caring for someone or, indeed, if that person was elderly, would pose a significant problem.

I feel that the closure proposals will affect people's democratic participation. That should be avoided. The Electoral Office in Northern Ireland has done tremendous work, along with elected representatives, to increase participation in the democratic process. We have seen considerable increases in registration due to various awareness campaigns. It would surely be a retrograde step to make access to the very service that ensures the right to vote much more difficult.

On that basis, I fully support the motion in asking that the closure proposal be halted and that the future of electoral offices across the Province be secured to ensure that participation in the democratic process is encouraged and facilitated through easily accessible localised services.

Ms Lockhart: I support the motion that my colleagues put forward today. As someone who represents the Upper Bann constituency, which includes Banbridge, where one of the electoral offices is located, I support the retention of these offices in local areas.

We have all been through an election and recognised the value that these offices bring to our constituents. People come to my constituency office daily asking for information about voting registration, postal votes and ID cards, and I believe that having that face-to-face contact in an office that people can travel to by public transport or by their own methods is vital. It is important that we, as elected representatives, encourage voter registration. I believe that, if we strip our local towns of these offices, it will do nothing to ensure that young people and others who live in our constituencies take that step to register.

As a young person just recently elected, I think that we need to do more to engage.

The entire electoral registration system certainly needs reform, but that does not in any way mean that we strip local towns of that particular service.

4.45 pm

I believe that online voter registration should be improved, enhanced and introduced in Northern Ireland, because I think that there is section of the community that would benefit from it, but I recognise that we cannot solely leave it to online voter registration because of issues around rural constituencies and access to broadband. I recognise that there needs to be reform and that we need to change how we do things, but that certainly does not in any way mean stripping areas of these offices.

This morning, I took the opportunity to contact our local office. In the Upper Bann constituency, 85,753 people are registered. At the recent election, I noted with interest that over 12,776 people were registered under late registration. It is vital that we note those statistics and recognise that the offices are servicing those people in the best way possible. I want to commend the staff who work out of the Banbridge office. They are fantastic. They do a very good job of servicing the people and us as elected representatives and of handling elections. I want to support wholeheartedly the efforts that are being made to retain the services. We also think of what they do around going into schools and encouraging our young people to get on to the register and exercise their democratic right.

The most important thing that people will do in this society is cast their vote for a party that they believe aligns with their policies. We have to make it easy for people to be able to do that. To do that, we should be retaining our local offices. Four full-time staff and nine part-time staff in the Banbridge office could lose their job or be required to drive to Belfast, which would impact on their family life. We talk about encouraging and enhancing family life in the home. Asking people to do this is unreasonable.

I call on those who are making this decision to think long and hard about it, do what is right by the people of Northern Ireland and do not always think of the small amount of money that they may save — may save — if they proceed down this route.

Mr O'Dowd: Has this decision been taken by the Electoral Office to improve democracy? No, it has not. It has been taken because of austerity. The NIO has cut funding to the Electoral Office. The office is then in a position in which it is trying to recoup savings out of what is already a limited budget. Mr Nesbitt read out some of the budget headlines and asked where those savings would be made. Talk of turning to a fully electronic system, where people register online, have their postal and proxy votes online and have their photo IDs processed online, is all a side issue. This is about the Conservative Government cutting funding to the NIO, and the NIO cutting funding to the Electoral Office. It has nothing to do with democracy.

In fact, what it does is impede democracy because, as many Members have already said, it is becoming more and more difficult to vote in this society. It is becoming more and more difficult to get on the register. Once you are on the register, it becomes more difficult to get the proper ID. Once you have achieved all of that, you have to go through

the process of voting in an archaic way compared with how it is done in many other societies. The motion is about protecting democracy and the right of people to register, to have photographic ID and to be able to vote.

Many contributors have quite rightly commended the work of the regional electoral offices. I have to say this: despite their very valiant efforts, not enough is done to ensure that people are on the register. There is not enough engagement with post-primary schools. There is not enough electoral registration and proactive canvassing to ensure that people are on the register.

During the most recent Assembly elections, in my area, when we called for electoral ID clinics and registration clinics to be held, we were turned down because, even at that stage, they did not have enough staff and resources. Those clinics went ahead, and because they were organised by local community groups, several hundred people were registered. Those community groups came together and did the work that should have been carried out by the Electoral Office. Several hundred people, who otherwise would have been denied, had the option to vote. So, I commend the work of those in the offices, but let us be very clear: even now, with those regional offices, there is not enough being done to ensure that people are on the register and that citizens have the democratic right to vote. The closure of these offices will not assist that; it will actively make the situation worse.

When Catherine Seeley and I joined the picket line outside the office in Banbridge when staff took industrial action, the staff came forward with alternatives. They said, "Why don't we share accommodation with the local council? Why is there not more imagination put into this, because the savings that they are trying to achieve are through leases and rents in the regional offices". So, the staff standing on that picket line were being more imaginative than the Electoral Office in this case. They wanted to keep the offices local. They recognised that there had to be savings made, but they also recognised that the key work that they carry out needs to be carried out locally and people need to have access to it.

That brings me to the amendment. What is there to fear from the Executive pursuing the transfer of functions of the Electoral Office? I remember during negotiations a long time ago, we brought forward the proposal that the transfer of policing and justice powers should be brought forward. Did I or any of our delegation know the fine detail of that? No. Were the t's crossed and the i's dotted? No. After that, there was negotiation around what that framework would look like and what inbuilt protections there would be.

Mr Ford is concerned about the independence of such a move. That independence would have to be protected. How will you protect it? The legislation to transfer the powers would have to come through the Assembly, so there are inbuilt protections for everyone involved.

The SDLP are going to oppose the amendment. I am not sure why. Do they not have confidence in their ability as legislators to ensure that the powers and governance of the electoral system are protected —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I am nearly out of time. As legislators around the Chamber, we are the defenders of democracy in this society. We are elected to participate in democracy —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: The transfer of powers to this Assembly is the way forward. Mr Nesbitt said that the NIO was not very forthcoming in its response —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: — but Mr Nesbitt opposes the amendment. Mr Nesbitt should support the amendment in that case.

Mr Aiken: I support the motion but not the amendment. I am new to the electoral process, and the support that the office in Newtownabbey gave was absolutely invaluable to me as a candidate and to my election team, which was able to understand a lot more about the electoral process and work in South Antrim. It has helped considerably my constituents for the Assembly elections and the forthcoming EU referendum. It has been absolutely important for people to be able to register and discuss registration face to face.

It was interesting to listen to the discussion today about some of the issues and costs. If some of the costs are less than a quarter of a million pounds when looking at potential housing for electoral offices, the offer of using council facilities is an excellent idea, and it is one that I encourage the Northern Ireland Office to look at.

We know that we have significant problems with broadband provision. If South Antrim is anything to go by, it will be very difficult for online provision to be an appropriate way of doing things in the future. So, the question I have is this: why are we doing this? What is the practical value of doing this? What is the problem creating instability in the system? What savings are likely to be made? Why can we not oppose this? We should reconsider it. The series of closures appears to be contrary to the regional provision of our democratic process.

Mr Storey: I commend my colleagues for tabling the motion, which I support and which follows on from a promise made to staff in the electoral offices that we would take this issue to the House. I think that is to be welcomed.

I want to make a few comments about the amendment. I notice that Mr McKay made reference to the fact that we should go for the amendment because it would ensure local accountability and that, because the NIO is not accountable, there are all these problems. However, the same Member has no difficulty in supporting the Parades Commission — the most unaccountable organisation in Northern Ireland. In a few weeks' time, he will trip in through the door of the Parades Commission to tell unaccountable, unelected individuals his woes, which he will want them to act upon, and then we will not know the reasons why they did certain things. Of course, double standards know no bounds sometimes in these issues, so let us not get carried away too much with us being champions for accountability. We need a wee bit of consistency on that.

Mr McKay: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I am happy to give way.

Mr McKay: I point out to the Member that we are more than happy to see the devolution and transfer of powers for parades as well. If the Member's party would like to hold further discussions with us about that, we would welcome sitting down with you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Storey: I will be happy the day on which the Parades Commission is placed where it rightfully belongs: in a Sadducee's grave from which there is no resurrection. I assure you that that is a day that should come very quickly, because it is the most useless organisation this country has ever had, and I can tell you that we have had some useless organisations.

I turn now to Mr Nesbitt, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. Maybe those two things are —

Mr Nesbitt: That was very good.

Mr Storey: He wanted me to rewrite history and say that somehow Danny Kennedy was not a member of the Executive when he made reference to the fact that there was a previous Executive. I am glad that he was only giving the House advice on the Electoral Office today and was not giving us advice on how to run elections. I am also glad that he was not the director of an electoral campaign.

Mr Nesbitt made some valid points. This is an issue of concern: the removal of a service that has already been reduced. In my constituency — I referred to this — we lost the electoral office in Ballymoney. Now they are proposing to take the one out of Ballymena, even though there was a proposal on the table, as the Member for North Antrim referred to, about the office accommodation that could be offered in Braid. I hope that that will still be seriously considered because, if it is about savings, there are savings that can be made.

Let me conclude by paying tribute to the staff in the Electoral Office. Yes, I would like to see votes counted a bit quicker; maybe that would reduce the overall burden. I still think we need a quicker process for counting our votes. However, that does not take away from the professionalism and independence of the staff. That is an important issue, because let us remember that, in the past, there were those who were quite happy to abuse the electoral system. That is why we need to ensure that, in Northern Ireland, we have an independent, robust and accountable electoral system, which is what we receive from the Electoral Office. I support the motion but not the amendment.

Mr Allister: An accessible electoral office is an indispensable part of a workable democratic process because it is there to facilitate those who wish to enquire about registration, to facilitate registration and to return postal ballots etc. If you draw that out and centralise it to one point, you diminish the interface between the electorate and the functioning of the election, and that is a retrograde step. This, therefore, is a retrograde step, and it is one that the Northern Ireland Office should certainly not proceed with, because it is going to diminish the electoral experience in Northern Ireland, which is not in people's interests. So, I totally back the motion.

I think the amendment is wholly misguided, because the Electoral Office and its affairs are excepted matters.

It oversees elections not just to this House but to Westminster, and it would be an absurd proposition if oversight of those elections, as part of the functions of the Electoral Office, were transferred to this devolved House when it oversees elections to the sovereign Parliament as well. There is good reason why this is an excepted matter and that is how it must remain; but that is not good reason

for diminishing the service and making it less efficient and less effective.

5.00 pm

In the case of Ballymena, we have lost so much. We will lose the courthouse if the last Minister has his way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Allister: We have lost many big manufacturing firms, and we will now diminish the town further by losing the electoral office. I trust that the offer by the local council to facilitate the service will be taken and that this facility will be saved.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Members for a very robust debate. I have taken down a few notes but I have only five minutes and I want to make my own points as well.

Sinn Féin decided to table the amendment because it believes that the Executive could carry out the functions of the Electoral Office. This would ensure the local accountability, integrity and independence that we need for the provision of electoral services. I am deeply concerned by the thought that we could lose our franchise in rural constituencies. If anybody thinks for a minute that this move will make it easier for people to vote, they are very misguided.

Points have been made about electoral ID clinics, schools outreach and postal and proxy votes. I will mention two groups that have not been mentioned. First, we have a very vibrant foreign national community in and around south Tyrone and, this year, an individual from the South Tyrone Empowerment programme was up every day with busloads of people to get them registered to vote and to get their electoral ID. Portuguese people do not need a passport to travel within the EU. They have an ID card that allows them to do that, but they cannot use that ID card to vote with. They all have the ID card but they cannot use it to vote with and we have put that issue to the ambassador. They do not have passports, so they absolutely need electoral ID. So, there is a very vibrant foreign national community that needs to have access to those offices to get their electoral ID.

Many of you talked about schools outreach, but young people who leave school at 16 are not part of that. With those who leave school at 16 or 17, there is always a flurry, when they turn 18 and 19, to get registered because they realise weeks or days before an election that they are not registered to vote and that they will miss out. Those two groups are very strong users of the service.

Like many others, I was on the picket line in Omagh. I want to bring to Members' attention that the Omagh office services, as others have said, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and West Tyrone. People from Blacklion and Garrison will not go to Belfast to leave in a postal or proxy vote form, and they will not go to Belfast for an electoral ID card. Those people will end up not getting the opportunity to vote.

Many Members will remember a very infamous previous British Secretary of State by the name of Jeff Rooker, who brought in PPS 14, which then became PPS 21. I would say that Theresa Villiers knows as much about rural Ireland as Jeff Rooker and cares even less than he did. I do not believe that this is an improvement in the service.

I believe that we absolutely need to ensure that we have local accountability. Having people working in local offices and having the ability to access a service locally is crucial to our ability to cast our vote and use our democratic right. We have a very short space of time to be involved in the consultation and we need to ensure that our voices are heard across the board.

The amendment is important, and, while we can call on the NIO to do more, the NIO, really and truly, is not that bothered about whether somebody from Garrison gets their postal vote. We need these services to be transferred to the Executive to enable people to have the ability to run these offices in a very fair, impartial and accountable way and to bring the decision-making back into the North of Ireland and outside the NIO.

I am very agitated and anxious about the motion. I spoke about the issue when we were returned as MLAs in Omagh. Like others, the Omagh staff made the point that Omagh council had offered them the use of its premises if that would help to save money. Those are the kind of creative ideas that we need to look at. We need to ensure that the offices remain open.

The amendment is important. We need to ensure that we are not back here again, in five, 10 or 15 years, debating the same thing. We need those functions to be transferred to the Assembly to protect the future of rural constituents.

Mrs Cameron: I support the motion and would like to thank my party colleague Paul Frew for bringing it to the House.

Each and every one of us in the House is here as a result of the democratic process. We have been returned by our peers to represent the public interest and ensure that their voices are heard in the development of legislation. I for one — I am certain that I am not alone — am extremely grateful that we have the privilege of living in a democratic society, and I recognise how fortunate we are that we have that freedom.

Since its inception in 1972, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland has been integral to facilitating the democratic process for the residents of Northern Ireland. It has provided a vital and fundamental role in ensuring that people can easily engage and participate in and contribute to the process. I have no doubt that, without the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, we would not have the same number of people registered to vote, nor would elections be managed as efficiently and as impartially.

I was, therefore, greatly concerned to learn of the plans to close the six regional offices that have provided such a vital community service to so many. I believe that, if those plans proceed, we will see a decrease in voter registration, a lack of access to electoral identity cards, a fall in those participating via postal or proxy voting and, ultimately, an increase in voter apathy. With electoral turnout widely in the region of 50%, we must do all that we can to ensure that we make political engagement as easy and as transparent as possible in an attempt to increase that figure and prevent any further decline.

I appreciate that the Electoral Office, like so many Departments, faces increasing financial constraints, and we must make savings to live within our means, but I feel that the closure of the offices will be detrimental. I similarly appreciate that it is moving towards digital voter

registration in line with the rest of the UK, which, I hope, will encourage more people to register to vote. We live in a generation that is led by technology, and the ability to register to vote via the Internet, at any time of day or night, should be embraced for its convenience and accessibility. I sincerely hope that that will encourage more of the younger generation to participate, as, at times, they appear somewhat disengaged with politics.

Conversely, in my constituency office, the vast number of calls requesting information and guidance on voter registration and postal and proxy voting come from the older generation. I am concerned that the closure of local offices will mean that those people will simply not vote, as the once-familiar process will have changed greatly. There are, of course, the inevitable jobs losses that could come with the office closures and the impact that that would have on those individuals must not be forgotten.

As I am sure that all Members did, I recently received a letter from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Ben Wallace MP, which acknowledged the importance of maintaining the ability of the electorate to exercise their democratic right. I hope that Mr Wallace has recognised the strength of feeling within Northern Ireland to maintain local services and will reflect that when it comes the time to make his decision on the future of local offices. Mr Wallace's letter went on to refer to the possibility of closer working with local councils to continue to provide a local electoral service. I sincerely hope that, should the worst-case scenario be arrived at and the local offices close, at the very least, provision can be made for the service to be maintained, for instance at the local council offices, and that the highly experienced Electoral Office staff can be redeployed to fill those roles. I was heartened that Mr Wallace refuted the speculation that electoral services would be available only in Belfast and hope that efforts are focused on retaining a local service.

The central principle of today's motion is protecting the democratic rights of the people of Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge the need to reform the Electoral Office to save money, but the closure of the local offices is not the way forward. I implore the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office to maintain and protect the future of these offices to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland continue to avail themselves of the same unparalleled access to the democratic process that we have enjoyed for the past 44 years.

I will move on to some of the comments by other Members in the debate. I welcome the fact that so many Members have seen fit to speak in the debate; it has certainly been well contributed to. The proposer, Tom Buchanan, led off the debate. He stated that he was not supporting the amendment and that he wished to work with the Secretary of State and the NIO to retain the six electoral offices. He referred to the declining turnout at elections in Northern Ireland. He said that he had no difficulty with the introduction of online services, but that they needed to be run in conjunction with local electoral offices. He also asked who would promote the work in the community and schools, as is done currently. He spoke of the risk to public confidence from online registration; we are all aware of what happened recently in England in regard to that.

Daithí McKay moved the amendment and spoke about the Electoral Office from a public rep's point of view. He spoke

about being powerless in the situation, and that is where his party's proposed amendment comes in.

Robin Swann also spoke about the local office in North Antrim and the fact that Ballymena is being closed before the consultation is finished. He praised Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, which has worked hard for a solution, without joy. He talked about the complete collapse of the online registration system in England last week. He did not support the amendment. He said that money should be found, at least temporarily, to ensure that the Ballymena office remained open.

Daniel McCrossan supported the motion and said that the SDLP was standing four-square behind the staff of the offices. He spoke of his concern for rural areas, asked about the provision of broadband services and talked about those who are not computer-literate. He said that there was a need to do more to encourage the public to vote.

David Ford spoke about his relationship with the local office in Newtownabbey, but he stressed the need for realism in the proposals. He also spoke about the lack of proper consultation. He talked about the reduction in numbers on the register and the need to keep them up. He said that the motion was unrealistic and that we needed to face reality, but that we should insist on genuine consultation on the issue.

Sydney Anderson also spoke on the motion. He talked about the important role the Electoral Office plays in our democracy. He talked about the budget reduction of 25% and, as we all have, had something to say about his local office, in Banbridge this time. I think that everybody has had good reports of how helpful staff have been in each and every constituency.

Michaela Boyle spoke to the amendment. She had a clear message to the NIO that the six offices should not be closed. She talked about modern technology and broadband services in West Tyrone, or the lack thereof.

George Robinson also contributed. He worried about the reduction in local services and spoke about the importance and value of the local office. He said that to remove the service would be a false economy.

Mike Nesbitt was in support of the motion but not the amendment. He said that there was a huge lack of information flowing from the Newtownards office and questioned the change. He also questioned whether the public would travel to Belfast to register to vote, and I greatly doubt that too, with bus lanes. He also referred to proposals to move to a completely online process for firearms licensing, and how this will not work for all people.

Caoimhe Archibald questioned the logic of centralising the services and said that electoral services should be delivered at a local level. Some of the services would not be available online, and she gave an example of a constituent she had dealings with over the election period.

5.15 pm

William Irwin spoke of services such as getting an ID card and photographs taken for free, and of the Electoral Office's value.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member please draw her remarks to a close?

Mrs Cameron: I will indeed. He also spoke of the fear that votes will be lost through the proposed changes. He also spoke about the tremendous work of the Electoral Office in Northern Ireland, and I think that that is a good line to end on because we all have very good things to say about Electoral Office staff in particular.

I thank everybody for their contributions to the debate. I support the motion.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 35; Noes 49.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms Archibald, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mrs S Bradley, Mr Carroll, Ms Dillon, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr E McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrath, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Boyle and Mr McKay.

NOES

Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKee, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Palmer, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Smith, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Anderson and Mr Robinson.

Question accordingly negated.

5.30 pm

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the proposals from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to close regional electoral offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh; believes that this will damage democracy in Northern Ireland, lead to fewer people on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in local schools and communities; and calls on the Secretary of State, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to retain and fund adequately all regional offices currently under threat of closure.

Assembly Business

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was listed to ask a question to the Minister of Finance. Unfortunately, a family emergency took me away from the House. I apologise to the House for not being in my place during the Finance Minister's Question Time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you for relaying that to the House. I hope that all is well on the domestic scene.

Adjourned at 5.31 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 June 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Retirement of the Clerk/Chief Executive

Mr Speaker: Members, today is our last sitting before the Clerk/Chief Executive, Trevor Reaney, retires this Friday. Although I have been working with Trevor closely for only a few weeks, I cannot allow today to pass without the Assembly recognising his contribution.

I am the third Speaker whom Trevor has worked with during his almost eight years in post. I know that he has been held in very high esteem by my predecessors, his colleagues in other legislatures and the staff in the secretariat. Of course, in recent days, he was officially recognised by Her Majesty The Queen. In my short time in office, I have gained a fuller appreciation of the pressures and responsibilities that fall on the Clerk. Over the last eight years, amid a number of periods of political deadlock and disagreement, Trevor has been a steadying influence, keeping this institution in readiness for future developments and supporting and advising the Speaker and the Assembly Commission on some very sensitive and challenging issues at very difficult times.

Trevor has also been instrumental in advocating changes and improvements at a time of challenging budgets, with a focus on how important this place is to the people whom we represent. As Clerk/Chief Executive of the Assembly, and during his time as chief executive of the Policing Board, Trevor has been in key positions throughout the development of our political process. I know that he will personally be reassured that he is leaving us at a time when we are free to continue the business of expressing political differences in the Chamber without the stability of the organisation any longer being in any doubt.

There is no doubt that Trevor's personality has aided him in his success. He has remained calm even on the worst days here. I have yet to hear of any example of him uttering a cross word.

He is known for his support of colleagues and I know of his concern for the welfare and interests of his staff. That all speaks well for Trevor's fundamental decency and, for that, he will be much missed. While Trevor is retiring from the Assembly, I know he will continue to be active in other ways, in particular, in his charity work, his community work and his church involvement. On behalf of the House and the staff of the Assembly, I want to express our thanks and gratitude to Trevor for his services over the years. We give Trevor, his wife, Liz, and his family the warmest wishes for whatever the future holds.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Like you, Mr Speaker, I do not want this moment to pass without having the opportunity to say thank you to Trevor and to pay my own tribute, not just for his work in this job but in his previous role as the chief executive of the Policing Board, when I was a member there, and as chief executive of Craigavon Borough Council.

Trevor, you have built a reputation for being fair and honourable and, in this particular line of work, that is not always easy to achieve. You were present when I was sworn in as Minister of the Environment, Enterprise Minister on two occasions, Finance Minister and, latterly, as First Minister — we have been through quite a lot together, Trevor.

I speak not just for myself, but for many colleagues who are here and those who have been Members of the House, when I say that we are grateful for all that you have done and the service that you have given. I know that dealing with politicians is not the easiest of jobs and, with responsibility for 108, the task is multiplied many times. However, in all of that time, you have carried out your duties with great diligence and professionalism. No one who has ever dealt with you could fail to be impressed by the manner in which you have approached your responsibilities and served us all.

Trevor, you have been in post for as long as this period of stable devolution has been in place and you have always proven yourself to be a rock of stability and a sound source of wise advice. In the past eight years, we have faced many difficulties, crises and challenges but your presence has been a constant throughout. As First Minister of the Assembly, I want to pay tribute to you and to thank you for that stability. As the Speaker said, although you are retiring from this post, I know that it is not the last that we will see of you in public life, and we wish you well. Thank you for all that you have done. I look forward to working with Lesley, your successor. She has big shoes to fill. Those of us who come after people with big shoes know what that is like. I wish her well and we look forward to working with her. I wish you every success.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: On behalf of the SDLP, here in the Assembly and more generally, I wish Trevor all the best. On one level, Trevor's career demonstrates that he is a glutton for punishment because he jumped from the frying pan of Craigavon Borough Council into the fire of the Policing Board. Then, at risk of mixing my metaphors even more, once bitten, twice shy, he jumped from the frying pan of the Policing Board into the fire of the Northern Ireland

Assembly. In that way, he was a glutton for punishment, but, in a much more important way, Trevor demonstrates commitment to public service. There have never been harder places of public service than councils, the Policing Board and the Northern Ireland Assembly. In my opinion, the highest responsibility in public service that Trevor Reaney held was with the Policing Board during the implementation of Patten and the new beginning to policing. In my view, since 1998, that has been the single biggest paradigm shift, and Trevor Reaney was part and parcel of that.

Of course, in all of that, he needed a partner. It is not for me to tell the story, but there is a story, as Trevor knows, in relation to the age at which he became engaged and subsequently married. Maybe before the end of this week, he will share that story, because I think it is for him to share, not for me to tell. He has had a partner and wife for many, many, many years, of which many of us would be envious, I am sure. On behalf of the SDLP, I offer him and his wife, Liz, every success in their future endeavours.

Ms Ruane: I echo what our Speaker, First Minister and, indeed, Alex Attwood, have said. I am speaking for Sinn Féin, because Martin McGuinness is over at a football match that is happening tonight somewhere. Martin asked me to pass on my best wishes and thanks to Trevor for the enormous work that he has done. I wish Trevor all the best in his retirement, but I do not believe it will be a real retirement because I have already heard about some of the work that he plans to be doing. I have enjoyed very much working with Trevor. I did not work with him on the Policing Board, because he had left it when I joined it — he had left it to come here — but I worked with him very closely on the Assembly Commission. He showed tremendous leadership in very difficult times on the Assembly Commission. He played a key role in helping to establish the first women's caucus, which other legislatures are very envious of. I worked with him on the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association. Indeed, at one of those meetings, Trevor got very sad news about his father and headed up the road; his father had passed away.

I have been working with him on the Speaker's team. We had our last meeting, this morning, with Trevor. I know that this is his last week here and that this is his last day in the Chamber, so I am sure it is a bittersweet day. I am sure you are looking forward to your retirement, but I am sure it is also a very sad day.

I hope your family enjoy having time with you. We often met in corridors, late at night, as we wondered whether we could book hotels, as business was going on until two or three in the morning. Trevor was always one of the people to go to. I congratulate him on his recent honours and on the work that he has done in the public service, and I very much look forward to working with him in the future. I have no doubt our paths will cross again.

Mr Swann: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party Members — current and past — who have served and known Trevor, I thank you, sir, for your guidance. Indulge me, Mr Speaker, I do not want to speak through the Chair, but to Trevor. I thank you for your guidance and support in the time that you have been here and for the neutrality, professionalism and understanding that you have brought to this place and its Members. That steadying influence, within the Chamber and outside it, has helped many a Member through a difficult time. It is the personal

understanding that you brought to your role that has been truly valuable in this place.

Your charity work has been mentioned. I know that that is something that has been, and is, dear to you, and it is something that you intend putting a lot more of your time and effort into. We wish you well as you take forward those worthy and worthwhile endeavours, and we wish you well in your community works. Much has been made of Trevor as a public servant, but it is the work that you have done behind the scenes that has been a great benefit to Northern Ireland and this place. That is why we think that you were richly and well rewarded in Her Majesty's Birthday Honours with an award. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, we wish you well, not on your retirement, because we know you are not retiring, but in your next endeavours. We hope that you have a safe and enjoyable long life to enjoy that.

Mr Ford: I have heard it said that Trevor Reaney is not the kind of person who appreciates being made a fuss of. Therefore, I probably should speak briefly and not repeat everything that has already been said, so as not to add to his embarrassment. However, I am delighted that he will be suffering a certain amount of embarrassment at present due to the positive words that have been said from all round the Chamber. In particular, I am very much reminded of the comments that Alex Attwood made about his role in the Policing Board and the crucial role that was performed there before he came to the Assembly. That was at a time when life was not particularly easy, and things were not terribly smooth.

Those of us who have been here since 1998, as Alex and I have been, will recognise the very significant achievements that have been made by the secretariat in general in the last few years under Trevor's leadership and the excellent work that he has carried out, building on a career of dedicated public service over very many years elsewhere.

10.45 am

I have had the pleasure of knowing Trevor and Liz in a slightly different way — as mutual parents of students at Queen's. One of the things that I find amazing about Trevor is that, whether at that kind of informal occasion, when you are rejoicing in the successes of your children, or during the work that he has done in very difficult times here, he has been relentlessly cheerful, relentlessly positive and always optimistic in looking for the way in which the best good can be done for everyone. That is something that does not sit easily with many public servants, but it is an exemplar that we have seen in Trevor's work here. I was delighted that, just last week, Anne and I had the opportunity to have a brief conversation with Trevor and Liz to congratulate him on the award of the CBE, which was a richly deserved recognition of a full career in public service, not just in this place. We trust that he will have a long and very happy retirement in which to enjoy it.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, to move the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Ó Muilleoir (*The Minister of Finance*)]

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): Mora duit ar maidin. My good wishes to Trevor as well, and, if there is a football indulgence this morning, I wish the Northern Ireland team well and the Irish team well for tomorrow. I believe William Humphrey gave his ticket to Martin McGuinness — no greater love has any man. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 2) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I call Ms Sinéad Bradley to move the motion.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. That is an error on our part. It is being moved by Mr Justin McNulty.

Mr Speaker: As this is the first opportunity for Mr McNulty to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption — that is, unless the Member chooses to make controversial remarks.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you clarify whether it is in order for a Member to move a motion to which their name is not attached?

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while the point of order is checked.

I ask Members to resume their seats. The point of order raised by Lord Morrow is upheld. I call Sinéad Bradley to move the motion.

Ms S Bradley: I beg to move

This Assembly notes that 42% of premises in rural areas do not have access to the proposed universal service obligation speed; further notes the urgent need for better provision of broadband and expansion of mobile phone coverage in rural areas; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop further proposals to ensure that Northern Ireland has a modern telecommunications network that enables existing businesses to compete and to ensure that all areas are attractive for foreign direct investment, including our rural communities.

As expected, I have not come prepared to move the motion. However, the SDLP was confident in putting the motion forward. As was the case for many Members in the House, during our campaign and canvass, access to good, reliable quality broadband was repeatedly brought up on many doorsteps, particularly in rural areas.

I will cite one example that comes to mind from my own canvass. I met a young girl who had a great entrepreneurial spirit and was very eager to convert what was essentially a family garage into a potential business. Speaking to her, it was clear to me and others that simple barriers to business promotion, like lack of access to broadband, were, in fact, acting as real barriers to growth. She had gone to the lengths of costing out the possibility of having to change the rating structure for her garage for change of use. All that aside and even though she had a very sound business case, I was disappointed to learn that she made the decision not to go ahead with that business proposal purely based on the fact that she could not compete with others within the sector without access to good and reliable broadband.

On returning to the SDLP group, when we were having our discussions about how canvasses had gone and what the messages were on the ground, it quickly came to light

that there is a clear demand across some pockets of urban areas that have yet to be serviced and, particularly across rural areas, that broadband is not accessible and is not there when we need it, which is hampering the betterment of our economy and local economies.

When I spoke to others, I realised that there has been a change in culture. Access to broadband is something that family units almost expect as a utility now. Long gone are the days when it was listed alongside electricity and telephone lines. Broadband is now something we look at when we are using curriculum structures for doing homework. There is a growing demand for it, especially for the entertainment factor it brings. Many households across Northern Ireland will recognise the arguments that happen when one member of the family is on an iPad and there is a rush around the house to see who is doing what. It is about trying to prioritise whose access to broadband should trump the others'.

Many parents will recognise that argument. I think that it happens in many houses.

I suppose that, today, I would be particularly mindful of the potential blockages to economic growth that exist. Based on that, I urge all Members of the House not just to support the motion but to really look within their own remit. We talk about the House coming out of its silo mentality and thinking. I urge all Members, across their remit on different Committees to, please, look at opportunities to see where and when access to broadband can be increased and bettered.

Mr Storey: As I rise to contribute to the debate, I think that it is important that we should, at the outset, say that we all agree on the importance of having access to good broadband provision. Obviously, we come to the debate with another aspect, which is that it reminds us of the important role that the Government play. Often, this House and Governments generally do not get good press around what they do or do not do. However, when we come to the issue that we are debating, it is important that the Government play that role of stimulating, providing and assisting.

When we look at the many statistics, which I am sure that the Minister and others will undoubtedly give us on the issue in the House today, there is one fact that, I think, we would do well to remember, which is that, over the last eight years, something in the region of over £60 million has been invested by previous Executives, and will be committed to by this Executive, to help to provide for broadband provision. Undoubtedly, the figure will be given to us that something in the region of over 95% of Northern Ireland will be covered by broadband. That is all to be welcomed. All that is to be applauded. However, I concur with the comments made by the proposer of the motion, eventually.

I cannot resist saying that the Opposition really do need to have a look at Standing Orders. We have been told about this dynamic Opposition that we will have; that it will be incisive and really get to the issues. Well, we need to have a look at Standing Orders. I have to commend the Member in all that. Members in the House know that I say many things, but I never make them personal. I trust that Members understand that. I commend her in the comments that she made.

Today, across the House, many examples will be given from our constituencies. I can take you to the town of Bushmills in my constituency of North Antrim, where, in that rural area, a business that has to depend on clients in

the City of London cannot get the broadband speed that it requires to do its business in an accurate and appropriate way. In fact, it was suggested to that business that what it should do is move into a town such as Ballymoney, Coleraine or Ballycastle and then that service could be provided. In many ways, that undervalues the importance that we place on our rural communities and in having rural businesses. If we want to see, as I have no doubt that the Minister does, a spread of the financial benefit, it has to be not only in urban areas but in rural areas. I certainly encourage the Minister — I welcome the fact that he is here to speak on this issue — to continue to work with the providers. Let us remember that while the Government can stimulate and provide a certain degree of money, they still have to involve those providers. It is not good enough that they say, "Oh, but there are alternatives to having fibre. There is a lovely cabinet outside your door." In this particular case, my constituent can see the —

11.00 am

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that broadband is fundamental, particularly in rural areas, to developing business and taking it forward? In my area, we have many black spots where small businesses and rural communities cannot access the Internet. Does he accept that much more needs to be done, concentrating in particular on rural communities?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: I concur with the Member. With the exception of Members who are from the city of Belfast, there are very few Members who do not have a rural element to their constituency. Rural proofing was mentioned in the House yesterday. As a legislature, we are good at bringing forward legislation, but we have to ensure that those pieces of legislation are enacted and are fit for purpose so that, when it comes to an issue such as this, an obligation is placed not only on the Government to provide the services but on those who provide those services in the private sector. The private sector is always very good at coming knocking on the door of the Government and saying, "You have a duty to do this for us. You need to help us", and the leaders, plural, of the Opposition will tell us —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Storey: — that it is incumbent on the Government to provide. However, it is equally incumbent on the private sector, which has a responsibility in this area, to work more proactively to ensure that the areas where there are black spots are delivered for and that we continue to make progress on this vital issue.

Ms Archibald: Broadband provision and mobile phone network coverage, as everyone in the Chamber will recognise, are issues that we deal with regularly in our constituencies, probably more so in rural constituencies like mine of East Derry. I am speaking today in support of the motion. As the opposition parties have often been at pains to state to those of us in government, when you put forward things that we can support, we will support them, and that works both ways. A modern telecommunications network that enables existing business to compete and ensures that areas are attractive for foreign direct investment, including rural communities, is something that we can support.

Many telecommunications issues can be raised, but I will focus on a couple of things. First, I was disappointed that the motion referred only to ensuring that areas are attractive for foreign direct investment and enabling businesses to compete. We in Sinn Féin believe that, to grow our local economy, it is also vital to encourage indigenous entrepreneurship. While I accept that similar conditions apply to both, I feel that it is important to highlight the importance of indigenous enterprises. Encouraging start-ups and SMEs, as Mr Storey said, to remain in rural areas where they start their business is of the utmost importance to those local economies. It is important that SMEs have the infrastructure that allows them to get off the ground and grow, and that includes premises, transport and telecommunications. An online presence is vital to many small businesses, especially when they are starting off. Increasingly, social media is the method of choice for reaching customers and for marketing initiatives.

Secondly, for the purposes of attracting foreign direct investment, it goes without saying that a reliable and robust telecommunications network is essential. In fact, telecoms infrastructure ranks amongst the top factors in attracting companies to invest in an area, along with transport infrastructure and labour costs and, indeed, ahead of corporation tax, which is no surprise given that most companies, whether multinationals, public services or indigenous enterprises, are all looking at how they can use telecommunications to make businesses more efficient.

As we look towards a reduction in the corporation tax rate, which ultimately aims to encourage investment here, it is essential that we have all the other factors in place to attract investment and enable businesses to function effectively. That must, as the motion states, include all areas right across the North and not just the towns.

Finally, the right to request a connection to the universal service obligation speed would present a challenge in the North. Despite the numerous interventions to date to upgrade the networks, there are, as the motion states, still significant rural areas that do not have adequate or, indeed, any broadband coverage. Such programmes and initiatives that have been conducted or are ongoing are very welcome, but there is still some way to go.

In my constituency, pockets of areas that would not even be considered particularly rural or isolated have no broadband coverage. My parents live less than six miles from Coleraine, which is a fairly large town and the landing point for Project Kelvin, and a mile and a half from the main Coleraine to Derry road, yet they do not have broadband coverage. They have had to obtain satellite broadband, and that is the case for many businesses and residents in the Ballerin, Glenuillin and Drumsurn area. Alongside that, we often get complaints of failing mobile phone network coverage.

Like I said, the upgrading and access initiatives in place are welcome, including that for satellite broadband under the basic broadband scheme, although expectations must be managed. Those who believe that satellite broadband is an equivalent solution to conventional broadband may be disappointed, because, while it certainly does the basics, it must be noted that most packages come with data download limits that are comparatively restrictive. It will certainly cover things such as email and social media, but it means that streaming and other things that people

take for granted are not realistic, and it is, of course, more expensive.

I support the motion. Perhaps the further proposals that the signatories to the motion suggest the Minister develop should include a strategy to target, area by area, the so-called not spots and ensure providers funded under any future initiatives target those areas to support rural business development.

Mr Aiken: I also pass on my thanks to the Clerk for his hard work and congratulate him on his honour.

I support the SDLP's motion. I want to talk about a few of the issues, and I will echo a lot of the things that Members have already said.

Throughout Northern Ireland, the concept of a universal service obligation (USO) is in rural areas and, increasingly, in some urban areas a bit of a hollow joke. In my constituency, over 8,000 premises are not connected; indeed, even when small and medium-sized enterprises have sought satellite broadband connection, several have been informed that they are in the shadow of retransmission positions. Indeed, getting 2 megabits per second, never mind 10 megabits or 24 megabits per second, is well outwith their reach. If we look at what is happening in London and increasingly in Manchester and areas that we are competing against, we see that areas there already have 200 Mb per second. That is what we need to aspire to.

We talk about Northern Ireland being the best place to do business. We are competing against the rest of Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, but GB already has a superfast Britain policy. Unfortunately, I do not see a superfast Northern Ireland approach, which is something that we need to have. We need to address the issues with some urgency.

I have personal experience of BT Openreach taking over three months to connect my house to broadband, bearing in mind that my house is only 75 metres from the green box and they were busily digging up my lane to try to achieve connection. That just shows that some of the frustrations that we have across the Province are very much to the fore.

When we talk to potential foreign direct investment investors, we find that the provision of superfast broadband and adequate broadband is key. Much more than that, we are trying to build the approach for our people. We are trying to encourage rural enterprises to develop and to ensure that more of our people get the benefits of having a broadband connection.

This is not Government bashing. One of most important things that we have to do is to have urgent discussions with the regulator to see what is being provided in Northern Ireland. Bearing in mind the amount of money, public and private, that is being spent on the process, we need to hold the providers to account. One of the things that I will ask the Minister —

Mrs Palmer: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that, in my constituency of Lagan Valley, the only opportunity that we have to access broadband in the village of Hillsborough and within the curtilage of its rural dimensions is when we are sitting at the back of an Ulsterbus that has free Wi-Fi? That is certainly the extent

of the service that we have in the village of Hillsborough and its outlying rural areas.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Aiken: I thank the Member for the intervention. I do not think that we have a policy of asking Translink to have its Wi-Fi-enabled buses go around Northern Ireland to improve hotspots, but that is an example of some of the significant issues that we have. I am sure that every Member here would be able to intervene during this conversation to say that he or she has similar problems in his or her area.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: I will indeed.

Mr Beggs: Would the Member be surprised to learn that some of our enterprise agencies still do not have superfast broadband and have not been prioritised and provided with the service that would enable small businesses to get online and win business internationally?

Mr Aiken: Unfortunately, I am not surprised. We need to look at this urgently. I ask the Minister to hold the public-private partnership to account on the issue and to talk to the regulator. Let us not dwell on 12 or 24 megabits per second; let us see how quickly we can, like the rest of the United Kingdom, get to approaching 200 megabits per second.

Ms Armstrong: I rise as a rural dweller and on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the motion. While broadband coverage has improved, there are rural areas that still do not have Internet or where access to the Internet is hampered by low speeds. There is a growing digital divide. While it is true that an increasing number of urban premises have superfast broadband, a significant number of rural premises — 42%, as highlighted by the motion — do not have universal service obligation speeds; indeed, some premises that I have visited have speeds of less than 2 megabits per second.

The Department for the Economy continues to deliver the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project, which is a welcome initiative that has already enabled broadband access for 47,000 premises. As we know, the project includes a clawback gain share mechanism that compels BT to return part of the investment when adoption of the new service passes the 20% mark in related areas. However, the scheme does not appear to measure how comprehensively BT serves the rural community. For example, in my constituency, which is the Minister's constituency, the coastal village of Cloughey along the Ards peninsula is deemed to have broadband. New green cabinets were installed, and residents certainly took advantage of the faster broadband packages available. However, on the periphery of the village, there is a small development called Castle Meadows located less than 200 yards from the main road that passes through the village. No green cabinets were installed there, and the residents of that part of the village are not being provided with the broadband speed to meet even the USO's 10 megabits per second. Is anyone looking at how effective the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project is in rural areas? Is the 20% update in the adoption of new services all that is measured?

In answers to recent written questions, the Minister has confirmed that he will know the amount of money available from the BT clawback in the autumn. As called for in

the motion, I urge the Minister to review the broadband coverage achieved to date and put plans in place to ensure that no one in a rural area is left lagging behind. I also ask that the Department review the clawback mechanism to see whether it is set at the appropriate level and is returning enough resources to allow the Department to maximise the delivery of broadband to isolated rural areas. I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is cold comfort to someone to know that most people in their area have high broadband speeds if they do not have access to it themselves.

I read with some consternation the suggestions on NI Direct that people who are not yet being provided with high broadband speeds could use the Internet facilities in their local library. Given the reduction in the number of libraries and the reduced opening hours in those that are left, this will not be a practical option for many people and is completely absurd for anyone trying to run a rural business.

In another answer to a written question, I noted that the Minister confirmed that his Department had no plans for intervention at present for mobile coverage. That is very disappointing. Isolated rural areas not currently covered by broadband are the very areas where it is unlikely there will ever be green cabinets.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that, particularly when it comes to mobile phone coverage, the Minister and his party are putting mobile phone users in Northern Ireland at extreme jeopardy by suggesting that we should vote to exit the EU, which protects mobile phone users and delivers lower costs on a daily basis?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for his points. Given that roaming charges in European states are being taken away this following summer, it is important that we consider the mobile phone.

It is imperative that mobile signal infrastructure is reviewed in conjunction with landline broadband. That way, when one is not available, the alternative should be provided. Satellite is not a realistic option as the download speeds are not appropriate for viable business use.

In summary, I urge the Minister to take the opportunity in the autumn to develop further proposals to enhance rural broadband and mobile coverage in rural areas.

That will be an investment that will enable the development of rural business and will open an attractive offer for potential foreign direct investors and local business development.

As Obama said:

"another key to strengthening education, entrepreneurship and innovation in communities ... is to harness the full power of the Internet, and that means faster ... more widely available broadband".

11.15 am

Mr Lyons: I do not intend to rehearse the arguments that have been made already, but it is important to understand the importance of broadband for people, especially those in rural areas. We all know of the need for businesses,

particularly farms, and students and households to have access to broadband, and we understand the importance of that.

I want to raise a few areas of concern, but it is important that we understand that progress has been made in the area. Sometimes, progress may be not as swift as we might like it to be. We can look at the facts and see that 96% of premises now have broadband of 2 megabits per second or higher. Average download speeds have increased by 3.5 megabits per second over the last year, upload speeds are better and there has also been an increase in 3G coverage across Northern Ireland. Particularly in my constituency, I have —

Mr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Aiken: I will give way.

Mr Aiken: The question about that is that we are talking about speeds of 2 megabits per second and 3G. The rest of the United Kingdom is talking about 4G moving on to 5G and 24 megabits per second and leading up to 200 megabits per second. We are trying to reinforce failure. I think that we should be looking towards doing more.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lynch: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will address some of those issues shortly, but we will never get 200 megabits per second in some of the rural areas in Northern Ireland; you are talking about some of the speeds that they are getting in the big cities across the water. I certainly want to see speeds and coverage increased everywhere.

We have to acknowledge that significant improvements have been made, but we need to go further because that is no comfort to people in rural areas who are struggling to get access to the Internet. Various projects have taken place. We have the Next Generation Broadband project, the remote broadband service, the broadband improvement programme and the basic broadband scheme. All those have helped to increase the number of those who can access broadband.

We have particular problems in Northern Ireland, especially in rural areas. Probably the most common problem is that the average length of the line from households or businesses to exchanges or cabinets is much longer in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. We also have a problem in that the rural population in Northern Ireland is more dispersed than in other parts of the UK.

Despite the fact that progress has been made, it is still a very difficult situation for many rural dwellers. Some of the Members from the SDLP said that the issue had been raised with them when they were out on the doorsteps, and it has been raised with me frequently throughout my time as an elected representative. I understand the difficulties and real frustration that people have when it comes to not being able to access broadband. People feel aggrieved when they cannot connect or get the speeds that they want.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that one of the criteria that should be seriously considered when providers are refusing to, maybe, be helpful in the provision of an appropriate broadband speed is for businesses in the rural community to be given priority? That is only one customer, as opposed to them

having hundreds of customers, which makes it financially viable for them.

Mr Lyons: I certainly agree with the Member and what he has said, and I am sure that the Minister has heard that as well.

I want to commend BT. I suppose that we can give BT quite a hard time, but I have found it to be very responsive to the queries that I have put to it as a representative for East Antrim. It is important that that is put on record. Of course, large areas in my constituency around Carnlough, Glenarm and some of the rural area at Ballyboley are still struggling to get reasonable speeds, and we need to look into that.

I want to make a couple more points. First, I know that the Minister does not have responsibility for it — he should not be able to interfere in the area — but I feel that it is unfair that companies can charge consumers the same regardless of whether they just about get a very basic speed or a far higher one. Those who are getting a very poor speed should not have to pay for a service that they are not getting in its entirety, but I understand that that is not the responsibility of the Minister. I ask the Minister to continue to invest and identify the areas in need, and to keep working and bringing in these projects and schemes that have been done in the past so that we can get higher broadband speeds and greater coverage.

I cannot sit down without referring to the comments that were made by Mr Dickson. We have heard that Brexit will cause World War III; we have heard that Brexit will cause economic calamity. We have been given all sorts of scare stories, and now Mr Dickson is suggesting that we will not be able to make telephone calls in the event of Brexit. We will not be able to send text messages. We will maybe just park that there, and I will spare his blushes any further.

I support the motion and hope that the Minister will continue to invest so that speeds can be improved for everyone.

Mr Milne: Before I go into my prepared piece, I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Floor. I also pay tribute to Trevor Reaney and wish him every success for the time ahead.

Much has been done over this past number of years to improve access to broadband and mobile phone coverage, such as the Next Generation project, the voucher scheme and, currently, the super-fast roll-out programme. While this is to be commended, it also needs to be acknowledged that not everyone has benefited or is benefiting from this. A large number of rural areas, many within my constituency of Mid Ulster, continue to experience difficulty in access, speed and reliability. Some have no access, some have limited access and many are unable to avail themselves of competitive pricing or the opportunities open to others. This patchy coverage has a direct impact on local services such as GPs, where records cannot be accessed in a timely manner or correspondence dealt with efficiently.

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

Mr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Milne: I will.

Mr Aiken: One of the key issues already mentioned is the distance and what rural provision is throughout these

islands. One of the issues that we should be addressing is the fact that there is no difference between the length of cables in Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, yet provision has managed to be achieved. Also, mobile telephone coverage is significantly better, as anybody who has recently been in rural Ireland has seen. This is not an issue that is basically just a Northern Ireland problem. We need to be able to hold the providers to account.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Milne: Thank you for those comments; I agree wholeheartedly with them.

It impacts on businesses and the business community, which are in regular contact with my office highlighting the negative impact that a slow and inconsistent signal has on their business and expressing their frustration at the lack of the progress that can be seen in urban areas. It affects farmers, who are encouraged and rewarded for processing grant applications online, schools, which are always increasing their use of technology, and the recreational user, who is multiple in many households, all requiring access to the service, often at the same time.

Mobile phones and the Internet have changed the way that we interact and access our information. It has allowed many local businesses to expand into new markets and adopt new and innovative approaches. It has allowed for increased speed and efficiency and has also enabled the workforce to become more mobile, which breaks down some of the barriers to employment. For those who have excellent coverage and access, it is very much part of their lives. It is unusual to see a person without a smartphone. "Google it" has become a much-used phrase when we do not know the answer to a question.

I have witnessed much frustration when access to a strong signal is not instantaneous. Yet, for people in many locations, a poor signal or no signal is the norm, so there is an absolute need for fairness across the urban and rural locations. The Rural Needs Act, passed in this House a few months ago, required that rural needs be appropriately taken into account by public authorities in policymaking and service delivery. Its aim is for rural dwellers to enjoy the same quality of life as all others across the North.

I appreciate that telecommunications is not a devolved matter, but as it is not economically advantageous for private companies to bring these services to rural locations, they are unlikely to do so, rightly or wrongly, without government intervention and assistance. There was disappointment in my constituency when the mobile infrastructure project, a publicly funded initiative that it was hoped would correct the market failure in supply, failed to materialise, despite being granted the necessary planning permission to build the base station. There is a lot resting on the current Superfast Rollout programme, and, while I appreciate that it is a work in progress, it is unlikely to reach everywhere.

I ask the Minister to give his commitment today that he will make access to broadband and a mobile signal, regardless of location, a departmental priority. I also bring to the Minister's attention that, on three occasions, requests for a meeting with ETI Ministers by, for example, Mid Ulster Council fell on deaf ears. I ask this Minister to speak to councils not just in the Mid Ulster area but right across the North.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. We all recognise the need for an improvement in broadband and mobile services in rural and urban areas. Modern business and family life require fast communications through broadband and mobile phone systems.

Significant investment has taken place in recent years to improve the installation of broadband projects, including the Next Generation Broadband programme and phase 2 of the Superfast Rollout programme, representing an investment of over £60 million over the last six or seven years. We recognise that that is significant investment by DETI and other Departments, but more is needed to bring the service provision up to 10 megabytes per second, as stated in the USO — the universal service obligation.

It is important, as we move towards 2018 and the proposed reduction in corporation tax and seek to attract new business into Northern Ireland, that we are ready with modern, high-speed broadband and mobile phone services that are fit for purpose and that no area is disadvantaged by the lack of modern technology. Given our high number of SMEs and that over 70% of manufacturing is now outside Belfast, we are highly dependent on the Internet and high-speed broadband to be able to operate efficiently. Whether the business is in the Hollywood hills in North Down, for example, where there may be small businesses, such as kennels or a quarry operation, effective, efficient broadband is essential for data handling and communication. The Department for the Economy needs to influence providers to get improved delivery in support of businesses and our residents.

Effective, efficient mobile phones are critical for business communications. It is so frustrating to have poor local services. If you travel a short distance down Massey Avenue and up to Craigantlet, about two miles away, you find you are hit by poor service in a rural area. Does it matter that it relates to the low density of the population? That seems to be the major factor. Where there is low density, we get low investment. More needs to be done to encourage investment by the phone providers and to share existing facilities, such as masts. Planning, again, seems to be an issue, and we need to put more pressure on to improve the planning facility. More improvement is needed for customers, with improved services for all users.

Efficient and effective business delivery requires modern and high-speed communications. We recognise that our new Minister, Simon Hamilton, will continue to ensure effective delivery to make Northern Ireland a better place for business. I support the motion.

11.30 am

Mr Chambers: I thank the SDLP for tabling this worthy and important motion. It is an example of proactive opposition. It should focus our minds on the fact that we all recognise that many people in rural areas are unable to enjoy the high broadband speeds and reliable mobile phone coverage that many of our citizens take for granted.

The Consumer Council hit the nail on the head in a recent consultation response on the issue, when it stated:

"access to broadband can be viewed in the same way as basic utility services."

Now that many government services are being moved and promoted online, it gives us one more important reason to ensure that everyone has equal opportunity to enjoy a top-end, quality broadband service. Online electoral registration, which we discussed in the House yesterday, is the latest example of that.

The project to introduce a reduced rate of corporation tax has been referred to and is foremost in our minds. We are rightly focusing a lot of attention on the establishment of training provision to create the skill sets that, we anticipate, will be required as new employment opportunities open up. However, we should not take our eye off day-to-day housekeeping requirements that international investors will be looking for and expecting. Universal high-speed broadband and robust mobile phone coverage will be one such expectation, especially with so many people now working from home, which is a trend that will increase.

We need to recognise also that many small farmers are diversifying into other income opportunities and broadband is essential to accommodate their ambitions and help grow our economy.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Member for giving way. Is he aware that there is a rural/urban divide in Northern Ireland? Currently, in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, 37% of premises cannot receive a broadband download speed of greater than 10 megabytes per second, compared with 2% of premises in Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Chambers: I am sure that the House sympathises with and shares the Member's concern at that statistic.

We also recognise how important tourism is to our economy. Visitors going to our must-visit locations expect to be able to use their iPads, tablets and smartphones. One bad experience can be the one recalled when visitors return home to share their stories with friends and families, who are our potential future visitors.

In conclusion, we should not imagine that broadband black spots are exclusive to rural areas. In my North Down constituency, there are many high-value rateable urbanised housing areas that are still receiving download speeds that would have been considered as snail's pace years ago. That is just not good enough.

After Friday and the result of Brexit, I certainly do not anticipate war. However, I hope that we will continue to enjoy the European grant aid that we have received to date to help us improve our communications network.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Before doing so, I pay tribute to Mr Reaney, who has now left the Chamber. He and I served together on Craigavon council during some very sad and difficult times in the history of that borough, and he was a very steady hand at the helm. I pay tribute to him for his work on Craigavon council and also here at the Assembly.

I move to the debate in hand. As everyone agrees, broadband is an essential element to daily life, our economy and the learning skills of young people. Everyone, particularly Members from a rural constituency, will have experience of where broadband is non-existent or the lack of it severely hampers the promotion of rural life, whether it be in employment, industry or education.

As Members have also said, during the recent election campaign, when we were out knocking on doors and talking to people, it was a topic of conversation on many doorsteps. People should have access to a high standard of broadband, whether they be in Belfast city centre or on the shores of Lough Neagh in Maghery.

In fact, I was watching a programme recently that intrigued me. A fisherman off the Cornish coast was going out, lifting his lobster pots, taking photographs of the lobsters, tweeting them and selling the catch through social media. If you were a fisherman in Lough Neagh, you could not do that because the broadband connection would be insufficient for you to be able to lift your catch, tweet the photographs and sell it. Why should we not be able to do that? Why should the local infrastructure and local economy not enable that to be done, whether it is that old tradition of fishing off Lough Neagh or the new industries that are coming into our rural communities?

Of course, those who tabled the motion ignore the fact that there is already a commitment in the Programme for Government framework to increase broadband accessibility to everyone, particularly to rural communities. The Executive have recognised that in their commitments under the Programme for Government framework, which is out for consultation and which we are encouraging people to move forward to. The question is not whether we support access to rural broadband. The question is: how do we achieve it? Is it the responsibility of the Executive? Is it solely the responsibility of the Economy Minister? I would argue that it is not, because I suspect that major corporations are sitting back in their boardrooms saying, "Keep calm. Keep cool. Don't spend a penny. This will land on the Government's doorstep, and they can invest tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money into a service for us, as a private company, to lay whatever infrastructure is required". When our telecommunications industries were privatised, we were told that that was the best way forward and that privatisation would offer competition —

Mr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: One second.

Mr O'Dowd: — greater value for money and the services that are required. Clearly, it has not. I give way to the Member.

Mr Aiken: Thanks very much to the Member for mentioning that. One issue that we need to talk about is that there is already a significant debate about the relationship between Openreach, BT and other providers. One thing that we should do as a matter of urgency is to look at what is being provided by the private sector and holding it to account. Thank you for allowing me to intervene.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr O'Dowd: I was going to come to your point, Mr Aiken. Throughout this debate, you have made very valid points in your interventions. If we use millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to lay whatever infrastructure is required to provide rural broadband of the standard that we all expect and hand that over to the private sector, which then charges the same taxpayers who paid for the infrastructure to be laid in the first place, I want to know what comeback there is, what regulation will be in place, and what authority

this or any other Economy Minister will have over those providers to ensure that they provide a fair and equitable service to the taxpayers who paid for the infrastructure to be laid in the first place. That is the debate that we need to have. How do we hold what are now private companies to account if we are going to hand over tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money for the provision of broadband? Of course, we could debate at length whether we should hand that money over or not.

One thing that is clear and that the House is obviously agreed on is that, if we allow the current service to continue, rural communities will be disenfranchised. We had a debate here yesterday about online registration. One Member referred to the fact that gun licensing is moving online. Car tax and tax returns are moving online. As we move towards a modern health service, healthcare will be delivered online as well. If you are living in a rural community, will you have the same access to your GP or consultant online? If the infrastructure remains as it is, you will not.

A number of valid points have been raised during the debate, but the one that resonates with me most is how we hold to account those private companies that are sitting back and waiting on tens if not hundreds of millions of pounds of public money to be invested in their infrastructure.

Mr T Buchanan: My apologies for missing part of the debate. My comments will be brief. As you know, I have broadband provision in West Tyrone down as the topic for this afternoon's Adjournment debate, so we will be focusing on that later. I will keep these few comments broad.

Excellent broadband coverage is one of the fundamental components in the digital age for driving our everyday lives and our economy forward. Technology is continually advancing, and we need to ensure that we have proper broadband and mobile phone coverage throughout our constituencies. Black spots are a particular problem right across rural constituencies in Northern Ireland. It is about how we deal with the problem, because there has been a commitment from the Executive over the past few years to bring on faster broadband speeds and upgrade broadband services. However, that does not address the gaps that appear in rural areas, where we have farm businesses, small businesses, schools, schoolchildren and parents contacting our offices about the lack of broadband cover. It is essential for businesses and for children, who seek to study.

It is an issue that the Executive will have to face up to, but the question is this: how do we address it? As the Member who spoke previously said, there are private companies out there that we need to hold to account. There are those that we need to work with in innovative ways as we seek to bridge the gap that exists in rural areas. Over the next five years, the Executive will have to face up to how we make progress on improving broadband services in rural areas.

The motion is quite clear in stating that the problem still exists. I support the motion and ask the Minister to look at some innovative ways of working alongside the private sector to see how the matter can be addressed, in order to ensure that there is equality of service right across the constituencies for those who really need it for their businesses as they seek to drive the economy forward.

Mr Mullan: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. In doing so, I will demonstrate to the House the

harsh realities of life facing many of my constituents in East Derry. Many individuals and families, including farmers, have contacted me to express their deep frustration at the slow progress made with broadband provision across the constituency. From places such as Benone, Blagh and Drumsurn, which are on my doorstep, to places right across the constituency, such as Waterfoot, Kilrea and Glenullin in the east and Feeney and Claudy in the west, I have not seen any broadband improvement in recent years. That is in spite of having Project Kelvin in Portrush, a £28 million fibre-optic cable connecting my constituency to North America in a matter of seconds.

I understand that DETI spent a considerable amount of money on rolling out broadband schemes, but my constituency has yet to receive any tangible benefit from it, despite multiple promises of higher speeds and upgrades to service infrastructure. That failure to improve rural broadband services has exacerbated the digital divide, and that is having a severe economic impact on many business across my constituency. Business owners have told me that poor Internet connectivity is stifling their business growth, job creation and productivity in the area.

Many homes and businesses throughout East Derry struggle to obtain a mere speed of 2 megabits per second. What business would want to come and invest in an area that does not have the proper broadband infrastructure?

11.45 am

According to research carried out last year, 11% of Internet connections in East Derry have a speed of 2 megabits per second or less: in 2016, that is unacceptable. Compare that with areas like north and south Belfast, where the figure sits at a very comfortable 2% and 3% respectively. With the opening up of many online markets and the emergence of the digital economy, rural businesses simply cannot compete.

The broadband voucher scheme promised much to many rural businesses, but less than a year ago it was stripped of funding, leaving many rural businesses stranded and disconnected once again. I call on the Minister to clarify whether he or his Executive colleagues have plans to reinstate the scheme and deliver fully on what was promised to so many rural businesses, especially those located in east Derry.

Satellite broadband and blue boxes have been used as stopgap provision in many rural areas, but they do not provide a consistent, reliable or stable connection.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that farming is one of the biggest industries in rural areas? Does the House realise that the PSNI is moving towards 100% of gun permit applications being done online by August? We are also looking at staged payments of the single farm payment to help the farming community in this time of austerity. To get those staged payments, at least 70% of applications will have to be done online. Does the Member agree that rural areas need to be looked at with greater detail and urgency?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Mullan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. There is no doubt that the farming community suffers greatly from the lack of

broadband. I sympathise with his comments and hope that the issue can be addressed by the Minister.

There are better long-term solutions. We simply cannot have a glass-half-empty approach for rural broadband; it is much too important for the survival of many businesses in rural constituencies like East Derry.

Mobile phone coverage is an equally important issue in my constituency, which is littered with what have been referred to in the Chamber today as "not spots" — areas where there is little or no mobile phone coverage. In preparation for today's debate, I went onto Ofcom's website, which details mobile phone coverage throughout the North. When I looked across the map of my constituency, I saw that areas surrounding Limavady, Dungiven and Magilligan Point were marked in red, which means that there is limited outdoor and indoor phone network coverage, whilst access to 3G and 4G Internet is almost non-existent. I understand that DETI, in collaboration with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Mullan: — had intended to improve service through a mobile infrastructure project with £150 million earmarked to improve mobile phone coverage to over 60,000 remote areas in the UK.

The people of my constituency need assurances that the superfast broadband scheme —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Mullan: — will reach them soon and that the mobile phone infrastructure will be progressed in a timely fashion.

Mr Robinson: I will highlight the difficulties that are being experienced by rural businesses when it comes to our telecommunications network. Last year, Minister, I had your DETI predecessor, Mr Bell, in the East Londonderry constituency to hear at first hand some of the problems that businesses experience. The Minister will confirm that yesterday I gave him the names of areas in Limavady where broadband provision is very poor. I deal weekly with constituents who are unhappy with their broadband and mobile phone coverage. In Limavady, it is often impossible to get good reception on some networks. Over the months, I have heard from the networks that relays are down or masts are giving problems, but there is no commitment to repairing the problem.

As the Minister is aware, I am committed to bringing employment to my constituency, but I am firmly convinced that the communications infrastructure needs enhancement to achieve this. I ask that he does what he can to ensure such improvement is supported.

Today's business relies increasingly on technology for transactions and product information, so limited high-speed broadband coverage places rural areas at a disadvantage. What is particularly annoying for people in East Londonderry is that Project Kelvin runs close to some of the areas that experience difficulties. Will the Minister consider looking at the possible use of the fibre-optic system of Project Kelvin to help to boost the connectivity in rural areas to high-speed Internet?

The website of the former Coleraine Borough Council says that this effectively makes Coleraine and Limavady

an attractive digital suburb of the major cities in the USA, Canada, the UK and continental Europe. I hope that, with interdepartmental approaches, where required, all areas in Northern Ireland will soon be able to benefit from high-speed broadband and state-of-the-art mobile connectivity, and become a base for business. Not only would that help the Northern Ireland economy, but it would help to make rural businesses sustainable and create employment. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr Boylan. We are running pretty tight to the wire for time, so I advise the Member not to take any interventions.

Mr Boylan: Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I will say a few words on the motion, but, first, I pay tribute to Trevor Reaney and wish him and his family all the best for the future.

I commend the mover of the motion for the way she dealt with the situation and Mr Attwood for the fleetness of foot that he showed in getting the matter to the Clerk.

My colleague John O'Dowd adequately described what was needed to go forward with what the motion calls for. I will use three examples. First, the mover of the motion talked about how, when out canvassing, she met somebody who wanted to convert a garage or part of a garage to business use. In a case in my constituency, somebody wanting to do exactly the same thing sought assistance from the rural development programme. As part of that discussion, they started to talk about the provision of broadband and how difficult it was to get the proper speed for downloads and that.

Another example from my area is Tullygoonigan, an old creamery outside Armagh city. A number of years ago, it was taken over and turned into a number of units. The owner of the premises could not get people to take the units because of the download speeds. Thankfully, the previous Minister intervened, and the business is up and going and going very well.

I think that Mr Mervyn Storey was going to make a point about this. There was a case of a young lady who lives near the border and only about 500 yards from a cabinet that had been upgraded just recently, but it is on a different line. She can see it, but she came to me and told me that her son had to travel to an urban setting to download stuff for his homework.

I am sure that most of us have experienced such problems and examples. To be fair, my colleague Megan Fearon and I have met BT on a number of occasions, and I put on record my thanks to BT for the way in which it has dealt with some of this. However, as Members have commented — it has been a good debate — the issue is that we need to look at the providers and hold them to account.

I want the Minister to touch on the NI broadband improvement project. In 2014, at the outset of that project, which had an investment of £23.5 million, the aim was to push a faster broadband service to an additional 45,000 premises: to date, 17,500 homes and businesses have been facilitated. We know rightly that, bar doing fibre not only to the cabinets but to homes, there are some rural areas where satellite may be the only solution. I want the Minister to give an update on where BT is with that. Most of us have a good working relationship with BT, but there is still a lot more to be done. For most of the people coming

back to me, BT says that they can access broadband. However, when they phone up — some of them are already getting charged — and get routers out, there are problems. It is up to us and the Minister; if we are giving out public money to deliver, somebody has to be held to account. Maybe the Minister can give us a wee update on where we are with that programme. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): I join others who have congratulated the outgoing Clerk/Chief Executive on his retirement. I think that everybody will join in wishing him a very enjoyable retirement and thanking him for the service that he has given to the Assembly and other parts of the public sector in Northern Ireland.

I thank Members from the Benches opposite for bringing the debate to the Assembly today. I fully recognise, as many Members have said during the debate, the importance of access to functional, modern and sustainable telecommunications networks and services in support of economic prosperity and business growth. In recognition of that, over the last eight years, my Department has led the way in the United Kingdom by channelling some £64 million of public funding into initiatives aimed at stimulating improvements in the reach, speed and quality of broadband services across Northern Ireland. It is important, therefore, to take the opportunity to place on record the progress that has been made in this key area. The latest infrastructure report from Ofcom has pointed to Northern Ireland having the highest coverage of fibre-based networks in the whole of the United Kingdom, at 95% across fixed and mobile technologies. That can provide a broadband service of 2 Mb per second or better. Ofcom has also reported that the average broadband download speed in Northern Ireland has continued to increase to 28.3 Mb per second, compared with a UK average of 29 Mb per second. Specifically, my Department's broadband improvement project, which was mentioned by Mr Boylan, has already ensured that, for the first time, some 48,000 premises, largely in rural areas, have received access to at least 2 Mb per second and that just over 29,000 premises can now access 30 Mb per second or better.

I listened to the contribution of Mr Mullan towards the end of the debate, and I think that he said that there had been no improvement at all to broadband services in his East Londonderry constituency. The broadband improvement scheme is a good example of where we are making the investments that the motion calls on us to make to make improvements to broadband services in his constituency and others. Up to March of this year, the investment being made in the broadband improvement scheme has seen improvements to 164 exchanges across Northern Ireland. Some of those are in places like Claudy, Feeny, Kilrea and Limavady, all of which were mentioned by the Member. There is a lengthy list of others that, I am sure, touches on some of the areas that other Members talked about. It may not be perfect, but I do not think that anybody can genuinely stand in the Chamber and say that there has not been investment or there have not been improvements. In addition —

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr McGrath: Does the Minister accept that some people in rural areas have an existing connection that is not as

good as the new connections and the telecommunication companies are not allowing them to transfer? Whilst there are improvements for new customers in rural areas, it is the existing customers not being upgraded whom we would like to see help for. Will the Minister's Department work with the companies to address that issue?

Mr Hamilton: That is something that my Department does on an ongoing basis with various telecoms providers. I accept entirely the point that the Member makes; it is one that I could make myself on behalf of constituents who come to me on a frequent enough basis.

The point I was making in previous comments — this ought to be acknowledged, and I think it has been generally acknowledged in the House — was that there has been a significant investment in Northern Ireland that has taken us ahead of other parts of the United Kingdom in its scale. That investment has tried to improve the service. It is not perfect — I am not standing here saying it is perfect — but the broadband improvement scheme is one good example of where investment has been made to try to enhance and improve broadband services, including his constituency, where of the 164 exchanges that have been improved some are in Downpatrick, Newcastle and Ardglass, which is a village I am very familiar with. There have been improvements, and investments have been made. I accept that it is not perfect, it is not right in every case and more work needs to be done, but that is what we are obviously trying to do.

12.00 noon

In addition to the broadband improvement scheme, my Department is managing the superfast roll-out programme, which, by 31 December 2017, will provide access to superfast broadband with speeds of at least 24 megabits per second to a further 39,000 premises, business and residential, across Northern Ireland. It is anticipated that, by the time those projects have completed, 87% of premises will have access to services of at least 24 megabits per second, compared with 77% when the projects began.

The motion refers to the United Kingdom's intention to introduce a broadband universal service obligation. Through that, it is expected that by 2020 everyone should have the legal right to request a broadband service of at least 10 megabits per second, subject to certain conditions. My Department has already expressed the view to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in London, which is leading on the regulatory change, that the minimum should be at least 30 megabits per second. Perhaps that is not the several hundred that Mr Aiken was talking about, but I hope it at least shows there is a degree of ambition in my Department and the Executive over and above what DCMS in London wants, which is only 10 megabits. I accept that it is not several hundred, which, as Mr Lyons said, is a speed more likely to be in places like London, but it is at least a sign of some ambition on the part of this Department and the Executive that we want to see that USO raised from 10 to at least 30.

Mr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, briefly.

Mr Aiken: I am grateful for that, and I am glad to see that we have set an ambition for 30, but I would like to see an ambition pushing for much more. There are technological

changes coming on fairly quickly that we should be at the forefront of and be able to do. When we look at the use of 5G technology, for instance, and how it is moving onwards, we see that we should be able to do a combine between fibre and mobile to be able to push it on. We want to see Northern Ireland work, and giving Northern Ireland the opportunity to have the highest broadband speed and connectivity possible will reinforce our position as a great place to do business. However, I thank you for your ambition.

Mr Hamilton: I appreciate the comments made by the Member. I think 30 acknowledges some degree of ambition over and above what the DCMS has. Whilst I would like to see it higher than that, aspire to it and want to make progress towards it over a longer time, I think getting a minimum of 30 for people, particularly those receiving less than two megabits a second at the minute, would be a substantial improvement in the broadband service they receive.

A universal service obligation, with its target date of 2020, will be provided on the basis of a reasonable request from consumers, with services delivered using the most cost-effective technology available. Consumers may be expected to contribute to the costs where they go beyond a reasonable threshold. While we wait to hear the full details, it is possible that the universal service obligation will include the use of various technologies in the most challenging areas. The motion notes that 42% of rural premises cannot currently achieve speeds of 10 megabits per second or better, as recorded by Ofcom in its 'Connected Nations 2015' report. While it is important to note that 86% of premises overall in Northern Ireland can access those speeds, I recognise it is important that as much as possible is done to improve access for rural premises going forward.

Mr Storey acknowledged the investment that has been made — I think Mr Dunne made the same point — recognised that improvements have been made and acknowledged that broadband access is, by and large, much better than it was a number of years ago. Yes, there is work to do. Sometimes I think we fail to compare ourselves. It is fair enough for us to look at ourselves and say that there are parts of Northern Ireland that are not as good as others, but we should compare it with other nations around the world, including the countries we are competing against for investment, which the motion talks about. The OECD does analysis of the well-being of regions, and one of the indicators that it uses is access to services. The indicator that it uses to mark that is household broadband access. Northern Ireland's access to services rating in the OECD regional well-being index shows that we are in the top 16% of OECD regions for household broadband access. I would like to see it higher than 16% — it has been higher than that in the past — but that is not bad in comparison. I am not saying that I am settling for being in the top 16%, but that is not bad when you compare it with the countries that are in the OECD. This is not global; it is not every country in the world. This is the most advanced and most developed economies in the world: the likes of Japan, the United States, France, Germany and other parts of Europe. We may not be perfect, but when we compare ourselves with others we are doing quite well.

In this context, it is important to note that Ofcom also indicated that the roll-out of my Department's superfast programme with access to a speed of 24 megabits per

second will cause this picture — the picture of 86% of households getting access — to improve and change rapidly and, I believe, for the better.

While the substantial investment that has already taken place resulted in a very welcome level of improvement and illustrates that much has been done to enhance provision, I recognise that the overall picture may not reflect the reality for some of our most geographically remote and demographically challenging locations. We recognise this, and my Department's ongoing initiatives are very much aimed at further enhancing our broadband infrastructure. In that context, I urge Members to recognise that alternative networks offer a viable option for the delivery of broadband services in the most difficult to reach and less densely populated areas.

Over recent years, my Department has supported projects that have extended fixed wireless and satellite broadband networks across many parts of Northern Ireland, with the capacity to offer high-speed broadband services. In January this year, my Department launched a scheme that allows consumers with a service of less than two megabits per second to access a subsidy towards the cost of having a satellite service installed, subject to satisfying certain eligibility criteria. For the future, under the broadband improvement contract, BT can reinvest certain clawback funds when take-up exceeds specific thresholds. The final amount will not be known until the autumn, when plans can be developed to further improve the coverage of faster broadband connectivity across Northern Ireland.

I also have to stress that telecommunications matters are reserved by Westminster and that my Department has limited powers to intervene in what is a fully privatised and independently regulated market. While public funds can and will be used to encourage private sector investment, it is ultimately a business decision for providers how and if they wish to participate in any joint venture. In addition, public funds have to be used in a way that ensures value for money while protecting competition and adhering to the rules on state aid. In that context, neither I nor the Department can direct or compel a network operator as to where it should invest or what technology it should use. However, I agree that, while recognising —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I am pushed for time. Can you be very brief?

Mr O'Dowd: I am sorry, Minister, I just misheard you there. Has your Department powers to compel where and when materials are used or what facilities are put in place?

Mr Hamilton: No, we do not. The Member and others touched on the point about it being a privatised and independently regulated market. We do not have the power to compel and cannot force companies to get involved in a joint venture. We will encourage them, and, to be fair, most telecommunications companies have been willing and receptive to that. I do not have the time to get into the Member's point in great detail now, but he made an interesting and relevant point.

I agree that, while recognising the significant advances that we have made to date, there is and will continue to be a need for the further evolution of and improvement in broadband and mobile infrastructure in rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland. My Department is currently taking stock of what has been achieved and what is likely

to remain to be done after the current initiatives have been completed. This is at an early stage, but it is already apparent that, if the ambitions of the draft Programme for Government with regard to improving Internet connectivity are to be realised — again, a point made by Mr O'Dowd — the costs, no matter what technology is deployed, are likely to require further investment.

I now turn briefly to mobile coverage. The UK Government have put in place an agreement with the mobile network operators through which the mobile industry will invest £5 billion in UK infrastructure to increase coverage by 2017. It is envisaged that mobile not spots in Northern Ireland will be reduced to 0.3% of the land mass by the time that investment is completed. In addition, the mobile market in the UK is highly competitive and fast-moving, and the operators are constantly evolving their networks and developing new products and services that can offer better coverage and more adaptable packages.

I hope that the Assembly will recognise that Northern Ireland has made significant progress on the reach and quality of the broadband services that are now available. We have made that progress within the confines within which the Department is required to operate in developing our telecommunications networks. I understand and appreciate the importance of having access to a good broadband service not just to rural dwellers but to the many businesses located in rural parts of Northern Ireland. Broadband is now viewed as every bit as essential a service as water or electricity, especially for businesses. I want us to continue to encourage the use of alternative technologies that already exist and can bring solutions to rural parts of Northern Ireland where fixed fibre is not feasible.

I fully understand and appreciate the frustrations of those who cannot access satisfactory broadband speeds. My message to them is that we will continue to work with private sector providers to improve —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: — broadband availability, especially in rural parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): This is, I believe, Mr McNulty's first opportunity to speak as a private Member. I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Mr McNulty: I will make the winding-up speech on rural broadband provision. Before I address the motion, I want to introduce myself to this esteemed institution and formally kick off my role as an elected Assembly Member for Newry and Armagh.

My first faltering steps down the rocky road of politics were greeted with a mixture of derision and disbelief. What is a former Gaelic football player with the County Armagh team of 2002 doing? What does a Gaelic footballer and manager know about politics? What right does he have to stand for the SDLP? My family, on both sides, has been involved in politics for four generations. My parents were founding members of the civil rights movement. My father was a member of the committee that organised the Newry march in 1969. They joined the SDLP at its inception and are still passionate, active supporters of the party. My grandfather on my mother's side, a Derry man, was in the RAF. He served in Gibraltar in World War II and went to

live in Newry when peace came. He stood for election for the SDLP in 1974. That is a brief taster of the background that gave rise to discussion at our family table, so it was no surprise that I decided to follow in the footsteps of several family members.

As I stand here today, I am very aware of my party colleagues who represented the people of Newry and Armagh before me. My immediate predecessor, Dominic Bradley, served the constituency for the last 10 years. Before him, it was Séamus Mallon and the late John Fee. They have left big shoes to be filled. I am proud to follow in their footsteps, and, although I could not lace their boots, I will not forget the core values that they held dear.

I feel honoured and proud to be an elected representative of the great constituency of Newry and Armagh — lú Cinn Trá agus Ard Mhacha. Our place is a place of wonderful historical, cultural, geographical, musical, sporting and economic heritage. We have Eamhain Macha; our cathedral city; Ballymacnab; an Port Mór; Creggan; and the mountain of the steep slope, Slieve Gullion. At the summit of that mountain of the steep slope lies the highest surviving passage grave in Ireland, from where our mythological heroes' ghosts survey an area of outstanding natural beauty. Sometimes, I dream deeply at night, convinced that I hear the Cailleach Beara's keen. Then, I awaken in relief, contented that I have not been transformed into an old, withered man.

I have travelled many parts of our county: Milford, Keady, Ballyhagan, the two Lisleas, an Mullach Bán, Killeavy, Middletown, Mullaghbrack, Corrinshigo, the Grange, Whitecross, Granemore, Tullysaran and Crossmaglen. I have kayaked the crooked lake, biked the Crooked Road and swum the Albert Basin. I have been inspired by our sporting icons: heroes in Gaelic football, hurling, ladies' Gaelic football, camogie, athletics, golf, soccer, bullets and rugby. Our Ireland captain is from Poyntzpass.

I have drifted away to the tones of our musicians, dancers, rhymers, bards and poets. An Curadmír. Our dramatists have always made me think a little differently.

Newry: our frontier town; our city of enterprise, ambition and endeavour. First Derivatives, Glen Dimplex, Norbrook: three colossi of commerce, industry and finance, sitting atop a multitude of microbusinesses. Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for your indulgence.

12.15 pm

Turning to the motion, I am delighted to make the winding-up speech on behalf of the SDLP. The motion is vital, not only to my constituents but to the whole of Northern Ireland. That has clearly been reflected by contributors to today's debate. The contributions of Caoimhe Archibald, Mervyn Storey, Sinéad Bradley, Gerry Mullan and others are reflected in my speech.

In 2014, a broadband report ranked all 650 Westminster constituencies by the average speed of broadband. Belfast East and Belfast South were seventh and eighth respectively, but Newry and Armagh was ranked 448th. That is 448th out of 650 constituencies. The only Northern Ireland constituency ranked lower was West Tyrone, at 458th. That means that 447 constituencies in the UK have better, faster broadband than my constituents.

The same report put my constituency at 12th out of 650 when it came to constituencies with 15% of connections being slow, at less than 2 megabits per second. In fact, five of the 12 slowest constituencies for broadband are in Northern Ireland. That means that at least 15% of broadband connections in Newry and Armagh, South Down, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and West Tyrone, which, unsurprisingly, are all constituencies with a substantial rural population, are below 2 megabits per second. That is a shocking statistic when you look at the motion. We refer in our motion to the universal service obligation speed, which was proposed by the London Government in November 2015. The speed proposed is 10 megabits per second, which is much faster than the 2 megabits per second that is 15% of my constituents' best hope for Internet speed. Many premises in places such as Derrynoose, Madden, Killylea, Cullyhanna, Aughanduff and Forkhill do not have any access at all.

Ofcom's most recent report stated that at least 14% of premises in Northern Ireland do not have access to the proposed universal service obligation of 10 megabits per second. The deficit in service provision is most acute in rural areas. In border communities, 42% of premises do not have access to the proposed universal service obligation speed, compared with just 2% of premises in urban areas that currently fall short of the requirement.

Rural communities already experience significant isolation. That is being compounded by widespread digital dereliction, where businesses, schools, farmers and homeowners struggle to reach even basic levels of broadband speed and connectivity. Not spots, as they have become known, impact not only on business but on people living in rural constituencies, farmers, children's education and the ability to drive economic growth and productivity.

These are real experiences that our offices are dealing with week in, week out. Just last week, one gentleman from Armaghbreague was told by BT that he will never get broadband. His kids have to travel into Keady to the library to do their homework. There are similar stories in places such as Derrynoose, where in the community centre we met local businesses and broadband providers seeking new and innovative ways of providing broadband.

Reliable broadband is essential for competitive and successful enterprise in a growing digital economy. It is vital that rural communities and businesses have access to effective and affordable broadband if the digital divide between rural and urban areas is not to grow any wider.

Newry and Armagh is a great constituency, but things are not all positive. The motion highlights one area in which vast improvement is needed. Just last year, we saw a raft of posters erected claiming to be delivering broadband to south Armagh, but, again, our people have been failed. Just as the posters disappeared, so did those promising to deliver broadband.

Without the correct communication infrastructure, Newry and Armagh, as well as other rural constituencies, cannot attract the investment that is so desperately needed. Businesses tell me that lack of broadband holds them back and costs jobs not just in rural areas but in places like the centre of Newry. Despite years of lobbying BT, it was only through the use of the broadband voucher scheme that high-speed broadband was brought to the WIN industrial

estate in the city. I place on record my thanks to Orla Jackson from Newry Chamber of Commerce and Thomas O'Hagan of B4B Telecoms for working with us on that.

There are many other issues including health, education, infrastructure and investment that I will use my time here as an MLA to fight for in order to improve the situation for people in the constituency. Our young people need jobs at home, and we need solutions for problems facing our rural communities. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of building a truly connected Newry and Armagh. Improvements to broadband will not, in themselves, make Newry and Armagh a truly connected constituency; much more investment and infrastructural improvement is needed before that becomes a reality.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr McNulty: It will, however, go some way towards helping to ensure that our existing businesses are able to compete at a global level.

I want to finish by remembering two very important groups. The first is the leaders of the SDLP in my constituency: Séamus Mallon; Dominic Bradley and the late John Fee. The other group is the leaders of the SDLP, who are the reason why I am here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr McNulty: To John Hume, Ireland's greatest.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Mr McNulty: Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Assembly notes that 42% of premises in rural areas do not have access to the proposed universal service obligation speed; further notes the urgent need for better provision of broadband and expansion of mobile phone coverage in rural areas; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop further proposals to ensure that Northern Ireland has a modern telecommunications network that enables existing businesses to compete and to ensure that all areas are attractive for foreign direct investment, including our rural communities.

Animal Cruelty

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The amendment has been tabled by the proposers of the motion. The motion and the amendment will be proposed and wound together, with 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mrs Little Pengelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty and the increasing risks with the online sale or transfer of animals; welcomes the actions thus far to address issues raised in the interim report of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take further action to establish an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act and to further protect animals from cruelty.

I also beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after “Minister of Justice” and insert

“to bring forward proposals to enhance animal cruelty protections, including considering further and tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act.”.

In proposing the motion on the horrendous subject of animal cruelty, I know that the issue is close to the heart of many across the Chamber and Northern Ireland, and it is one that makes me genuinely angry. You can see clearly from the briefing pack that there has been much consensus on the issue across the Chamber previously, and there have been many clear and agreed motions on it during previous Assembly mandates. There has been some positive action taken, and we wanted to acknowledge that in the motion. Yet, in spite of that, we bring the motion to the House today because of the genuine sense of frustration and the genuine concern among so many people in Northern Ireland. That frustration and dismay was raised with me many times on the doorsteps over the last six months.

For the purposes of the motion, I want to focus on non-farmed animals or, as they are more commonly referred to, domestic pets. There are hundreds of thousands of pet owners and animal lovers across Northern Ireland, and those pets give considerable love and happiness to many homes. The relationship between an owner and a pet is one of love and trust. Pets give incredible joy. They love, seemingly unconditionally, and see past our flaws when perhaps no one else is prepared to do so.

I am unashamedly a pet lover, and I know from speaking to so many people on the doorsteps that there are hundreds of thousands of genuine pet lovers and animal lovers right across Northern Ireland. Yet, all too frequently, we hear of shocking cases of abuse, cruelty and neglect. There is abuse or deliberate injury of dogs, cats and other animals; use and abuse of pet cats as bait or fighting fodder; and cases of neglect and starvation. The new opportunities of

the 21st century — the Internet and online marketplace — have brought increased dangers and risks in the transfer of ownership of animals. There is disappointment that, despite all the strongly worded motions and despite the moves to amend legislation to strengthen sentencing, the point does not seem to be getting through. I hear weekly from constituents who are dismayed at what they hear about sentences for horrendous acts of animal cruelty.

We have tabled an amendment to the motion, and, although concerns were raised in the review about data protection and human rights issues in terms of an accessible register, this is an issue of considerable interest to people. In particular, people are dismayed that, when they want to sell an animal to someone, they cannot access information on who is disqualified from owning an animal. Some improvements have been made on that, but there is certainly strong interest in seeing further accessibility and further information on that issue. I firmly believe that the issue of data protection can be overcome, and I wanted to provide the Minister with the opportunity, given that she is a new Minister, to look at the issues — hence the amendment to the motion — and to bring forward further proposals, particularly in light of the recent review mentioned in the motion.

I welcome the actions so far. I welcome the review. It is clear from the various responses in the Chamber previously by all parties and a range of Ministers that there is genuine consensus that we should tackle the issue, yet there is still frustration that we have not been able to do that. My first act as the newly elected Member for South Belfast was to go to the Bill Office and indicate my interest in putting forward a private Member's Bill on animal cruelty. That came about because it was such a key issue raised with me on the doors by so many people. There is such genuine frustration out there.

I have sat in my constituency office over the last number of months and heard horrendous cases. I heard from a cat owner whose cat had gone missing. Unfortunately, she had to view footage of her pet being thrown into a cage to dogs and being ripped apart. Anybody who has ever owned an animal such as a cat or a dog knows their personality and what they are like, so that is absolutely heartbreaking and horrifying for any animal owner. The hurt is furthered by what seems to be weak sentencing of the perpetrators and the attitude of some of the perpetrators afterwards, when they show no remorse and have not been given a significant sentence. It is incredibly difficult to comprehend some of the sentencing that is set down. Although, as a barrister, I understand the very good arguments that are often made against minimum sentencing, in this case, genuine concerns have been raised that, despite raising the other end and allowing judges the discretion to give more severe sentences, it does not seem to have had an impact on the quantum right across.

Animals give so much to individuals and families and to society. They augment our lives and provide so much love, kindness and joy. The abuse and misuse of that trust and the cruelty towards those so reliant on us humans for food, shelter and protection genuinely disgusts me. I know that it genuinely disgusts so many. It was clear at the doors that people want further action on this. They want to see those who abuse or neglect or are cruel to animals face a punishment that fits the crime. I hope that the motion before the House will provide a new and fresh opportunity

in this mandate for us to join together to fight against and stamp out animal cruelty in Northern Ireland.

12.30 pm

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate about animal cruelty and to consider what further steps the Assembly can take to clamp down on those who inflict cruelty on defenceless animals. In essence, the debate on a central register is about preventing crime against defenceless animals. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber would agree that crimes against vulnerable animals are abhorrent and should not be tolerated in our society.

The Welfare of Animals Act 2011 is the statute that introduced a duty of care in respect of protected animals. It allowed for intervention and prosecution, as the previous Act had done, but it also provided new enforcement powers to allow action to be taken to protect animals from unnecessary suffering, even before that suffering occurs. The legislation also provided courts with the power to make a deprivation and/or disqualification order against an individual found guilty of committing an offence. While there is no provision in legislation for a central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences, I know that the previous Justice Minister was looking at the feasibility of such a register. I ask the new Justice Minister to take up the baton and to explore further what possibility there is of introducing such a register.

I know that the Department maintains a register of persons banned by the courts from keeping animals. However, there are issues with the sharing of that information among the enforcement bodies — DAERA, the councils and the PSNI — that require the implementation of new procedures and protocols. My understanding is that that would be relatively straightforward. More significantly, however, there are more complex legal issues around the sharing of that conviction data with non-statutory bodies, such as animal charities or sanctuaries that provide new homes for animals. As the previous Member mentioned, there are issues relating to freedom of information and data protection, for example, that would need to be resolved satisfactorily before non-statutory bodies could access a central register of the type that we are discussing.

I appreciate the complexity of some of the issues and know that there are major difficulties. However, as I said at the outset, the issue is the prevention of crime and the prevention of cruelty to animals. As it stands, someone who has been convicted of animal cruelty can go into an animal sanctuary and ask to take possession of one of the animals, take it away and perhaps inflict further cruelty on it or use it as bait in dog fighting or something of that nature. If there was a register, the animal sanctuary could access that register and find out if that person had been convicted of animal cruelty.

I accept that there are difficulties. However, I also believe that, if there is a will to get over those obstacles, it can be done and a register can be established. I support the motion.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Member for tabling the motion. It is an important motion, and I welcome the debate. I agree that it is a bit like treading water. In 2014, we had a similar debate that started off with:

“That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of extreme animal cruelty”. — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 94, p18, col 1].

Here we are in 2016:

“That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty”.

That is not a criticism; it just tells you that, from 2014 to now, we have not progressed far enough. Of course, in 2014, we did progress. We got a review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. That helped to increase the sentence after conviction on indictment to a maximum of five years with an unspecified fine and on summary conviction to a maximum of 12 months with, I think, a £20,000 fine. There are a lot of things we can do to prevent cruelty to animals and deal with welfare. They include confiscation, disqualification, improvement notices and PSNI enforcement powers on dogfighting, for example. The legislation is there, and we have done well to get it in place. What it is all about now is implementing it.

Like the Members who have spoken, the Ulster Unionist Party is absolutely in favour of creating a central register of those convicted of animal cruelty. The Data Protection Act is only an obstacle and not an insurmountable obstacle that we can get past to implement this. It is something we know about and can work through, and I ask the Justice Minister to really put some effort into this so that we are not standing here having the same debate in another two years.

We in the Ulster Unionist Party also believe that there are other things we can do to help the legislation, such as to regulate the online advertisement of pets for sale, instead of having it self-regulated, along with breeder registration so that they work in conjunction and to improve welfare at slaughterhouses. We talk a lot of fluffy animals and see a lot of them on the television — cats and dogs — and people talk about cruelty to them, but the cruelty to some of our animals that go to slaughter is just as bad. We believe that every animal should be stunned before slaughter. We are open to everybody's religious views and practices, but that is the most humane way to do it, and we think we should ensure that all animals are stunned. Although we have confidence in our slaughterhouses and the regulations for them, to give the public confidence it would be important to have CCTV in the slaughterhouses where animals are kept and slaughtered. When we look at greyhound racing and the regulations governing it, we can see that they need to be tightened up to prevent cruelty. That would include registration of the dog from birth to death and a database outlining all its injuries.

You can see that all the legislation we need to create a good animal welfare policy is there, but it is all about the message. How do we message this, and how do we deal with sentencing? Although we have got to the stage where we have increased sentences for animal cruelty, we are not actually applying them. I do not want to see anybody languishing in jail, but sometimes you have to say, “If you are going to do this continually, you deserve to go to jail”. In April this year, a farmer — I will not mention his name, but he was a repeat offender — was convicted of cruelty to his livestock. He had 153 taken off him, and 18 had to be put down. Some of the animals were lying dead in sheds with other animals walking over the top of them. Some animals had not been fed, and some were not getting

water. He got a five-month prison sentence suspended for three years and was banned from keeping animals for five years. That is just not enough for a repeat offender.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Beattie: It is really important that we take action against these people, and I fully support the motion.

Ms Mallon: On behalf of the SDLP, I support the motion and the amendment. I think it is fair to say that we are known as a society of animal lovers. In most homes where there is a household pet, it is held in loving regard; indeed, it is often regarded, as other Members have said, as a member of the family.

To most people and, I am sure, to every Member cases of animal neglect, cruelty, mistreatment and abuse are truly abhorrent. The pain inflicted from the act of cruelty on the animal is sickening, and the insight that that act gives us to the perpetrator is disturbing and should set alarm bells ringing. Therefore, I am pleased to see that, as a direct result of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 and the Justice Act 2016, there are now stricter and harsher punishments for those who have been convicted of animal cruelty.

The 2011 Act introduced a duty of care in respect of all protected animals and created an offence of failing to take reasonable steps to ensure that the welfare needs of that animal are met. Importantly, it specifies that abandoning an animal is an offence, whether the animal is likely to suffer or not.

The Justice Act passed at the end of the last mandate amended the 2011 Welfare of Animals Act to ensure that those who are convicted have a harsher, more suitable sentence imposed on them. Among other things, it increased the maximum sentence for cases heard on indictment from two years to five and for summary cases involving unnecessary suffering and causing, attending or other involvement in an animal fight the maximum sentence increases from six months to 12 and the maximum fine from £5,000 to £20,000.

More than 4,000 animal welfare cases have been investigated by councils each year from 2012. I have spent time with the animal welfare officers of Belfast City Council as they carried out investigations. I pay tribute to their commitment, compassion and hard work. We must continue to support those who work on the front line. We must continue to ensure that all allegations of the abuse of animal welfare are investigated fully and that those responsible are held to account.

Between 2012 and 2014, there were 114 convictions for animal cruelty, 15 of which resulted in custodial sentences. It is vital that we unite with the public in our condemnation of those acts and fulfil our duty of care to the citizens and animals in this jurisdiction. A range of Members have indicated actions that, they believe, the Minister should consider if we are to effectively deal with animal cruelty. I think that, fundamentally, we must take the opportunity to pledge our support for the animal-based welfare organisations that work tirelessly to eradicate animal cruelty.

The SDLP shares the concern of the public about cruelty towards animals. The practice must be stopped and those responsible brought to justice. We are pleased to see this afternoon genuine support for animal welfare, and we join

other parties in the House in supporting the motion and the amendment.

Mr Lunn: We will also support the motion and the amendment. I have some reservations about the wording, but the general thrust and spirit of the motion is fine with us.

There are obvious difficulties with having a central register, as outlined by Mr Sheehan. There is the question of data protection and the question of who has access to such a register. However, at the end of the day, if the Minister is capable of bringing forward something that allows the Department, the PSNI, statutory agencies and charitable agencies involved in this work to have access to previous records, it would be a good thing. It would also be a good thing —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes, go on.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that the Member obviously supports the thrust of the motion. However, given his latter comments, he will also appreciate that some of those agencies already hold personal information. Doug Beattie talked about repeat offenders: how can we tackle repeat offenders unless those who carry out the licensing function have that information and know that people have been banned from keeping animals?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for that intervention. I do not disagree with him: I am just making the point that it is a difficult area. It is not a simple thing to establish a register. Who would it be available to?

I speak as a pet lover, as Mrs Pengelly did. I grew up with dogs, and, when I got married, I lived with cats — I choose my words carefully — for the last 40 years. I also twice had the experience of owning a horse, which is not something that I would recommend financially, but it certainly was a very pleasant experience.

12.45 pm

The amendment talks about “further and tougher criminal sanctions”. Members made the point that the Justice Bill passed in February toughened up the sentences considerably. A five-year maximum sentence for animal cruelty is among the most severe in the UK, if not the most severe in these islands. The same Bill increased the sentence for causing unnecessary suffering from six months to 12 months and the fine from £5,000 to £20,000, which is also very severe. I have a slight problem with where unnecessary suffering ends and animal cruelty begins. There must be some overlap there.

The problem lies not with the legislation or the level of sentences but with the courts. As in many areas of our legislation, the courts do not avail themselves of the available facility to really make a point when they are delivering these sentences. I think of a case in my constituency a couple of years ago, when a dog was sprayed with an inflammable liquid and then set on fire. Under the regime of a two-year maximum sentence, the court awarded a sentence of 10 months. Frankly, how cruel do you have to be to get the maximum sentence for something like that? This dog was set on fire. It lived in agony for a few days and then had to be put down. In

the normal way, that 10 months was probably subject to remission for good behaviour. There was maybe even a discount for remorse; I do not really know offhand. This kind of thing makes a nonsense of the law.

There was the east Belfast case, when somebody who was kidnapping animals to groom them for fighting got a suspended sentence. What is going on? I heard about a case recently in which a father and son were disqualified from keeping horses for 25 years. They are now to be seen regularly at horse fairs with a relative, who buys the horses. That is outrageous. There must be some scope for a central register. Banning only the individual and not the household from keeping an animal in these circumstances seems completely off the wall. If I were banned for animal cruelty, my wife could go out and buy a pet. That does not make any sense to me at all. I feel strongly about that. I hope that the Minister will address those points in whatever she has to say today. In this country, we are all animal lovers except for the small number of people who clearly are not. Frankly, it is those people whom we need to deal with.

Mr Weir: I support the motion and the amendment. It is right that the House has taken a very strong view on animal cruelty issues. They were raised a number of times in the last mandate. To be fair to the DOJ and DARD, they are issues that not only the whole House but the Departments took seriously. It is important that we build on the good work that has been done. I congratulate my colleagues on tabling the motion to show that, despite that good work, we do not regard this as a done deal, and we should constantly look for where we can improve things for the animal kingdom and combat cruelty. It was mentioned that we are a nation of animal and pet lovers. Sadly, there is a small minority in Northern Ireland who seem to be prepared to inflict pain on animals. Indeed, some seem to take a perverse pleasure in that very deliberate cruelty, which goes beyond simple neglect. It is important that, at the start of this mandate, a very clear marker is put down that this is an issue that continues to exercise the House.

The motion states that a range of actions were taken in the last Assembly.

A very useful report was produced on the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. It is commonplace now to talk about the need for Departments to work closely together, and good work was done between DOJ and DARD in the previous Assembly to produce the report. When it was launched, there was, for the first time ever, an opportunity to get all the stakeholders together. That was very useful, particularly the discussion with the rehoming charities. A number of recommendations arose from the report. Practical action was taken on sentencing, which was endorsed by the House and included an increase in the maximum sentence and the opportunity for sentences to be reviewed.

It is important that we are not complacent on the issue. Although the House has stepped up to the mark, there is a clear signal that needs to be sent out, both to wider society about respecting animals and to judges. I know that judges closely guard their independence, and we have seen a number of custodial sentences handed out in recent years, but it seems to me that the message that is coming from across society has not always got through to the judiciary. Members will bring up individual cases, but mention has been made of fairly horrendous cases of cruelty that, when they have gone before the courts, even in recent

months, have resulted in what most of us would regard as being relatively lenient sentences. There has to be a clear message sent to judges that they have to follow through on the public mood and public concern.

It has also been asked what further actions can be taken, and a range of things has been mentioned by some contributors, including the specific issue of greyhounds. That is an area in which there needs to be an examination of the law. The increasing risk from online sales, which is a developing field, needs to be considered. We want to ensure that proper regulation is put in place. It is very good advice for people to go to a rehoming charity if they are looking for a pet, for we see the tremendous work that volunteers do there.

This is something that is not confined to Northern Ireland, but we must make sure that there is proper regulation in place to ensure that we do not become a transit camp, either as a recipient for abused animals or as some sort of flow-through between different jurisdictions. It is important that that issue be reviewed, too.

There needs to be a clear examination of the issue of a central register. Mention has been made of the difficulties, and some of those can be overcome, but that requires a degree of thought, and it requires work with rehoming charities in particular. It seems a little bit incongruous that a pet could be given to someone who commits these crimes, and we need to ensure that we deal with the risk.

Trevor Lunn raises an important point, and in the wider examination of what we do with the data, although I appreciate that there are constraints —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will, yes.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that the Member is coming to the end of his time. It is easy for us all to say that things need to be done, but we need to be clear about what those things are.

Mr Weir: There needs to be a robust examination to ensure that we have something that is fit for purpose.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Weir: It has been said, for instance, that, if we use a central register, we have to have something that does what it says on the tin and prevents animal cruelty. As Mr Lunn rightly pointed out, we need to make sure that we do not have a situation in which, for example, there is a specific ban on an individual owning a dog but that individual finds a loophole by getting a spouse, a son, a daughter or a friend to adopt the dog instead. I appreciate that how we police that will create great difficulties, and I look forward to the Minister's remarks, but we need a strong and robust system. Examination is needed to ensure that what we do have is the best possible.

In the context of the debate, it is evident that a very clear signal will yet again go from the House that we will not tolerate animal cruelty in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: I therefore look forward to there being cross-party support to send out that signal to wider society.

Ms Boyle: I apologise to the proposer of the motion for not being here at the start of the debate. I thank her and her colleague for bringing it to the House today. I will speak in support of the motion and the amendment.

I and others in West Tyrone were lobbied about animal abuse and cruelty during the election campaign. Rescue shelters there — for example, Grovehill — have expressed huge concerns about breeding and pet abandonment, and shelters are full as a result. Neutering schemes and behavioural advice are necessary. Some shelters are saying that education is required on breeds that are suitable to be domestic pets. This is just one area on which the shelters have concerns. There has also been a significant rise in malamute and husky breeds, which has been a concern for rehoming shelters and is due to people not being aware of a breed's needs before they acquire a cute wee pup.

There needs to be strict regulation of the trading of pets on sites such as Gumtree, DoneDeal and other social media sites, perhaps under a trade Act or for tax reasons. People who sell pets online rarely declare taxes. This also applies to the private sale of larger animals such as horses. In the equine world, DARD, now DAERA, has recorded data on how many horses are registered here, but there are still many that are not microchipped or have passports. Therefore, the DAERA figure is not an accurate reflection of the true figure. Unfortunately, it is, as others have said, extremely difficult to police the sale of animals online.

Having an accessible central register of those who are convicted of animal welfare offences and, as the motion says, those who are disqualified from keeping animals, is important. It should, first and foremost, raise the seriousness of animal welfare and protection, and sound education and advice on that is necessary. It should also encourage responsible ownership and better access to, and regulation of, puppy farms. One important area is to discourage the free-to-good-home appeal. People who have sought small domestic pets through free-to-good-home adverts have used them for baiting, which is deplorable and despicable. If there is going to be a register, there also needs to be a vetting process for those who are buying online.

People have come to me and said how easy they found it to go into a pet shop and buy a domestic pet. So, pet shops need to have access to the register as well. Pet shop owners should be able to do frequent spot checks on people's homes before they purchase an animal.

The motion calls on the Justice Minister to introduce a cruelty register, which I support, and to ensure that those who are guilty of such offences are not able to adopt animals. I welcome the work that has been done, and the work that the Justice Department and DARD have done by joining forces. Bringing forward the implementation review in February was mentioned. That review warns, in its recommendations, that people should, and must, face tougher sentences and penalties under the law. Both Ministers launched the report on the review. The review was welcome and contained 68 recommendations aimed at enhancing communication. Again, it goes back to having good education.

It is important also to highlight that, in the Animal Welfare Party's manifesto —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Boyle: They have sought sociological evidence of links between domestic violence and animal cruelty. That is one area that we need to explore. Healthcare workers and social workers need to be educated in that area to bring that information to the relevant authorities. I support the motion and amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Assembly Business

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is my understanding that the First Minister has rightly suggested some leniency in employment practices this afternoon to support the Northern Ireland football team. I was wondering whether the Office of the Speaker might be able to enquire whether some of the television screens in the Great Hall could assist Assembly staff who wish to support Northern Ireland and make sure that they keep up to speed with our progress.

Mr Speaker: I think you know that that is not a point of order, but it is an opportunity.

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time as Minister of Health. I inform the House that question 10 has been withdrawn.

Causeway Hospital: Missed Appointments

1. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Health how many patients have failed to turn up for appointments in the Causeway Hospital over the last 12 months. (AQO 90/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): Provisional data for 2015-16 indicates that there were 52,303 new and review attendances at Causeway Hospital. Some 3,779 patients, of whom 995 were new appointments and 2,784 were review appointments, did not attend their appointment, which represents a did not attend (DNA) rate of 6.7%. This is lower than the average regional DNA rate of 8.3% in 2015-16. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has the lowest rate of patient non-attendance of all the trusts: 6.5% in 2015-16 against the average of, as I said, 8.3%. Measures taken by the trust include using a text reminder service, which has reduced the did not attend rates for hospital appointments, and reminders are sent out three days prior to an appointment date with a telephone number to call if the patient is unable to attend.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer and congratulate her on her new post. I look forward to seeing her at the Causeway in the near future.

Minister, across the Province, how many appointments have been cancelled by the trusts? That is a rising problem.

Mrs O'Neill: It is. We need to come at this two ways. We need to address the issue of why patients cancel appointments, but we also have to be serious about hospitals cancelling appointments for whatever reason. Appointments can be cancelled by hospitals for a range of reasons, but I have set a target for 2016-17 that we must reduce by at least 20% the number of hospital-cancelled, consultant-led outpatient appointments. It is only fair that, when we ask people to respond better, we also ask the service to respond better and make sure that the maximum number of people can be seen in an appropriately timely manner.

Mr Mullan: Will the Minister detail how many appointments have been cancelled by the Causeway Hospital in the last year and the financial ramifications of that?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have that figure, but I can make a general reference to the fact that appointments can be cancelled by hospitals for a range of reasons — for example, if consultants or other staff are not available — and appointments will be rescheduled or a patient treated elsewhere. Suffice to say, I regret any cancellations that inconvenience patients and mean that they have to wait longer. At times, that might be necessary, but I want it minimised as much as possible.

As I said, I have set a target for 2016-17 to reduce by 20% the number of hospital-cancelled consultant-led outpatient appointments. I acknowledge that performance is not

where it should be and needs to be better. We need to get better at how we deliver the service. I look to the board and the trusts to continue to focus on the issue to make sure that we secure improvements in performance. The board will continue to work with the trusts to ensure that best practice, including the application of good waiting list management, is consistently applied to minimise the number of hospital cancellations. Consultants, for example, are asked to give at least six weeks' notice of planned leave or study leave, and the board meets the trusts regularly to monitor elective care performance, including the delivery of agreed volumes of core activity. The rate of cancellation of outpatient appointments is one of the factors considered when assessing the delivery of core activity.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister outline what consideration is being given to providing patients, personally and publicly, with details of the time that they are expected to wait for an appointment following an initial referral from their GP? Does she agree with me that more accurate information should reduce the number of missed appointments?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that we communicate well with patients. It is important that people are seen in a timely manner in relation to their medical needs. That is why we have the targets in place. We need to keep striving to reduce the waiting list targets. I have said in the House over the last number of weeks that the current situation is not sustainable and is not acceptable to me. We need to drive forward with improvements, which is about working with the board and the trusts and looking at the elective care plan; the Member will know that I have asked the trusts to bring that forward. I am keen to make sure that we drive down the waiting times for all the people who need urgent medical attention.

Ms Dillon: What responsibility is there on clinicians to ensure that the number of cancelled appointments is reduced? How does the Minister plan to tackle that?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we have to come at that by communicating with patients and asking them to work with us. If we are asking them to work with the service in relation to how they cancel appointments, we have to be upfront about the disappointing number of appointments cancelled because clinicians or other staff are not available. As I said, I have set a target for this year to reduce by 20% the number of hospital-cancelled consultant-led outpatient appointments. It is important that we send out the message very clearly that we want patients to help the service to be more effective. We can do that with strong communication and by making sure that the service does not cancel appointments unnecessarily.

Health: All-island Approach

2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Health how she plans to improve the all-island approach to health. (AQO 91/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: A key priority for me will be the further development of all-island networks to tap into the benefits that collaboration on health and social care services will bring to every part of the island. I have spoken with my counterpart in the South, Simon Harris, to explore how our health services can further collaborate on improving people's health. My vision of a transformed health service in the context of the upcoming Bengoa report and the

announcement by the Minister in the South of a 10-year plan is an opportune time to strengthen and progress all-Ireland health.

There is already positive collaboration with the South through, for example, EU-funded initiatives, as well as cancer and cardiac services in the north-west. I commend the work that has been done to date between the health services, and I want to take those efforts to the next level. We face the same health issues, challenges and opportunities right across the island, as was highlighted by the 2009 North/South feasibility study: demographic change, health inequalities, mental health, obesity and substance abuse. Working together to address those would make sense on a number of levels. It would utilise the total population size to secure the sustainability of vulnerable services, where collaboration would realise real benefits for patients. It would deliver better outcomes for patients, North and South. It would achieve the more effective use of resources and investment in new healthcare initiatives, where we could share learning and best practice between our health services. We can work together particularly in relation to public health awareness initiatives.

I intend to build on examples of that collaboration, including the Altnagelvin radiotherapy unit, which will open later this year. It will make world-class cancer treatment accessible to patients living in the north-west of Ireland. It will add to the successful 24/7 primary PCI service at Altnagelvin Hospital, which was expanded in May of this year to make life-saving treatment available to patients from County Donegal. Good progress has also been made on the establishment of the all-island congenital heart disease network. I am confident that we will take the next major steps forward in achieving the network's vision of a world-class all-island service with our colleagues very soon.

Further priorities for my Department will include exploring opportunities for further collaboration in specialities such as organ transplantation, the treatment of rare diseases, the response to major trauma, alcohol and substance misuse and mental health, particularly the prevention of suicide and self-harm. At the heart of that collaboration is my commitment to put the interests of patients first and foremost by delivering safe, high-quality health services and better outcomes for all.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her extensive answer. She will be aware that one of the most modern hospitals in Europe is the new acute hospital in Enniskillen, although it has its difficulties. I extend an invitation to the Minister to visit that excellent facility. What potential is there for a greater all-Ireland approach in public health?

Mrs O'Neill: I intend to get out and about to meet the people delivering the service on the ground right across the North, so I am happy to take the Member up on that invite at some stage over the next number of months.

As far as examples of public health are concerned — I have pointed to a few — the two Departments work closely on alcohol and drug misuse to ensure that we share information and best practice, and we have taken forward joint initiatives when appropriate. Recent joint initiatives include jointly commissioned research on the potential impact of minimum unit pricing for alcohol, a joint report on reducing alcohol misuse through addressing accessibility and availability, a joint resource on hidden harm and

information-sharing on new psychoactive substances and learning from the legislation that has been enacted in the South. There is also a lot of work happening on obesity. We have an all-island obesity action forum, which is chaired by Safefood and continues to meet and share information and best practice.

Other areas include anti-smoking campaigns and a smoke-free HSC. On mental health and promoting positive mental health messages and on suicide prevention there is excellent work ongoing by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland. We have had the work that has been done on a self-harm registry. We have been working with the GAA, for example, through the Public Health Agency and the National Office for Suicide Prevention in the Twenty-six Counties. There are really positive initiatives on promoting good public health messages, and I want to build on that in the time ahead. I am delighted that after a recent conversation with Simon Harris, the Minister in the South, he agreed to work more cooperatively on how we can explore all the areas of mutual benefit.

Mr Swann: The Minister mentioned the children's cardiac all-Ireland approach, and I declare an interest in that. Will she give the House any indication of when the business case will eventually be signed off so that we can turn this aspiration into a reality and start treating children on the island?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree on turning it into a reality, and I intend to do so over the next, I hope, short period of time. Obviously, we are reviewing the business case, and I hope that we are coming towards the end of that process. In the immediate future, we will be in a position to make an announcement, move forward and provide this vital service. There has been a very strong campaign for it, rightly so because it is needed on the island. We can provide a first-class service to all the children who are affected by heart problems as a result of congenital heart failure because we will work collectively. I hope to make an announcement on that in the coming weeks.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she give us an update on deep brain stimulation, which functions in Belfast, and what is being done to extend the service to patients in the Republic of Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any detailed briefing on that, but I am happy to respond to the Member. We are looking at all areas where we can work more collaboratively. Providing a first-class service means you need to have a certain number of patients to treat. When it comes to all these areas, there is a lot more scope for cooperation across the island. The Minister in the Twenty-six Counties has indicated his willingness to allow us to move forward and scope that out. There was a feasibility study in 2009 that highlighted key areas where we could work together, but we need to build on that and update it. I want to bring forward that work and explore where we can work best for the patients who need the service and how we can do that collectively.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her initial response, which detailed a number of cases. Some of them were cross-border issues around Altnagelvin, Enniskillen or Daisy Hill. Will the Minister highlight examples of specialisms that we have in Northern Ireland that could be offered to people across the entire island?

Mrs O'Neill: That is the work that we are involved in at the moment. When the feasibility study was done in 2009 — it is pretty much out of date now — heart surgery, for example, was identified as an issue. We have reached 2016 before we have been able to deliver that service. In my initial conversations with Minister Harris, I want to use that as a baseline or a starting point, but I want to look at what we do better. I am happy to provide you with a list, outside Question Time, of what we assess that we can deliver that the South maybe does not have. That is part of the core work that we will take forward together. I do not want it to be a stretched-out process; it is work that can be done pretty quickly. As I develop my vision for the health service — he wants to deliver a 10-year vision — let us set out a plan where we can work collaboratively and provide first-class services to people across the island. This is a small island with a small population, and there are natural areas where we can work more collaboratively.

2.15 pm

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister to her Question Time, but I am disappointed that she has refused to meet in relation to the Causeway Hospital. Given that today she is interested in islands, can she give a commitment to the House that she will continue to provide healthcare for the only inhabited island in Northern Ireland, which is Rathlin in my constituency, and that the people there will get the continued care that they need, given the particular issues that they face daily?

Mrs O'Neill: I can give that assurance. I worked closely with the people of Rathlin when I was Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Legislation that I brought forward in the last mandate means that all Departments have a responsibility to protect the needs of rural dwellers, and people on Rathlin are, obviously, more isolated than most. It is important that we are mindful of the islanders and the services that they require and make sure that they have access to first-class healthcare.

In relation to not meeting you with your delegation, I am inundated with requests to meet. However, I can say that I want to make sure that I consider all the information that is before me. The previous Minister obviously halted the process in relation to the day centres because of the changes in the private sector. That was the right decision to take at that time. When the information is in front of me on my desk, I will listen to all the evidence, and I will make sure that I take a very informed decision going forward.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. It is good to hear of the Minister's commitment to enhanced North/South collaboration. Can the Minister say anything to allay the real concerns that exist about what negative impact there will be on existing, planned and future cross-border or North/South services and projects in the event of the result of the referendum being that Britain and Northern Ireland leave the European Union?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be very aware of my party's position on Brexit. We have the same position on the implications that there will be for the North. If you look at research and development in the health service, you see that we have been able to draw down research money with Scotland and the South, which was quite significant. That is one example, I suppose, of the implications. I have listened carefully to the "Leave" campaign, which has very much majored on the health service and said that,

if we pull out of Europe, we will have a lot more money to put into the health service. I do not see that being the case. It is a false argument and a scare tactic in relation to the implications in moving forward. Whilst we can only speculate on the outcome of Thursday's referendum, I believe that the challenges in the health and social care system will be there after Thursday. They are there before Thursday, and they will be there after Thursday. I do not believe that leaving the European Union will be the panacea to solve all the ills in the health service. That is certainly not my understanding or my assessment of the evidence that I have in front of me.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Outpatients

3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Health, as of 1 June 2016, how many outpatients have been waiting longer than 52 weeks for their first appointment at Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQO 92/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The latest provisional figures for Craigavon Area Hospital show that at 31 May 2016, the most recent date for which figures are available, 1,623 patients were waiting longer than 52 weeks for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment. I have made it clear that patients waiting for that length of time to be seen by a consultant is totally unacceptable to me. Reducing the length of time that patients have to wait for elective assessments, surgeries and treatments is a key priority for me; it is one of a number of key priorities.

As I highlighted in my response to the first question for oral answer, lost capacity through missed appointments could have a significant impact on waiting times. Last year, over 8,600 new and review appointment slots at Craigavon Area Hospital were lost because patients did not attend their appointment. I know that many patients have a genuine reason for not being able to attend their appointment, but every missed appointment is a lost opportunity for someone else to be seen. Again, I urge the public to let hospitals know, where possible, if they are unable to attend so that their slot can be reallocated.

As I indicated in my statement to the Assembly last week, the root causes of the problems in waiting times are representative of the wider challenges to the provision of world-class health and social care: an over-reliance on acute services rather than early intervention in meeting increasing demand, the financial constraints and slowness to bring about radical change and reform. My policy will be to adopt a balanced approach to taking further short-term action combined with longer-term change to address waiting times. It will take time and significant investment to bring waiting lists back to an acceptable level whilst, simultaneously, increasing capacity to meet increasing demand. I will continue to engage with my Executive colleagues to secure the additional investment that is necessary to transform the delivery of services.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her direct answer. I hope she can agree that statistics can often mask the hurt and pain that patients feel as they wait for an initial appointment, or, as I have found out recently, that of those who have had tests and get the results far too late.

In many ways, she has answered my supplementary, but how will she adopt a more patient-centred approach to addressing waiting times than we saw with her predecessor?

Mrs O'Neill: We all realise the impact on patients who are waiting to be seen. If you are unsure about what is wrong and are waiting to be seen by someone, there is worry and stress that has an impact on your health. It is important that we deal with the issue. We have to get waiting lists down and make sure we get to a position where we have a sustainable healthcare system. There is too much focus on acute services. We need to transform the health service to allow us to invest in primary care and take a preventative approach whereby we work more with our GPs, our allied health professionals and the people in the community.

If we are to move that way, the whole focus of the health service needs massive structural reform. I want to get to that position and for the Assembly to work with me to get to it. I am certainly committed to doing that in the time ahead. Whilst we deal with the short-term issues of getting patients seen and achieving their appointments, we have to tackle the longer-term issues seriously, and I am committed to doing so. We have an opportune time now: Professor Bengoa's report is coming out in the next short while, and that will allow me to clearly set out a vision on how we move forward and get the political buy-in to deliver on that vision.

Ms Hanna: I thank the Minister for her answers and congratulate her on her new post. In the November monitoring round, the then Finance Minister announced £40 million for elective care procedures, precisely to address those waiting lists. Will the Minister outline how much of that money was spent and, if it was not all spent, where the surplus went?

Mrs O'Neill: As you said, £40 million was secured in the November monitoring round. That was an attempt to address the short-term measures that are dealing with waiting lists. There was some success in that over 80,000 patients benefited as a result of the additional waiting list activity carried out in the latter part of the year. At the end of March, as a result of the £40 million, those waiting for their first outpatient appointment came down by 25%, and those waiting for admission for treatment came down by 16%. Those are significant outcomes in moving in the right direction, but we have a lot further to travel.

Of the £40 million, £21.5 million was utilised on waiting list activity, and a further £3.4 million that we were able to allocate brought waiting list activity spend to about £25 million. Eighty thousand patients benefited through the delivery of 54,000 additional outpatient assessments, 17,500 additional inpatient day case treatments and diagnostic assessments. In 2015-16, the balance of the funding was utilised for a range of pressures, particularly for domiciliary care and GP out-of-hours services, which have impacts on waiting lists and people being referred if they do not get primary care in the community.

In addressing the pressures, the £40 million allowed us to bring down the number of people on waiting lists and to put the Department on a firmer financial footing for 2016-17, avoiding the need to reduce any elective care services this year. It was an investment well worth making.

Ms P Bradley: I congratulate the Minister on her new role. As Chair of the Health Committee, I look forward to working with her, and I thank her for her answers so far.

It is not a popular thing to say, but we have used the independent sector in Northern Ireland health and social care for many years, and it has to play a part in bringing

our waiting lists down in the short to medium term. Has there been a strategic approach to how we will use the independent sector over the coming months and years, and has the Minister had any conversations with the sector?

Mrs O'Neill: First and foremost with the waiting lists, it has to be about patient safety. That is why there has been an over-reliance on the independent sector to get people seen. I clearly identified that as a short- to medium-term issue. I look forward to working with the Chair of the Health Committee and Committee members on how we transform the service to allow us more money to invest in primary services. In the longer term, we want to provide those services in-house. The only way we will be able to do that is if we seriously transform how we deliver services.

In my first number of weeks as Minister, I have been out meeting staff and engaging with the trusts and people right across the sector, and there is a willingness to change how we do things. With a fair wind and with good political will in the Chamber, we can, once and for all, put report fatigue to bed. We have had so many reports, but now, with Professor Bengoa's report and the restructuring of the board — all the things combined — we have a massive opportunity to transform the health service. That will mean that we provide more services in-house, which is ultimately my objective. I have not engaged with the independent sector to date, but I am sure that I will in the time ahead. My priority is to make sure that we have a first-class health service and that all those services, by and large, are provided in-house.

Ms Seeley: How does the Health Minister hope to tackle the loss of 20% of our newly trained nurses, as well as a significant number of consultants, to England, which places huge pressure on our health system?

Mrs O'Neill: The loss of newly trained nurses in particular is one of the biggest challenges that we have in workforce planning. The Department established a regional nurse recruitment group in January this year to address proactively nursing workforce challenges. To date, the group has agreed the streamlining of all regional recruitment processes for band 5 nursing vacancies across the trusts to make it easier for nurses to navigate the recruitment process. That also includes the advertising of nursing vacancies and regular interviews, the promotion and use of social media to engage with students and to communicate job opportunities and a joint approach by my Department and the trusts to engaging with university students in years 1, 2 and 3 to promote the local job opportunities that are available to them. The trusts will also make conditional job offers to third-year preregistration nursing students, pending successful completion of their degree programme and registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Alongside that, my Department commissioned the development of a career pathway for nurses and midwives to identify opportunities for local nurses. It was launched by the Chief Nursing Officer in November 2015. We continue to focus on making HSC an employer of choice for those wishing to pursue a nursing career. I am keen to engage with nursing staff. Next week, I will meet representatives of the Royal College of Nursing, and I am keen to talk to them about what else we can do to make sure that we retain newly qualified nurses and train more nurses. There is massive pressure on the system, and,

even though we have been able to increase the number of nurses coming into the system this year, we need to do a lot more about training more nurses and offering more opportunities. We are working with difficult budgets, but we need to be creative in how we do that and how we can get more nurses into the system.

Western Trust: Learning Disability Services

4. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Health what action her Department is taking to support adults with learning disabilities affected by the £8 million underspend in learning disability services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQO 93/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that I start by acknowledging the concerns of the families and carers in the Western Trust who have been affected by the issues with adult learning disabilities services in their area. I want it to be clear that I fully understand their concerns and support their efforts to seek the assurances that they are entitled to from the trust that their loved ones are being provided with appropriate and effective services. That is why, in my first few days of office, I sought an urgent and detailed briefing from my officials on the issue.

On the basis of that briefing, it is now clear to me that there is a historical issue with funding for adult learning disability services in the Western Trust. However, I assure the Member and local families and carers that action is now being taken to address that, starting with the development of a long-term plan by the Western Trust to quantify and address any spending gap. The trust will be fully supported in its work by the Health and Social Care Board and my Department. Families and carers will be fully engaged too.

It is also my intention to monitor closely the trust's progress in the coming weeks and months on the issue. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to what families and carers are saying, which, to date, has raised some questions about the trust's handling of the issue. In the light of that, I am seeking an explanation from senior trust officials of their actions leading up to and including the statement that was made on 10 May.

Mr Hussey: Any of the Members from the western part of the Province who attended meetings with the parents and, indeed, with the trust will recognise the shock and horror that was expressed by those parents. It appears to have been a 20-year underspend, Minister, and, as you are aware, there will be a debate on the issue next week. How much, in total, has not been spent on adult learning disability services in that 20-year term? Will you again assure the House that the elderly will not be victims of any compensatory payments by the trust? It has made a suggestion that it will take the additional funding from the elderly.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has time for a short response.

2.30 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I want to assure the Member that I will ensure that the plan to rectify what has been identified as a problem will be fully communicated to parents and carers. I assure you that the board will also work with the trust to quantify the money that we are talking about: £8 million has been mooted, but I do not know whether that is an accurate figure at this stage. We are still working with the trust to identify that, but I can assure you that we will

ensure that we will work with the families and those people with a learning disability who have been affected by the underinvestment that has clearly been there over the last number of years.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

Fatal Foetal Abnormality and Abortion: Working Group

T1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Health, after welcoming her to Question Time, to state who is right and who is wrong, given that, in a plenary debate on 10 February, the House was told that a working group was being set up to look at the issue of fatal foetal abnormalities and abortion, with, yesterday, the Attorney General telling the Court of Appeal that the group was up and running, albeit that, in a letter that he received from the Minister, dated last Thursday, she said that the group is not up and running. (AQT 61/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Well, I will not answer for the Attorney General: you can take your issue up with him. I can say that the Executive did, as you rightly said, set out that there needed to be a working group on fatal foetal abnormality. Simon Hamilton raised the issue with the Executive when he was Health Minister. I can confirm that the terms of reference for the group were proposed and drafted and that the membership of the group was discussed with the former Justice Minister. I can confirm that the terms of reference were not formally signed off, so, consequently, the group has not met. However, I am looking at the issue and giving the matter careful consideration. I will meet the Justice Minister over the next number of weeks. I intend to discuss how we take the issue forward. As current Health Minister, I want to meet families who have been impacted by fatal foetal abnormality and then decide how we move forward as quickly as possible to bring clarity to the issue of fatal foetal abnormality in the health service.

Mr Nesbitt: The impression was given four months ago that it would report in six months — in two months' time — and now we hear that it has not even met. Once again, this House is a Dickensian Bleak House, where citizens arrive in hope and leave in despair. Why does the Minister think that this panel is even necessary given her undoubted support of motion 122 at her party's 2015 ard-fheis, which committed to a call for a legal framework to be introduced that would allow women to access abortion services under the circumstances of fatal foetal abnormality?

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure the Member that he has not unearthed any new secret: it is my party position that we think that there should be legislation that allows women to be supported in relation to fatal foetal abnormality. The legislation that needs to come forward will come from the Department of Justice. I want to work with the Justice Minister. I also want to engage with women who have been impacted. This afternoon, I will meet Sarah Ewart. Obviously, everyone knows Sarah's story. I want to engage with her because she is someone who has actually gone through the experience of having a child with fatal foetal abnormality. It is important that we take decisions that are based on evidence and that we take the right decisions. I do not think that it is any shock that I will speak to the Justice Minister over coming weeks. We have a meeting

scheduled. We will discuss the issue and will be able to move forward.

Health Inequalities: Executive Discussions

T2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Health whether she has spoken with her Executive colleagues about health inequalities. (AQT 62/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Not as yet; I suppose that we are four weeks into the new mandate. Certainly, it will be a focus for me. It is important that we tackle health inequalities, which is why we need to transform the healthcare system to allow us to do that. Unfortunately, at the moment, no Minister has been able to tackle and actually invest properly in order to deal with health inequalities because there simply was not the funding to do so. All the money is, I suppose, being sucked into dealing with the acute sector. Unless we shift that focus, we will not get to the point where we can tackle health inequalities. I have identified it as a priority. I know that the Executive will want to have a discussion on the way forward and how we do that. I am very keen to explore that with them.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree that it is not good enough that your life expectancy depends on where you live.

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. We have to tackle the root causes of why people get sick in the first place. We have to try and get a breakdown of the correlation between people who live in deprived areas and their health outcomes; for example, tooth decay, cancer diagnoses and all those things. For me, as Health Minister, this is something that needs to be a priority. We have to get to the point where we tackle those issues head on, where we invest in prevention and have a very strong public health message. Very positive work is happening and has been happening for quite some time. We have a strategy for illness prevention and health promotion. I want to see that through. However, I think we can do much more. In order to get us to that point, we have to really reinvigorate, and look at structural issues in, the health service.

Fatal Foetal Abnormality and Abortion: Working Group

T3. **Mr Aiken** asked the Minister of Health, to follow up on the question asked by his leader, why the terms of reference for the working group have not been signed off, to outline the reasons for the delay and to state whether there are any significant issues about which the Assembly should be made aware. (AQT 63/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: No, there are not. I have just answered the question. I told you my position in relation to fatal foetal abnormality and being able to support those women who are in a crisis situation. I have been given the work that has been done to date — the terms of reference that have been drawn up — and I intend to sign off on them when I have had a conversation with the Justice Minister over the next number of weeks.

Mr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments. May I ask that the discussion be taken forward with a degree of urgency and the information brought back to the Assembly as soon as possible? The delay is unacceptable for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: A meeting is already scheduled.

Addiction Services

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for her assessment of the addiction services available here and the importance of ease of access to those services. (AQT 64/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that we tackle the issue and support people who want to get help. I am sure that the Member is aware of Northlands in Derry and the issue of funding. I am going to take up an opportunity to visit it and talk about the service that it provides, which, I am aware, is a first-class service that people value very much. It is important that we invest in addiction services and support people who are at a time in their life when they are most vulnerable. I do not have figures in relation to the current investment in addiction services, but I am very happy to provide that to the Member in the future.

Mr Durkan: I am very heartened by that answer from the Minister. Will she clarify that she recognises the valuable role of the community and voluntary sector in delivering addiction services and is committed to working with it and listening to it when designing services in future?

Mrs O'Neill: We all recognise the value of the community and voluntary sector's work. It alleviates a lot of pressure in the health service, and, without it, the service would be stretched a lot more. So, yes, I value the work that it does, and I want to work with it and move forward on how we can work together, how we can be more innovative about how we work with people and how we can be more creative in changing and structuring how we deliver services to those in need.

Mental Health Issues: DOH Prioritisation

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Health how she and her Department will prioritise mental health issues. (AQT 65/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Since becoming Minister, I have made it clear that mental health is one area that I will prioritise. We all recognise that mental health problems are a significant societal challenge that need to be addressed. I intend to address some of the historical underinvestment, but, equally, I accept that the health and social care budget in general is under extreme financial pressure, as are the Executive as a whole.

In my assessment so far in relation to mental health services, we invest annually about £250 million. That is an increase of £50 million a year compared with the position a decade ago. Also, it is significant to note that nearly 60% of mental health funding is spent on community services compared with 40% a decade ago. That shows that there is a lot more early intervention, crisis response, home treatment and the use of evidence-based psychological therapies.

There are gaps in service provision and funding, and I want to use all the information that I have to best identify how we move forward. I want to work with clinicians and people who are providing the service, as well as the community and voluntary sector. When it comes to taking positions on the new comprehensive spending review, I want to make sure that we properly invest in mental health and help the most vulnerable.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her answer. Is the Minister minded to advance a perinatal mental health approach?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. There has been some work done on it to date. There are plans for a perinatal mental health and a mental trauma service. Also, I omitted to say in my original answer that there will be study into eating disorder services, which will report in December. The lack of provision of a dedicated specialist and bespoke perinatal mental health service is a significant gap here. I want to be able to move forward with that. There are potential opportunities for us to do that on an all-island basis. That is something that I want to pick up with Simon Harris TD over the next number of weeks.

The 'Integrated Perinatal Mental Healthcare Pathway', which was published in December 2012, is being updated. That provides the regional guidance for all health and social care professionals who come into contact with pregnant women to ensure that their mental health problems are identified as early as possible and that we make sure that we have the appropriate support services in place.

The estimated cost of providing that service is about £1.9 million. Perinatal mental health is an issue that I can remember championing in the previous mandate from 2011, when I was on the Health Committee. It is certainly another area where I think we can do some good work. I want to explore that further with the Minister in the South to see whether there is any way that we can work together to deliver it quicker.

Nurses: Recruitment

T6. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Health how confident she is that everything that needs to be done is being done to ensure that we can successfully recruit the nurses who are very much needed across our hospitals. (AQT 66/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, nurses are key to service delivery. They are the backbone of the health service. I want to work with the Royal College of Nurses to make sure that there is better workforce planning. A lot of work has been done in that area. A number of additional nurses — I think it is 100 — are coming in to start their training this year. I think that that is significant, but we need to continually keep that under review. I do not believe that 100 nurses will fill the gap that has already been identified there, so I want to work with nurses and the royal college to make sure that we bring forward the correct number of nurses in the future. There have been significant improvements in nursing numbers over the last number of years. There are an additional 186 nurses in our trusts compared with the number this time last year. That shows that we are moving in the right direction, but we certainly have further to go.

The Department invests heavily in training new nurses every year, with the provision of university fee and bursary support. We also continue to work with the nurses on education and continuing with education. The other area that we have been looking at is the return-to-nursing programme, and we recently committed additional funding to commission an increase of 100 nurses. That will also allow us to take get more nurses back into practice. So, while I think that there are major challenges, we are

moving in the right direction, but we certainly have a further way to go.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that answer. I declare an interest as I have family working in nursing and midwifery. Minister, do you agree that there needs to be a much greater focus on encouraging our young people to enter the nursing profession? Do you also agree that they should be paid a proper wage for the difficult job they do, and that less emphasis should be put on agency nurses and nurse banks?

Mrs O'Neill: I do agree with you. The Department and the trusts are working particularly with new nurses who are training. In an earlier answer, I referred to the fact that about 20% of nurses decide to leave once they have qualified. It is about trying to talk to those nurses to say that there are opportunities and make sure that they are aware that there are opportunities here.

I think that nursing staff deserve to get fair pay for the job they do. I think that we have massive challenges here, not least because of continual Tory Government cuts to the block grant. That being said, I want to work with the nursing profession to make sure that we do absolutely everything we can to maximise the numbers in the service and make sure that those nurses feel supported, because obviously we value the work they do, day and daily, in supporting patients.

Suicide and Self-harm Prevention

T7. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Health, after welcoming her to her first Question Time, to outline the steps her Department is taking to address the high level of self-harm and suicide in our community. (AQT 67/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Again, as I said earlier, mental health is a priority for me, and I seriously want to work with groups on the ground providing services, particularly in the community and voluntary sector, which I very much value for working with people who find themselves in crisis or want to ask for help and some support. I certainly want to prioritise that area of work. I want to review what services we provide and how they are provided. Lifeline has recently been reviewed, so we are going to be moving forward with that. I want to make sure that we deliver on the Bamford vision. I think that there is so much that we can do. If the Department can be a wee bit more creative in working with the community and voluntary sector, we can be more effective on the ground.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that the Protect Life strategy is out for consultation and that that will close in the next number of weeks. Does she agree that, while strategies are important, we need the resources and the finance to back those up?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I absolutely agree. When we come to review the strategy, we want to make sure that we get it right, listen to everybody and look at what has been good and what has worked. We also need to look at the challenges in rural areas compared with urban areas, because sometimes they can be very different. We need a proper review of all that as we move forward. Yes, I think there is underinvestment, and I think we need to shift the balance of the investment that has occurred to date. I have

a very difficult financial picture in front of me. That said, this is an area where I want to prioritise some work.

2.45 pm

Justice

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time.

Race Hate Crime

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the work her Department has taken in conjunction with the PSNI to address race hate crime. (AQO 105/16-21)

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): I thank the Speaker for his kind sentiments.

My Department's community safety strategy contains a commitment to tackle all forms of hate crime and the harm it causes through prevention, awareness, education and support for victims and communities. To deliver on this commitment, my Department chairs a multi-agency hate crime delivery group that takes forward a range of actions to combat hate crime from the criminal justice perspective.

The PSNI holds membership of that group and is engaged in a number of specific initiatives alongside my Department. These include the hate crime advocacy service, jointly funded by my Department and the PSNI, which provides a consistent point of contact for victims who require advice, support and assistance on a practical and emotional level. Dedicated bilingual advocates to assist victims of racial hate crime are engaged through this service, and there is the hate incident practical action scheme, which is funded by my Department, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Communities. That scheme can provide victims of hate crime with personal protection and safety measures to help them feel safer in their home. My officials and PSNI officers also recently participated in Good Practice Plus, which is a Europe-wide project led by the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities. The project facilitates sharing and embedding of best practice in tackling hate crime right across a range of operational agencies in the countries involved.

More broadly, my Department will be working with the Executive Office to take forward those aspects of the Executive's racial equality strategy relating to racist hate crime. That work will form part of addressing the wider societal issues that ultimately manifest through racial hate crime. At a local level, policing and community safety partnerships deliver targeted projects, including initiatives to influence the attitudes of young people, with a view to increasing awareness of diversity and difference.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for her answer. I recognise much of the work that is ongoing. Given the recent reported and alleged race crime in the Minister's constituency involving several members of the police, will she give us an assurance that a proper and fully independent investigation will be carried out? Does she agree that we need to ensure that there is zero tolerance of racism across all our services?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I am aware of the recent incident in my constituency regarding the actions of off-duty PSNI officers in Portstewart, and it has been reported that the PSNI is looking into a hate crime element of that. Investigating the matter is an operational issue for the PSNI. If the Member has any concerns, I suggest that he takes them directly to the PSNI. I will say this: there should be zero tolerance of all incidents of hate crime, whether it be racial or sectarian, and my Department is certainly keen to support that.

Mrs Palmer: Does the Minister share my concern that the rhetoric employed by some people in the debate on Brexit has the potential to encourage racism and increase race hate crime? Is she confident that the law is sufficiently robust to deal with the minority of people who think it is acceptable to spread race hate via social media?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her question. I entirely agree with that sentiment. I think the language we use, whether it is about Brexit or any issue, is very important. As politicians, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that the words we use do not instil any sort of hate within people through who they are directed at. In the context of the legislation that looks at that, through some of the initiatives that my Department is involved in, we are trying to tackle that, but I certainly take the point that more could be done, and I am quite happy to engage with the Member to, hopefully, see a way forward in that respect.

Ms Mallon: I welcome the Minister's unequivocal statement that there should be a zero tolerance approach to all hate crime. Does she share the view that legislation in this mandate for equal marriage in Northern Ireland can help to develop a more tolerant, inclusive and respectful society here?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. It has been well established that I would support equal marriage, and I will certainly try to have those conversations with my Executive colleagues. That topic does not really fall within my remit, but, as an Executive, we are there to discuss the issues. It is something that I am quite keen to do, and I have said from the outset as a Minister that I will try to do that.

Conflict-related and Legacy Inquests

2. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to make funds available for over 80 conflict-related inquests, as requested by the Lord Chief Justice. (AQO 106/16-21)

10. **Mr Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to raise the provision of adequate resourcing for legacy inquests at the next meeting of the Executive. (AQO 114/16-21)

Ms Sugden: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 10 together. I welcome the work that the Lord Chief Justice has undertaken to develop his proposal for the completion of 56 outstanding legacy cases and have discussed with him the urgent need for funding to be made available under the terms of the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements to enable him to do so. My predecessor submitted a proposal that covered funding for legacy inquests over the initial 19-month period to the former Executive, but it was not included on the agenda prior to the election.

Without resolving the issue of the resourcing of investigations of outstanding Troubles-related deaths, we are failing the families of victims. I am committed to making progress on the matter and will, in due course, discuss it with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and my Executive colleagues.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Declan Kearney.

Mr Eastwood: Can I get a supplementary question?

Mr Speaker: Sorry. Colum Eastwood.

Mr Eastwood: Thanks, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her answer. I think that she understands that so many families have been waiting for far too long and should not have to wait any longer, given the fact that we are at the point at which we are able to do something about some of those cases. She said that she will meet her Executive colleagues "in due course". Does she agree with me that it is a matter of utmost urgency and that the Executive need to make a decision urgently to make sure that we can request the funds to be drawn down to allow the Lord Chief Justice to do the job he began in advance of this mandate?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Yes, I agree with you: I think that it is a matter of urgency that we approach this issue. Indeed, without going into any specific details, I have had initial discussions with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I am confident that, as an Executive, we will approach the issue and that we will do it sooner rather than later. It is really about having those discussions and trying to ensure that we move forward in the best way. I agree with the Member: these families have waited for far too long. The reality is that the legacy inquests will go ahead whether it is within five years or 25 years. I think that we owe it to the victims and the families of the victims to try to do it sooner rather than later, so that we can start dealing with the past and move forward.

Mr Kearney: Guím gach rath ar an Aire san Aireacht nua s'aici. I welcome the Minister to her new portfolio. Does she recognise that the continued refusal by the British Government to lift their veto on maximum information disclosure in relation to matters of the past is an increasing source of anger and concern in the wider community?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his kind sentiments and for his supplementary question. There are significant challenges in dealing with legacy issues and the past. To enable us to move forward, we are having discussions within the Executive, and those are conversations that we need to have with people outside the Executive. I am committed to ensuring that we do that. If there are concerns with the challenges that we face, I am more than happy to listen to them to see whether there is a way around those challenges.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a question, they should continually rise in their place.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. In response to Mr Eastwood's supplementary question, she said that, having met the First Minister and deputy First Minister, she was "confident" that we would make progress on this matter in a short time. Given the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister failed to place this on the Executive agenda previous to the election and that they failed to allow me, as the then

Minister, to make an urgent decision, will she explain on what basis she is confident, please?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, I want to put on record my thanks for the work that he has done up until now. A lot of the detail that I have been put over in my Department alludes to his work as Justice Minister, so I just want to put that on record.

I am confident that we will be able to find a solution to this problem. The difference between me and my predecessor is that I enjoy a level of support from the First Minister and deputy First Minister in a way that, perhaps, was not possible for him as a member of a political party. I am confident moving forward. It is no secret that the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the wider Executive have committed, particularly in this mandate, to working together. I am confident that we can do that. Of course there will be challenges, but, right now, Northern Ireland needs an indication that we are about getting things done and moving forward. I am confident that we will address this legacy issue.

Mr E McCann: Does the Minister agree that, while the matters we are talking about are commonly presented in this Chamber and in this part of the world as difficulties arising from two hostile communities with grievances going back a number of years, when representatives of the state murder its citizens, the truth should be told without recourse to concepts such as national security and that this is not a nationalist issue but a democratic issue? The state must be held to account when it kills its citizens.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. We need to look at all aspects of the issue that you raise. I agree that we need truth from all sides. As Justice Minister, I will not concentrate on one community; I will look at all aspects. If concerns such as yours are raised, I am quite happy to take them forward and try to address them as best we can. To move forward, there needs to be a sense of truth. Let us have those honest conversations so that we can move forward.

Paramilitary Panel Report

3. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Justice how she plans to implement the recommendations contained in the Fresh Start panel report on the disbandment of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. (AQO 107/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I welcome the report by the independent three-person panel and take this opportunity to place on record my thanks for its hard work and commitment in producing a comprehensive report. The report represents a positive way forward for dealing with this difficult issue. When we published the report, we committed to publishing an action plan setting out how we will work together to take forward the recommendations. The recommendations are wide-ranging and complex, and associated actions will need to span much wider than issues of policing and justice.

My Department is coordinating work across all Departments and with relevant criminal justice agencies to prepare an action plan based on the recommendations and the commitments in section A of the Fresh Start Agreement. The action plan will come to the Executive for approval, and we will publish it in due course.

Mr Douglas: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time and wish her all the best. What is the Minister's view

on the panel's recommendations to address the barriers to disbandment of paramilitary organisations?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and his kind wishes. In the report, the panel set out what it identified as barriers to the disbanding of paramilitary groups and ways in which those might be addressed. I fully appreciate, as I am sure will the Member, that these are difficult and sensitive matters. We are in the process of putting together our action plan. We are considering the recommendations carefully and will set out our response in due course.

Mr Attwood: I will quote what Séamus Mallon said to the first Oversight Commissioner for Patten:

"I wish you all the best for now."

Is it the case that, six months after Fresh Start, not one penny of Fresh Start moneys has been released to the PSNI and the NCA to tackle the threat of organised crime in Northern Ireland and on these islands? When will moneys be released to the PSNI for that purpose?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question and good wishes. I wish him the best for always, because I am that type of person. [Laughter.] I appreciate the Member's comments. There needs to be political agreement on the moneys being released. It is critical that we move forward in doing that. From my perspective of leading the Justice Department, I am keen to ensure that we have political agreement on moving forward so that the moneys can be released. As I mentioned in my earlier response on legacy inquests, these problems will occur, and they will not go away. We need to deal with them, and, as Justice Minister, I am committed to ensuring that we start to address them.

Ms J McCann: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. Will she join with me in commending the important work of community restorative justice schemes, as acknowledged in paragraph 4.16 of the panel report, and particularly the role of Community Restorative Justice Ireland?

Does she agree with this recommendation:

"the Executive should put in place a dedicated fund ... to provide enhanced ... resource over longer periods"

for this type of work?

3.00 pm

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her kind wishes and for her supplementary question.

I commend the work of the community and voluntary sector in tackling different aspects, in the area of justice and in the wider public service. They play an important role. I am a big advocate of the community and voluntary sector, from the perspective that those people are best placed to understand and facilitate their communities. I will certainly look at other ways in which my Department can facilitate the community and voluntary sector in trying to deal with these problems, which are very close to home.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the Justice Minister to her first Question Time. Has she any concerns over the ability of the Executive to work towards the disbandment of paramilitary groups, given the intimate relationship

between one of the Executive parties and the main and still existing paramilitary organisation in Northern Ireland — namely, PIRA — and the other party's history of flirting with other paramilitaries over many years, such as Ulster Resistance?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her kind wishes and for her supplementary question.

As I said to Mr Douglas, I appreciate that these are difficult and sensitive matters, but it is a case of trying to move Northern Ireland forward. To do that, we need to start addressing the issues honestly. If that means engaging with people, by all means, we have to do that. It is not about justifying their existence but about being part of the process of moving Northern Ireland forward. I am of a generation that wants to see things being done in Northern Ireland. I am a representative of people, and, if that means that I can contribute in some way to moving Northern Ireland forward, I will.

We have to take these difficult decisions. It is why people put us in the Chamber to represent them: so that we can make decisions on their behalf. I am quite happy to do that and to try to get a better outcome for Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: The report on ending paramilitary activity states that tackling segregation will be vital to building a society in which paramilitarism no longer exists. It recommends ambitious targets and milestones:

“to measurably reduce segregation in education and housing”.

I therefore ask the Minister what she believes is an ambitious target for increasing integrated education and what actions she will be proposing, as a member of the Executive, to deliver that outcome.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. I am familiar with the fact that the Member has an interest in the area of integrated education. Generally, it is something that we should be moving towards. Forgive me, but I am not over the detail of my Department and have not yet come to a conclusion as to what my priorities will be. I realise that these conversations need to be had. It is not just about adults having these conversations but about bringing the kids along with us to ensure that we do not find ourselves in a situation in which our communities are segregated.

Given the Member's interest in the area, I would certainly welcome a conversation with him to see how he feels we can broach the subject. As I said, I have not quite set my priorities yet, but, as some Members will already be aware, I am inviting all political parties, including the smaller ones, to come forward with their ideas for justice so that I can see whether they can form a part of my priorities for the next five years.

Legal Aid Reform: Savings

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the savings made through legal aid reform in the 2015-16 financial year. (AQO 108/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Legal aid is demand-led, and expenditure fluctuates depending on the volume of cases and their complexity and outcome. The spend on legal aid in the 2015-16 financial year was £92 million. The total spend was affected by barristers in the Crown Court's withdrawal

of services, which reduced the number of cases completed last year.

The reforms that have been introduced, including the introduction of standard fees in the criminal courts and the removal of very high cost cases, will realise savings of some £19 million per annum when fully implemented. The first of the reforms introduced in the civil courts, relating to the authorisation of counsel, have already delivered savings in excess of £1 million.

Further reforms will be brought forward in this financial year. In particular, standard fees for family proceedings cases will be brought forward to replace the current system. It is estimated that that will realise savings of £3 million per annum. Proposals for changes to the scope of civil legal aid will also be brought before the Assembly later this year and are aimed at delivering further savings.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for her answers and wish her well in her new post.

In the Northern Ireland Audit Office report released today, which I have in front of me, recommendation 8 on page 37 mentions the need for the agency to:

“embed its counter fraud strategy.”

Will the Minister give us an assurance that she will use her influence on the agency to establish a reliable estimate of the value of fraud in the legal aid system and take further steps to build an effective counter-fraud culture within the agency?

Ms Sugden: I thank Mr Dunne for his supplementary question. He will appreciate that the report was published this morning. I will take time to consider it carefully. I welcome that the report acknowledges that progress has been made and that we are continuing to deliver on our reform programme, which has not been fully implemented. Indeed, the Member will be aware that my officials will be speaking on the report when they next meet the Committee. I acknowledge the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General in scrutinising my Department's progress against the recommendations made previously.

Mr Swann: Minister, I welcome you to your new position from the Opposition Benches. The Legal Services Agency's accounts have been qualified since 2003. Is the Minister hopeful that that qualification will be removed from the 2015-16 account?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. I welcome his kind wishes from the Opposition Benches, and I also wish them well. Forgive me; I am not over the detail of what you asked, but I am quite happy to come back to the Member in writing with an answer on that.

Mr Lunn: I also welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. Under the current legal services legislation, the agency does not have any powers to carry out inspections of the offices of legal representatives. Is the Minister satisfied with that, or is it something she might look at?

Ms Sugden: I thank Mr Lunn for his kind wishes and for his supplementary question. Again, I am not overly familiar with the detail of that, but I will come back to you with an answer.

Kingsmills Inquest

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of developments in the Kingsmills inquest. (AQO 109/16-21)

Ms Sugden: First, I express publicly my sympathy for the families on the loss of their loved ones. That day, 5 January 1976, was one of the most tragic days in the history of the Troubles, when 10 workers were singled out on their way home from work and gunned down. Therefore, the holding of an inquest some 40 years on is a welcome development for the families, albeit it has been far too long.

The Kingsmills inquest opened on 23 May 2016 before His Honour Judge Sherrard. On 31 May, the coroner received correspondence from the Crown Solicitor indicating that new evidence had come to light inasmuch as a match had been identified for a palm print found on a vehicle thought to have been involved in the attack. The families were apprised of this development on the same day. Following submissions from legal representatives, the inquest continued on 8 June but has been adjourned until today.

I recognise the importance of the inquest system to deliver a proper and robust investigation into the deaths that resulted from this atrocity. Like the families, I welcome that a new investigative avenue has been identified. That must be fully explored. As the conduct of the ongoing inquest is a matter for the coroner and the police investigation is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr Allister: The Minister had no difficulty making adverse comments about the Brexit campaign, but she seems a little more reticent about an inquest that falls under her jurisdiction. Surely it would be legitimate and appropriate for her, as Minister, to seek explanation about how palm prints that have been in the possession of forensics for years and examined multiple times were identified only after the inquest started and with the consequence of the delay in the inquest. What does it say of the probity and thoroughness of previous investigations that this situation has evolved? Is she satisfied with that? What steps are being taken to rectify such situations in the future?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I draw his attention to my comments on Brexit and the language that we use in trying to move Northern Ireland forward.

The police investigation is a live investigation. At this stage, I cannot comment on the timeline for the conclusion of the investigation or any elements within it.

Mr Sheehan: I also wish the Minister well in her new post.

Does she agree that the urgent establishment of all of the mechanisms for dealing with the past, as agreed under the Fresh Start Agreement, provide the best opportunity to secure maximum recovery of the truth and justice for all families and individuals who suffered as a result of the conflict?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his kind wishes and his supplementary question. Yes, I do agree, and I think we need to move forward on dealing with the past, whether that is with the legacy inquests or the historical investigations unit. Cases such as these demonstrate the need for doing that to finally give victims and their families a response to something that they have been dealing with for many years.

Mr Bell: I congratulate the Minister. This is my first opportunity to do so in the House, and I welcome her having taken the very courageous decision on a very difficult post. I wish you well in that.

The Minister will be aware that the Kingsmills massacre is a festering sore that, until justice is done, will never allow proper reconciliation and healing in our society. Can the Minister assure the House that no stone will be left unturned in seeking that justice, because there is scepticism about the Provisional IRA's involvement in what was a sectarian massacre akin to what we have seen in Kosovo and other horrendous areas? Can she also confirm that, if the Provisional IRA is found to be responsible by due process of law, it will be held to account for what was a heinous sectarian atrocity?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his good wishes and for his supplementary question. I do recognise that this was an atrocity and it is a journey that will not end with the outcome of the inquest. Indeed, a lot of the outstanding inquests that we need to take forward, hopefully sooner rather than later, will have a similar impact on the victims and their families. On this inquest, it is a matter for the Coroner to hold people to account, and any police investigation is an operational matter, so it is difficult for me to comment. Moving forward, it is something that we need to address, and we need to do so sooner rather than later.

Mr McGrath: Does the Minister fully accept the content and findings of the Police Ombudsman's report into the Loughinisland murders, and does she agree that the remarks made by the Secretary of State were unhelpful and deeply disrespectful to the families and the victims?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. Again, the Loughinisland report is an operational matter for the PSNI, so it is difficult for me to comment on that. I will say this: in 1994, six men did not come home, and that is a travesty. Whilst this report might provide some comfort to the families, the journey that they are on will not end. This is an indication of a lot of these types of inquest in Northern Ireland. As I said in answer to a previous question, we need to be careful in how we put these things and be very mindful of the fact that there are victims here. Working with my Executive colleagues, it is something that I hope to address sooner rather than later, so that Northern Ireland can move on and to ensure that we are dealing with the past in the most appropriate way.

Ms Bradshaw: Does the Justice Minister agree that the investigation into the Kingsmills massacre demonstrated the need for a robust system for investigating the past? What negotiations is she involved in to establish institutions to do this?

Ms Sugden: Yes, I do agree that it demonstrates that, as will other events that, inevitably, come before us. To reiterate, I am speaking with my Executive colleagues to seek a way forward in trying to deal with these issues.

Crawfordsburn Country Park: Antisocial Behaviour

6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Justice whether she has raised the issue of antisocial behaviour at Crawfordsburn Country Park with the PSNI. (AQO 110/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The issue of addressing antisocial behaviour at Crawfordsburn Country Park is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I can let you know, however, that addressing antisocial behaviour is a strategic objective for all policing and community safety partnerships and that the Ards and North Down partnership has set aside over £95,000 to address the issue this year. I can also advise that, in May 2016, Translink, Ards and North Down council, Lisburn and Castlereagh council and the PSNI ran a joint operation for five consecutive weeks, which helped to reduce antisocial behaviour at the Crawfordsburn Country Park and beaches. As a result of the joint operation, calls to the Police Service of Northern Ireland for its services were drastically reduced.

3.15 pm

The Police Service of Northern Ireland, which is also a designated member of the policing and community safety partnership, has robust measures in place to deal with any antisocial behaviour incidents in the park, including a ban on alcohol. The Ards and north Down policing district command unit has also developed an effective collaborative working relationship with Translink, the council and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which will manage the park, and there will be ongoing monitoring to ensure that everyone enjoys the facilities at the park over the summer months.

Mr Speaker: I regret, Mr Chambers, that there is no time for a supplementary. That ends the period of time for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

Explosives Find: North Belfast

T1. **Mr Aiken** asked the Minister of Justice, after congratulating her on her appointment and the assured manner with which she has answered questions during her first Question Time, whether she has received a security briefing about the explosives find in north Belfast last night. (AQT 71/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his kind remarks. I welcome him to the Assembly and look forward to working with him on any issues he wishes to raise with me in respect of my Justice remit.

I have received a briefing about the suspected explosive material that was taken out of circulation last night. Those who have such explosives have no regard for public safety and do not conduct anything with care. In fact, their intent is to cause havoc. Unfortunately, that can cause injury or killing. I also find it incomprehensible that the explosive material was found in a residential area. I reiterate that there can be no justification for that type of action. Those who are responsible should be held to account for their actions.

Mr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments. Will she brief the Assembly, after a proper forensic examination of the explosives has taken place, on whether, as reported, there was 1.5 kg of Semtex and whether it is newly acquired or part of some historical find of explosives that should have been long since decommissioned?

Ms Sugden: I agree with the Member; it is a worrying find. However, it is an operational matter for the police to

investigate. I suggest that he contacts them directly if he has any questions particular to that incident.

Drug Abuse and Antisocial Behaviour: Newry and Armagh

T2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice, after wishing her well in her new role, what her Department is doing to work with other agencies to address the problems of drug abuse and antisocial behaviour in the Newry and Armagh area. (AQT 72/16-21)

Ms Sugden: As I mentioned to other Members, we have a community strategy that deals with various agencies in tackling drug or alcohol abuse. We work with the PSNI and the local policing and community safety partnerships and other various agencies in trying to do that. It is something that we take very seriously.

I spoke in a debate a couple of weeks ago in respect of psychoactive substances, but it is important to note that alcohol can be as damaging as any other type of drug, including ones that are legal, such as prescription drugs. It is something that my Department is committed to, and we are keen to engage to see whether we can stop that type of activity.

Mr Boylan: In light of the announcement that Armagh courthouse is to close, what extra services can you provide to support people who need assistance with addiction?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that legal challenges to the closure of Ballymena, Lisburn and Strabane courthouses were submitted to the High Court in early May. All three applications for leave to appeal were heard on 16 June, and leave was granted. The substantive appeal hearing will not take place until autumn — the end of October, I believe — so it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the closure of those courthouses while ongoing legal action is in effect.

Magilligan Prison: Future Upgrade

T3. **Ms Archibald** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her first Question Time and wishing her luck in her role, to state whether, following her visit to Magilligan prison last week, she envisages an upgrade of the facilities there in the near future. (AQT 73/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her kind wishes. Indeed, I extend my kind wishes to my constituency colleague, who is new to the House following the recent election.

Yes, I had a very positive visit to Magilligan. It was positive in the sense that it was important for me to get out and see my prison estate and determine what work needs to be done. For me, the visit reiterated that a refurbishment of Magilligan really needs to take place. Prior to my becoming Minister, that is certainly something I advocated. It is now about how I can build on the work of my predecessor to realise the outline business case that has been approved and how we can maybe put the appropriate funds in place to try to move it forward.

Ms Archibald: I thank the Minister for her kind wishes and her answer. As you said, the facilities in Magilligan have long been highlighted as not fit for purpose. Will the Minister acknowledge that it is important for the

rehabilitation of prisoners and for allowing the prison staff to do their jobs effectively that they have adequate facilities?

Ms Sugden: Yes, entirely. I think we need adequate facilities across our prison estate not just in Magilligan but in other establishments in Northern Ireland. Certainly, my Department is committed to trying to realise bringing new facilities forward. It is a case of trying to ensure that the current outline business case is appropriate and looking at how we can move it forward through funding.

Proceeds of Crime: Recovery

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her first Question Time, what role her Department plays in the recovery of assets and the proceeds of crime. (AQT 74/16-21)

Ms Sugden: An assets recovery scheme is run through my Department. It takes assets that have been recovered and shares them among appropriate community and voluntary sector groups. Depending on the crime, it might help the victims. I think it is a great scheme and a way of ensuring that crime does not pay. Indeed, the proceeds of crime can go back to its victims. Various groups that I sit on — I am thinking mainly of the Organised Crime Task Force, a multi-agency group that I chair — recover assets on a cross-jurisdictional basis, and we then decide what to do with them.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that answer. Recently, Minister, I was approached about assets by someone involved with the Sea Cadets in Ballymena. We saw on television recently that, across the water, some boats had been confiscated, and he made a case for them. What more could you do, Minister, to distribute this information to community groups, which have a valuable role to play, to make sure that they know that they can avail themselves of some of the assets that have been received by the Department?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. By all means, I think there is a role for my Department and, indeed, all the Departments within the Executive, to better inform, if you like, the community and voluntary sector of how they can make use of public funding, particularly in areas such as this. Having that engagement with the community and voluntary sector moving forward is one of the aspects of the Programme for Government that I am really content with. I know that officials in my Department are working on a strategy to identify the really fantastic community and voluntary groups out there that provide a service to our community, let us face it, on our behalf. It is an important concept moving forward and one I hope the Executive will fully realise when we have an action plan on our programme.

Loughinisland: Secretary of State's Comments

T5. **Ms Mallon** asked the Minister of Justice, while accepting her comments about the operational aspect of the Loughinisland report and it's being a matter for the ombudsman, and also accepting genuinely that she is coming from a very compassionate place on the issue, to state whether she agrees with the Secretary of State's comment that collusion is a "pernicious counter-narrative"

or agrees with the thousands of people who have signed a petition because they profoundly disagree with the Secretary of State's comment and find it deeply offensive. (AQT 75/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for her question. The language used should be very carefully considered, because this is, and rightly so, a very emotive issue that we are dealing with. I think that some of the comments need to be considered in that light and, more than anything else, in mind of the victims and their families. I would certainly take care with the language I use.

Ms Mallon: Part of the response to dealing with collusion lies in inquests. Is the Minister pressing for a paper to go to the Executive before recess that focuses on the release of resource for inquests to give some comfort to the many families who are waiting and waiting?

Ms Sugden: Yes. My Department certainly is trying to encourage us to move forward on the legacy inquests. The Lord Chief Justice's plan to deal with all the inquests sooner rather than later is something that my Department is very supportive of. As I mentioned in response to earlier questions, it is something that I think that we will move on. I hope that that will happen sooner rather than later. It is certainly something that I am encouraging very much at the Executive table.

Bonfires

T6. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her post and wishing her well, whether she agrees, as we approach the marching season and the bonfire season, albeit acknowledging that a lot of work has been carried out in the PUL community to reduce tensions, particularly with bonfires, that it is still unacceptable to see posters, effigies and images being burned on bonfires. (AQT 76/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his question. Of course it is unacceptable; all incidents of hate crime are unacceptable, whether it be sectarianism or racism. The people responsible for that type of activity need to be held accountable for it. It is the police's role to investigate that. All incidents of hate crime are unacceptable.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer. A number of sites have become notorious, such as the Ballycraig Road and the Dublin Road in Antrim. We have seen the continuing burning of posters and effigies in my constituency in Banbridge and Portadown. Does the Minister not agree that the PSNI should treat it more seriously and treat it as a hate crime?

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. If he has examples of specific ongoing incidents, I suggest that he directs those comments to the PSNI, even through the Policing Board. Again, it is an operational matter, which I find it difficult to comment on. Indeed, it would not be appropriate for me to do so. To reiterate: incidents of hate crime are unacceptable. I appreciate where you are coming from, so, in trying to deal with this particular issue, I would direct the Member to the PSNI.

Legal Aid

T7. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice, after welcoming her to her first Question Time, why, in light of the report released today that states that, in the four

years from 2011 to 2015, there was an annual increase in legal aid costs, with £92 million mentioned for 2015-16, the reforms that were introduced to reduce legal aid costs have not delivered and to state whether much more needs to be done. (AQT 77/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his good wishes and question. I appreciate why people think that the reforms to legal aid have perhaps not been fully realised in the way in which they were set out to do. A number of reforms have been implemented to date, although a number have not. It is fair to say that £19 million in savings will be realised when they are fully implemented. Does that suggest that we should look to further reforms? Perhaps. This is a new mandate, with new representatives and new opinions. I am more than happy to listen to the views of people who think that we need to go further in reforming legal aid.

From my perspective, legal aid should very much be about helping the most vulnerable in society to get access to justice. Access to justice is my overarching aim of what we intend to do in that area. If that means looking at the current process, that is something that we should certainly explore.

Mr Speaker: Mr Anderson, there is time for a quick supplementary and a quick answer from the Minister.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. I sat on the Justice Committee in the previous mandate and heard many debates on this. Do you agree that much more needs to be done to bring the legal aid bill down further?

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: A quick answer, Minister.

Ms Sugden: We should certainly look at that issue.

Mr Speaker: Members may wish to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair)

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we return to the debate on animal cruelty, I wish the new Minister of Justice all the best. It is always good to get through your first Question Time. Well done.

Private Members' Business

Animal Cruelty

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty and the increasing risks with the online sale or transfer of animals; welcomes the actions thus far to address issues raised in the interim report of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take further action to establish an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act and to further protect animals from cruelty. — [Mrs Little Pengelly.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "Minister of Justice" and insert

"to bring forward proposals to enhance animal cruelty protections, including considering further and tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act." — [Mrs Little Pengelly.]

Mr Stalford: Concern about the welfare of animals is nothing new. In fact, we can be proud that, in this part of the world, the first animal welfare legislation was introduced in 1635. Throughout history, people have always been concerned about the welfare of animals because we recognise that we have a duty to them to protect them. In the words of Bernard Rollin, a pre-eminent animal rights activist:

"dominion does not entail or allow abuse any more than does dominion a parent enjoys over a child."

I think that that is right. It is right that we have a moral obligation to protect animals from cruelty, neglect and ill treatment by others.

Over recent times, there has been an increasing awareness of our obligations in that regard. All Members will have been deeply horrified by the case of Cody the dog who was burned so cruelly by evil and wicked people. In my constituency — I am sure that Members from all 18 constituencies can attest to this — we have reported to us horrific instances of animal cruelty, be that animals being starved, beaten or mistreated. It impresses on us, therefore, the need to act. A deterrent is important, which is why I welcome the measures that have been taken in toughening up sentencing, but it can go only so far.

What we are aiming for and what everyone would like to see is a societal attitudinal change on how we treat animals. Education is important, which is why I am pleased that one of the policies that we detailed in the DUP animal welfare policy during the election was the importance of responsible pet ownership being taught in schools. That is a good idea. In this Assembly term, we should look at the provision of resources to young people and children and educating them as to how they should look after the animals that they want to keep as pets.

Speaking to our culture and attitudes, I believe that, in this day and age, there is absolutely no place for circuses that use wild animals. The outlawing of that practice — I

am glad that the Justice Minister is still in her place — would send a very powerful message about the attitude of society. A vigilant public is a watchful guardian against animal cruelty. A recent Millward Brown survey that was carried out for the USPCA showed that very few people were aware of whom they reported animal cruelty to or who the responsible authority for dealing with it was.

In a previous guise, I served on Belfast City Council for 11 years, along with the Member for North Belfast. I am glad that the council supported and pushed through a simple measure that cost only £10,000, which was the provision of a sticker to go on every ratepayer's bin in the city advertising the telephone number to call if people suspected animal cruelty or neglect. In that simple way, through a small step that did not cost a lot, we aimed to increase public awareness of how to report cruelty to animals.

The motion mentions a register, which I absolutely support. Concerns have been expressed about data protection and what have you. Ultimately, I believe that, if people take it upon themselves to torture, mutilate or starve an animal, frankly, whatever considerations there may be about protecting their data, the balance of the law should not be on their side. We certainly should not allow a situation to exist —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Stalford: I will. We certainly should not allow a situation to exist in which such people would ever have access to animals again.

Mr McKee: This is a very important debate. Everyone in the Chamber will be appalled at the thought of animals being neglected or harmed. Indeed, coming from a farming background, I know that my duty was not only to raise animals but to do so within certain standards to ensure that they all had a reasonable quality of life. In fact, Northern Ireland's farmers produce food to animal welfare standards that are among the highest in the world. The vast majority of local farms here are responsibly run, recognising the huge importance of good animal welfare and husbandry. Unfortunately, however, there are people in society who think that it is acceptable to inflict suffering on what are, most often, totally harmless animals, whether pets, wildlife or agricultural.

Animal welfare is an issue that has already been receiving a higher profile in recent times. As a country of supposed animal lovers, our local papers and news bulletins include mentions of animal abuses all too often. Although there are well-known cases, such as that of Cody the dog, there are many more that simply go unreported. Some people are caught and punished, but many others get away with it completely. Not only have too many people been getting away with it but those who are caught have been getting away too lightly.

The 2011 Act was a major step in the right direction, but its implementation was pretty poor. The best way in which to deter people from committing animal cruelty is to convince them that the risk of being caught is so great and the subsequent sentence so strong that it simply is not worth it. Unfortunately, however, although the 2011 Act gave us the powers, it was not followed by punishments. In 2010, the year before the new Act, there were just four custodial sentences, but, by 2013, this had fallen to a measly two. What a mockery of the law. When, following an infamous case in east Belfast, the four men who had been convicted

of one of the worst ever cases of animal cruelty here were seen joking, laughing and taunting the police as they walked free from court, that was probably the clearest example in recent times of how we have still not got the balance right and how the punishments are not fitting the crimes.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way on that particular point. Does he agree that what made it worse was the sentences that were handed down by the judiciary in that case? You rightly describe it as one of the worst cases of animal cruelty, but the way in which the judges dealt with it and the lenient sentences handed down were nearly more shameful than the crime itself.

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

Mr McKee: That is a very good point. That was probably the clearest example in recent times of how we have still not got the balance right and how the punishments are not fitting the crimes. I therefore very much welcome the Public Prosecution Service's new power to refer unduly lenient animal cruelty sentences to the Court of Appeal.

For the time being, we believe that the PPS is the best safeguard to ensure that people convicted of this awful crime face the full consequences.

I am happy to support the motion's call for a central register; in fact, it was one of the key policy priorities in the animal welfare paper that we produced earlier this year. There is a strong case for improving the information currently collated and stored about those found guilty of inflicting suffering on animals. It is essential that our enforcement bodies, including the PSNI and local councils, are able to quickly access and share conviction data among themselves and the wider public. In addition, collecting conviction data could assist local animal welfare charities to make decisions more confidently about who is a suitable owner.

In addition to a register, however, other key steps are needed. The scourge of puppy farming and the accompanying upsurge in the online sale of pets presents authorities with major challenges. It remains effectively unregulated, and some people are making an awful lot of money from animal suffering. I hope that the new Department is actively considering ways to tighten the sale of pets in that way.

Finally, I make the point that animals involved in the provision of entertainment must be treated with the same care and compassion as we expect for our pets. I fully support the motion.

Mr McMullan: First of all, I congratulate the Justice Minister on her first day at the podium.

Animal cruelty is one of the most difficult sections of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 that we, as legislators, have to deal with. No matter how many laws we make and fines we impose, there are always those in our communities who continue to inflict pain and suffering on defenceless animals. We must now look at other deterrents in the continuing fight against animal cruelty.

The motion calls for a central register of those convicted of animal welfare issues or disqualified from keeping farmed or non-farmed animals. I have listened with great interest to the debate, and there has been little talk of farm-reared animals.

They all come under the Welfare of Animals Act, and I am surprised that they have been left out so much today.

In the last mandate, the Agriculture Minister, Michelle O'Neill, called on the Justice Minister to look at how a register could be set up. I know that there are problems with data protection and that there, and I will listen with interest to what the Minister has to say. I am in favour of a register, but we must see the courts doing their job. As other Members have said, it is no good having laws when the courts only give offenders a slap on the wrist. I agree with the Member that, when we see people coming out of court laughing and joking, the deterrent is not there.

As I said, the register would also apply to farm-reared animals. Cruelty happens to them too, although, thankfully, not on the same scale as to non-farmed animals. DAERA veterinary inspectors, when required, can carry out rigorous ongoing programmes of farmed animal welfare inspections. Those inspections are part of the statutory cross-compliance surveillance to assess whether on-farm welfare meets the standards laid down in the legislation; in other words, if a farmer is not adhering to cross-compliance regulations, he can be fined twice. First, he can be fined by the Department and face a heavy fine that comes out of his single farm payment. When that is done, he can also be fined later by the courts. That deterrent is not being publicised. He can be hit with two fines. Inspections can also be carried out as a result of information from the public or from vets in meat plants. When a vet inspects a carcass in a meat plant, he can see whether there are signs of cruelty. That can go back to the farmer, and he can be taken in for cruelty even when the animal is dead.

3.45 pm

Some dog breeders carry out the online sale of animals, which causes those animals great stress and pain. I ask the Minister to look at that area. We have the Welfare of Animals Act, and, in the schedules, there is every animal you can think of from chickens, goats and calves to pigs and cattle, but there is nothing about pups, the conditions that breeding establishments have to adhere to or the size of whelping cages. I asked some councils to send me information on the data that they carry for that, and it is a piece of paper that you would see a primary 1 child filling in at school. There is nothing about the size of cages. We have seen on television pups and dogs crammed into cages. The law must crack down on these unscrupulous dealers and owners. Before a member of the public makes a purchase, they can inquire as to whether the animal comes from a reputable dealer. We must do all in our power to protect farmed and non-farmed animals from those who take great delight in inflicting pain and distress on defenceless animals.

I will take the opportunity before I finish to ask the Minister to look at a ban on trophy hunting. People go out to Europe or Africa, shoot defenceless giraffes and other animals as trophies to take back home. We have the power here to ban the import of hunting trophies.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McMullan: I ask the Minister to look at that.

Ms Lockhart: I support my colleagues who have tabled the motion. We all know the preciousness of animals in

our society, whether they are kept as pets or for livelihood. As someone who was brought up on a farm and lives on a farm, I know all too well the value that animals can and do bring to society. There is no doubt in both cases, whether animals are kept for livelihood or as pets, that there should be an aim and a common purpose that the health and well-being of the animal is key for the owners.

So often, we hear of high-profile cases — they have been mentioned throughout the House today — but we have to be mindful of the activity that goes on underground and the high number of cases that never make it to the media. We have to engage in awareness raising and education around the reporting of animal cruelty. The Member for South Belfast Christopher Stalford mentioned the initiative that he brought forward in Belfast City Council, and he has to be commended for that. As a Government, we should strive to ensure that initiatives like that are rolled out in all council areas.

The implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act in 2011 has given more teeth to our councils and to those dealing with animal cruelty. For instance, it is important to note that, in the last year in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) council area, 583 cases were investigated. There were 972 visits and, as a result, nine cases of seizure and seven prosecutions. The implementation of the Act is starting to bear fruit, and we are starting to see progress on that.

That also links to the issue of the central database that my party wants to see implemented. The seven people who have offended and have been prosecuted should be listed and should not be allowed to keep animals in the future. I spoke with the local authority earlier today, and I asked it about this situation. It said that, when it is licensing dogs, for instance, it asks if anyone has been disqualified, but the situation is that there is nowhere they can go to check the information. There is no central point for the local authority to go to and ask, "Is this information correct?". A central database would definitely go some way to ensuring that those who have offended do not and will not keep animals again.

The 2011 Act also gives magistrates and judges the power to imprison offenders for up to five years on conviction of a cruelty offence. I encourage the Minister today to ensure that the judiciary are minded in that way when dealing with such offences in court, because nothing else will deter that type of activity. I do not agree with just a slight slap on the wrist; they should have appropriate sentencing and fining.

I welcome the fact that the legislation covers the sale of animals to a person who may be engaged in using animals for cruel so-called sports. However, there remains a disjoint between our enforcement bodies. I therefore call for greater collaboration, with shared intelligence and proactive operations to find these people and to bring them before the courts.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. She mentioned so-called sports: does she agree that we need to remove the provision in the animal welfare Act that exempts hunting from the protection of animals against unnecessary cruelty?

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

Ms Lockhart: Thank you. That has certainly been under debate, and I imagine that it will be before the House in the future.

Going back to the issue at hand on the implementation of a central database, I believe that that is a step that we can take. Certainly, I am not opposed to looking at all of that in the round going forward. As elected representatives we have a duty of care as much as reasonable owners do. Our duty is to legislate on the matter and to allow the courts to deal with it when offenders are brought before them.

I think of my constituency, and I welcome the fact that, in Banbridge, for instance, we have a very successful dog sanctuary that takes in dogs that have been left at the side of the road or dumped. It is sad that that charity has to rely solely on donations; as an Assembly we should look at better financing the charities that help in that regard.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Lockhart: I support the motion today, and I trust that the Minister will take on board the issues.

Mr Robinson: In a previous debate, I mentioned how the Internet could be a positive tool to help local businesses develop. This animal welfare debate flips the coin, and we see that there is, on occasions, a darker side to the Internet. Sadly, that includes selling, giving away or transferring animals. My concern is to ensure that vulnerable animals, including family pets, are treated in the correct manner, given our duty of care. I commend the various animal cruelty organisations for the sterling work that they do.

The report highlights issues of concern that I would like to raise. First, how is the socialisation of a puppy sold online monitored and quantified before sale? Secondly, are there any plans to have online animal sale points specifically registered so that additional welfare checks can be carried out? Thirdly, are there any proposals in development to lay out minimum staffing levels at breeding kennels? Fourthly, what action is being planned to increase sanctions for licensed dog breeders who break the law and cause suffering? Those are important points that I would appreciate the Minister addressing. At this stage in my contribution, I wish her well in her new post. I would also appreciate it if she could outline what steps have been taken to establish an accessible central register, as mentioned in the motion.

I believe that all of us want to ensure animal welfare of the highest standard to protect pet animals, in particular, and to avoid unnecessary suffering of or cruelty to all animals. I support the motion.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Chris Lyttle, who has four minutes.

Mr Lyttle: I am delighted to speak in support of animal welfare and against animal cruelty. I support the principle of the motion: that the Assembly says "No" to animal cruelty and will legislate for zero tolerance of animal cruelty.

I experienced at close hand the heinous case of animal cruelty in my constituency of East Belfast, where we saw pets and loved animals being stolen from homes and used as bait to train fighting dogs. People were brought to the courts, and there was public outrage at the leniency

of the sentencing that was applied in that case. I am proud, therefore, that an Alliance Justice Minister, David Ford, took action to ensure that there was an increase in the maximum sentencing available for animal cruelty in Northern Ireland. It was increased to a maximum of five years, placing it amongst the toughest sentences on these islands, through the Justice Act 2016.

I know that the amendment mentions further and tougher criminal sanctions. I am unsure how specifically the DUP proposes that they should be enhanced, but perhaps they will mention that in the summing-up of the motion. As organisations like Northern Ireland Says No to Animal Cruelty and the League Against Cruel Sports have said, one of the key ongoing problems is ensuring that those maximum sentences are administered and enforced by the courts. I was proud to be part of a public rally on 14 May this year where almost 1,000 people turned out in support of the call for tougher sentencing in cases of animal cruelty. The Attorney General stated that he feels that the sentences act as a deterrent, yet the high number of cases we have seen this year begs to differ in that regard.

The motion also mentions a central register. I know that the Alliance Justice Minister previously actively scoped the feasibility of an animal cruelty register, and I look forward to hearing from the new Justice Minister about how that could be progressed. I understand that there are problems about what agency may oversee banned offenders and check they are not in contact with animals, and I understand that some human rights legislation makes it difficult to extend bans to full addresses to ensure that anyone who lives at that address who has been banned cannot own an animal. It would be hard to deliver that enforcement.

Members mentioned online sales. Puppy farming remains a huge problem for our society that should perhaps be debated in its own right. There are recommendations in the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act, which pertains to the DUP Minister of Agriculture, on ensuring that that issue can be addressed more robustly, particularly, as the Member for South Belfast Christopher Stalford said, to raise awareness of to whom people should report animal cruelty. There is a recommendation for a public website and an awareness campaign, and, hopefully, that is something the DUP Minister of Agriculture can take action on.

Others Members mentioned wider animal cruelty concerns in our society, such as the need for a ban on hunting, a ban on the use of snares and a ban on the use of wild animals in circuses. Again, it is my understanding that they are actions —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Lyttle: — that the DUP Minister of Agriculture can take, and we certainly hope to see those brought before the House.

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): I thank those who tabled the motion, which raises the really important issue of animal welfare. For me, it is so positive that we are debating the motion early in the mandate, because I have no doubt that each one of us, when on the doorsteps, heard concerns from our constituents about animal welfare during the election. I thank Mrs Little Pengelly and Trevor Clarke for bringing it forward.

The motion and debate acknowledge the work that is already under way as a result of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The review was carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, supported by the Department of Justice. The motion also touches on the challenges faced in tackling the scourge of animal cruelty in our society, particularly given the impact that technology has had on the sale and transfer of animals.

Public opinion is strong on the need for us to protect animals, promote welfare and bring to justice those who inflict harm and suffering. We have heard a wide range of concerns today about the farmed and domestic animal sectors, online selling, access to data, the inappropriate criminal justice response to cruelty and the need to educate more and promote animal welfare. Before turning to the detail, I give a commitment now: I will write to my Executive colleague the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to bring the detail of today's debate to her attention and to seek a conversation about whether there is more to do to ensure that the arrangements for protecting animals are as robust as possible.

4.00 pm

Like all the Members who have spoken, I am an animal lover — unashamedly, like Mrs Little Pengelly. I grew up with pets in my family home, and I have absolutely no understanding of what motivates people to commit such abhorrent crimes. While it is worth noting that my Department has a specific role in animal welfare, I am keen to explore this with my Executive colleague.

The motion calls for further consideration of tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences and those disqualified from keeping animals. Several members noted the joint review, and Mr Beattie referred to the progress being made. Mr Sheehan stressed the need to prevent crimes against animals. For instance, tougher sentences have been legislated for and will be commenced on 1 August this year, as was alluded to by Mr Lyttle. I also welcome the fact that DAERA and the councils have put a proposal to the Judicial Studies Board offering a briefing on animal welfare issues. That proposal is being considered.

During the review, those calling for a central register or alternative system for sharing conviction data argued that it would assist in the enforcement of the 2011 Act. Mr Weir referred to the need for robust systems, perhaps more generally, and that is something I would like to discuss with my DAERA colleague.

Under the 2011 Act, the statutory duties for enforcement fall to three bodies: DAERA, in respect of cases involving farmed animals; councils, for cases involving non-farmed animals; and the Police Service of Northern Ireland for cases involving wild animals or more serious animal welfare offences, including those involving other forms of criminality. My Department's involvement relates to the general policy on disclosing information on criminal convictions.

It may be helpful for the record if we note the detail of the new sentencing arrangements, some of which Ms Mallon touched on. As many of you will remember, in March 2014, the Assembly called for the Department of Agriculture and

Rural Development, in conjunction with the Department of Justice, to review the implementation of the 2011 Act, particularly sentencing guidelines and practices, to ensure that maximum effectiveness is brought to bear to combat animal welfare crime. Although sentencing was a key issue for the review to consider, engagement with key stakeholders identified other important areas where animal welfare arrangements should be examined to see what, if any, improvements could be made. Those areas included the arrangements for how the 2011 Act was enforced, how the various enforcement bodies worked together and how best to serve the public.

The review team published its interim report in February 2015, setting out emerging findings and recommendations. Responses to the public consultation that followed indicated broad support for many of the recommendations and highlighted additional matters for the review to consider. Dog breeding, in particular, was an area that attracted significant interest.

The issue of sentences for animal cruelty offences, which is the main aspect of the review that is relevant to my Department, was considered in detail. While sentencing in individual cases is a matter for the independent judiciary, which must take account of the relevant facts and circumstances of any case, the role of my Department is to ensure that a suitable legal framework exists to provide courts with appropriate powers to deal with all cases of animal cruelty. That includes ensuring that the maximum penalties available to the courts are appropriate. However, I appreciate that members of the public will be frustrated when they hear about awful acts of animal cruelty and will rightly want to see appropriate sentences handed down.

One of the key recommendations for my Department arising out of the interim report was that the maximum penalties should be increased. In examining that matter, the review considered factors such as the penalties available in neighbouring jurisdictions for animal welfare crime and considered the sentencing framework more generally to determine what the appropriate sentencing powers should be. The 2011 Act already provided Northern Ireland with the highest maximum penalties in the UK and provided for the most serious cases in Northern Ireland to be prosecuted in the Crown Court with a maximum penalty of two years. In the rest of the UK, animal welfare offences are summary only offences. The review also recognised, however, that, since the introduction of the 2011 Act, the Republic of Ireland has introduced new animal welfare laws that carry a maximum penalty of five years.

While it was clear that the maximum penalties in the 2011 Act were strong, a combination of factors, including the serious nature of some of the most recent animal cruelty cases, resulted in the review recommending a further increase. That recommendation was warmly welcomed in the consultation that followed the interim report, so much so that the former Justice Minister and Agriculture Minister accepted the recommendation at that point and agreed that it should be implemented as soon as possible. The necessary legislative provision was included in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 — again, Mr Lyttle alluded to that — and was debated by the Assembly earlier this year, which many of you may remember. My officials are preparing an order to commence a number of provisions of the 2016 Act, including the higher penalties for animal

welfare offences, which, it has been agreed with the Department, will come into effect on 1 August 2016.

I want to highlight some of the key changes to increase the maximum penalties. For cases heard in the Crown Court, the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 will increase the maximum sentence from two years to five years. In the Magistrates' Courts, the maximum sentence for more serious offences has increased from six months to 12 months. The 2016 Act also changes the mode of trial for certain animal welfare offences to allow for the prosecution of the most serious cases in the Crown Court, where new higher maximum penalties will apply. Those offences include the breach of a disqualification order, which the review considered as part of its wider approach to preventing those disqualified from obtaining an animal. Until that point, it was only possible to prosecute those cases in the Magistrates' Courts. The changes provide Northern Ireland with amongst the toughest maximum penalties for animal cruelty of any jurisdiction on these islands.

Alongside increasing the maximum penalties, my Department has extended the range of offences captured by the unduly lenient sentences scheme to include certain animal welfare offences. These changes, which have recently come into effect, allow the Director of Public Prosecutions to refer Crown Court cases involving unnecessary suffering and causing, attending or other involvement in an animal fight to the Court of Appeal if he believes that the sentence handed down is unduly lenient. Together, the measures significantly enhance the law on animal cruelty.

I turn now to the matter of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals. Calls for the introduction of a central register raise two distinct issues.

Mr McMullan: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes, go ahead.

Mr McMullan: The PPS put in place two criteria for prosecutions in relation to farmed animals: one is the assessment of available evidence, and the other is the public interest. Can you explain that? What is the public interest part of the assessment for?

Ms Sugden: It was seen that we were to have robust sentencing for some of that, but the public interest, particularly in recent cases, drives a lot of things we do in the Chamber and how that is relevant to legislation. It is important that we take into account the public interest, particularly in these cases, and see how best we can serve the people of this area.

I come back to the central register and the two distinct issues it raises. The first relates to access to conviction data for three enforcement bodies: DAERA, councils and the PSNI. The review recognised the need for all enforcement bodies to have access to relevant animal cruelty data. At present, DAERA and the PSNI have access to all relevant conviction data, and work is ongoing to provide councils with similar information. Councils can, however, already access animal cruelty conviction data in cases that they investigated. Those arrangements provide enforcement bodies with the information required to monitor compliance with the legislation effectively. Mr Clarke was concerned about this issue: law enforcement organisations certainly have access to the information they need.

The motion raises the prospect of an accessible register. I understand the motivation for this, and it was considered in the review. It is a complex area, and I know that there were calls for either a fully open register or for data to be made available to rehoming organisations. The review listened carefully to the concerns of stakeholders calling for animal cruelty conviction data to be shared more widely. Stakeholders argued that the information would, for example, be helpful in assessing the suitability of those seeking to rehome an animal. I understand the desire to ensure that animals do not fall into the hands of those who have been convicted of animal cruelty or disqualified from keeping an animal by the courts. The review team listened to those concerns seriously and considered the matter in some detail. It is fair to say, however, that the evidence did not demonstrate a clear need for such arrangements, nor did it point to exactly how the central register might be formulated or what precisely it might seek to achieve. The review recommended that a central register should not be introduced.

Mr Lunn acknowledged the difficulties with a central register but urged that we explore whether there are any solutions that we have not yet thought about. Certainly, I am willing to listen to Members who have expressed an interest in the area. I can explore the detail behind this more fully, and I will discuss it with my Executive colleague in DAERA.

What makes the issue difficult is that information relating to convictions is sensitive personal data. In Northern Ireland, such information is managed through a system known as the criminal records viewer. Due to the nature of the information, only organisations involved in the criminal justice system and a small number of other government bodies have access. Even within those organisations, the ability to view conviction data is very tightly controlled.

Each organisation has to be able to demonstrate a specific business need and that it has appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that the information is handled securely.

I know that some contributors to the review felt that, as convictions —

Mr Stalford: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Sugden: Sure.

Mr Stalford: Does the Minister accept that, in this day and age, it may not be beyond the realms of possibility that the data can be processed? No one is talking about everyone's criminal record being available to any person selling animals. Surely it cannot be beyond the realms of possibility that convictions that relate specifically to animal cruelty can be kept on a register that can be accessed by those responsible for the trade in animals?

Ms Sugden: I appreciate the sentiments of the Member, and others have expressed similar views. These are the challenges around establishing a central register. I am quite content to see whether there are ways around the challenges. I will work with the Member and others who have expressed a similar view to see whether we can overcome those challenges.

The review considered the findings of the Information Commissioner, where he has determined that convictions are pronounced in court before a very limited audience, and, as time passes from the date of the court, the memory of those present diminishes. The commissioner

therefore considers that convictions handed down in court are not public records or information in the public domain.

Although organisations involved in rehoming animals have an important role to play in animal welfare, that role is not, and should not be, an enforcement role. That is a role for the statutory bodies. I am also mindful of the potential for conviction data to be misused if it were to be published on an accessible central register. The review also investigated other more limited options for disclosure and found that, despite potential legal difficulties, it might be possible to share conviction data in certain circumstances. However, broader consideration of relevant factors, including how such a system might work in practice, revealed that any method for disclosure would be resource-intensive and would result in resources being diverted away from front-line enforcement. That may have a detrimental impact on animal welfare. The review found that protecting resources for front-line enforcement provided the best approach to tackling animal cruelty.

The review team also consulted with enforcement bodies to determine the extent of non-compliance with disqualification orders. It found that there was limited evidence to suggest that individuals disqualified from keeping animals have approached rehoming organisations. The review sought to address concerns regarding animals being rehomed with those who have been disqualified. To gain a deeper understanding of the issue, the review engaged with rehoming organisations to find out more about the rehoming processes already in place. An event was held in February for animal rehoming organisations, and the review heard of effective systems and protocols already in place to assess rehoming applications. Mr Weir kindly attended and spoke at the event, and I am glad to hear that he found it interesting. The event was helpful in providing a forum to share many of the excellent processes in place and to seek to build on those arrangements. The charities go to considerable lengths to avoid rehoming with people who are unsuitable, and we will all be happy to pay tribute to their excellent work. This goes well beyond avoiding matching animals to unsuitable people: they really make exceptional efforts to put the right animals with the right people — people who will love and care for them. That involves home visits, check-ups and fantastic practical help and advice.

I will briefly refer back to the review's sentencing recommendation. In that proposal, we have taken on board the concerns of those seeking to ensure that animals do not fall into the wrong hands, which is why the offence of breaching a disqualification order has been made a hybrid offence.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to please bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Sugden: Although I welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to debate animal welfare issues today, policy decisions around how best to maximise the effectiveness of agricultural welfare provisions are a matter for the Agriculture Minister. However, I gave a commitment earlier to work with my Executive colleague to see how best to move forward the issue.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Trevor Clarke to wind up the debate on the motion and the amendment.

Mr Clarke: I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. I listened carefully to what the Minister said. I am

sorry: I should have begun by welcoming her to the debate and wishing her well for her term of office.

I listened carefully to her words on the review. The review team suggested that concentration on central registers and stuff like that would divert resources from front-line enforcement. However, that suggests to me that there might be less need for enforcement if animals were not placed in the wrong properties in the first instance. Therefore, it may not be a necessity to have so many people in the front-line team.

I am trying not to hang on the Minister's words, but she said that sentences in some cases could be reviewed. Only today, the MP for North Antrim contacted Emma when he realised that this debate was on. He had asked for an appeal against a lenient sentence for animal cruelty, and he got a letter back from the PPS on 16 June. The word back from the PPS was that this was only for cases from the Crown Court and not those from the Magistrates' Court. Some of us do not necessarily know whether cases are going to the Crown Court or the Magistrates' Court. Ultimately, we know that animals are being abused and mistreated in our communities. That is typified by what people have said in the Chamber today about their own experiences. It is not for us to get confused about whether stuff is in a Crown Court or Magistrates' Court.

4.15 pm

The good Member allowed me to intervene in relation to the case in east Belfast. That case typifies that the judiciary has got it wrong. In many cases, sentences cannot be appealed because they do not fit within the remit. Three people who put cats in a cage and let dogs pull them apart can go in front of the judiciary and leave the court in a jovial manner with a suspended sentence. Any right-thinking person, including you, Minister, would agree that that is too lenient. It troubles many of us.

Mr Lyttle made a point about some of the things that the previous Minister did. The motion is not trying to take anything away from what the previous Minister did or from what Ministers from any other Departments have done. What we are trying to say is that we still have not got it right. Things are still not right, and we want to make them better. Chris Lyttle wanted to hear from the DUP about what we want to do to make it right.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will indeed.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member agree that there was almost unanimity around the Chamber on the issues that we were debating? It is unfortunate that the Member for East Belfast, and the Member for North Down who is no longer in his place, decided to introduce an element of partisan politics into the discussion. That actually demeaned the issues that were being discussed.

Mr Clarke: I agree wholeheartedly. That is what I was coming to. It seems more a case of sour grapes about the fact that those Members missed a trick and set the bar too high for themselves to take the role of Minister. I am thankful that Claire Sugden came up to the mark. I am thankful that she is here today and is taking her brief and this issue seriously, as are all the Members in the Chamber.

It is not for us to suggest to you, Minister, how to do your job and how to go about things. The motion is merely making a suggestion about a central register. I will give you an example. Others talked about family pets. I have a family pet, which was advertised on the Internet by a local council, and I contacted the council about the dog. Council officials told me that they could not release the dog until a certain date the following week. The reason for this was that they had to keep the dog for so many days before they could release it. The interesting fact about that particular case was that the wardens knew where the dog came from. They knew the family involved, because they had visited the home on so many occasions. I am told that what happened, as a regular practice, was that the door of the property was opened in the morning and the dog was pushed out onto the street. They were not being responsible dog owners, but the council had no power to do anything with them. The owners were so caring about the dog that they did not come to collect it from the pound on this occasion. Thankfully, it came into our care and we have given it a good, caring home. As there is no central register, that family could have gone to another charity the following day and took a dog regardless of how they were going to care for it. There is no concern about how people acquire these pets. In the same way as you can go into Tesco and buy a litre of milk, you can go to a rehoming charity and get a dog, a cat or any other animal.

I read today's information pack and looked at some of the statements in the newspapers on harrowing cases of people abusing animals over the last couple of years. There is nothing to say that those three gentlemen in east Belfast cannot go to a neighbouring constituency and purchase a dog, a cat or any other animal, because they are not on a central register. Their neighbours may know that a case has been brought against them, but some people in the area where they are purchasing the animal will not know. A central register is the only way that we can overcome this problem. Three Members referred to the case of Cody, the dog that was set on fire in Lisburn. There is nothing to prevent any of those people going into any establishment to get another dog.

Reference has also been made today to social media. Some social media sites have started to get it right and are taking responsibility by suggesting to people that their adverts will be taken down, particularly when they are offering dogs free to good homes. Many of us know — I think that it was Michaela who said it today — that these dogs are being used for baiting. That is the last thing that anyone in this Chamber wants to see, so the sooner that we can actually ban online sales and keep a register of those who have been convicted of cruelty and prevent them from acquiring animals, the better.

We are not serious if we continually debate this. Members said this has been debated: yes, it has been debated, and it will be debated again. We will continue to debate it until we get it right. We have not got it right. That is why Emma and I asked for the motion to be debated today, and I am thankful to all those who took part in the debate. I will briefly go through some of the things that people said.

Emma talked about a fight against cruelty, and that is exactly what it is: a fight against cruelty, and most Members want to join in that fight. She talked about how it makes her angry, and it makes me angry, too. Whenever you see sites, such as YouTube or elsewhere, on which

people still advertise dog fighting and you can go on and see it — in this day and age — that makes me angry. It disappoints me that we do not have a robust system to bring this to an end and prevent these people from keeping animals.

Doug Beattie talked about us having progressed the issue, and he said that it had been debated. We know that it has been debated, but we do not want to continue debating it; we want a system that is robust. One of the ways that we see of achieving that is a central register. It was interesting to note, Minister, that when you said that the review talked about a clear need, it was not that they could not do it; I suggest that they did not want to do it. That is how I view it. There is no reason why we cannot do this; there is no willingness to do it. I am not saying for one second that that was on your part, but that is my view, and we need to change the attitude of some of the individuals in the Departments.

Nichola Mallon talked about harsher sentencing, which is something that none of us will disagree with, because we see suspended sentences given to people who abuse and destroy animals. To get off with a lenient or suspended sentence is absolutely ridiculous in this day and age. They should be behind bars and prevented from keeping animals for life, and the only way to do that, Minister, is to keep a central register.

Trevor Lunn talked about the ban, and I think he had a valid point when he said that the ban can be against individuals in a household. I have three children in my house, plus my wife and myself, and if one of my children was banned from keeping animals, there is nothing to prevent the rest of us from keeping animals in the same house. I think that that is wrong, Minister, because the same people, with the same mindset, are in contact with those animals. That should be removed. Those are all suggestions that we are looking at to try to get tougher on animal abuse in Northern Ireland.

Peter Weir acknowledged the work that has been done; again, these are general themes that are coming across today. More needs to be done to improve this.

Harold McKee talked about how people were appalled by the treatment of animals. That is apparent here today, and it is apparent by the number of people who wanted to contribute to the debate, and I thank the Member for his contribution on that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Clarke: I will indeed, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I support this motion, and I appeal to the Minister to do more, now that she is in the role, and fill in the gaps where the previous Minister did not get it right and take us much further, so that we can have a central register and prevent people from abusing animals in our society today.

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

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty and the increasing risks with the online sale or transfer of animals; welcomes the actions thus far to address issues raised in the interim report of the review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals to enhance animal cruelty protections, including considering further and tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Just to let the House know, I have three hens and two cats. I did have four hens, but, unfortunately, a fox got one of them. I am delighted that this debate has been held here today because we have to do everything that we can to protect animals.

Motion made:

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. —
[Madam Principal Deputy Speaker.]*

Adjournment

Broadband Provision: West Tyrone

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members will have approximately six minutes.

Mr T Buchanan: I know that there is something very important on this evening and we are holding some folk here, but broadband provision in West Tyrone is an important issue. I want to look at it from a slightly different angle. I want to look first of all at the positives in broadband cover in West Tyrone before moving on to the more negative areas.

In this digital age, one of the fundamental components of our economy and our everyday life is excellent broadband cover. Establishing a reliable and high-speed broadband infrastructure has been a priority of this Government over past years, and DETI made considerable progress on the matter. As we start this new term at Stormont, one of the main priorities must be to continue to improve the broadband infrastructure across Northern Ireland. One of the consistent cornerstones of the previous Executive was working with the private sector to develop and implement a strategy that would ensure that Northern Ireland had world-class telecommunications infrastructure in broadband capacity, access and cost.

DETI, with my colleagues Arlene Foster and, later, Jonathan Bell at the helm, had a strategic vision for Northern Ireland to be a leading broadband region in the UK and for homes and businesses across Northern Ireland to have 100% broadband coverage and access. That important infrastructure development is a work in progress, and, whilst it is a priority of the Government, it continues to be the backbone of economic development in our region.

I am an MLA for the predominantly rural constituency of West Tyrone. West Tyrone is an area of two extremes with regard to broadband. On the one hand, Omagh was chosen as the location for a back-up hub for Project Kelvin, which is a €29.5 million collaborative initiative that connects Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with north America. Omagh is host to the hub that would take over if anything went wrong with the main hub in Belfast. It is important to note that.

We are on the cusp of a digital wave, which has the potential to attract global companies to the west of Northern Ireland through the Project Kelvin hub. Since Omagh Enterprise Centre tapped into the Hibernia Atlantic US-Europe cable connections, which are part of that cross-border initiative, it has been attracting world-class industry to West Tyrone. At that location, Omagh has one of the fastest broadband connections in the UK, enabling it to compete with the likes of the New York Stock Exchange or the London Stock Exchange. This broadband infrastructure project that links Northern Ireland to north America has unexpectedly provided a unique connectivity opportunity for businesses in the local area to tap into. Indeed, since Omagh Enterprise Centre saw the potential

of that opportunity, it has been working with Invest NI to attract major players in the digital field to the west of Northern Ireland.

Thanks to Project Kelvin, we have a unique opportunity in Omagh through the hub, which means we have a base in the constituency where potentially world-class digital companies could base themselves, with the broadband connection being second to none. It was refreshing to see that companies had the vision and foresight to tap into the excellent resources in the heart of my constituency. We have 65 companies in the Omagh Enterprise Centre, and there are over 300 jobs there. There is the potential to increase that to over 100 companies and over 500 jobs. At this juncture, I invite the Minister to come down to see the work that is ongoing at the business centre in Omagh and the potential there. Not only do we need to highlight the discrepancies and failures in broadband in rural areas throughout West Tyrone, but we need to highlight and sell what we have. We need to get the Minister to look at what we have and the potential to expand in West Tyrone.

4.30 pm

This is a clear example of how the establishment of broadband infrastructure across Northern Ireland has presented opportunities for places like Omagh. The choice of Omagh as a backup hub for the Hibernia Atlantic broadband company has provided a unique opportunity for the constituency. Omagh Enterprise Company tapped into the unique opportunity that has moved its vision closer to reality, and it is now working hard to attract investment into the area in a digital capacity. Such vision is precisely what West Tyrone needs, and it ensures that the west of the Province has a chance to compete on a global scale. The opportunities at stake here are not to be underestimated, and we could see Omagh as a digital hub for huge global enterprises in the future.

Despite the amazing opportunities in Omagh town itself in the enterprise centre, all we have to do is drive a few short miles into the country to find that there are many pockets of the constituency where households have extremely poor, if any, broadband cover. According to Ofcom, the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area has the lowest broadband speeds anywhere in Northern Ireland. Added to that, the area is predominantly rural, and that is compounded by the patchy availability of broadband cover. There are huge gaps between rural and urban broadband accessibility. Ofcom noted that average download speeds are almost twice as fast in urban areas as in rural areas due to rural premises being that much further away from their nearest fibre cabinet. That disparity in broadband cover is frustrating. While successive Departments have invested in seeking to change that, broadband cover for rural areas in Northern Ireland remains consistently at 40% of premises having access to superfast broadband. That is the challenge we face and the challenge we have to seek to address. Most households and businesses in West Tyrone are immediately at a disadvantage simply due to their location. It is unfortunate that, despite significant investment in broadband infrastructure, this continues to be the case.

Other options need to be found to counteract these pockets of unavailability and slow or practically nil broadband cover. More needs to be done to encourage huge companies such as BT to invest in cabinets in rural

areas to develop their coverage to put it straight into the homes of those who are too far from fibre-enabled cabinets. In addition, rural areas have the greatest number of lines currently incapable of supporting speeds above 10 megabits. In 2015, 2% of urban areas in Northern Ireland did not have access to superfast broadband and 42% of premises in rural constituencies had no chance of accessing superfast fibre-optic broadband. That is the disparity between urban and rural areas.

The blight of poor provision has a devastating impact on companies and is a debilitating factor for businesses trying to compete in a global market. I have to say that, even with such poor infrastructure in some areas, the manufacturing industry continues to do fairly well within West Tyrone. Precision engineering is a niche market in West Tyrone and is thriving and growing. It is one example of how, with our skills and the attitude of businesses, the manufacturing industry can adapt and be a world leader, despite the difficulties across that sector and with the broadband infrastructure in rural areas.

I am aware that the Department has alternatives, such as satellite broadband, but that is simply not suitable for some people in a lot of areas because of cost or other issues. Businesses in rural areas are affected, disrupted and hindered. Schoolchildren are at a disadvantage when they want to do homework or study online. Farm businesses are suffering and are hindered due to the poor quality of online access. Work between Departments such as the Department for the Economy and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs must be coordinated. They must collaborate to ensure that rural areas are no longer the poor relation of urban areas. Our constituents should not expect poor broadband coverage simply because of their location. That is simply unacceptable in the digital age that we live in.

Access to high-quality mobile and Internet services is vital to our increasingly online social and economic lives here in Northern Ireland. While much good work has been and continues to be done, much more needs to be done to close the gap between urban and rural areas, as householders and businesses in West Tyrone continue to be subject to the slowest broadband speeds anywhere in Northern Ireland.

One of the most frustrating things in West Tyrone is that we have constituents who are living on one side of the road and are not doing too badly with broadband cover and yet somebody living on the other side cannot access broadband at all. You also have instances where somebody is living fairly close to one of the fibre-optic boxes but cannot access it because it is in a different postcode area or whatever. The Minister will know that I have put through quite a number of issues to the Department regarding constituents, whether they be farmers, homeowners or in small businesses, who are struggling with their broadband cover. I fully appreciate today that this is a real, challenging issue for the Assembly and the Department. We need to look at some innovative ways to see how we can address the gaps that exist in rural areas and West Tyrone.

It is also important today that we in West Tyrone highlight the benefits of what we have. We can continue to grow that, attract businesses to West Tyrone and create a balance, rather than just presenting a negative image to the Assembly today about the difficulties that we have. We

have huge difficulties, but we also have the ability, outside of Belfast, to provide companies with the highest speed of broadband that they can expect to have right across Northern Ireland.

I thank Members for being here for the debate today.

Mr McAleer: I take the opportunity to commend and thank Thomas Buchanan for bringing this very important issue to the House today. It is great to see the Minister here to listen to the debate. The debate follows on from another very important one that Barry McElduff tabled last week to do with rural roads. Indeed, Ross has tabled an Adjournment topic next week in relation to learning disability, so West Tyrone is fairly having a say in the last few weeks before recess. It is great to see the voice of West Tyrone being heard very loud and clear here in the Assembly.

I will pick up on some of Tom's points. Broadband is an essential commodity. All of us are out and about in the constituency. West Tyrone is a two-thirds rural constituency. Some of the most isolated areas of the North and, indeed, Ireland are in West Tyrone. When you go up into the Sperrins, it is extremely isolated. The people in those areas feel very disconnected. Their broadband coverage is not very good at all. That is compounded by poor public transport. The roads could do with an injection of funding as well. People feel quite disconnected and isolated.

Broadband covers all aspects of life. It is not a commodity; it is absolutely essential for life now. Children need it for homework. Businesses need it, as does the farming community. Tom will know from being on the ARD Committee with me in recent times that perhaps the main thing to get the faster payment of single farm payments is for farmers to fill in their applications online. That is the key ingredient for the speeding up of single farm payments. Not having quality broadband in certain rural areas is undermining the Department and Minister's attempts to get the faster payment of single farm payments. We hope for earlier payments, year on year, to help farmers to cope with the financial crisis that they find themselves in.

As such, I welcome the fact that the commitment to improve broadband connectivity is one of the Programme for Government indicators. That is good news; it is good that that commitment is there.

It is important that people make their views known. I think that the consultation period ends on 22 July. I know that people out there feel that broadband is a massive issue in their communities. Stakeholders and individuals should have their say in the PFG consultation process and make their views known. I welcome the comment made by the Minister that the Executive wants the universal service obligation (USO) threshold raised from 10 to 30 megabits. That is a really good commitment from the Executive.

Drawing on the debate earlier, a couple of things jumped out at me. I note and welcome the fact that there has been progress in recent years, and I suppose it is a fact that there is 95% coverage across the North. One of the big figures that jumped out at me was that £64 million had been spent in the past eight years on trying to improve connectivity throughout the North. That is £64 million of public money going largely to private operators to fill the not spots that we experience across the area. Whilst we have had good progress in recent years, it is not good enough. In West Tyrone, along with many other constituencies across the North that have been mentioned,

there are very large not spots in rural constituencies. It is really important to draw on that £64 million and put a focus on the private sector, which has been granted millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. We need to see exactly what it has been doing to provide connectivity to rural areas. It is a huge issue.

While preparing for this debate, I came across a review of a report from Scotland. Comments made by the Connectivity Secretary, Fergus Ewing, indicated that they had been doing a lot of work on mobile infrastructure in Scotland. They have been getting 4G and preparing for 5G. They have been working very closely with the private sector on initiatives to expand the 4G and prepare for 5G. They are dealing with the same mobile operators as we are here, and, even though it is a Westminster initiative, the Scottish Government have taken it forward as their own. It would be worthwhile exploring, in conjunction with the Connectivity Secretary, some of the initiatives that they have looked at, for example, business rates relief for operators and investing in the construction of new and enhanced infrastructure. It might be an idea to look at some of the good or best experiences in similar parts of the world that we could draw on here.

This has been a worthwhile adjournment debate. It put a focus on West Tyrone. When we were out and about, particularly over election time, it hit us as a massive issue. It is great to see the Minister here, and I encourage him to work with Executive colleagues and look at other areas and other countries to see what practices or lessons we can learn from other parts of the world to improve the connectivity that we lack in many rural areas in West Tyrone and throughout the North.

Mr Hussey: I begin by thanking Mr Buchanan for bringing the issue before the House, and I thank the Minister for being here. I look forward to his visit to West Tyrone to see what is available.

It seems strange that in the county town of Tyrone we have Project Kelvin, one of the most advanced Internet services in the world, and can get in touch with North America, yet, from Omagh, we have major difficulty getting in touch with north, south, east or west Tyrone. Reference was made to the rurality of West Tyrone. In Greencastle, we had businesses that could not transmit their paperwork through to their suppliers or pay their staff because the Internet had gone down. We talk about rurality and isolation, but, in Malin in County Donegal, which is not, for those of you who do not know it, the centre of the universe — it is on the most northerly tip of the Republic of Ireland and is further north than we are, sitting here — you can get full broadband facilities. Yet, you cannot get that three or four miles outside the county town of Tyrone.

There has been reference to people doing their homework. I look across the Chamber and see few who would have used the Internet to do their homework, with the exception of you, Mr McCrossan. I look across at the oldies over there, and I know that they, like me, were glad to have a biro and a piece of paper. When I did my degree with the Open University, I had to send off my assignments via the Internet. It was marvellous to hear that Doctor Who sound as your computer whirred into action. The Tardis was about to land, and you hoped that it landed in time for you to get your assignment in before the deadline. Many's the time, by one or two minutes, I managed to make it and get the assignment away.

4.45 pm

There are people in Tyrone who would love to hear the sound of the Tardis arriving in their home, because then at least they would have some sort of Internet connection. They do not have it. Doctor Who had a blue box. We talk about the green boxes that are scattered throughout Tyrone, and we know that some of them have so many wires coming out of them that they may as well be the Tardis. It is impossible for all the systems to work from those boxes. There are also suggestions that there are green boxes scattered throughout West Tyrone that are not connected, because it does not make financial sense for BT to have them connected. It is waiting for more and more customers to become available, and then the famous box may be connected. Why is that? At one stage, BT boasted that 99% of the United Kingdom was covered by broadband. I know that there are Members who do not like to recognise the fact that this is part of the United Kingdom. BT used to say, "It's good to talk". It is good to talk until you want to talk to BT. BT would not engage with me about our constituents on the Edenderry Road in Omagh, which is less than three miles from the town centre. They are on the Beragh telephone exchange but cannot get access to the Internet. Strangely enough, when questions to the Minister appeared, BT wanted to talk. BT phoned me, but BT was not willing to come to Omagh. BT wanted to meet me here in Stormont. I have now discovered what the problem is: BT does not know where BT78 and BT79 are, because it has never travelled outside greater Belfast. It does not know where Tyrone is. It does not know where Omagh is.

In the 21st century, it is scandalous that somewhere like Malin in the back of Donegal can get full-strength broadband but, three miles outside Omagh, you cannot get broadband. In a lot of our rural areas, you might as well have a tin can and a piece of string, because that would be the most effective form of communication.

I listened to the debate on the provision of broadband. We in West Tyrone have been very badly serviced. Mr Buchanan is correct: we have great provision in Omagh, we have great facilities and the broadband works. We have a great working population. That is wonderful in the town, but we cannot forget the rural dwellers. Mr McElduff is famed throughout the world for using the expression "rural proofing". We need to have broadband rural-proofed. There is 3G and 4G: some parts of Northern Ireland would be glad to get a G — anything at all — because they are not getting it. Why is West Tyrone being forgotten about? I know that the issue will be dealt with as part of the Programme for Government. Can we have an assurance that, by the end of the mandate, everyone in West Tyrone will have access to broadband? Be it 1G, 2G, 3G or 4G, we want access.

I thank Mr Buchanan for bringing the topic to the House. I am glad that the Tardis has landed. Let us hear it taking off again, and let us hear about broadband being available in West Tyrone.

Mr McCrossan: I, too, welcome this all-important debate and thank my constituency colleague Mr Tom Buchanan for bringing it to the House. I also welcome the Minister and his attention to this all-important issue.

We have just come out of an election, and this is a problem that we picked up on at every rural door. Ross is right.

Barry has heard it, I have heard it and every MLA before us in our constituency has heard it. It is not a new problem. Tom, on a point that you made, this is not about being negative; this is real life. It is real life for the people of West Tyrone, particularly those in the more rural parts of the constituency.

It is great that we have Project Kelvin in Omagh, with everything that it could potentially deliver for the area, but that in itself is not enough. That is only one area. West Tyrone is a hugely rural constituency, and the people feel very neglected. I could ramble about the figures and the costs and the money that has been spent elsewhere, but I am going to talk about the real-life aspect of this particular situation. I am going to talk about the people who are trying to run businesses in our constituency — a constituency that has been rife with unemployment, social deprivation and lack of investment for a long number of years. This is not a new problem, but it could help to address the very real difficulties that we have in relation to the local economy.

Ross is right: businesses cannot get their staff paid. There is a major flaw right there. That should not be happening in 2016. Businesses cannot get their orders out in time, which has a knock-on effect for the reputation of that business and on the person who is purchasing the materials. It is limiting our capacity, as a constituency, to truly expand economically. People will not invest in a constituency that cannot meet the basic needs in relation to broadband. In 2016, broadband is a vital strand of any infrastructure, and that needs to be appreciated by the House. To hear that a particular area does not meet the needs or the costs is utterly ridiculous. There are 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland, and each and every person, from one end of those to the other, has a right to access that service.

That is only one area. There are also schoolchildren, as Ross rightly pointed out. Some in this House may have used a biro or a pen, but we have come much further than that — in relation to homework, at least, but certainly not in relation to broadband. We need to get real about these issues. It is feeding into the migration issues that we face in Northern Ireland — emigration issues, in fact, but in particular the migration. Students do not want to come home from Belfast because they have no access to the Internet. They cannot communicate with their friends — the most basic thing. As Mr Buchanan rightly pointed out, you may have broadband on one side of the road while the people on the other side of the road do not. That is hugely frustrating. To a large extent, it is discriminatory, although I do not like using that language. I want to know what the Department is going to do, on a meaningful basis, to actually deal with this issue. There is no justification — the Minister is listening — for the lack of investment, funding and delivery around this particular issue in my constituency.

It is an issue in relation not only to broadband but to telephone coverage. I will give an example from when I was canvassing — a very real insight. I needed to get access to a phone, and I said to someone with me, "Can I borrow your mobile?", and they said, "We have no network, Daniel." So I went to the next house and had a conversation, and I asked the lady, "Can I use your landline?", and she said, "I'm sorry, but there was a lightning strike, and we haven't had a BT landline for a few weeks. We have made contact with BT. They have

ignored us and ignored us and ignored us. We have no Internet and we have no mobile signal." Complete and utter isolation — that is an example of the reality. We have much to talk about of benefit, yes, in central Omagh and the central parts of Strabane, but when you go to the farther roads, people are utterly, completely isolated, neglected and ignored. Those who are benefiting are talking about the slow speeds, and some say that that is satisfactory because they are getting some broadband. It is a neglect of a rural community and of all rural constituencies. It must be addressed, Minister, and addressed in this mandate. It cannot go beyond that. We are not going to suffer any more excuses.

Ms Boyle: I also thank Mr Buchanan for bringing this very important Adjournment debate to the House today.

I want to commend the work that has been done thus far. Obviously it is not enough for us in West Tyrone. I believe that, as others have said, we can and should be doing more. I just want to talk, as others have talked, about examples of how it affects people's lives if they do not have any broadband access, never mind good broadband access. I know of a home that has three modems — one in the living room, one in the kitchen and one upstairs in the bedroom — just to get some sort of coverage. This is a family that has school-going children who depend on broadband access for school.

I am also aware of a young teacher who lives in Plumbridge and works in Strabane. She drives home to Plumbridge every day after school, has her tea and drives seven miles to her brother's house to get broadband access because she has none in her home, even though it is set up for that.

Those are just some of the issues that we hear about daily. In areas such as Glenelly and Aghabrack — other Members know where these areas are — people leave their homes and drive their cars to get access to broadband and phones. That should not be happening in this day and age.

I have said here before, and I have heard others say, that there is no incentive to build small businesses in rural areas because of the lack of broadband and phone access. In my opinion, as the previous Member to speak said, that is discriminatory. We need to have a specific concentration of high-priority areas to allow for a fit-for-purpose broadband infrastructure.

Declan McAleer and others mentioned the private sector providers. They have a responsibility because they have received public money to provide a service with coverage in rural areas. Users who receive their service from the private sector are experiencing varying degrees of outage, which is not acceptable. When we, as elected representatives, contact those providers, there is an inconsistent approach to responding to us, which is not acceptable either.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Boyle: I will indeed.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Member agree that, in the exact context in which she is speaking, Douglas Bridge, in our own Strabane district, is an example of that? There was a cut-out, and when my office contacted the provider — I am sure it was the same in your office — we were asked for the phone numbers of absolutely every person in that area

who was directly affected, and they would not address us otherwise. That was unacceptable.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Member for his intervention. Absolutely; I have experienced that in my office, as have others. Indeed, the consequence of this has an impact on people's ability to go about their daily business and their work. Support must be given to those who are affected, and a proper line of communication must exist from the provider to the user, because that is not happening. As Mr McCrossan said, if they are not going to get back to us, they are not going to get back to the service user either.

I want to pay tribute to the services that our libraries provide. In my home town of Strabane, many children from rural areas are picked up from the school bus by their parents and driven to Strabane to use the Internet facilities that our libraries provide. I want to commend the libraries for doing that. Many of them have after-school clubs, which helps. I am also aware, going back a number of years, of families who did that. My predecessor as MLA, Claire McGill, raised the issue of small post offices in rural areas, and not much has changed. That was over five years ago, and there is no reliable broadband service in parts of Aghabrack, Aghyaran, Glenelly, Killeter and Killen.

We do a lot of talking in the House about having a high-quality workforce in the public and private sectors, but how are we going to allow for that when our young people cannot stay at home to study or, as the previous Member to speak said, will not come home from university at the weekend because of bad access to broadband? I was on the Finance and Personnel Committee in the last mandate, and we talked a lot about flexible working patterns, but those do not work for people who live in rural areas, even though the then Department of Finance and Personnel said that it had provided for that through rural proofing.

I am also aware of two young friends who live in the rural area of Aghabrack. In the morning, when one family picks up the child from the other family to get to the school bus — they live a field apart — they have to sound the car horn to let the other family know that they are on their way to pick up the child because they have no other way of communicating inside the house or outside it. Their landline does not work and their Internet service is very poor.

5.00 pm

Today, I have two young students with me from my hometown of Strabane; Ellie and Marissa. They have spoken about their school friends coming into school literally in tears because they have been unable to complete their coursework. That is a sad reflection on society and what we are meant to provide. I am delighted that the Programme for Government provides for good-quality broadband. I would like to hear the Minister's views on that in his summing up.

It has also been said to me that people in many rural areas are just happy that there are defibrillators in their areas because God forbid that a home had to call 999. That applies not just in West Tyrone but in other rural areas and constituencies.

I am thankful to the Member for bringing the Adjournment topic to the Floor of the House. This is one issue that

we are not going to let rest. We will continue until we get proper broadband —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Boyle: — and Internet services in West Tyrone.

Mr McElduff: Where would you start? It is so bad. This really needs to be tackled. At the end of the day, it is more about people than it is about technology; the same as the roads debate last week was more about people than it was about roads. I would suggest to the Minister, in all seriousness, that, if he wants to go down in history and leave a great legacy as a Minister for the Economy, he could do worse than take up the challenge of ensuring the provision of first-class broadband in constituencies like West Tyrone by the end of this mandate, as has been suggested by other Members who have spoken. The Programme for Government should reflect that. The Minister should set himself the ambition and target of sorting this out in a major, comprehensive way in the next four to five years — sooner if possible. I am really trying to convey to the Minister from the outset that this is a massive priority for rural citizens.

Some months ago, I met his predecessor, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Jonathan Bell, in Netherleigh House. I brought with me rural council representatives. In anecdotal fashion, Minister Bell told me that he was familiar with our community; he was once a social worker in the area and had stayed in a bed and breakfast in Seskinore. He enquired about the family in Seskinore and I told him that that family had a great word on him except when it came to broadband. Broadband is dominating the minds and thoughts of people in West Tyrone to a huge degree.

Tom Buchanan, who sponsored the debate, was right when he emphasised the entrepreneurial side of things in West Tyrone and Tyrone. He mentioned the niche area of precision engineering. I think that it is a well-known statistic that 80% of the world's quarry manufacturing equipment is made in County Tyrone. I could easily spend a lot of time or my remaining time giving the Minister a tour de force of rural areas in West Tyrone. He might think that I will have done that by the end of this speech, but I do not think that I am doing it because I am just touching the surface. Take an area like Clanabogan between Omagh and Dromore. You have a major tractor-selling company there at Corradinna Road, JB Barrett Tractors. It is a significant employer that has no or poor broadband all the time. How can it do business?

In the Creggan area, you have a very distinguished building contractor, J&M Begley. Its tale of woe — its recent experience — really needs to be retold here and now. It was eight days without any Internet provision, between 17 May and 24 May, trying to run a business that operates solely on the Internet. It was an extremely distressing time for the company, as it had the following deadlines to meet: wages processed on the Internet every Thursday to Revenue and Customs; subcontractor return posted on the Internet by the nineteenth of the month every month; VAT due before the end of the month to Revenue and Customs, with the deadline fast approaching; and Southern VAT due before the nineteenth of the month. Revenue and Customs was contacted. The position was explained to it, and it could not believe that, in 2016, the

Internet could be off for eight days. It was quite adamant, because it is quite ruthless, that the company has to pay the fines of £100 per day, I think it was. The Southern Government charge was a €400 penalty. The company is irate, the company is distressed and the company is disadvantaged in meeting crucial deadlines.

When I was in the Trillick area during the recent election — it does not take an election to hear these messages, but they certainly get reinforced over a four, five or six-week period — I met a farmer in the Kinine area of Trillick who could not fill out his single farm payment form online at a time when the Minister's colleague Michelle McIlveen is pushing farmers towards online completion, as did the previous Minister, Michelle O'Neill.

An electrical engineer, a young man from the Derryallen area of Trillick would love to work one or two days a week from home —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his — sorry, you have a few more minutes.

Mr McElduff: No problem. I am very grateful for your latitude, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. An electrical engineer, a young man from the Derryallen area of Trillick cannot work from home but would be offered that facility by his Belfast-based employer should this be got right.

Last Saturday —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McElduff: Do I have half a minute or just six minutes?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Three seconds.

Mr McElduff: OK. I will just leave it at that. We want to end this major economic disadvantage.

Ms Armstrong: I thank Mr Buchanan for bringing forward the debate. As a rural dweller, I know that having issues with broadband can cause absolute distress in homes with teenagers. It is not a luxury or an indulgence; it is a utility. Believe me, when you have kids at school or are trying to run a rural business, it is not a luxury; it absolutely is a utility.

I very much welcome hearing about the Omagh hub approach, and I would like to see that replicated across Northern Ireland, because, where there is a hub approach, you can see broadband being spread out into the rural areas around it. I believe we should consider how we identify the gaps in rural areas. Mr Hussey talked about 99% of the UK having broadband provision. I would like to challenge that. As I mentioned in the debate earlier, while there are some villages that claim to have broadband, when you look into the detail of it, you see that the periphery areas, which are not close to a green cabinet, do not. So, when someone says there is 99% coverage, is there, and has there been a good enough review in rural areas of those streets, towns and roads where the provision is not very good?

I think there needs to be a targeted approach to reach those rural areas where broadband is not yet available or speeds are not of a good enough standard, because this is hurting rural businesses. It is making them uncompetitive. Those businesses that I have spoken to have told me that it is hurting their sales and marketing strategies. They are not able to brand themselves globally, and, as far as online

banking is concerned, you may as well forget about that. A while back, when they talked about doing away with cheques, how many rural businesses went into panic mode because online banking was not available due to the lack of broadband?

I believe that rural proofing is a necessity in this issue and that any future proposals must be rural proofed. It is not acceptable for rural people to be expected to have slower speeds than urban dwellers. I think, therefore, that it must be a priority for the Minister and the Department to ensure that rural areas receive a fair coverage of broadband.

I would like to see cross-departmental consideration on the issue. As I said, when you are the mother of a teenager and you see the homework that is expected to be done online, printed out and with reports completed, as well as the absolute panic in your child's eyes when they realise that the library shut at 4.30 pm and there are no alternative provisions available for them, you feel that it is not fair.

We need to work with Education on that. GPs and hospitals depend more and more on linking through reports, but that is impossible if broadband speeds are not good enough or, indeed, if broadband is not available. We want to develop our rural businesses and build entrepreneurship. I read with some interest that, through the Bring IT On campaign, we are pushing to see more and more young people become coders, but there is not much point in that if young people do not have access to appropriate broadband when they go home in the evening to take forward what they have learnt during the day. We need to improve connectivity because, more and more, Departments are putting information on NI Direct or moving to apps. That is not a lot of use if you do not have broadband at home and cannot access it.

I am concerned about BT but not because of the work it has been doing to roll out green cabinets; that has been quite successful in the majority of places. However, when you phone up after a new green cabinet has gone in, they say, "Sorry, we are not in your area". The mapping system is out of date. I am keen to challenge BT by saying, "Are you up to date with what your engineers are doing?". It is important that we consider that our rural customers are not getting the best provision from BT because its mapping system is not up to date.

Mr McAleer talked about the draft Programme for Government framework, in which almost every outcome will depend on improved Internet connectivity. In fact, if we want to achieve many of the outcomes, the indicators say that we need improved Internet connectivity.

In summary, West Tyrone is not the only rural area in Northern Ireland that is being let down. There are a significant number of rural areas and pockets across Northern Ireland where the lack of broadband provision is not only harming our rural businesses but stagnating and stopping our young people getting involved in the IT industry.

Mrs Barton: While I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I have great empathy with my colleagues from West Tyrone and further afield. The issues of broadband and mobile not spots are exactly the same. Yes, some villages have benefited, but, unfortunately, rural dwellers appear to have been forgotten about or neglected. Is that because, in the long term, superfast broadband to those areas would not be economically viable? Furthermore,

we have the situation in Fermanagh and South Tyrone where people living within a few hundred metres of a new green box cannot receive fast broadband as, historically, the infrastructure that already exists means that they have been connected to a green box six kilometres in the opposite direction and are, therefore, out of range of the fast broadband. That needs to be looked at.

We then have the situation in Lisnaskea, where green boxes are located at either end of the town and the centre of the town is outside the range of either green box, because many of the businesses were originally connected to the exchange directly in the town centre that cannot be upgraded. Surely that indicates that some thought needs to be given to upgrading the already out-of-date historical infrastructure.

Yesterday, we debated the proposed closure of the electoral offices and the difficulties of registering online due to limited broadband. Farmers, who traditionally live in rural areas, cannot avail themselves of the facility of registering their newborn animals online and thus keeping their registers up to date. Many have to travel some distance to their nearest Agriculture office, at extra cost to themselves, to do that. Farmers are also encouraged to submit their single farm payment applications online for quicker assessment checks by Department staff and, of course, quicker payments, which all farmers need these days. We tax our cars online, bank online, book holidays online etc. None of that can be done.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Barton: Yes.

Mr McCrossan: The Member mentioned applications for farming and car tax. Does she agree that the difficulty, as I said to fellow Member Michaela Boyle, is in getting through to these people? The car tax agency is now in Swansea, having moved from Coleraine. Again, there is a disconnect: they do not know where West Tyrone or Fermanagh and South Tyrone are. That is a huge issue.

5.15 pm

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but we will not have time to give you an extra minute.

Mrs Barton: OK.

I totally agree with the Member. These people have no idea of the geography of the area.

We have another problem in that the divide between the broadband available seems to be getting greater. In England, they have up to 200 megabits. In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, we are trying to get 2 megabits. Something needs to be looked at. Over many years, questions have been asked in the House about broadband and mobile connectivity, and a substantial amount of money has been allocated for upgrading both. However, connectivity and mobile not spots remain a major issue that is very important for the people of the west.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): I congratulate the Member on securing the debate on broadband provision in West Tyrone, which developed into a debate on broadband provision in several other parts of the country as well. I think that this is my first opportunity to say this: I could almost refer Members to the comments that I made some hours ago, having debated the issue at

length in the Chamber this morning. It is an opportunity to highlight some of the important issues that were discussed earlier during the debate on Northern Ireland's telecommunications network and to hone in specifically on West Tyrone.

Again, I congratulate the Member on securing the debate, and I am very happy, in due course, to visit Omagh in his West Tyrone constituency, particularly the Enterprise Centre, which I am familiar with already, and, indeed, some of the other superb businesses in the West Tyrone constituency. I do not think that anybody who contributed to the debate suggested for a second that West Tyrone was not a hive of some very good industries and businesses and, indeed, has the potential to be more. I am very happy to travel down to West Tyrone and visit some of those businesses over the coming months.

I begin by stressing that, as Minister for the Economy, I fully recognise the importance of access to fast, dependable Internet connectivity in the world of business as well as a growing reliance on online access for various educational and social needs. Broadband has quickly become essential for everyday life. I am, of course, familiar with many of the issues raised during the debate from personal experience in my constituency, particularly on broadband provision in rural areas. My Department is fully committed to working to deliver improvements to our telecoms connectivity as set out in the draft Programme for Government. Over the last eight years, my Department has channelled some £64 million into a number of projects that have significantly raised the reach, speed and quality of broadband services across Northern Ireland and had, at a time, put us ahead of other UK regions. Those initiatives have undoubtedly had a positive impact in the West Tyrone constituency.

A briefing report produced by the House of Commons Library in January this year identified that 60% of premises across West Tyrone can access superfast broadband services of at least 30 megabits a second. In addition, it reports that, in the constituency, 88% of premises currently have a broadband connection of greater than 2 megabits a second, 56% of premises have a connection of greater than 10 megabits a second, and 30% have a connection of greater than 30 megabits a second. Importantly, this suggests to me that some 30% of premises that can access a broadband service of 30 megabits a second or greater have not yet taken up a faster service. Anyone wishing to find out whether they can access a faster service should visit the Openreach website, where there is an availability checker that can search by phone number or postcode. The report also shows that the average broadband download speed across the West Tyrone constituency stands at almost 21 megabits a second, which I acknowledge is lower than the Northern Ireland average of 28.3 megabits a second.

I will set this in the wider context of our investment in improved services across Northern Ireland. My Department's Northern Ireland broadband improvement project has already ensured that, for the first time, 48,000 premises that are largely in rural areas have received access to a broadband service of at least 2 megabits a second and that just over 29,000 premises can now access services of 30 megabits a second or better. I pointed out in the earlier debate that that £24 million broadband improvement project has, up to March 2016,

led to broadband improvement work at 164 exchanges across Northern Ireland, many of which are in the West Tyrone constituency. Forgive me if I get some of the names wrong, but, looking through the list, I know some of the geography of the area. Carrickmore, Castlederg, Beragh, Drumquin, where Mr Buchanan is from, Fintona, Gortin, Newtownstewart, Omagh, Sion Mills and Strabane have all benefited from that £24 million investment in the broadband improvement scheme.

If I am quoting him correctly, Mr McCrossan said:

"there is no justification ... for the lack of investment",

but there has been investment. I accept that it is not perfect, ideal or where anybody would want it to be at, but it is not right to say that there has been no investment. There has been investment, and we need to look at ways in which we can improve that investment, target it and use different technologies to ensure that those who are a little bit further away and harder to reach can get better broadband speeds. There has, however, been some investment. As a result and as the figures have shown, there has been some improvement in accessing better broadband speeds.

It was reported that, at 31 March 2016, almost 7,100 premises across West Tyrone could access new broadband services delivered through the project. Although that presents a reasonably good picture overall, I recognise that more can always be done to increase the coverage of faster broadband services in places such as West Tyrone. That is why my Department is engaged in ongoing initiatives that are aimed at further enhancing our broadband infrastructure. For instance, under the broadband improvement contract, BT will reinvest certain revenues made when take-up exceeds a specific threshold. The final amount will not be known until the autumn when plans can be developed to improve further the coverage of faster broadband connectivity across Northern Ireland. Additionally, my Department is managing a contract for the delivery of the superfast roll-out programme, which, by the end of 2017, will provide access to superfast broadband, with speeds of at least 24 megabits per second, to a further 39,000 premises, both business and residential, across Northern Ireland, including in West Tyrone.

Members may already be aware that Ofcom reported that 42% of rural premises and 2% of urban premises cannot currently achieve speeds of 10 megabits per second or better. That is largely due to Northern Ireland's premises having some of the longest line lengths in the UK, as a result of population spread. However, Ofcom did add that the deployment of my Department's superfast programme will change that landscape rapidly. It is anticipated that, by the time that the projects have been completed, some 87% of premises across Northern Ireland will have access to services of at least 24 megabits per second, compared with 82% when the project began.

Alternative networks can also offer a viable option for the delivery of broadband services in the most difficult to reach and less densely populated areas. Over recent years, my Department has supported projects that have extended fixed wireless and satellite broadband networks across many parts of Northern Ireland, particularly in West Tyrone. In January, my Department launched a scheme that allows consumers with a broadband connection of

less than 2 megabits per second to access a subsidy towards the cost of having a satellite broadband service installed from a list of registered providers, subject to satisfying some eligibility criteria.

It might be helpful to remind Members of the constraints within which any intervention that is taken forward by my Department has to operate. As many Members will know, telecommunications matters are reserved at Westminster, meaning that my Department has only limited powers to intervene in what is a fully privatised and independently regulated market. In addition, initiatives have to be designed in a way that meets state-aid rules, which require us to be technology-agnostic and to ensure that any procurement is open and competitive, with the overriding aim of ensuring value for money and delivering the maximum benefit for public funding. Although public funds can and will be invested in the development of telecommunications networks, it is ultimately a business decision for providers to decide on how and whether they wish to participate in any scheme. In that context, neither I nor the Assembly can direct or compel a network operator on where or when it should invest and what technology can be used.

My Department is reviewing what has been achieved to date and considering what will need to be addressed after the current initiatives have been completed. Although still at a very early stage, it is already apparent that, if the ambitions of the draft Programme for Government on improving Internet connectivity are to be realised, further investment is likely to be required, no matter what technology we deploy.

I hope that the run-through of what we have been doing and the impact that that has been having has been beneficial in presenting to Members a record of achievements to date in the West Tyrone constituency, as well as providing an overview of what is ongoing to enhance telecommunication infrastructure across Northern Ireland and a summary of plans for future intervention at both a devolved and national level. I fully appreciate and understand the concerns and issues that have been raised by Members from West Tyrone. They are concerns and issues that could be and are raised by people who live in my constituency, as well as by those in other parts of Northern Ireland. I want to see us build on the £64 million that has been invested in broadband projects since 2008, which has brought about significant improvements. There is still more to do to improve broadband access, and I am committed to doing my best to achieve better broadband speeds for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.25 pm.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 3 June 2016

Written Answers to Questions

Department for Communities

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Communities what plans he has to progress the Sexual Orientation Strategy by 2021.
(AQW 63/16-21)

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): The good relations strategy, Together: Building a United Community, gives a commitment to publishing a Sexual Orientation strategy. The Stormont House Agreement and the Fresh Start document both state that the Together: Building a United Community will be implemented in full.

Department of Education

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 9760/11-16, whether trade unions proposed the idea of an early retirement and replacement scheme that subsequently became the Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme.
(AQW 12/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The idea for this Scheme was first proposed by the teaching unions in 2012; however, at that time, funding was not available to develop the proposal further or to implement it.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of teacher exception from fair employment regulations in Article 71 of the Fair Employment and Equal Treatment Order 1998.
(AQW 14/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Fair Employment and Treatment Order (NI) 1998 (FETO) is the legislative responsibility of The Executive Office. Notwithstanding, I am committed to deliver equality for all school sectors. I will, therefore, be giving this matter my early consideration.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education whether the extra £15M announced in February 2016 for the Aggregated School Budget has been accounted for in the budgets disseminated to schools in March 2016.
(AQW 15/16-21)

Mr Weir: The 2016-17 Resource Budget was allocated on the basis that the £20m funding commitment would be honoured in the 2016-17 June monitoring round. The £15m for ASB was included in the 2016-17 budget allocations issued to schools in March.

The outcome of the 2016-17 June monitoring round is not yet known.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education whether the additional £20M for the Education budget announced on 10 February 2016 has been confirmed and allocated as part of the June monitoring round.
(AQW 16/16-21)

Mr Weir: The 2016-17 Resource Budget was allocated on the basis that the £20m funding commitment would be honoured in the 2016-17 June monitoring round. The £15m for ASB was included in the 2016-17 budget allocations issued to schools in March.

The outcome of the 2016-17 June monitoring round is not yet known.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on a new school build for St Columbanus College, Bangor.
(AQW 23/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are currently no plans for a new school build for St Columbanus' College.

The school was not included in previous major capital investment announcements due to area planning uncertainties. Outstanding area planning issues have since been resolved and a Development Proposal has been approved (February 2015) to increase the approved enrolment at the school from 500 to 750 on a phased basis by 2025.

At present there are no plans for a further major capital investment announcement; however the school's Managing Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), has stated that major capital investment for St Columbanus' College remains a strategic priority and the school will be submitted for consideration should a future call for potential major capital projects in the post-primary sector be made.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on a new school build for Bangor Central Primary School. (AQW 24/16-21)

Mr Weir: On 23 March 2016, Bangor Central Integrated Primary School was included in an announcement which set out the shared and integrated education projects to advance in planning, benefitting from the release of the first tranche of the dedicated UK government capital funding allocated under the Fresh Start Agreement.

This project is currently in the very early stages of planning. Departmental officials and representatives from the Education Authority met with the school's Principal and the Chair of the Board of Governors in early May to outline the process for delivery and timescales.

The first main stage of planning for any major capital works project is the development of a Feasibility Report. This is a high level technical assessment of the options available to deliver the project which will be used to feed into the development of a robust economic appraisal.

Work is underway to development procurement documentation to engage an Integrated Consultant Team for the project whose first task will be the completion of the Feasibility Study.

In parallel, to inform the Feasibility Study, a site search is currently being commissioned to identify all available, suitable sites in the catchment area, including the existing site.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to introduce an early retirement scheme for teaching staff. (AQW 88/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will take time to consider the detail of the proposed Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme; however, I am mindful of the academic year and the importance of minimising disruption to the delivery of the curriculum to pupils.

As such, an Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme will not run before the next academic year.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Education what assurances he can give that suitably qualified teachers will be able to apply for job vacancies that may arise from an early retirement scheme. (AQW 89/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will take time to consider the detail of the proposed Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme; however, I am mindful of the academic year and the importance of minimising disruption to the delivery of the curriculum to pupils.

As such, an Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme will not run before the next academic year.

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Investing in the Teaching Workforce scheme. (AQW 94/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will take time to consider the detail of the proposed Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme; however, I am mindful of the academic year and the importance of minimising disruption to the delivery of the curriculum to pupils.

As such, an Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme will not run before the next academic year.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education to detail the capital building projects planned for Upper Bann in the next three years, including any plans for new school buildings for Portadown College, Lurgan College and Craigavon Senior High School. (AQW 107/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes a large number of new build and School Enhancement Projects representing significant investment in the Upper Bann constituency. There are currently no plans for new school buildings for Portadown College, Lurgan College and Craigavon Senior High School.

An official opening of the new build for St Teresa's Primary School in Lurgan which provided investment of some £4m took place in February 2016. A new build project for Tannaghmore Primary School, Lurgan with estimated capital costs of £7.3m is on track to complete in September 2016. A further project providing investment of £6.8m to provide a new build for St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge is currently on site.

Design work is underway on new build projects for St Ronan's College in Lurgan and Lismore Comprehensive in Craigavon. These projects will bring estimated investment of £26.5m and £22.8m respectively to the area. A business case remains under development for the project for Portadown Integrated Primary School to provide a new 14 class base primary school and double nursery unit.

In addition, King's Park Primary School in Lurgan was included in an announcement on 15 March 2016 as one of 10 projects (with associated estimated total investment of £40m) in the primary sector to advance in planning. Finally, on 23 March 2016,

New-bridge Integrated College in Loughbrickland was included in an announcement which set out the shared and integrated education projects to advance in planning, benefitting from the release of the first tranche of the dedicated UK government capital funding allocated under the Fresh Start Agreement. Both these recently announced new build projects are currently in the very early stages of planning.

School Enhancement Programme (SEP) projects (school refurbishment or extension schemes costing between £0.5 - 4m) underway include Donard Special School and Millington Primary School both of which are at construction stage and Ceara Special School that is about to commence on site. The scope of a SEP project for New-bridge Integrated College has been reviewed to focus on immediate accommodation needs only following the inclusion of the school in the Fresh Start Agreement announcement and is currently at design stage.

All projects that are not contractually committed will be subject to funding being available at the time to permit the project to proceed to tender stage.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 55109/11-16, (i) for the terms of reference of the review of the Education Authority decision to reduce special educational needs nursery provision from full-time to part-time; (ii) how and when the Education Authority will engage with those directly affected; (iii) what assurances he can give that there will be no decision on this matter prior to this review and engagement; and (iv) whether he will scope the viability of introducing full-time hours for all special educational needs nursery provision.

(AQW 113/16-21)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Education Authority (EA) has advised that its terms of reference for the review of its decision on full-time and part-time pre-school provision in special schools involve the review being taken forward in two phases. The first phase of work is to review the pattern of provision of pre-school places in special schools for children who require this type of placement to ensure that adequate places are available for September 2016. This phase is focusing on an analysis of the current number of early years places across special schools and on providing indications of special schools that are likely to experience pressure in September 2016. I understand that the EA will not address the regional differences in duration of pre-school placements in special schools until the second phase and that, while the terms of reference in relation to the second phase have not yet been completed, it will involve the establishment of a professional practitioner group and will include consultation with parents and other stakeholders.
- (ii) I am assured that the EA will engage with those directly affected, particularly the governors and principals of special schools; professional practitioners; and parents and other stakeholders. I attach considerable importance to this aspect and will be asking the EA Chair for more detail on how the Authority will ensure that consultation and engagement is meaningful.
- (iii) I can assure the member that no decision on this matter will be made prior to completion of the review, and implementation of the EA's original decision is therefore on hold pending the completion of this work.
- (iv) The EA is the statutory authority with responsibility for making decisions regarding the nature and duration of provision needed to meet the needs of children with SEN. I understand that it will, as part of the review, therefore consider the range of early years options and support that could be introduced.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the childcare strategy; and (ii) whether he introduce 30 hours of free childcare, which has been proposed by the UK government.

(AQW 188/16-21)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The first phase of the Childcare Strategy is progressing well with more than 3,000 low cost childcare places already supported. I hope to bring forward the Childcare Strategy to my Executive colleagues in the coming months, having taken account of the analysis of the consultation responses, the context of a broader remit for education and the agreed Programme for Government.
- (ii) I will reflect on the need for additional childcare places as part of my overall considerations in relation to finalising the Childcare Strategy. The introduction of 30 hours free childcare in England will only be available to working parents of three and four year olds.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education (i) to outline the policy and procedures for primary schools if a child presents with injuries or discloses abuse; (ii) whether this applies to all primary schools; (iii) when procedures were last updated or reviewed; and (iv) how the current policy and procedures differ from those in place in 2012.

(AQW 193/16-21)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Department's document, 'Pastoral Care in Schools – Child Protection' provides advice to schools and others on their responsibilities in relation to child protection. All advice issued from the Department is consistent with Department

of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) guidance and the recently updated DHSSPS 'Co-Operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (March 2016)' was issued to schools on 15 April.

All grant-aided schools are required by law to have a child protection policy which outlines the procedures to be followed in the event of a child protection concern.

All schools have a named Designated Teacher for Child Protection who acts as a focal point for child protection within the school through providing advice and support to staff and by liaising with agencies outside the school as appropriate.

The Department's child protection arrangements make clear that schools must report any concerns about the safety and welfare of children to the appropriate authorities - the social services or the police.

There are clear procedures under the UNOCINI (Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland) assessment framework to facilitate referral from schools to social services and onward to other agencies such as PSNI, as appropriate.

- (ii) The Board of Governors (BoG) of all grant-aided schools have a statutory responsibility under the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils and to have a written child protection policy. Requirements on other settings are a condition of grant.

To fulfil their responsibilities BoGs are obligated to acknowledge and work within the relevant guidance and procedural documents that have been produced by the Department of Education and the DHSSPS.

- (iii) The DHSSPS guidance 'Co-operating to Safeguard Children May 2003' has been reviewed and re-issued in March 2016 as 'Co-Operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland'. The Department's 'Pastoral Care in Schools – Child Protection' was issued in 2009 and is currently under review, with the aim of issuing to schools by mid 2017. While it is acknowledged that this document requires review the principles within the guidance remain valid.

- (iv) The Department's policy and procedures have not changed since 2012 however guidance has been issued to schools on issues arising, including guidance on Child Sexual Exploitation, Female Genital Mutilation, Harmful Sexualised Behaviour and Protecting Life in Schools – Helping Protect Against Suicide.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to detail his Department's capital investment plans, including the School Enhancement Programme, for Upper Bann for the next five years; and the location and value of each capital investment. **(AQW 226/16-21)**

Mr Weir: The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes a large number of new build and School Enhancement Projects representing significant investment in the Upper Bann constituency.

An official opening of the new build for St Teresa's Primary School in Lurgan which provided investment of some £4m took place in February 2016. A new build project for Tannaghmore Primary School, Lurgan with estimated capital costs of £7.3m is on track to complete in September 2016. A further project providing investment of £6.8m to provide a new build for St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge is currently on site.

Design work is underway on new build projects for St Ronan's College in Lurgan and Lismore Comprehensive in Craigavon. These projects will bring estimated investment of £26.5m and £22.8m respectively to the area. A business case remains under development for the project for Portadown Integrated Primary School to provide a new 14 class base primary school and double nursery unit.

In addition, King's Park Primary School in Lurgan was included in an announcement on 15 March 2016 as one of 10 projects (with associated estimated total investment of £40m) in the primary sector to advance in planning. Finally, on 23 March 2016, New-bridge Integrated College in Loughbrickland was included in an announcement which set out the shared and integrated education projects to advance in planning, benefitting from the release of the first tranche of the dedicated UK government capital funding allocated under the Fresh Start Agreement. Both these recently announced new build projects are currently in the very early stages of planning.

School Enhancement Programme (SEP) projects (school refurbishment or extension schemes costing between £0.5 - 4m) underway include Donard Special School and Millington Primary School both of which are at construction stage at an estimated cost of £2.3m and £3.9m respectively. A further scheme at Ceara Special School is about to commence on site with an estimated cost of £1.2m. The scope of a SEP project for New-bridge Integrated College has been reviewed to focus on immediate accommodation needs only following the inclusion of the school in the Fresh Start Agreement announcement and is currently at design stage.

All projects that are not contractually committed will be subject to funding being available at the time to permit the project to proceed to tender stage.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the power held by schools to address bullying. **(AQW 285/16-21)**

Mr Weir: Under Article 3 of the Education (NI) Order 1998, all schools are required to have a discipline policy which should outline the behaviour it expects from registered pupils and the sanctions it will impose for breaches in discipline. Article 19 (3)

of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 extended this, adding a specific requirement for the discipline policy to include measures to prevent 'all forms of bullying among pupils'.

The school's discipline policy will therefore set out the powers which it will exercise, the processes by which any breaches will be considered and addressed; and the sanctions which the school can apply where bullying is found to have taken place. The Principal and Board of Governors of the school must adhere to its published policy in responding to any incidents or complaints of bullying and their treatment of bullying incidents and complaints is monitored as part of the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) inspection process.

More recently, a Bill for Addressing Bullying in Schools was taken forward by my Department. The Bill received Royal Assent on Thursday 12 May and became the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016.

The Act provides a definition of bullying and requires each school's Board of Governors to be actively involved in setting its anti-bullying policies, monitoring their implementation and ensuring these are regularly reviewed.

The Act also establishes a duty for schools to keep a record of all incidents of bullying or alleged bullying occurring within school premises, while pupils are travelling to and from the school, while pupils are under the control of school staff or while pupils are receiving educational provision arranged by the school but delivered in outside premises.

Additionally, the Act introduces a new power explicitly permitting Boards of Governors to include measures within their school's discipline policy to address cyber-bullying incidents, occurring outside the boundaries outlined above, where the cyber-bullying is judged likely to have a detrimental effect on the pupil's ongoing education at the school.

The Department recognises cyber-bullying represents a particularly complex challenge for schools and it will be for individual Boards of Governors to decide how they wish use this new power.

Department of Health

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether she plans to ring-fence funding for mental health services.
(AQW 39/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): Financial planning for the period 2017-20 will be commencing shortly and as such, decisions on the ring fencing of funding have not been made at this stage.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether the departmental Permanent Secretary was present at the recent Assembly election count in Belfast in his official capacity.
(AQW 69/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: No, he was not there in his official capacity.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health for an update on the progress of delivering paediatric cardiac surgery as a joint working model between Royal Victoria Hospital for Children and Our Lady of Lourdes.
(AQW 70/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The All-island Congenital Heart Disease Network Board has submitted to the Health Departments north and south a detailed implementation plan for the transfer of elective surgery for patients of the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC), who are currently being treated in England, to Our Lady's Children's Hospital Crumlin (OLCHC). The plan includes proposals to open additional paediatric intensive care beds in OLCHC, a new Cath Lab due to open in OLCHC later this year and the development of a Children's Heart Centre at the RBHSC. It is anticipated the plan will be approved in the near future. In addition to maintaining the current transfer of emergency patients to OLCHC the plan envisages completing on a phased basis the transfer of all urgent patients to OLCHC by the end of 2017 and all elective patients by the end of 2018. In the interim the Belfast Trust continues to operate a service level agreement for the provision of emergency surgical treatment in OLCHC. Under these arrangements 25 patients have received their emergency surgery, and 45 patients have received catheterisation procedures in OLCHC since April 2015. The remainder of their care continues to be provided by the Belfast Trust. My overriding concern is to ensure that the Belfast Trust continues to provide a safe and sustainable service for these vulnerable children and their families by providing their treatment through specialist heart centres in England until the transfer of surgery to OLCHC is completed.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the amount of funding spent in the Western Health and Social Care Trust for Disability Services over the past 20 years.
(AQW 98/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I can however advise that the Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services and the Trust has now agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for

Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the level of underspend in disability services within the Western Health and Social Care Trust over the past 20 years.

(AQW 99/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I can however advise that the Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services and the Trust has now agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health how much funding the Western Health and Social Care Trust spent on Learning Disability Services over the past 20 years; and where this money was spent.

(AQW 101/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I can however advise that the Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services and the Trust has now agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health to detail the level of underspend in learning disability services within the Western Health and Social Care Trust over the last 20 years.

(AQW 102/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I can however advise that the Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services and the Trust has now agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health what engagement her Department has had with the families impacted by the lack of funding for learning disability services within the Western Health and Social Care Trust over the past five years.

(AQW 103/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: As spending decisions on individual programmes of care are made by Trusts in line with the priority needs of their local community, engagement with families and carers has been taking place directly with the Western HSC Trust, through established Carers Voice Fora and other groups, such as the Western Area Learning Disability Action Group. Further engagement with families and carers will now take place as the Trust develops its long term plan to quantify the spending gap and address the historic resourcing issue in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health what action her Department has taken to resolve the current underspend in learning disability services within the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 104/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services. However, it is ultimately for the Western Trust to decide how it funds its individual programmes of care in line with the priority needs of the local community. To resolve the issue, the Western Trust has agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board.

Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for her assessment of the historical underspend on learning disability services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 115/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services. However, it is ultimately for the Western Trust to decide how it funds its individual programmes of care in line with the priority needs of the local community. To resolve the issue, the Western Trust has agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what is the current cost of providing interpreter services in the Health Service.

(AQW 125/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The cost of providing interpreter services in 2015/16 (latest information available) was £3,402,745.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health what discussions her Department has had with the Western Health and Social Care Trust in relation to the underspend in services for adults with learning difficulties (i) to identify when this underspend commenced; (ii) the amount involved; (iii) if an individual or agency has been identified as allowing or authorising this underspend; (iv) to identify the steps that will be taken to rectify the underspend and to provide the full support required by these individuals and their carers and; (v) to confirm that no other services within the Western Health and Social Care Trust will be penalised to correct this underspend.

(AQW 129/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services. However, it is ultimately for the Western Trust to decide how it funds its individual programmes of care in line with the priority needs of the local community. To resolve the issue, the Western Trust has agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board.

Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health what provisions are in place to support children in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area with 22q11 deletion syndrome, and their families, including in cases where the child's IQ is over 70.

(AQW 150/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Children who have the 22Q11 Deletion Syndrome have a wide variety of needs and each child will be treated according to their individual needs by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Children with this condition are also referred to regional specialist services where appropriate, for example, to cardiology or endocrine services and will also be referred to the new 22q11 Genetic Clinic in Belfast City Hospital. Equitable treatment is offered to all children irrespective of IQ level.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the working group to consider how to address the pressures facing GP-led primary care services.

(AQW 182/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: I recognise the very important role played by GPs in providing high quality and accessible health and social care services and want to ensure that GP-led services are sustainable into the future.

The report of the working group established to look at the issues facing GP-led primary care services was published in March 2016 and is available on the Department's website at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/review-gp-led-primary-care-services.pdf>. Separate reviews of GP out of hours services and nursing services in district and primary care settings also fed into the report.

I will consider carefully the issues highlighted in the working group's report, together with the recommendations and actions, and will respond in due course.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health whether she will attend the ME, CFS and Fibromyalgia Conference 'Chasing Competent Care', held on 6 June 2016 at the Stormont Hotel.

(AQW 200/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: I have not been invited to this conference.

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health whether she will instigate an inquiry into funding of Adult Learning Disability Services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust since 1996; and will she ensure that these services are properly funded and administered in the future without any negative impact on other front line services.

(AQW 206/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services. However, it is ultimately for the Western Trust to decide how it funds its individual programmes of care in line with the priority needs of the local community. To resolve the issue, the Western Trust has agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health what steps her Department will take to address the funding deficit incurred over the past twenty years for learning disability in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 216/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services. However, it is ultimately for the Western Trust to decide how it funds its individual programmes of care in line with the priority needs of the local community. To resolve the issue, the Western Trust has agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital; and to outline the progress of the recruitment process.

(AQW 217/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Construction of the new Radiotherapy Centre and associated infrastructure is progressing on site with an anticipated handover of the building in Summer 2016. This will then be followed by a period of client commissioning and specialist staff training with the commencement of service planned for Autumn 2016.

Advance recruitment of staff across a range of key disciplines is progressing in accordance with the planned profiles.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health what capital investments are planned by her Department in Upper Bann over the next five years; and what is the estimated value and location of each capital investment.

(AQW 223/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table lists capital investments which are currently ongoing in the Upper Bann parliamentary constituency.

Project	Value
Craigavon Area Hospital High Voltage Infrastructure	£11.3m
Craigavon Area Hospital Mechanical Infrastructure	£5.9m
Craigavon Area Hospital Paediatric Ward and Ambulatory Care Unit	£8.6m

Future capital investment projects in the constituency will be considered by my Department and the Executive as part of Budget 2017 which will conclude in the autumn.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Health to detail the community and voluntary organisations in East Derry that received funding from her Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 234/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Detail on voluntary and community organisations funded by my Department is publicly available on the Government Funder's Database which can be accessed at www.volcomgrantsni.gov.uk.

Funding is mainly provided to organisations with a regional presence. Some organisations may deliver services in East Derry.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health to detail the community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that received funding from her Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 249/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Detail on voluntary and community organisations funded by my Department is publicly available on the Government Funder's Database which can be accessed at www.volcomgrantsni.gov.uk.

Funding is mainly provided to organisations with a regional presence. Some organisations may deliver services in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will review planning application E/2012/0028/F and take into consideration the views of local home owners.

(AQW 57/16-21)

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure): The application which you refer to was granted planning permission on 23 April 2013. With the transfer of planning powers on the 1 April 2015, responsibility for any planning matter related to this application/approval has passed to Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. I am not therefore in a position to review or comment on the application.

I would advise that any concerns you or your constituents may have with this application should be raised with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. You may wish to contact Mr David Jackson, the Chief Executive of the Council directly. Mr Jackson can be contacted at the address below:

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, Cloonavin, 66 Portstewart Road, Coleraine BT52 1EY.

Department of Justice

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether she will review the absence of a police presence in courts.

(AQW 29/16-21)

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): The deployment of police officers is a matter for the operational judgement of the Chief Constable and therefore I will be guided by him in relation to the need for a police presence at court buildings.

A contract is in place with G4S Secure Solutions (UK) Ltd (G4S) to provide security services at courthouses and that contract is operating effectively. On occasions, when it is considered appropriate by the Police Service of Northern Ireland to provide a presence at a courthouse, arrangements are made to do so.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Justice to outline the steps she is taking to improve staff morale at HMP Maghaberry.

(AQW 47/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Staff morale is supported by regular communication and engagement with the Governor and senior management of the Prison. Management continue to build on a safe and decent environment for both staff and prisoners within Maghaberry Prison.

It is my intention to visit Maghaberry Prison, as well as the other prison estates, at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Palmer asked the Minister of Justice what assessment has been made of the Domestic Violence Disclosures Scheme, which has been trialled and rolled out in the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 48/16-21)

Ms Sugden: My Department has recently undertaken a consultation on the introduction of an offence of domestic abuse and a domestic violence disclosure scheme in Northern Ireland. This consultation was informed by the Home Office Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme, including the subsequent assessment of a 14 month pilot programme in four police force areas in England and Wales.

An initial assessment completed by my Department is detailed within the equality screening associated with our consultation which can be accessed on the Department's website at:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/doj/equality-screening-domestic-violence.pdf>

Further consideration of the findings from the England and Wales Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme pilot and roll-out will be undertaken in association with the analysis of evidence flowing from the recent consultation in Northern Ireland. It is my intention to engage with the Justice Committee setting out the findings of the consultation and the proposed way forward.

Mr Smith asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been jailed for offences relating to paramilitary crimes in each of the last five years.

(AQW 54/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The specific information requested is not available from Departmental prosecutions and convictions databases, as they do not contain information on the circumstances in which an offence was committed. There are no criminal offences

relating specifically to paramilitary criminality and offences committed by paramilitaries may be recorded under more generic descriptions.

However, terrorism offences may be prosecuted under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism (Northern Ireland) Act 2006 and the Counter Terrorism Act 2008. The latest 5 year period for which information is available is 2010 – 2014. Information in relation to convictions for which a custodial sentence was imposed for offences under the legislation specified, in the years concerned, has been provided in the following table.

Convictions and custodial disposals at courts for terrorism offences, 2010 – 2014

Year	Convictions resulting in a custodial disposal
2010	6
2011	2
2012	4
2013	8
2014	16

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to convictions for the offences in question, whether or not they were the primary offence at conviction.
- 2 Figures provided relate to all categories of the offences specified.
- 3 Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

Mr Smith asked the Minister of Justice what steps she is taking to ensure that staff numbers at HMP Maghaberry are increased.

(AQW 55/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Northern Ireland Prison Service keeps staffing levels under review.

NIPS has recruited 39 additional staff. These staff have recently completed their training and are deployed at Maghaberry Prison alongside experienced colleagues on landings. Another 40 staff will begin training in September.

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been jailed for offences relating to fuel fraud or smuggling in each of the last five years.

(AQW 58/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Offences relating to fuel laundering, smuggling or illegal sales of fuel from other evasion of duty or intent to defraud offences are prosecuted under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 and/or the Criminal Attempts and Conspiracy (Northern Ireland) Order 1983. The latest 5 year period for which information is available is 2010 – 2014.

Information from court order records show that there was one conviction resulting in a custodial sentence for the offences specified in 2010, where the item involved was hydrocarbon oil. No convictions resulting in a custodial sentence were handed down in relation to the offences specified, relating to fuel fraud or smuggling, in any of the years 2011 - 2014.

Mr Smith asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted of offences relating to attacks on prison staff at each prison, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 59/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The specific information requested is not available. Departmental prosecutions and convictions datasets do not record the location in which an offence took place, or details of victims' occupation. Therefore, it is not possible to identify in which prison an attack may have taken place, or to identify convictions specifically relating to attacks on prison staff.

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Justice how her officials cooperate with HM Revenue and Customs to reduce the threat posed by fuel fraud and fuel smuggling gangs.

(AQW 60/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Excise evasion is a reserved matter and policy and legal responsibility rests with HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). HMRC is however a key member of the Northern Ireland Organised Crime Taskforce (OCTF), which I chair, and works closely with other members across Northern Ireland law enforcement and government. This involves regular formal meetings with informal contact in between. My Department has provided support with regard to local legislation on unduly lenient sentencing and my predecessor met with the Exchequer Secretary last year to discuss the issue.

The OCTF has established a subgroup which is chaired by HMRC and which focuses exclusively on tackling fuel crime on a cross-border basis. HMRC's work with the Revenue Commissioners in the Republic of Ireland through this OCTF subgroup has led to the introduction of the new Accutrace™ S10 Fuel Marker which has now been in use for a year and which is proving

to be a valuable tool in the fight against fuel laundering. HMRC is also working together with the Revenue Commissioners to develop a strategy to reduce the current emerging threat which is the smuggling of fuel.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Justice how she will improve support for the victims of crime.
(AQW 67/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Addressing the needs of victims of crime is high on my priorities as Minister of Justice. I recognise that much good work has been taken forward over the last number of years with a range of initiatives implemented from the first three years of the five year Victim and Witness Strategy – ‘Making a Difference’.

It is my intention, not only to take forward the remaining actions in the strategy, but also to explore ways in which we can further develop new services or deliver existing support and protections more effectively.

I am planning to publish a consultation on a new Witness Charter shortly that will set out the services and support to be provided to witnesses of crime. This will build on the Victim Charter published last year.

I will also be taking forward work to scope the changes needed to introduce a pilot for cross examination and re-examination of victims and witnesses. This will enable vulnerable victims to video record their evidence and cross examination in advance of the trial.

I will be investing £2.2m this year for the provision of support services to all victims and witnesses of crime in Northern Ireland through our voluntary sector partners Victim Support NI and the NSPCC Young Witness Service. These services ensure victims and witnesses can receive the support of which they are entitled.

I am delighted to advise that our Delivery Partner, Victim Support NI has recently secured funding from Comic Relief to pilot an Independent Sexual Violence Advocate service across NI. This will mean victims have access to specialist support which will help co-ordinate a multi-agency support package tailored to their needs.

Whilst it is focused on sexual violence, some victims of domestic violence will benefit directly from this role. It is likely that learning from this pilot will also help shape any future considerations regarding the best model for an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor service for victims.

A range of support measures have been agreed to enhance the specialist court listing arrangements for domestic violence and abuse cases currently operating in Londonderry. These measures include achieving more timely referrals of victims to specialist support services such as Victim Support and the development of a protocol between the various support services with the aim of further improving the quality of services provided.

The success of these new measures will be reviewed following a period of implementation with a view to extending them to other geographic areas.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Justice how many operations have involved input from the National Crime Agency; and how many people have been convicted as a result.
(AQW 68/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Operational activity is a matter for the law enforcement bodies. However, since it became fully operational in this jurisdiction on 20 May 2015 the National Crime Agency (NCA) has carried out operations within Northern Ireland covering areas such as child sexual exploitation and drugs. This has led to at least 42 disruptions against organised crime groups operating in Northern Ireland.

As a result of joint NCA/PSNI operations there have been more than 40 arrests with 11 individuals charged for various offences. Prosecution action is ongoing and there have been two convictions to date for offences relating to child sexual exploitation.

The NCA has also assisted PSNI with a number of operations which have spread across other UK and international jurisdictions. PSNI has also been able to provide reciprocal local support to the NCA.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been jailed for offences relating to crimes against older people in each of the last five years.
(AQW 141/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The specific information requested is not available. Departmental prosecutions and convictions datasets do not currently record victim age, so it is not possible to identify those cases in which a custodial sentence was handed down, where the victim was an older person.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been jailed for offences relating to the online exploitation of children and young people, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 144/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Offences relating to the online exploitation of children and young people may be prosecuted under the Protection of Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 and the Criminal Justice (Evidence, Etc.) (Northern Ireland) Order 1988.

The latest five year period for which information is available is 2010 – 2014. Information in relation to convictions for which a custodial sentence was imposed for the offences specified, in the years concerned, has been provided in the following table:

Convictions in which a custodial sentence was imposed for offences relating to the online exploitation of children and young people, 2010 - 2014

Year	Convictions resulting in a custodial disposal
2010	13
2011	17
2012	21
2013	27
2014	19

Note:

- 4 Figures relate to convictions for the offences in question, whether or not they were the primary offence at conviction.
- 5 Figures provided relate to all categories of the offences specified.
- 6 Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Justice whether she has any plans to introduce the provisions of the Domestic Violence Disclosures Scheme.

(AQW 145/16-21)

Ms Sugden: My predecessor gave a commitment to the Assembly during the Consideration Stage of the Justice Bill on 02 June 2015 to consult on the introduction of a domestic abuse offence and a domestic violence disclosure scheme in Northern Ireland. The consultation closed on 29 April 2016 albeit a small number of respondents were granted further time to reply.

As Justice Minister, I want to ensure I am fully informed on the best way to support potential victims, empower them to make informed choices about their relationships as well as preventing abuse from happening in the first place.

Naturally I will wish to consider carefully the views expressed during the consultation and engage with the Justice Committee on the proposed way forward.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of prosecutions for Stalking under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 in each of the last five years.

(AQW 325/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Stalking is a colloquial term and there is no specific offence of stalking in Northern Ireland. A number of offences, namely, harassment; causing another to fear violence; breach of an injunction prohibiting harassment; and breach of a restraining order may be prosecuted under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

The latest five year period for which information on convictions for offences under this legislation is available is 2010 – 2014.

Number of convictions for offences under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, 2010 – 2014

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Harassment	103	110	139	126	127
Breach of injunction prohibiting harassment	1	4	0	2	4
Breach of restraining order	2	7	14	19	18
Causing another to fear violence	2	3	2	2	0

Note:

- 1 Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.
- 2 The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offences specified.
- 3 Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 10 June 2016

Written Answers to Questions

Department for Communities

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Communities what plans he has to reform licensing laws.
(AQW 84/16-21)

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): In 2012 the Department for Social Development consulted on a wide range of proposed changes to the law regulating the sale and supply of alcohol in Northern Ireland.

My predecessor intended to introduce a Bill during the previous Assembly mandate. However, due to competing priorities this was not possible.

I am considering all the issues and will announce my plans in due course.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what action the Housing Executive has taken to remove the republican memorial from its lands at Lurgantarry.
(AQW 126/16-21)

Mr Givan: The replacement or removal of symbols such as murals and memorials is a complex and sensitive matter. No one single agency can work on its own to do this. It needs a number of agencies and bodies to work together, as well as involving the public and relevant communities.

The safety of Housing Executive staff and contractors is paramount. Having consulted with the PSNI, the Housing Executive believes that it could not guarantee their safety if an attempt was made to remove this structure.

The Housing Executive will continue to work with those who live on our estates, their representatives and other agencies, to look at an alternative use for these spaces.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what plans he has to progress the disability strategy.
(AQW 151/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Disability Strategy aims to raise awareness and improve opportunities and services for people with disabilities, addressing the inequalities and tackling the barriers they face in their daily lives.

Policy responsibility for the Strategy, which was previously extended to March 2017 by OFMDFM, now rests in my Department. I also have responsibility for the former DEL 'Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities'. Clearly there is much commonality between these and I will be looking to bring all our activities together in a more co-ordinated manner so we can make greater progress on our commitments.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the housing need in each constituency.
(AQW 152/16-21)

Mr Givan: Unfortunately, I cannot provide the answer by parliamentary constituency. However, I have provided the 2015 Housing Need Projection for the next 5 years by Local Government District. The 2016 figures are currently being processed.

I am aware of the high need for Social Housing in Northern Ireland and will continue to ensure that this need is addressed.

5 year Projected Need

Local Government District	Rural	Urban	Total
Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council	23	780	803
Ards & North Down Borough Council	144	1105	1249
Armagh Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council	36	295	331
Belfast City Council	0	5458	5458

Local Government District	Rural	Urban	Total
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	145	437	582
Derry & Strabane District Council	65	1916	1981
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	7	65	72
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	88	619	707
Mid & East Antrim Borough Council	206	829	1035
Mid Ulster District Council	77	461	538
Newry Mourne & Down District Council	490	1198	1688
Northern Ireland Total	1281	13163	14444

Should you require further information regarding a specific area please let me know.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what plans he has to progress the anti poverty and child poverty strategies.
(AQW 153/16-21)

Mr Givan: On 26 May, the Executive agreed a Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21.

The draft Framework contains 14 strategic outcomes, supported by 42 indicators which are clear statements for change.

My Department will specifically be responsible for the development of a Social Strategy on a pathfinder basis to complement the Programme for Government. Work to tackle poverty and child poverty will be integral to the development of this strategy.

Department of Education

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 55029/11-16, what work his Department has undertaken to determine the appropriateness of the proposed level of sustainable Year 8 enrolment, as set out at point 4.2.6 of Putting Pupils First: Shaping Our Future, Developing Sustainable Irish-medium Post-Primary Education.
(AQW 13/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Department's Sustainable Schools Policy sets out minimum intakes for recognition of new schools for funding in order to deliver a viable and sustainable school. There are no current plans to revise these levels in light of the Putting Pupils First: Shaping Our Future, Developing Sustainable Irish-medium Post-Primary Education report.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education which budget was used to pay teachers' national insurance, salary and superannuation costs, over the last five financial years.
(AQW 17/16-21)

Mr Weir: The funding for all Teachers salaries, national insurance and superannuation costs, over the last 5 financial years, comes from the Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB), with the exception of a small percentage of non-school based teachers, e.g. Youth tutors, Peripatetic Support staff, Teachers in special classes/units, whose salaries, national insurance and superannuation costs have been funded from the Education Authority's block grant.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education what steps are planned to devolve more control of the education budget to schools.
(AQW 18/16-21)

Mr Weir: In Budget 2016-17, 59% of the overall Education Budget was allocated directly to schools via the Aggregated Schools Budget. In addition, around 12% of the overall 2016-17 budget will be allocated to schools from centre budgets held by the Education Authority with a further 13% attributable to schools for services provided to them.

It is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the levels of funding to schools in Northern Ireland and other regions as figures are calculated using different categories of spend and different elements within those categories. Differences in levels of delegation and in arrangements for distribution of central funding add a further layer of complexity.

It is my intention to give further consideration to the overall Education budget position before I consider what steps I may take to devolve more control of the budget to schools.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the percentage of the Education budget allocated to the Aggregated School budget.
(AQW 19/16-21)

Mr Weir: The percentage of the Education budget allocated to the Aggregated Schools Budget as part of the opening 2016-17 budget process is 59.3%.

In addition approximately £500m of funding, 25% of the Education budget, is provided to the Education Authority. This funding is for areas such as Special Education, transport and schools meals. Therefore with these two sources of funding, schools are benefiting from, either directly or indirectly, 84% of the total education budget.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education whether there are plans to adopt the change from alphabetic to numeric grading for GCSEs being implemented in England.

(AQW 21/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is essential that the GCSE grading system in Northern Ireland meets the needs of learners and that students from here are not disadvantaged when applying for jobs and university places.

I have raised concerns previously about the system currently in place which is why I want to consider other options that may be available. I will do this in the coming weeks and announce my decision as soon as possible.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education to outline any plans he has for the protection and promotion of the Dickson Plan.
(AQW 81/16-21)

Mr Weir: Responsibility for the planning of all grant-aided schools rests with the Education Authority. The Education Authority has been tasked with producing a new post primary Area Plan and associated Annual Action Plan which are due to be presented to my Department in July 2016. I am committed to the maintenance of the Dickson Plan and have no plans to remove or indeed to change the Dickson Plan itself.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what funding he will provide to protect the early years funding for Loughgiel, Co Antrim.

(AQW 85/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Pathway Fund replaced the DE Early Years Fund from 1st April 2016. This new Fund opened the access to funding, welcoming application from all voluntary, community and independent providers or facilitators of Early Education and Learning, focussed on ages 0-4.

Early Years – the Organisation for Young Children (EYO), which administers the Pathway Fund on DE's behalf, advises that Loughgiel Community Playgroup applied to the Fund but were not awarded funding. They received transitional funding to meet obligations to the end of June 2016. EYO met with representatives from the Playgroup on 10 May and discussed their application and the funding decision in detail.

Pathway Funding is additional and does not provide funding to support the Department's Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) or any other publicly funded provision. It is awarded as a contribution towards projects that will be undertaken within the funding year, and which are separate from any other public funding.

Loughgiel Community Playgroup is funded by DE for PSEP places in 2015/16 and is due to continue as a PSEP provider in September 2016.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many schools have had a recorded surplus in budget over the last five years.

(AQW 86/16-21)

Mr Weir: The table below provides the number of schools that recorded a surplus in budget, at the end of each of the last five years, in the Controlled and Maintained sector for which the Education Authority (EA) is the Funding Authority:

Year	Number of Schools in Surplus
2011-12	836
2012-13	862
2013-14	820
2014-15	791
2015-16 *	786

* 2015-16 data is based on schools position reported by the EA at Provisional Outturn. The 2015-16 figures are not yet finalised therefore this information is subject to change.

Similar data is not available for Voluntary Grammar (VG) and Grant-Maintained Integrated (GMI) Schools, for which my Department is the Funding Authority. VG and GMI schools are not reported on in the same way as each other (the same accounting policies are not used by all) or in the same way as Controlled/Maintained schools for which the EA are the Funding

Authority. The cumulative surplus/deficit figures of a VG and GMI school can reflect non public funds and cannot be compared on a like-for-like basis with another VG/GMI school or an EA school.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Education what funding is being made available to schools for National Insurance and Superannuation payments for staff.

(AQW 87/16-21)

Mr Weir: Under the delegated Local Management of Schools funding arrangements, the funding for all school staff salaries, national insurance and superannuation costs, are incorporated within the Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB), distributed to grant-aided schools under the Common Funding Formula arrangements.

The Department received and allocated £30 million to schools in 2015-16 for additional Employers Pension costs. This was subsequently included within the 2016-17 ASB of £1,167.5 million.

As part of the Budget 2016-17 final outcome for Education, no pay and price pressures were funded. Therefore, these pressures, including those changes to National Insurance costs, are to be absorbed in 2016-17, on the basis that to fund these would simply involve equivalent reductions elsewhere in the Education budget.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to improve consultation with children.

(AQW 146/16-21)

Mr Weir: I am committed to ensuring the voice of the child and young person is heard in all levels of policy and decision making, in keeping with requirements under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

My Department is currently developing the next Executive Strategy for Children and Young People through a co-design process with sector representatives, children and young people and parents. One of the key issues to be considered within the Strategy will be how better co-operation and better engagement is promoted to support improved outcomes for children and young people. This will include thinking on how ongoing active engagement and consultation with children and young people can be supported and facilitated.

In addition to this, the Education Authority (EA) has developed a Youth Council structure that supports the local decision making centred around the identification of local need, social action programmes and initiatives and commenting on local Youth Service provision. Many areas also have more localised participative structures and some specific communities of interest groupings are supported to build capacity within under-represented groups.

In 2015/2016 the EA in taking forward the 2015-16 Regional Youth Development Plan undertook a pilot for Local Advisory Groups (LAGS) that has actively engaged young people at the heart of the local decision making process for the delivery of youth services. LAGS are to be developed by all Youth Service area planners within the 2016/2017 financial year.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what capital investment is planned for North Antrim in the next five years.

(AQW 178/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes a large number of new build and School Enhancement Projects representing significant investment in the North Antrim constituency.

In Ballymena, a new build project for Castle Tower Special School with estimated capital costs of £21m is on track to complete in June 2017. Design work is underway on a new build project for Braidside Integrated Primary School which will bring estimated investment of £5.27m. A business case has been approved for a new 840 pupil school for Dunclug College with associated estimated costs of £18.6m.

Business cases remain under development for projects to provide Mary Queen of Peace Primary School with a new 9 class base school at an estimated cost of £4.59m and to provide a new 700 pupil school for Cullybackey College bringing further investment of approximately £17m to the area.

In addition, work is underway on the Ballycastle Shared Campus Project providing a new build for Ballycastle High School and Cross and Passion High School which was announced in July 2014 with an estimated value of at least £21m.

School Enhancement Programme (SEP) projects (school refurbishment or extension schemes costing between £0.5 - 4m) underway include a £3.8m two-storey extension for Ballymoney High School and new sports facilities costing £2.2m at Dalriada School both of which are in the final stages of construction and are on track to complete in the autumn. In Ballymena, a scheme to extend and refurbish the old convent building at St Louis Grammar School is due to commence on site this month and design work is currently underway on a scheme to provide a new sports hall and 3G pitch for Slemish Integrated College; each with associated investment of circa £4m.

All projects that are not contractually committed will be subject to funding being available at the time to permit the project to proceed to tender stage.

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education to list the early years playgroups or nurseries in County Tyrone that applied successfully to the Pathway Fund in 2016; and to detail the level of funding each group received.

(AQW 203/16-21)

Mr Weir: The organisations in County Tyrone which successfully applied to the Pathway Fund and how much funding they were awarded for 2016/17 are outlined in the table below.

2016/17 Pathway Funded Groups in County Tyrone

Number	Name of Organisation	Post Code	Town	Amount Awarded
1	Care Bears Community Playgroup	BT78 4AP	Newtownstewart	£4,653.00
2	First Steps Daycare Ltd	BT81 7QJ	Castledearg	£91,839.90
3	Denamona Pre-School Education Centre	BT78 2BN	Fintona	£12,151.63
4	First Steps Community Playgroup	BT81 7QJ	Castledearg	£25,179.96
5	Cornabracken Child Care Ltd	BT78 5LW	Omagh	£62,380.36
6	Eskra Childcare Ltd	BT78 2RJ	Omagh	£23,448.34
7	Jack and Jill Pre-School	BT80 8PZ	Cookstown	£ 6,894.00
8	Nippers Alley Playgroup	BT79 9LG	Loughmacrory Omagh	£14,875.00
9	Ardstraw Community Playgroup	BT 78 4LL	Ardstraw Omagh	£19,587.97
10	Pomeroy Pre-School Playgroup	BT70 2RD	Pomeroy	£19,981.90
11	Woodland Adventure Playgroup (Acorn Women's Group)	BT77 0EG	Augher	£28,610.00
12	McClintock's Children Centre	BT78 1UQ	Seskinore Omagh	£24,896.63
13	Giggles and Wiggles	BT82 9SQ	Strabane	£16,250.44
14	Clogher Valley Playgroup	BT76 0UW	Clogher	£ 6,508.53
15	Kids R Us Cross Community Playgroup	BT75 0ND	Fivemiletown	£ 6,508.53

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education (i) how many teachers are employed in primary schools; (ii) how many of those teachers have completed accredited autism awareness training; and (iii) how many primary school teachers currently hold up to date autism awareness training certification.

(AQW 228/16-21)

Mr Weir: The number of teachers employed in the 2014/15 academic year in Primary schools was 8,782 and 140 in Preparatory departments.

Autism specific training for teachers, to build the capacity of schools to effectively meet the needs of children with autism, has been delivered by the Education Authority (EA) and Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA). However,

the EA and MCA have advised that they do not hold a database on teachers with accredited autism awareness training or on teachers who currently hold up-to-date autism awareness training certification.

Notes:

- Information on teacher numbers is taken from the Teachers' Payroll and Pensions Administration System and validated individually with each school on an annual basis.
- The data provided refer to the 2014/15 academic year, and specifically to 24-28 November 2014.
- The following types of teacher are included:
 - full-time (FT) permanent teachers;
 - part-time (PT) permanent teachers;
 - temporary teachers filling vacant posts, secondments or career breaks
- The following teachers are excluded:
 - substitute teachers covering illness or other short-term absences;
 - peripatetic teachers;
 - teachers employed under the Signature Project
- The figures provided are headcounts, where a part-time teacher counts the same as a full-time teacher.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Education to detail the changes to school annual budgets following the 2016/17 budget. (AQW 246/16-21)

Mr Weir: On a like for like basis with 2015-16, the total Budget 2016-17 Resource allocation for Education means a net cash reduction of £72m.

In February 2016, a further allocation to the Department of Education was announced, with the Department to receive an additional allocation of £20m as part of June Monitoring, subject to the availability of funds and the ratification of the Executive. This additional funding has been used to mitigate the overall reduction by £15m being allocated to the opening 2016-17 ASB, and the remaining £5m allocated to the Education Authority Block Grant to address pressures on Special Education Needs. Taking this further allocation into account means that the overall net cash reduction in the Education Budget is £52m.

Therefore the scale of the net cash reductions in 2016-17 has required a reduction of £10m to the Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB).

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Education whether superannuation payments are now included within schools' resource budget following the 2016/17 budget. (AQW 247/16-21)

Mr Weir: All grant aided schools, funded under the Common Funding Scheme, receive a fully delegated budget. Schools therefore can determine their own priorities and staffing complements, and are responsible for all staffing costs, including basic pay, superannuation and national insurance contributions.

As set out in the Department's budget letter to all schools of 2 March 2016, the £30 million the Department received and allocated to schools in 2015-16 for additional Employers Pension costs is included within the £1,167.5 million 2016-17 Aggregated Schools Budget.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding cuts to (i) school budgets; and (ii) schools in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, following the 2016/17 budget. (AQW 248/16-21)

Mr Weir: The amount of funding directly delegated to schools via the Aggregated Schools Budget in 2016-17 is £1,167.5 million. This represents a reduction of £10 million or 0.85% compared to the total budget allocations to schools in 2015-16.

For schools in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency, total delegated funding to these schools in 2016-17 is £76.9 million. This represents a reduction of £0.7 million or 0.9% compared to the previous financial year. Funding at individual school level will reflect both the overall levels of funding distributed and demographic changes within the school, in particular changes in pupil numbers year on year.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what cuts are planned to the home teaching service in the North Eastern Education and Library Board region in the current financial year; and how many children this will effect. (AQW 262/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised me that there are no cuts planned to the home teaching service in the North Eastern area.

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Education what capital investment is planned for South Antrim in the next five years. (AQW 271/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes one new build project and two School Enhancement Programme (SEP) projects (school refurbishment or extension schemes costing between £0.5 - 4m) representing significant investment in the South Antrim constituency.

A new build project for Parkhall Integrated College, Antrim with estimated capital investment of £20.7m is currently on site and on track to complete in summer 2017.

A SEP project to provide a new multi-purpose hall and modular classrooms for Maine Integrated Primary School was completed in July 2015 with an approved cost of £728k. A further scheme involving a new extension, toilet refurbishment and a new entrance to main school building at Ballyclare High School with an approved cost of £3.7m is in the final stages of construction and on track to complete in September 2016.

Other capital projects throughout Northern Ireland will be considered as and when funding becomes available.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail his capital budget for 2016/17 financial year. (AQW 286/16-21)

Mr Weir: Following the Executive's agreement of Budget 2016/17 on 17 December 2015, the Department has been allocated a total capital budget of £193.7m. This includes £20.3m of Economic Pact capital funding which will be applied to the

Strule projects and 3 Integrated Primary Schools which were selected to be funded under the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) initiative.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how long an assessment of educational needs should take; and how long assessments of educational needs are taking at present.

(AQW 301/16-21)

Mr Weir: Following receipt of a request for a statutory assessment of a child's special educational needs The Education Authority (EA) is required, under legislation, to complete the assessment and statementing process in no more than 26 weeks, subject to valid exceptions.

The EA has advised that it is not possible to provide an accurate figure at present; however the EA has previously indicated that in the vast majority of cases it is meeting its statutory target to complete the assessment and statementing process within 26 weeks, subject to valid exceptions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether he will encourage primary schools to prepare children wishing to sit a transfer test; and facilitate same with funding.

(AQW 305/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will be discussing this issue with a wide range of stakeholders and will want to consider very carefully how any changes might be taken forward.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education, when a Catholic Maintained school receives public funds for a new school building, to detail which body owns the new building.

(AQW 329/16-21)

Mr Weir: The school's trustees own any new school building in the Catholic Maintained sector. Grant-aid is provided to meet approved expenditure incurred in the provision or alteration of a school building. The Voluntary Schools Building Grant Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 (S.R. 1993 No. 457) require the school premises to be vested in the trustees who are applying for the grant-aid and the Department of Education ("the Department") is joined as a party to the Deed to secure the grant-aid. This means that the premises cannot be disposed of without the Department's consent and repayment ("clawback") of grant-aid if required.

Mr Lyons asked the Minister of Education what steps he will take to ensure more of the education budget is spent by schools rather than centrally by his Department.

(AQW 349/16-21)

Mr Weir: In Budget 2016-17, 59% of the overall Education Budget was allocated directly to schools via the Aggregated Schools Budget. In addition, around 12% of the overall 2016-17 budget will be allocated to schools from centre budgets held by the Education Authority with a further 13% attributable to schools for services provided to them.

It is my intention to give further consideration to the overall Education budget position before I determine what steps I may take to devolve more control of the budget to schools.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education whether he will uphold and act in accordance with the ruling by The Honourable Mr. Justice Treacy that his Department has an obligation to encourage the development of Irish medium education.

(AQW 353/16-21)

Mr Weir: As I have already stated publicly I will ensure that my Department fulfils all of the statutory duties that are placed on it and that all pupils and all schools, are treated fairly and equitably, regardless of their sector.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Education when he plans to publish the findings of research commissioned by his Department on the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender youth in schools.

(AQW 357/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department is awaiting final delivery of research carried out on the "Post Primary School Experiences of 16-21 year old people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender (LGB&T)".

Once the final report has been signed-off by the Project Steering Group the publication date will be considered, in line with standard departmental practice of publication of research reports.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many and in which locations are pre-school places still available in North Down.

(AQW 359/16-21)

Mr Weir: The EA has provided the following list of pre-school settings with places still available at the end of Stage 2 of the pre-school admissions.

Pre-School Setting	Available Places
Bangor Abbey Playgroup	11
Big Red Balloon	3
Bo-Peep Corner Pre-School	9
Cabbage Patch Day Nursery	7
Early Days Playgroup	1
Groomsport Playgroup	6
Little Bears Playgroup	9
Tiddliwinks Playgroup	7

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many children in North Down are yet to receive a Primary year one place.
(AQW 360/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has confirmed that as of 2 June 2016 there were four children in the North Down area who are yet to receive a Primary one place for September 2016 admission.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many and in which locations are Primary year one places still available in North Down.
(AQW 361/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has confirmed that Primary one places for September 2016 admission are currently available at the following schools:

Schools with Primary 1 places available at 2 June 2016	Number of places available
Clandeboye Primary School	8
Kilcooley Primary School	14
Hollywood Primary School	10
St Patrick's Primary School, Hollywood	8

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education whether he will allocate additional funding to school budgets that face an immediate reduction.
(AQW 367/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is my intention to give further consideration to the overall 2016-17 Education budget position before I make any funding decisions.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Hollywood Multi-Schools project.
(AQW 377/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Hollywood Multi-Schools Project is not currently within the Department's Major Capital Investment Programme of announced schemes.

Following the announcement on 23 March 2016 regarding the first tranche of projects to benefit from the government's Fresh Start Agreement funding package for shared and integrated education, a project for Priory Integrated College will be advanced in planning.

Projects for Hollywood Primary School and Hollywood Nursery School have not been successful in any previous announcements. The Education Authority has advised that the schools remain a strategic priority and would be submitted for consideration if there should be a future call for potential major capital projects.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed new build for Kingspark Primary School, Lurgan.
(AQW 381/16-21)

Mr Weir: Kingspark Primary School was one of 10 projects in the primary sector with an overall estimated capital investment of £40m announced to advance in planning on 15 March 2016.

This project is currently in the very early stages of planning. An engagement event outlining the process for delivery and timescales took place on 18 May 2016 with key representatives from all schools included in the announcement.

The first main stage of planning for any major capital works project is the development of a Feasibility Report. This is a high level technical assessment of the options available to deliver the project which will be used to feed into the development of a robust economic appraisal. Work is underway to develop procurement documentation to engage an Integrated Consultant Team for the project whose first task will be the completion of the Feasibility Study.

In parallel, to inform the Feasibility Study, a site search is currently being commissioned to identify all available, suitable sites in the catchment area, including the existing site.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to introduce a regulated transfer test.
(Aqw 383/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will be discussing this issue with a wide range of stakeholders and will want to consider very carefully how any changes might be taken forward.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Education what action his Department will take to encourage young people to explore career options in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
(Aqw 403/16-21)

Mr Weir: My Department's STEM intervention activity complements the curriculum and is aimed at promoting the excitement of STEM subjects and highlighting the good career opportunities available in the STEM sectors. My Department provides annual core funding to Sentinus, our frontline STEM delivery partner, which delivered interventions to approximately 44,000 primary and post-primary pupils in 2015/16. Some of these interventions specifically offer career insights into industry.

My Department has also been supportive of efforts to increase teachers' knowledge of the range of careers that a qualification in a STEM subject can access.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme; and whether he plans to amend the proposed age restrictions.
(Aqw 415/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will take time to consider the detail of the proposed Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme; however, I am mindful of the academic year and the importance of minimising disruption to the delivery of the curriculum to pupils.

As such, an Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme will not run before the next academic year.

Ms Seeley asked the Minister of Education to identify the research and findings to back up his claim that academic selection prevents a crude form of social selection.
(Aqw 434/16-21)

Mr Weir: The arguments for and against academic selection are well rehearsed. Academic selection which provides an opportunity for all is preferred over a fee-paying sector reserved for the wealthy elite.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the transformation of the special educational needs statement process to three stages.
(Aqw 452/16-21)

Mr Weir: A draft revised Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, which will issue in late autumn 2016 for public consultation, will set out the processes within the new SEN framework. In due course I look forward to hearing views on the draft Code.

The new SEN Framework comprises primary legislation, SEN Regulations and the Code of Practice.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education how many children with a statement of special educational needs are being taught in primary schools rather than schools with specialist provision.
(Aqw 490/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are 7,616 pupils of primary school age with a statement of special educational needs. 5,369 (70.5%) are educated in a mainstream primary school. 2,247 (29.5%) are registered with special schools.

Source: NI school census

Notes:

- 1 Figures include pupils at stage 5 on the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice as recorded by the school.
- 2 Primary school figures are based on pupils in years 1-7 attending primary schools. This may include pupils that are in learning support centres in primary schools for some or all of the time.
- 3 Special school figures refer to any pupils attending special schools aged between 4 and 10 on the 1st July 2015.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to reform the post-primary transfer test.

(AQW 511/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will be discussing this issue with a wide range of stakeholders and will want to consider very carefully how any changes might be taken forward.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 53221/11-16, whether the business case has been published.

(AQW 516/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that it is not their normal policy to publish business cases but they will make the business case available to anyone who requests it.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail the budget for (i) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; (ii) the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; (iii) Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta; and (iv) the Controlled Sector Support Council in (a) 2013-14; (b) 2014-15; (c) 2015-16; and (d) 2016-17.

(AQW 561/16-21)

Mr Weir: My Department provided budget allocations to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Council for Integrated Education and the Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta in the 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17 financial years, as detailed in the table below:

	Final 2013-14 Budget £m	Final 2014-15 Budget £m	Final 2015-16 Budget £m	Opening 2016-17 Budget £m
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	3.3	3.7	4.1	3.8
Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8

The Controlled Schools' Support Council is scheduled to come into operation on 1 September 2016 and has been allocated an indicative annual budget of £1million. The budget allocation for the period 1 September 2016 to 31 March 2017 remains to be finalised.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what role the Controlled Schools Support Council will have regarding the ethos of an Integrated Controlled school.

(AQW 563/16-21)

Mr Weir: In September 2014 the Executive agreed that one of the functions of the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) should be to work with schools within the sector to develop and maintain its collective ethos, including, where appropriate, a role in identifying, encouraging and monitoring governors and ensuring that ethos is part of employment considerations. This function applies to all Controlled schools.

It is a decision for the Board of Governors of controlled schools to decide if they wish to register with the CSSC.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education whether the Catholic Schools Trustee Service will have the same duties and functions as the NI Commission for Catholic Education.

(AQW 564/16-21)

Mr Weir: An application for funding from the Catholic Schools Trustee Service is still under consideration; therefore, duties and functions have not yet been confirmed.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 113/16-21, (i) when the second phase of the Education Authority review of its decision on full-time and part-time pre-school provision in special schools will commence and conclude; and (ii) when the Education Authority review of its decision on full-time and part-time pre-school provision in special schools will conclude.

(AQW 604/16-21)

Mr Weir: I have asked the Chair of the Education Authority to attend a meeting on 7 June to discuss, among other things, the Authority's review of its decision on pre-school provision in special schools, including timescales for completion.

Following that meeting, I will write to the Member to provide him with an update on the review's progress.

Department of Finance

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to ensure that the provisions of the Defamation Act 2013 are extended to this part of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 27/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): I am awaiting the report of Dr Andrew Scott and his recommendations will help to inform any decisions that I make with regard to the law in this jurisdiction.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance (i) what was the value of goods and services sold in 2015 by local manufacturing companies to Great Britain; (ii) what was the value of goods exported to countries outside the UK in 2015; and (iii) what value was exported to EU countries.

(AQW 33/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: HMRC Regional Trade Statistics do not include trade in goods or services from one part of the UK to another and therefore the information requested at part (i) is not available from this source. Local business surveys estimate that the value of goods and services sold in 2014 by NI manufacturing companies to Great Britain was £8.3 billion. 2015 data from this source will be available in December 2016.

- (ii) HMRC Regional Trade Statistics (RTS) indicate that the value of goods exported from Northern Ireland (i.e. goods sold to countries outside the UK) in 2015 was £6.3 billion.
- (iii) HMRC RTS figures also show that the value of goods exported from Northern Ireland to EU countries in 2015 was £3.5 billion.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to list the countries to which local business exported in 2015, broken down by (i) value; and (ii) percentage.

(AQW 34/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: The information requested is available from the HMRC Regional Trade Statistics and is presented in Table 1. Destination countries are presented within continent and EU classifications for ease of reference.

Table 1. Value of exports from Northern Ireland to all countries (2015)

EU Indicator	Continent	Country	Value of Exports (£m)	% of all sales
EU	European Community	Austria	15	0.2
		Belgium	90	1.4
		Bulgaria	7	0.1
		Croatia	2	0.0
		Cyprus	3	0.1
		Czech Republic	34	0.5
		Denmark	42	0.7
		Estonia	3	0.0
		Finland	27	0.4
		France	302	4.8
		Germany	334	5.3
		Greece	8	0.1
		Hungary	15	0.2
		Irish Republic	2,111	33.4
		Italy	59	0.9
		Latvia	6	0.1
		Lithuania	9	0.1
Luxembourg	1	0.0		
Malta	4	0.1		
Netherlands	124	2.0		

EU Indicator	Continent	Country	Value of Exports (£m)	% of all sales
		Poland	68	1.1
		Portugal	25	0.4
		Romania	20	0.3
		Slovakia	4	0.1
		Slovenia	2	0.0
		Spain	96	1.5
		Sweden	51	0.8
	Total		3,462	54.7

NON EU	Asia and Oceania			
		Australia	86	1.4
		China	91	1.4
		Hong Kong	37	0.6
		India	16	0.2
		Indonesia	3	0.0
		Japan	30	0.5
		New Zealand	16	0.3
		Other Asia and Oceania	107	1.7
		Pakistan	9	0.1
		Philippines	14	0.2
		Singapore	37	0.6
		South Korea	71	1.1
		Taiwan	7	0.1
		Thailand	95	1.5
	Total		619	9.8

	Eastern Europe	Other Eastern Europe	16	0.3
		Russia	31	0.5
		Ukraine	22	0.3
	Total		69	1.1

	Latin America and Caribbean	Argentina	6	0.1
		Barbados	1	0.0
		Brazil	18	0.3
		Chile	12	0.2
		Colombia	9	0.1
		Costa Rica	2	0.0
		Dominican Rep	2	0.0
		Ecuador	1	0.0
		Guyana	0	0.0
		Jamaica	4	0.1

EU Indicator	Continent	Country	Value of Exports (£m)	% of all sales
		Other Latin America and the Caribbean	12	0.2
		Panama	1	0.0
		Trinidad:Tobago	2	0.0
		Uruguay	1	0.0
		Venezuela	0	0.0
	Total		73	1.1

	Middle East and N Africa			
		Algeria	5	0.1
		Bahrain	2	0.0
		Egypt	18	0.3
		Iran	1	0.0
		Israel	17	0.3
		Jordan	6	0.1
		Kuwait	9	0.1
		Lebanon	12	0.2
		Libya	0	0.0
		Morocco	16	0.3
		Oman	14	0.2
		Other Middle East and North Africa	18	0.3
		Qatar	21	0.3
		Saudi Arabia	79	1.3
		South Sudan	0	0.0
		Syria	0	0.0
		Tunisia	2	0.0
		Uae	64	1.0
	Total		285	4.5

	North America			
		Canada	368	5.8
		Mexico	35	0.6
		Other North America	0	0.0
		United States	1,116	17.6
	Total		1,519	24.0

	Sub-Saharan Africa			
		Angola	11	0.2
		Botswana	1	0.0
		Cameroon	3	0.0
		Ethiopia	4	0.1
		Ghana	10	0.2
		Ivory Coast	17	0.3

EU Indicator	Continent	Country	Value of Exports (£m)	% of all sales
		Kenya	14	0.2
		Mauritius	1	0.0
		Namibia	1	0.0
		Nigeria	23	0.4
		Other Sub-Saharan Africa	54	0.9
		South Africa	33	0.5
		Tanzania	1	0.0
		Zimbabwe	1	0.0
	Total		172	2.7

	Western Europe exc EC	Iceland	5	0.1
		Norway	21	0.3
		Other Western Europe	2	0.0
		Switzerland	63	1.0
		Turkey	38	0.6
	Total		128	2.0
Non EU Total			2,865	45.3
Grand Total			6,327	100.0

Source: Regional Trade Statistics, HMRC

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to detail the (i) value; and (ii) percentage of goods imported in 2015 from (a) Great Britain; (b) the Republic of Ireland; c) other EU countries; and d) the rest of the world.
(AQW 35/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: HMRC Regional Trade Statistics do not include trade in goods from one part of the UK to another and therefore the information requested at part (a) is not available from this source.

HMRC Regional Trade Statistics indicate that the value of goods imported into Northern Ireland (i.e. goods purchased from outside the UK) were worth £6.1 billion in 2015, of which:

- b.) £1.7 billion (27.2%) came from the Republic of Ireland
- c.) £1.7 billion (27.9%) came from other EU countries
- d.) £2.7 billion (44.9%) came from the rest of the world.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency is currently developing a business survey based estimate which will include the value of goods and services purchased from Great Britain. This data will be available later this year.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what was the total of (i) EU agricultural funding; and (ii) EU Structural Funds receipts in 2015/16.

(AQW 36/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Totals are shown in the following table:

Fund	Receipts 2015/2016
Agricultural Funds Total	£266,565,000.001
Structural Funds Total	£55,154,612.25

1 This figure may be subject to change as the 2015-16 accounts are subject to ongoing audit. The accounts are due to be certified and laid in the Assembly at the beginning of July.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to ring-fence money for the Narrow Water Bridge project.
(AQW 41/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: As outlined in the 'Fresh Start' agreement, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government are undertaking a review of the project with a view to identifying options for its future development, for consideration by the North South Ministerial Council.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance whether Land and Property Services have the legal power to compel an owner to complete a new build domestic property within a set period of time in order for it to be liable for rates.

(AQW 127/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Land & Property Services (LPS) does not have powers to compel an owner to either complete a new build property or complete renovations within a set period of time. However, with the introduction of the rating of empty homes legislation with effect from 1 October 2011, a Completion Notice provision was introduced. The effect of a Completion Notice is to set the completion day at which the dwelling is deemed to be complete for the purposes of creating rateability, even if some work remains incomplete. A Completion Notice is only issued by LPS when it is assessed that the vacant building could be completed in 3 months or less. Whereas, a Completion Notice establishes the rateability of a property, the rate liability is then established after taking into account any relevant reliefs or exemptions.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance whether Land and Property Services has the legal power to compel an owner of an empty property with 100 percent rate relief to complete renovations within a set period of time in order for the property to be liable for rates.

(AQW 128/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Land & Property Services (LPS) does not have powers to compel an owner to either complete a new build property or complete renovations within a set period of time. However, with the introduction of the rating of empty homes legislation with effect from 1 October 2011, a Completion Notice provision was introduced. The effect of a Completion Notice is to set the completion day at which the dwelling is deemed to be complete for the purposes of creating rateability, even if some work remains incomplete. A Completion Notice is only issued by LPS when it is assessed that the vacant building could be completed in 3 months or less. Whereas, a Completion Notice establishes the rateability of a property, the rate liability is then established after taking into account any relevant reliefs or exemptions.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance how he intends to benchmark the delivery and efficiency of Departments against the other UK devolved administrations and similar sized local authorities in England.

(AQW 139/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Improving the efficiency of the public sector has never been more important. I am currently considering the initiatives to be taken forward under the next phase of reform.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to publish data on an annual basis regarding Departmental delivery and efficiency.

(AQW 140/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Improving the efficiency of the public sector has never been more important. I am currently considering the initiatives to be taken forward under the next phase of reform.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance whether he will provide the Committee for Finance with the relevant departmental documentation relating to the Project Eagle sale.

(AQW 175/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: My department shared all of the documentation it held relating to the Project Eagle sale with the previous Committee for Finance and Personnel during the last mandate. I am advised that some of those papers also contained information either not related to the NAMA sale, or of a personal or commercially sensitive nature. As such, the department redacted this information at that time as it was either not relevant to the Committee inquiry, or in order to comply with data protection obligations.

Subsequently departmental officials sought to engage with the individuals referred to in those documents to agree the release of this personal information as per legal advice in this regard. Where such agreement was reached, the Department provided the Committee with further unredacted versions of those documents in March 2016.

Transparency and public confidence is of the utmost importance to me as Minister of Finance. I can assure you that I will be reviewing all of this material, the level of redaction applied, to ascertain if further information can be released.

I can assure you I will be offering full support to all the Agencies investigating the Nama-Cerberus scandal and will continue to press the Irish government to set up a commission of investigation into the sale.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance how his Department will work with the new independent fiscal council.
(AQW 176/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I welcome the establishment of an independent fiscal council and my Department will work with the council to provide the necessary reassurances that our public finances are balanced and sustainable.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of Civil Service jobs, by Department, that are located in each constituency.

(AQW 209/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: The information requested is shown in the attached table. It is based on the latest available data as at 1 January 2016, since data following the restructuring of Departments from 9 May 2016 is not yet available.

Breakdown of NI Civil Service Staff by Department and Constituency of Work Location

Assembly Area	Department														Total
	DARD	DCAL	DE	DETI	DFP	DEL	DHSSPS	DOE	DRD	DSD	OFMDFM	DOJ	PPS	Other	
Belfast East	673	77	0	276	963	44	445	0	57	102	312	533	0	109	3,591
Belfast North	22	0	0	0	61	71	0	94	31	323	0	44	0	1	647
Belfast South	78	164	1	153	1,735	870	4	846	611	3,607	12	969	248	35	9,333
Belfast West	0	0	0	0	1	85	0	0	0	742	0	0	0	0	828
East Antrim	17	0	0	0	0	59	0	30	10	36	0	205	0	0	357
East Londonderry	188	0	0	0	0	78	0	273	135	105	0	349	0	1	1,129
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	326	10	0	0	0	79	0	55	124	122	0	20	0	0	736
Foyle	202	0	102	2	177	134	0	73	61	769	3	46	63	0	1,632
Lagan Valley	107	0	0	0	0	52	0	238	46	61	0	955	64	0	1,523
Mid Ulster	198	0	0	0	0	53	0	39	41	93	0	0	0	0	424
Newry & Armagh	209	0	0	5	0	117	0	24	89	183	10	27	40	0	704
North Antrim	106	22	0	6	64	80	0	34	176	119	0	29	33	0	669
North Down	0	0	495	0	157	26	0	5	7	32	0	131	0	0	853
South Antrim	271	0	0	0	0	39	0	36	79	81	0	13	0	0	519
South Down	98	10	0	0	0	40	0	62	153	55	0	13	0	0	431
Strangford	55	0	0	0	0	31	0	51	10	30	0	39	0	0	216
Upper Bann	100	9	0	0	85	112	0	44	153	135	0	39	0	0	677
West Tyrone	176	0	0	0	74	70	0	22	213	155	0	32	41	5	788
Outside NI	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	7
	2,827	292	598	442	3,317	2,040	449	1,926	1,996	6,750	343	3,444	489	151	25,064

Notes:

Data sourced from HRConnect and additional DOJ databases as at 1st January 2016.

Data quality is dependent on the data recorded onto HRConnect and the additional DOJ databases.

Includes NICS staff not on career break in the 12 ministerial Departments in place at 1 January 2016, staff in the Public Prosecution Service for NI, staff in the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland, the Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland, staff of The Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland/ The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry Team.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Finance to detail the community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that received funding from his Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 268/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: My Department did not provide funding to any community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone in the last five years.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the community and voluntary organisations in East Derry that received funding from his Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 337/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: My Department did not provide funding to any community and voluntary organisations in East Derry in the last five years.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Finance to outline any discussions he has had with HM Treasury since assuming office.

(AQW 438/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Since assuming office I have had an introductory telephone conversation with Greg Hands, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. I intend to engage more fully with Treasury Ministers on a range of matters in due course.

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance what is the current level of over-commitment within the 2016-17 Budget.

(AQW 502/16-21)

Mr Ó Muilleoir: As agreed through the last Budget process, the Executive start the 2016-17 year with no overcommitment. The Executive will soon consider the June Monitoring Round and I will report the outcome of this to the Assembly in due course.

Department of Health

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Health to outline her plans for the future of Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry; and whether she will return the range of services removed from Daisy Hill Hospital over the last ten years.

(AQW 37/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): Daisy Hill Hospital is a vital part of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) acute hospital network and will continue to deliver essential high quality hospital services now and in the future. There is ongoing discussion between the Southern Local Commissioning Group and the SHSCT about plans to enhance acute services at Daisy Hill Hospital. These plans include the delivery of critical care beds and enhancement of the medical rota. Final decisions on future services should take account of the output of the Expert Panel's report which will be available later this summer.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health (i) whether she has received the evidence from the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) requested by the former Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, outlining the level of risk associated with a permanent deferral, five-year deferral and a one-year deferral on gay and bisexual men donating blood in Northern Ireland; and, if so (ii) whether she plans to lift the ban on gay and bisexual men donating blood and move to a deferral period of twelve months.

(AQW 64/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) The Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) is currently conducting a review of all donor deferral criteria. This is due to be completed in 2017.
- (ii) On Thursday 2 June, having considered the evidence regarding patient safety, with the agreement of the Executive I decided to end the lifetime ban on blood donation by men who have had sex with men (MSM) and to put in place a twelve-month blood donation deferral for MSM. The new policy will come into effect on 1 September 2016. It is important to stress that blood donors comply with any deferral rules that apply to them.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health (i) whether Health and Social Care Trusts have a responsibility to accommodate mentally incapacitated remand prisoners; (ii) what facilities are available to accommodate potentially dangerous prisoners who are deemed unsuitable for prison; and (iii) whether Health and Social Care Trusts are responsible for accommodating such prisoners.

(AQW 75/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The accommodation of prisoners is the policy responsibility of the Department of Justice. Healthcare services across the NI Prison Service are commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and delivered by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

In the north of Ireland there are two regional forensic hospital facilities. The Shannon Centre at Knockbracken in Belfast which is a medium secure Mental Health Hospital and Muckamore Abbey Hospital (Belfast Trust) which has a low secure ward for people with a Learning Disability. As well as local forensic facilities it is possible for a prisoner, dependent on assessed needs and risk, to be placed in other local Psychiatric Intensive Care Units.

Persons requiring treatment in conditions of high security can be transferred to a high secure hospital (HSH) such as Carstairs HSH in Scotland (for males) or Rampton HSH in England (for females).

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what efforts are being made to help fund EXTERN to address the recent closure of FASA services, specifically in the Bangor area; and when services will commence.

(AQW 76/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department has recently agreed to accept a Neighbourhood Renewal application for funding from Extern. The application, which is currently being assessed, requests resource to support delivery of services aimed at addressing any shortfall in provision following the recent closure of FASA. Whilst there is a commitment by the Department to assess the application, funding will only be made available dependent on the outcome of the assessment process and availability of budget.

You have asked specifically about the provision of services in Bangor. It should be noted that the former Department for Social Development did not fund FASA for the direct provision of services in Bangor. It is understood that services delivered by FASA in Bangor were part of a service contract commissioned by the Public Health Agency.

At this time Extern are still in the process of developing a strategy to ensure continuation of services where needed, and it is understood that they plan to maintain a presence, where feasible, within the Bangor area.

Whilst the Neighbourhood Renewal funding assessment process is ongoing, I cannot confirm at this time that Neighbourhood Renewal funding will be directed at service provision in Bangor.

It is envisaged that the assessment process will be complete by end August 2016.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether she plans to reopen the Bangor GP ward.

(AQW 78/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Final decisions on the future provision of intermediate care in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area have not yet been taken. I hope to consider this issue in the light of the Expert Panel's report on the future model for HSC services.

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Health for an update on any discussions the Western Health and Social Care Trust or Apex Housing have had with her Department regarding the proposed closure of Bell Gray House in Newtownstewart.

(AQW 93/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department has had no discussions with Apex Housing Association about the proposed closure of Bell Gray Nursing Home. Apex Housing Association is an independent provider of nursing home care. Its decision to close Bell Gray was taken independently of the Department. The Department continues to liaise with the Western Health and Social Care Trust on this matter. A working group has been established to ensure the smooth transition of residents from their present home to a new home of their choice.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health how many patients with learning disabilities have received treatment in the Western Health and Social Care Trust over the last five years.

(AQW 105/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not held centrally by the Department and was therefore requested from the Western Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust. Their response can be found in the table below.

Table 1. Adult Learning Disability Services in the Western HSC Trust.

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Number of clients on Community Team Caseloads	1,156	1,082	1,087	1,085	1,174
Number of clients in Day Care/Day Opportunity Placements	924	917	928	975	1,177
Consultant Psychiatry - face to face attendance	1,008	980	996	988	784
Psychology - face to face attendance	384	449	448	245	819
Number of Admissions to Lakeview Hospital	40	30	28	30	33

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health what plans she has to increase and promote organ transplantation; and whether she will support and seek to introduce legislation, including a soft opt-out organ donation system.

(AQW 109/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: In relation to its responsibilities under Clause 15 of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, my Department has placed in the Assembly Library terms of reference for a clinical advisory group, whose role will be to develop a policy aimed at achieving an increase in the level of consent for organ donation. Work is underway to establish that group with appropriate representation from across the HSC. In light of the expert testimony given to the

Health Committee during the previous mandate in relation to a possible soft opt-out organ donation system, I do not intend to introduce legislation to that effect at this time.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether she plans to remove the ban on blood donations from gay men.
(AQW 114/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: On Thursday 2 June, having considered the evidence regarding patient safety, with the agreement of the Executive I decided to end the lifetime ban on blood donation by men who have had sex with men (MSM) and to put in place a twelve-month blood donation deferral for MSM.

The new policy will come into effect on 1 September 2016.

It is important to stress that blood donors comply with any deferral rules that apply to them.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether she will review the out-of-hours provision at Scroggy Road health centre, Limavady.

(AQW 117/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The GP Out of Hours (OOH) service in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area is provided by Western Urgent Care (WUC) across five bases - Altnagelvin, Enniskillen, Limavady, Omagh and Strabane. Like other out of hours providers, WUC faces challenges due to increasing demand and difficulty in filling shifts. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) monitors the performance of out of hours service providers on an ongoing basis and is aware of the difficulties being faced by WUC in filling shifts in Limavady.

The HSCB and WUC have taken a number of steps to increase GP capacity and fill OOH shifts within the Trust area, including actively seeking the support of GPs to work a number of sessions in their local OOHs centre, liaising with members of the Local Medical Committee to encourage GPs to work out of hours and recruiting more nursing staff to ensure that the pool of Nurse Advisors is sufficient to fill all telephone triage shifts. In May this year, 2 GP engagement events were held within the Trust area to encourage more GPs to work in OOH.

A Local Enhanced Service is in place in the Western area whereby GP principals provide additional clinical time (via booked appointments) for a 2½ hour period for five evenings during the week. This service has been put in place in the Altnagelvin base as WUC have identified this base as having the highest demand for GP OOH services. Supporting GPs in the Altnagelvin base to address current demands helps minimise the number of times that GPs in the other four centres in the Western area are moved from their respective centres.

In addition to core funding for OOH services, further funding will be available for WUC in 2016/17 to support extra clinical capacity where it is needed most, support additional bank holiday clinical capacity and develop skills mix.

My Department recently led a review of GP out of hours services across the north. The recommendations stemming from the out of hours review were incorporated into the report of the working group set up to review GP-led services, which is available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/review-gp-led-primary-care-services-northern-ireland-recommendations-working-group>. I will consider carefully the issues highlighted in the working group's report, together with the recommendations and actions, and will respond in due course.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health how much departmental funding is provided to Apex Housing to provide residential care for elderly residents in the various Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 131/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Health and Social Care Trusts provided funding in 2015/16 to Apex Housing Association for residential care for older people as set out in the table below:

Trust	Amount of funding
Belfast	NIL
Southern	NIL
South Eastern	£192,000
Northern	£1,083,755
Western	£1,332,697

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health to detail the provision in the Western Health and Social Care Trust to provide respite for adults with learning difficulties and the parents of adults with learning difficulties.

(AQW 132/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016, the Western HSC Trust provided a total of 112,134 hours of short breaks (formerly referred to as respite) to adults with learning disabilities.

A breakdown of this provision is detailed in the attached Annex.

Annex

Types of Short Breaks	Facility/Service	Beds/Places
Statutory Residential Respite	The Adult Respite Cottage, Londonderry	7 beds
	Beltany House, Omagh	3 beds
Independent Nursing Homes	Castlehill Nursing Home	1 Bed
	Private Residential homes within the WHSCT area	Vacant beds can be accessed for short breaks as and when available and within available funding.
Independent Residential Homes	Private Residential homes within the WHSCT area	Vacant beds can be accessed for short breaks as and when available and within available funding.
Short-term Adult Placement Service	Overnight and day hours are provided by Host Carers	There are currently 21 host carers providing this service within the Trust area.
Direct Payments	Recurring and one-off direct payments are made directly to parents/carers within available funding.	
Domiciliary Care	Night Sitting Service – 3 families are currently receiving this service.	

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health what actions her Department is taking (i) to ensure that people under the influence of psychoactive substances can have such substances seized and destroyed whilst in the care of a hospital or Health and Social Care Trust facility; (ii) to allow medical staff the right to search patients believed to be under the influence of psychoactive substances for evidence of the drug in their possession; (iii) to allow medical staff permission where necessary to restrain violent and abusive patients who are under the influence of psychoactive substances, and; (iv) to have people that assault staff whilst under the influence of psychoactive substances charged with criminal assault and any seized drugs or substances surrendered to police as supporting evidence of the misuse of legal highs.

(AQW 133/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) Each of the Health & Social Care Trusts has a policy of zero tolerance in respect of illegal drugs on premises and assaults on staff. Legal highs have now been made illegal in the north of Ireland. Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, those in charge of premises have a responsibility to inform the police if they believe that anyone is committing an offence. Written policies exist for the handling and management of illicit substances and they ensure a clear audit trail, for confiscated substances.
- (ii) Searches of patients or staff suspected of concealing illicit substances can take place where a written search policy exists. If no such policy is in place, the person in charge should consider calling the police. All actions are documented.
- (iii) Security staff, where available, are called to deal with, including restraining if necessary, anyone who assaults staff or other patients for any reason. Medical staff will act in the patient's interest to facilitate examination and maintain treatment and can use such measures as rapid tranquilisation.
- (iv) Any assault on a staff member is reported to the PSNI, as appropriate. It is a matter for the PSNI and the Crown Prosecution Service to determine further action.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health what consideration is being given to the introduction of a gender neutral human papilloma virus vaccination.

(AQW 134/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Vaccination policy here is informed by the work of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). JCVI is an independent expert advisory committee that advises the Health Ministers for England, Scotland, Wales and the North of Ireland. In formulating its advice and recommendations the Committee's aim is to ensure that the greatest benefit to public health is obtained from the most appropriate vaccination and immunisation strategies.

Vaccination against HPV was introduced in 2008 for girls aged 12/13 years of age with the aim of preventing cervical cancer. At that time JCVI did not recommend vaccinating boys against HPV.

JCVI is currently considering whether HPV vaccination should be extended to adolescent boys. I will consider any further JCVI recommendations in due course.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what plans she has to extend the seating availability and waiting room space at Daisy Hill Emergency Department.

(AQW 169/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: In recent years a total of £1.5 million has been spent on projects to refurbish and modernise Daisy Hill's Emergency Department which has resulted in doubling its size. There are however no further plans to extend seating and waiting room space in the Emergency Department.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what assurances she can give that services at Daisy Hill hospital will be restored and enhanced.

(AQW 171/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Daisy Hill Hospital is a vital part of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) acute hospital network and will continue to deliver essential high quality hospital services now and in the future. There is ongoing discussion between the Southern Local Commissioning Group and the SHSCT about plans to enhance acute services at Daisy Hill Hospital. These plans include the delivery of critical care beds and enhancement of the medical rota. Final decisions on future services should take account of the output of the Expert Panel's report which will be available later this summer.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health whether she plans to overturn the lifetime ban on the donation of blood by men who have sex with men.

(AQW 180/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: On Thursday 2 June, having considered the evidence regarding patient safety, with the agreement of the Executive I decided to end the lifetime ban on blood donation by men who have had sex with men (MSM) and to put in place a twelve-month blood donation deferral for MSM.

The new policy will come into effect on 1 September 2016.

It is important to stress that blood donors comply with any deferral rules that apply to them.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health (i) what steps have been taken by her Department to explore the possibility of the approval of Vimizin for people diagnosed with Morquio; and (ii) whether any discussions have taken place with the Department of Health in England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland in relation to this drug.

(AQW 183/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has formal links with the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) whereby Technology Appraisal guidance and Clinical Guidelines published by the Institute are locally reviewed for applicability and, where appropriate, endorsed for implementation in Health and Social Care (HSC).

Vimizim (elosulfase alpha) has been approved through the NICE highly specialised technology assessment programme. Guidance on its use in the NHS was published on 16 December 2015 and it is currently being considered for endorsement in north of Ireland.

I have been advised that there has been no discussions to date with other Health Departments in England, Scotland and Wales or the south of Ireland in relation to this drug.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health (i) whether an adult has to have a diagnosed mental or physical condition to avail of a social worker in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) what is the position in respect of a vulnerable adult who may not have either diagnosis but has issues of concern; and (iii) what other provision or support is available to people who do not fit the current criteria.

(AQW 190/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) Adults do not have to have a diagnosed mental or physical condition to avail of social work services. There are eligibility criteria to access social work services and an assessment of an individual's needs and circumstances will inform decisions about the best service, if any, to meet their needs.
- (ii) The individual can refer themselves or be referred by others to the Health and Social Care Trust if there are issues of concern. Action taken by the Trust will be informed by the nature of the concerns and, if relevant, by an assessment of need. If concerns are about an Adult Safeguarding issue, the Trust Adult Safeguarding services will respond.
- (iii) There is a range of support within the voluntary and community sectors that, depending on the nature of the issues or needs, the individual can be sign posted to if s/he does not meet the criteria for social work or other statutory services.

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health whether she will undertake a review of the decision by the Western Health and Social Care Trust to close Dromore Day Care Centre and Gortin Day Care Centre.

(AQW 205/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: No decision has been made on the future of these day care centres. I am currently awaiting advice from my officials on the Western Health and Social Care Trust's proposals for reform. I will make a decision once I have considered this advice.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health to outline the amount of funding allocated and spent on mental health provision during the 2015/16 financial year in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.
(AQW 218/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western HSC Trust had a budget of £39.6m in 2015/16 to cover direct costs for Adult, Children's and Elderly Mental Health.

Actual spend in 2015/16 was £40.4m.

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Health what capital investments are planned by her Department in South Antrim over the next five years; and what is the estimated value and location of each capital investment.
(AQW 272/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table lists capital investments which are currently ongoing in the South Antrim parliamentary constituency.

Project	Value
Antrim Area Hospital replacement MRI Scanner	£1.4m
Antrim Area Hospital 2nd MRI scanner	£2.9m
Antrim Area Hospital Decontamination	£1.3m
Antrim Area Hospital Adult Orthodontics	£1.9m

Future capital investment projects in the constituency will be considered by my Department and the Executive as part of Budget 2017 which will conclude in the autumn.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health (i) whether any bonuses were paid to directors of the NI Fire and Rescue Service in the last five years; (ii) if so, how much was paid in each instance; and (iii) what criteria was used to award the bonuses.
(AQW 299/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service have not made bonus payments to any of its directors in the last five years.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place to improve perinatal mental health provision.
(AQW 328/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Mental health is one of my key priorities and perinatal mental health is an extremely important element of this.

The Integrated Perinatal Mental Health Care Pathway, published in December 2012, provides regional guidance for all health care professionals who come into contact with pregnant women, to ensure that any mental health problems are identified early and women are directed to the appropriate mental health services.

The Health and Social Care Board has developed outline proposals for the future development of specialist perinatal mental health services, in line with NICE guideline CG192. These proposals include specialist community based services and a regional mother and baby unit. The estimated cost of developing these specialist services is £1.9 million. Future development of these services is subject to additional resources being secured. Funding requirements will be considered alongside a wide range of competing priorities, both during in-year monitoring, and in the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review.

RQIA will be carrying out a review of perinatal mental health services in 2016/17, and the recommendations from that review will help inform future development of this service.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to implementation of NICE Guideline CG18-0 Atrial Fibrillation Management to ensure better detection and management of AF.
(AQW 330/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: NICE Clinical Guideline CG180 was endorsed by DHSSPS on 7th August 2014.

Guidance for the implementation of NICE Clinical Guidelines is set out in circular HSC (SQSD) 3/13: NICE Clinical Guidelines – Process for Endorsement, Implementation, Monitoring and Assurance in Northern Ireland.

It is the role of the HSC Board to oversee and monitor implementation of Clinical Guidelines within the timescales set out in the circular.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether she will address the imbalance of ambulance response times between urban and rural areas and direct resources to areas with slow response times.

(AQW 339/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service HSC Trust (NIAS) provides a regional service and will despatch the nearest and most appropriate resource to respond to 999 calls. Providing a speedy ambulance response is more challenging in rural areas than urban areas due to the distances involved and the spread of calls over a wider area, and my Department has worked with NIAS over the years to improve ambulance response times in rural areas. Additional deployment points have been provided, along with Rapid Response Vehicles which can get potentially life-saving treatment to patients quickly until an A&E ambulance arrives; ambulances have also been equipped with information and dispatch systems, and state of the art vehicle location and satellite navigation systems.

The Health and Social Care Board and NIAS have been working to improve ambulance response times. The Board has allocated an additional £1.077 million recurrently to NIAS from 2016/17 to manage the increasing demand due to demographic growth. This funding is being applied to improve performance in the Northern, Southern and South Eastern Local Commissioning Group areas, and will deliver an additional 15,000 emergency response production hours across the three areas annually.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of attendances at each Emergency Department in each of the last three years, broken down by presenting illness or injury category.

(AQW 342/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Information on the reason for attendance at emergency care departments is not available.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health how many (a) hip and (b) knee replacement operations are listed as in excess of six months' waiting, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, including the longest waiting period for each operation listed by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 407/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (a) Information on the number of people waiting in excess of six months for hip replacement operations (including revisions), and the longest waiting period, at 31st March 2016, the most recent date for which official statistics is available, is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Patients waiting for hip replacement operations (including revisions) at 31st March 2016

HSC Trust	Patients waiting longer than 6 months	Maximum number of weeks waiting	Total waiting
Belfast	683	123.1	1,394
Northern1	-	-	-
South Eastern	*	28.4	7
Southern	72	74.2	234
Western	348	103.8	608

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

* Numbers less than 5 have been masked to protect patient confidentiality

1 The Northern HSC Trust is not commissioned to carry out hip replacement operations

- (b) Information on the number of people waiting in excess of six months for knee replacement operations (including revisions), and the longest waiting period, at 31st March 2016, the most recent date for which official statistics are available, is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Patients waiting for knee replacement operations (including revisions) at 31st March 2016

HSC Trust	Total waiting longer than 6 months	Maximum number of weeks waiting	Total waiting
Belfast	742	156.6	1,462
Northern1	-	-	-
South Eastern	*	59.9	*
Southern	75	76.2	221
Western	406	103.2	650

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

* Numbers less than 5 have been masked to protect patient confidentiality

1 The Northern HSC Trust is not commissioned to carry out knee replacement operations

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 49332/11-15, to detail (i) the monitoring undertaken; (ii) the number seen in primary care settings per Health and Social Care Trust in the year 2015; and (iii) the number seen in secondary care settings per Health and Social Care Trust in 2015.

(AQW 410/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Information on the numbers seen in primary and secondary care settings is not held centrally. The number of people presenting to statutory and non-statutory agencies for treatment for New Psychoactive Substance and Mephedrone/Methedrone misuse during 2015 are outlined in the table below.

Drug	Belfast	Northern	South-Eastern	Southern	Western
New Psychoactive Substances	27	9	10	8	68
Methedrone / Mephedrone	80	14	23	33	62

Source: Drug Misuse Database

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW53942/11-16, to detail (i) the decision reached; (ii) the implementation date; and (iii) any details of monitoring of the use of the services following any decision to close the facility in Gortin and Dromore, County Tyrone.

(AQW 412/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: No decision has been made on the future of these day care centres. I am currently awaiting advice from my officials on the Western Health and Social Care Trust's proposals for reform. I will make a decision once I have considered this advice.

Ms Seeley asked the Minister of Health how she plans to address gaps in mental health provision.

(AQW 432/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Bamford Review of Mental Health Services published a number of reports in the period 2005-07, which identified gaps in service provision to be addressed by changed methods of service delivery and by sustained real term increases in funding. This was underpinned by two Action Plans, covering the periods 2009-11, and 2012-15 (extended to 31 March 2016).

An evaluation of the most recent Action Plan is under way, and I expect to receive the evaluation report in the autumn. The report will outline how Executive Departments performed against the Action Plan, and assess if achievement of those actions has made life better for people with mental health issues. Importantly, it will also detail any gaps in mental health provision to inform the development of policy and services during this Assembly mandate, with a view to improving mental health, which has been included as an indicator in the draft Programme for Government framework, published for consultation on 27 May.

The ability to meet pressures and service developments will be subject to additional resources being secured. Funding requirements will be considered alongside a large number of competing priorities in the Health and Social Care system both during in-year monitoring, and in the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Health for an update on the construction of the new paediatric ward at Craigavon Area Hospital.

(AQW 435/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Construction has now commenced on the new building with completion and handover expected in June 2017. It is planned that the centre will be fully operational by Oct 2017 following commissioning.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health to outline her plans to improve health outcomes for those in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community.

(AQW 439/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The strategic framework for public health, Making Life Better, recognises that those in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities face specific challenges to their health and wellbeing.

I recently met with The Rainbow Project to discuss specific issues experienced by LGB&T people. I will be considering these issues, and will take every opportunity to ensure that Health and Social Care tackles inequality related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health to detail, in each of the last 12 months, (i) the number of patients transferred from the South West Acute Hospital to other hospitals; (ii) the reason they were transferred; and (iii) the clinical discipline for which they were transferred for treatment.

(AQW 446/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The latest available data on the number of patients transferred from the South West Acute Hospital to other hospitals, broken down by month of discharge and clinical discipline, are provided in the following table. Information on the reason for referral is not collected centrally.

Month of Discharge ^P	Medical	Surgical	Paediatric
April 2015	39	15	1
May 2015	38	8	3
June 2015	40	10	5
July 2015	37	9	6
August 2015	37	7	1
September 2015	29	16	1
October 2015	42	8	1
November 2015	45	8	2
December 2015	53	10	5
January 2016	45	8	2
February 2016	40	8	0
March 2016	34	7	4

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

^P 2015/16 data are provisional and subject to change

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the development of the Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System, whether it is (i) fully implemented by her Department; (ii) fully implemented by each Health and Social Care Trust; (iii) cross-departmental; and (iv) cross-border.

(AQW 451/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department established the Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System (DAMIS) in 2011 to gather information about new substances or trends that are causing harm. It should be noted the system does not record information at the individual level, but rather collates information on harm from a number of sources including substance misuse treatment services, the HSC, community and voluntary groups, social services, the criminal justice sector, etc. This information is then used to inform alcohol and drug workers, users, and the general public about substances causing particular risks or harms.

DAMIS is operated by the Public Health Agency (PHA) and is overseen by a steering group involving the Department of Justice, the PHA, the PSNI, Forensic Science NI, and is chaired by the Department of Health. Anyone can provide information to DAMIS via the email address: damis@hscni.net, and its use has been promoted across relevant Government Departments and all Health and Social Care Trusts.

DAMIS is also informed by, and feeds into, the Home Office and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs consideration of classifying substances under the Misuse of Drugs Act. In addition, DAMIS is used to feed into, and share information received from, the British Irish Council Misuse of Substances Workstream.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many patients are registered with Silverbirch medical practice in Bangor.

(AQW 461/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: There are 2,846 registered patients in Silverbirch Medical Practice, Bangor.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health how many community organisations that applied for funding directly from her Department for 2016-17 are awaiting confirmation of this funding; and when letters of offer or rejection will be issued.

(AQW 477/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has received a total of 66 applications for funding for the 2016/17 financial year. Out of this total, 13 letters of offer have been issued. A further 22 applications have been approved and those organisations will receive letters of offer within the next week.

The remaining 31 applications are still being assessed by the Department.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, in light of the news that eight separated children have previously gone missing from care, whether she will prioritise the implementation of Section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act. (AQW 530/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: To facilitate the establishment of the Independent Guardian Service under section 21(5) of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015,

I will seek to make the Regulations required as soon as possible, subject to scrutiny by the Health Committee.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of missed appointments at GP Surgeries in Upper Bann, in each month of the last three years.

(AQW 643/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: General Practitioners (GPs) are independently contracted to the Health and Social Care Board to provide Primary Medical Services to their patients. As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for the day to day management of their practice, including patient appointment arrangements, hence the issue of missed appointments is dealt with by practices on an individual basis. Information on the number or hours of missed appointments and the corresponding financial effect is not therefore collated centrally and is consequently not available.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health for an update on progress towards introducing independent guardians for separated children under Section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(AQW 650/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: To facilitate the establishment of the Independent Guardian Service under section 21(5) of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015,

I will seek to make the Regulations required as soon as possible, subject to scrutiny by the Health Committee.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the length of time children are waiting for autism assessments in East Derry.

(AQW 664/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Figures on autism waiting times are collected at Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust level and are therefore not available for East Derry.

Table 1 below details the number and waiting times for children waiting for an autism assessment in the Northern and Western HSC Trusts at 31 March 2016.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Length of Time (Weeks)							Total
	0-4	>4-8	> 8-13	>13-18	> 18-26	> 26-39	> 39	
Northern	127	82	64	49	119	153	55	649
Western	28	41	25	42	84	90	58	368

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to detail how many patients have requested support from GPs for appealing benefit decisions, in the last two years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 681/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: General Practitioners (GPs) are independently contracted to the Health and Social Care Board to provide Primary Medical Services to their patients. As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for the day to day management of their practice, including providing evidence for use by a patient in an appeal against their benefit decision. Therefore, the issue of providing support is dealt with by practices on an individual basis and information on the support provided to patients for use in benefit decision appeals is not collated centrally and consequently is not available.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health for an update on the additional £30m of funding to address waiting lists as announced by her predecessor on 6 March 2016.

(AQW 700/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: As I pointed out in my statement to the Assembly on the 6 June 2016, tackling excessive waiting times is high on my agenda for delivering improvements in our Health Service.

The additional £30m committed for 2016/17 by my predecessor is an important step in this process. This will support up to 25,000 additional assessments and some 12,000 additional treatments across a wide range of specialties including

orthopaedics, gastroenterology, neurology and ENT. Importantly it will see a £10m investment in diagnostic services, building capacity to support up to 50,000 additional tests to help meet increasing demands as well as supporting seven day services.

However on its own, this investment will not be enough. Waiting times are still far too long and it will take significant non recurrent and recurrent investment over a number of years to bring waiting lists back to an acceptable level while simultaneously increasing capacity to meet demand.

My Department will therefore be bidding for additional resources in June Monitoring. If we are successful with this bid then the Executive will be able to build on the progress made over the past few months in tackling waiting times by ensuring that the current demand for elective care is met at broadly the current capacity levels in the Health Service.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed pedestrian islands for the Ballycrochan Road, Bangor.

(AQW 22/16-21)

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure): I am pleased to advise that two pedestrian refuge islands have been identified for provision on Ballycrochan Road, Bangor in the programme of works for the Ards and North Down Council area for delivery during the current financial year.

The islands are to be provided on Ballycrochan Road, Bangor, close to Deansfield and Knightsbridge.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will ensure that all public footpaths in the North Down area are sprayed for weeds.

(AQW 25/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department is facing budgetary Resources pressures in 2016/17 which has created an immediate impact on the delivery of routine maintenance services, including weed control.

Currently my officials are engaged in discussions with external contractors to provide a chemical treatment programme for weeds which matches available funding. It should be noted at this time that it will not be possible to treat all footways and priority will be given to flagged footways, with high pedestrian movement.

Should the financial position improve following the outcome of subsequent monitoring rounds, I will of course, review this position.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to indicate his priorities for spending in South Down over the next five years.

(AQW 38/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am currently considering my priorities for the whole region, including South Down. As you will be aware a new budget process is due to commence in the summer and this will impact on my considerations.

However my priorities will be focused on supporting economic growth and developing social cohesion across the region, through the newly combined functions of strategic planning, water, rivers and flooding management, along with our roads and public transport network.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will prioritise the Narrow Water Bridge project and enter into cross-border talks on reinstating the project.

(AQW 40/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: A Fresh Start: the Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan commits that the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government will undertake a review of the Narrow Water Bridge project with a view to identifying options for its future development. This work is currently being taken forward by my officials and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) and a report on options will be presented to the North South Ministerial Council by June 2016.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he has any plans to review the Translink policy which allows dogs to travel on public transport.

(AQW 42/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: Translink continually reviews customer opinions and, more generally, how to ensure the customer's experience is a positive one.

Translink changed its Dog/Animal Policy in 2005 following customer consultation in the run-up to the introduction of new Class 3000 trains. At the time 66% of customers interviewed expressed a preference that dogs/animals should not be carried on trains (with the exception of assistance animals).

In 2013 Translink received a series of complaints and legal challenges to the dog/animal policy. Translink once again asked customers for their views on the carriage of dogs/animals. This time some 60% of customers surveyed were of the opinion that small dogs/animals should be permitted on public transport. In May 2014 Translink policy was changed to reflect the views of its customers.

To date the policy has been well received by the majority of customers. Translink is of the opinion that the current policy is fit for purpose, and since its introduction has had minimal challenges, hence it would not be its intention to review this policy presently.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the reasons for the delay in the adoption of the Old Manse Grove development on Taylorstown Hill, Grange, Randalstown.
(AQW 43/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The Old Manse Grove Development consists of seventeen dwellings, of which fifteen are constructed with fourteen occupied. The developer is Woodtown Developments Ltd. The development commenced circa 2010 with two houses still to be completed.

My Department's TransportNI will liaise with the developer seeking his intentions regarding completion of the streets. The situation will be kept under review and my officials will take action under the Private Streets Order if necessary should there be no indication of progress.

For your information I can confirm that road and sewer bonds are in place for this development which can be used to complete the street if necessary. The preference however is to work with the developer to have the roadworks completed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his plans to cut regularly the grass verges in North Down.
(AQW 79/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department's TransportNI is facing budgetary Resource pressures within 2016/17 financial period which has created an immediate impact on the delivery of routine maintenance services, including grass cutting.

With the available budget it is the intention of my Department's TransportNI to carry out one full cut of grass areas under its maintenance control, with additional cutting of sightlines carried out as required to ensure road safety is maintained.

Should the financial position improve following the outcome of subsequent monitoring rounds I will of course, review this position.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure how he will address the disrepair of roads in North Antrim.
(AQW 82/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: As the Member may be aware, that there are pressures on both capital and resource funding for TransportNI going into 2016-17. On the capital side, TransportNI continues to develop and plan road resurfacing, surface dressing and road improvement schemes. Within the Causeway Coast and Glens Council area some £3.6 million of this type of work is proposed during 2016/17. Similarly within the Mid and East Antrim Council area TransportNI proposes to carry out road works to a value of £2.9 million during 2016/17.

On the resource side budgetary constraints have had a significant impact on road maintenance service delivery in recent times, and in particular, defect repairs such as potholes. Current budgetary constraints mean that only the highest priority defects can be fixed across the entire road network, including unclassified rural roads and defects on medium / low traffic (high risk) footways. Repairs of lower priority defects will depend on additional funding being provided through in-year monitoring rounds.

My Department will continue to bid strongly for additional in-year funding for both capital and resource to ensure maintenance backlogs can be addressed.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure how he will ensure the maintenance of roads on Rathlin Island.
(AQW 83/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: As you are aware, the responsibility for the maintenance of the roads on Rathlin Island falls under the remit of my Department's TransportNI. The current Road Maintenance Standards for Safety dictate that these roads are inspected by my Department on a 6 monthly cyclic basis. The information collected from these inspections are analysed and used to manage the road maintenance requirements for the island, which includes various road maintenance activities such as pothole repairs and gully cleaning.

As access to the island is dictated by ferry availability and weather conditions, there are significant difficulties for TransportNI to adhere to the same maintenance standards as other, more accessible, roads on the mainland. Subsequently, there is an understanding with island representatives that routine maintenance will, generally, be undertaken on the island twice annually.

These maintenance visits are normally programmed for late Spring and September. These timings ensure my officials are able to use the more frequent summer sailing timetable, but avoid the busy summer season when tourist numbers are high and ferry availability may be restricted by passenger volumes.

I trust this provides you with reassurance that my Department is fully committed to ensuring the roads on Rathlin Island are maintained in the most effective manner given the difficulties involved in providing routine road maintenance to an Island.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the causes of road deaths in each of the last three years for which data is available.

(AQW 147/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The PSNI recorded road traffic fatalities by causation factor for 2013 – 2015 are as follows:

Principal Factor	2013	2014	2015	Total
Excessive speed having regard to conditions	11	14	14	39
Impaired by alcohol or drugs - driver/rider	10	16	8	34
Inattention or attention diverted	8	12	6	26
Wrong course/position	8	5	6	19
Emerging from minor road without care	4	2	4	10
Heedless of traffic crossing carriageway	1	5	4	10
Impaired by alcohol or drugs- pedestrian	2	3	5	10
Turning right without care	4	1	3	8
Overtaking on offside without care	0	4	4	8
Crossing or entering road junction without care	0	5	1	6
All other factors*	9	12	19	40
Total	57	79	74	210

* All other factors contains those causation factors which have total less than 5 over the 3 year period 2013 to 2015

According to PSNI data, the main causes of death and serious injury on our roads are consistently shown to be inattention or careless driving, speeding, drink or drug driving. My Department has a statutory duty to promote road safety and, within the context of the Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy, does this through a wide range of activities; with focus on the problem areas, such as drink driving, speeding, carelessness and inattention; and on groups over-represented in the casualty figures.

I am committed to continuing to work towards reducing deaths and serious injuries on our roads. I recognise the continuing challenges of preventing road deaths and serious injuries and as such my Department will continue to address the issues through various activities.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his future plans for Conlig Upper and Lower Reservoirs.
(AQW 149/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I have no future plans for Conlig Upper and Lower Reservoirs. This is an operational matter for Northern Ireland Water (NIW), which has an obligation to dispose of property that is no longer of use. The impounding reservoirs at Conlig have been identified as surplus to requirements.

NIW has informed me that the reservoirs were offered to the public sector in May 2014, and that an expression of interest received from North Down Borough Council at that time was later withdrawn in January 2015. NIW has further advised that it has no immediate plans to advertise the reservoir on the open market.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans he has to review the condition of road surfaces in South Down.
(AQW 170/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: As with the public road network in all constituencies, Transport NI keeps the condition of public roads within South Down under constant review. All public roads and footpaths are regularly inspected in accordance with my Department's Roads Maintenance Standards and as well as identifying and repairing priority defects, the inspection process feeds in to the identification and prioritisation of roads for resurfacing.

Unfortunately, there is not sufficient funding to resurface all the roads that require resurfacing. However, Transport NI's review process ensures that any available finance is targeted at roads in greatest need.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure how he will ensure the development of greenways in North Antrim over the next five years.

(AQW 177/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department is currently developing a strategic plan for greenways which I intend to publish later this year. This plan will provide a framework to assist local councils in the development of their own greenway schemes. I am also

continuing with the delivery of the competitive small grants programme for greenways which can provide councils with access to funding to help them draw up feasibility studies and scheme designs.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when work will begin to improve safety at the Bailie Terrace and A48 Newtownards Road junction.

(AQW 195/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department has identified a possible scheme to improve safety at this junction. The proposed scheme involves the provision of a section of footway along the A48 Newtownards Road at the junction of Bailie Terrace. This scheme is on the current Minor Improvement programme for the Ards and North Down Area.

At this time, due to a reduced budget for minor improvements to the Network, there are no plans to deliver this works in the Ards and North Down area in the current financial year. However, should additional money become available, my Transport NI engineering staff would hope to progress the work, subject to the successful acquisition of the necessary lands from a number of individual landowners.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will ensure that broken street lights are repaired in Bloomfield estate, Bangor.

(AQW 199/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Street Lighting Section in Bangor has repaired 11 defective street lights reported by your office in the Bloomfield estate area since mid March 2016. A further five defective lights in this area have been reported to the Bangor Street Lighting Street Office and these are due for repair within the next seven days.

These are currently all the defective lights which have been reported for this area.

It should be noted that since April 2015, TransportNI's Street Lighting Section only repairs defective lights which have been reported by the public or their representatives.

Mr Smith asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail to progress to date on the A24 Ballynahinch Bypass; and to outline the proposed plans and timetable for completion of the project.

(AQW 251/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: A significant amount of work has been completed on the A24 Ballynahinch Bypass, to progress the scheme through the Preliminary Options, Preferred Option and Proposed Option scheme assessments. This work enabled publication of the Environmental Statement, draft Direction and draft Vesting Orders in March 2015.

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) received a number of objections during the statutory consultation period for the draft Orders and it was determined appropriate to convene a Public Inquiry to examine the case for and against the Proposed Scheme. The Inquiry was held on 26th and 27th January 2016.

The Inspector's Report of the Inquiry was received in March 2016 and my Department's TransportNI project development team are currently considering the recommendations contained and will in due course prepare a report for my consideration.

Subject to a satisfactory outcome, my Department will publish the Environmental Statement Notice of Intention to Proceed with the scheme and make the Direction Order. I expect the making of the Vesting Order for the scheme will be delayed to align with the construction programme for the bypass.

I cannot be specific on the timescale for completion of the project as construction remains subject to the approval of the business case, clearing the statutory procedures, and funding being made available to my Department.

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how he will ensure the development of greenways in South Antrim over the next five years.

(AQW 273/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department is currently developing a strategic plan for greenways which I intend to publish later this year. This plan will provide a framework to assist local councils in the development of their own greenway schemes. I am also continuing with the delivery of the competitive small grants programme for greenways which can provide councils with access to funding to help them draw up feasibility studies and scheme designs.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how he plans to will address the growing number of potholes and general disrepair of roads in East Antrim.

(AQW 277/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: As the Member may be aware, that there are pressures on both capital and resource funding for TransportNI going into 2016-17. On the capital side, TransportNI continues to develop and plan road resurfacing, surface dressing and road improvement schemes. Within the Mid and East Antrim Council area TransportNI proposes to carry out road works to a value of £2.9 million during 2016/17.

On the resource side budgetary constraints have had a significant impact on road maintenance service delivery in recent times, and in particular, defect repairs such as potholes. Current budgetary constraints mean that only the highest priority defects can be fixed across the entire road network, including unclassified rural roads and defects on medium / low traffic (high risk) footways. Repairs of lower priority defects will depend on additional funding being provided through in-year monitoring rounds.

My Department will continue to bid strongly for additional in-year funding for both capital and resource to ensure maintenance backlogs can be addressed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why his Department has not replied to a series of emails, beginning in 2015, on required street light repairs in Bangor.
(AQW 287/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Street Lighting Sections have been dealing with a large backlog of street lighting defects which have built up since April 2015 and this has adversely affected response times for repairing these defects.

Because of the numbers of defective lights involved, my Bangor Street Lighting staff have been regularly responding to your emails on a batch basis so that your office was informed when lights were repaired. I can advise that repair times are now returning to a more normal level.

I will instruct my Street Lighting staff in Southern Division to contact your office to establish a more consistent form of reporting and feedback so that you are informed of the outcome of reports coming from his office.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans Transport NI has to progress a roundabout at the junction of Market Street and Ballydugan Retail Park, Downpatrick; and what are the associated timescales for such a project.
(AQW 292/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: Ballydugan Retail Park is a private development with its own access onto the public road network at Market Street. TransportNI has no plans to undertake improvements to this private access at public expense.

Any improvements to facilitate the private access from the retail park onto Market Street at this location would be required to be undertaken by others.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the number of overgrown grass areas in urban and rural areas, whether he will reinstate the use of external contractors for grass cutting in Upper Bann.
(AQW 470/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department is facing budgetary constraints which have had a significant impact on road maintenance services in recent times and grass cutting is one of the functions where budget cuts have had to be made.

Within the available budget, it is intended to carry out one full cut of grass across all areas with visibility splays receiving additional cuts as required to ensure road safety is maintained.

I am pleased to report that grass cutting in the Upper Bann area is underway and it is anticipated that the full cut will be completed by the end of July 2016. This work will be completed by TransportNI Operations & Maintenance staff and the use of external grass cutting contractors is not considered necessary to complete this scheduled cut. I can inform you that I will be bidding for additional funding in future monitoring rounds and if I am successful I will review the position regarding the use of external contractors in this area.

Department of Justice

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to outline the process in place for serving fine default summonses, following the reversal of the decision of Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service (NICTS) for this service to be carried out by court clerks; and why this decision was taken by NICTS.
(AQW 28/16-21)

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): G4S staff are participating in a pilot exercise which involves them issuing fine default notices on defendants under the direction of the court. This pilot was launched following separate discussion with G4S management, NIPSA and the judiciary. The decision was taken in the context of concerns in relation to the deployment of NICTS staff to undertake this task.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether G4S courtroom staff are trained in control or restraint techniques in courtrooms; (ii) whether control and restraint are part of their courtroom duties; and (iii) to outline procedure for G4S staff relating to restraint and control in courtrooms.
(AQW 30/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I can confirm that all G4S Secure Solutions (UK) Ltd (G4S) staff deployed as Court Security Officers (CSOs) are trained in Control and Restraint (C&R) techniques.

A CSO, if required, can use C&R techniques to ensure that court business is carried out without interruption or delay or to secure their own or any other person's safety. This obligation excludes defendants who are in the custody of the PSNI or the Northern Ireland Prison Service. CSOs should attempt, where possible, to diffuse an emerging situation and should only use C&R techniques as a last resort.

CSOs are trained to risk assess situations and to make a judgement in terms of the most appropriate action to take.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to outline the terms of reference for the Serious Case Review of Liam Lavery. (AQW 31/16-21)

Ms Sugden: A Serious Further Offence Review was commissioned in this case. The purpose of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Notification and Review Procedures for Serious Further Offences is to review practice in cases where offenders under their supervision have been charged with a serious violent or sexual offence so that, where necessary, lessons can be learned and recommendations (if any) made for future practice.

The Review has considered all the aspects of the risk management of Mr Lavery and concluded that he was managed in accordance with the Probation Board's Best Practice Standards. There were no recommendations for changes to current policy or practice made as a consequence of the review. In light of the ongoing police investigation into alleged further offences it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the specifics of this case.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the framework for local mandatory sentencing for murder, compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 45/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by the periodic, but consistent, concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which the current sentencing guidelines mechanism meets the objectives of enhanced consistency, transparency and confidence in sentencing, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework, including the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQO 2988/11-16, what progress has been made on updating sentencing guidelines for murder cases. (AQW 46/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by the periodic, but consistent, concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which the current sentencing guidelines mechanism meets the objectives of enhanced consistency, transparency and confidence in sentencing, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework, including the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Ms Palmer asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been jailed for offences relating to animal cruelty in each of the last five years. (AQW 49/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Animal cruelty offences span a number of statutes. During the period in question, offences were prosecuted under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, repealed under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

The table below gives the number of persons imprisoned following a conviction for animal cruelty for the calendar years 2010 to 2014, the latest year for which data are available.

Persons receiving a custodial sentence following a conviction for animal welfare offences, 2010 - 2014

Year	Persons given custodial disposal
2010	4
2011	3
2012	3

Year	Persons given custodial disposal
2013	2
2014	10

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to initial court disposals only. Results of cases brought to appeal are not included.
- 2 Figures relate to persons convicted of any one of the offences in question, whether or not they were the primary offence at conviction.

Ms Palmer asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been jailed for offences relating to dog-fighting in each of the last five years.

(AQW 50/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Offences relating to dog fighting are prosecuted under sections 8(1), 8(2) or 8(3) of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Prosecutions under this Act relate to animal fighting in general and do not specify the nature of the animal involved.

My response to AQW/49/16-21 provides further detail on the number of persons given custodial disposals for animal welfare offences. The figures include those convicted of offences relating to animal fighting.

Ms Palmer asked the Minister of Justice how she plans to ensure that meaningful sentences are imposed on people convicted of offences relating to dog-fighting.

(AQW 51/16-21)

Ms Sugden: A joint Review into the Implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, undertaken by the former Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and my Department, published its final report in February 2016. The report made sixty-eight recommendations aimed at strengthening animal welfare across a wide range of issues. A number of significant steps have since been taken to strengthen animal welfare.

Legislation brought forward by my Department, the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which recently received Royal Assent, increases the maximum penalties for animal welfare crime.

In consultation with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, which has policy responsibility for animal welfare, I hope to bring the relevant provisions into operation over the summer.

In addition to increasing the maximum penalties available, my Department has also recently provided additional powers to the Director of Public Prosecutions which will allow him to refer animal cruelty cases to the Court of Appeal if he deems that the sentence handed down in certain Crown Court cases is unduly lenient.

These measures strengthen the legal framework regarding animal welfare. Sentencing in individual criminal cases is a matter for the independent judiciary.

Ms Palmer asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to reduce animal cruelty and ensure that meaningful sentences are imposed on people convicted of such offences.

(AQW 52/16-21)

Ms Sugden: A joint Review into the Implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, undertaken by the former Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and my Department, published its final report in February 2016. The report made sixty-eight recommendations aimed at strengthening animal welfare across a wide range of issues. A number of significant steps have since been taken to strengthen animal welfare.

Legislation brought forward by my Department, the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which recently received Royal Assent, increases the maximum penalties for animal welfare crime.

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In addition to increasing the maximum penalties available, my Department has also recently provided additional powers to the Director of Public Prosecutions which will allow him to refer animal cruelty cases to the Court of Appeal if he deems that the sentence handed down in certain Crown Court cases is unduly lenient.

These measures strengthen the legal framework regarding animal welfare. Sentencing in individual criminal cases is a matter for the independent judiciary.

Mr Smith asked the Minister of Justice what steps she is taking to protect communities from paramilitary groups.

(AQW 53/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I am committed to actively supporting the PSNI and others in their efforts to tackle the criminality and violence perpetrated by paramilitary groups within communities.

But this issue demands more than just a policing response. The Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015 requires all politicians to recommit to working collectively to achieve a society free from paramilitaries; section A of the Agreement sets out a number of Executive commitments aimed at ending paramilitarism.

The independent Three Person Panel appointed by the Executive to produce recommendations on a strategy for disbanding paramilitary groups submitted its report on 27 May.

We will now need to give due consideration to how to progress these recommendations, with a view to producing an Executive Action Plan setting out the steps we will take to tackle the impact of paramilitarism on communities. This will include actions to be progressed by my Department.

Mr Smith asked the Minister of Justice how many attacks have taken place on prison staff at each prison, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 56/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The information on the number of attacks on prison staff at each establishment can be found in the table below:

Year	Maghaberry	Magilligan	Hydebank Wood College
2011/12	33	3	17
2012/13	44	4	13
2013/14	64	5	20
2014/15	85	7	37
2015/16	72	6	42
Totals	298	25	129

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to ensure that sentences act as both a deterrent and as a punishment.

(AQW 65/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the legislative framework including: sentencing for crimes against older and vulnerable people, for hate crime and for attacks on certain frontline public service staff; the maximum penalty available for those offences which may result in death; the underlying policy and scope of the unduly lenient sentence provisions; and the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

The Review may also assess the use of community sentences, for lower level offences, in more effectively addressing the factors which lead to reoffending.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Justice how she plans to build public confidence in sentencing in the criminal justice system.

(AQW 66/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the legislative framework including: sentencing for crimes against older and vulnerable people, for hate crime and for attacks on certain frontline public service staff; the maximum penalty available for those offences which may result in death; the underlying policy and scope of the unduly lenient sentence provisions; and the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

The Review may also assess the use of community sentences, for lower level offences, in more effectively addressing the factors which lead to reoffending.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether she will order a serious case review into the monitoring of Stephen Eugene McCourt.

(AQW 71/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The offences for which Mr McCourt was convicted in April 2016 were committed when he was no longer subject to any statutory supervision requirements and does not therefore meet the threshold for a Serious Case Review of his risk management by statutory agencies.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 52257/11-16, on what date the staff deployment agreement was last reviewed or amended; and to place a copy of the agreement in the Assembly library.
(AQW 72/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Staff Deployment Agreement (SDA) was agreed with Trade Unions in July 2012. No amendments have been made. Arrangements have been made to place a copy of the SDA in the Assembly Library.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what discussions the Court Service had with G4S staff on serving Fine Default Summonses at courts; and what were the outcomes of these discussions.
(AQW 73/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) discussed serving Fine Default Summonses at court with senior G4S Secure Solutions (UK) Ltd (G4S) staff and the G4S Contract Management Team who agreed to participate in a pilot exercise to issue fine default notices (FDNs).

Following consultation with the judiciary a pilot exercise commenced in Court 10 in Laganside Courts. Procedural instructions and a risk matrix were developed jointly by NICTS staff and the G4S Contract Management Team.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice to what extent her Department has reviewed maximum sentencing guidelines over the last five years.
(AQW 95/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework including the appropriateness of the maximum penalty available for those offences which may result in death.

Other areas under consideration include: sentencing for crimes against older and vulnerable people, for hate crime and for attacks on certain frontline public service staff; the underlying policy and scope of the unduly lenient sentence provisions; and the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

The Review may also assess the use of community sentences, for lower level offences, in more effectively addressing the factors which lead to reoffending.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department has any plans to review maximum sentencing guidelines.
(AQW 96/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework including the appropriateness of the maximum penalty available for those offences which may result in death.

Other areas under consideration include: sentencing for crimes against older and vulnerable people, for hate crime and for attacks on certain frontline public service staff; the underlying policy and scope of the unduly lenient sentence provisions; and the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

The Review may also assess the use of community sentences, for lower level offences, in more effectively addressing the factors which lead to reoffending.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the maximum sentence guidelines for section 14 of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.
(AQW 97/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework including the appropriateness of the maximum penalty available for those offences which may result in death.

Other areas under consideration include: sentencing for crimes against older and vulnerable people, for hate crime and for attacks on certain frontline public service staff; the underlying policy and scope of the unduly lenient sentence provisions; and the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

The Review may also assess the use of community sentences, for lower level offences, in more effectively addressing the factors which lead to reoffending.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice whether she will review the decision to close Limavady courthouse.
(AQW 116/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The decision to close Limavady court hearing centre was taken by my predecessor following public consultation in 2012 and ratified by him in February 2016.

My predecessor's decision to rationalise the court estate is now the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court in Belfast. Consequently it is not my intention to proceed with court closures pending the outcome of those proceedings. As the rationalisation of the court estate is now the subject of legal proceedings it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice how many people convicted of a serious sexual offence are being housed in hostel accommodation or similar settings, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 120/16-21)

Ms Sugden: As of 31 May 2016 the breakdown by constituency of those individuals convicted of a sexual offences and resident in approved premises are as follows:

South Belfast:	19
North Belfast:	19
Upper Bann:	less than 5
Foyle:	less than 5

The Department is unable to provide the exact figures for each constituency in all cases due to the small numbers involved and the need to minimise the risk of identification of the individuals concerned.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice how her Department intends to ensure the full implementation of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.
(AQW 121/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Psychoactive Substances Act came into force on 26 May 2016 and applies across the United Kingdom. The Act makes it an offence to produce, supply or offer to supply any psychoactive substances if the substance is likely to be used for its psychoactive effects and regardless of its potential for harm.

The legislation is intended to act against shops, known as "head shops" and websites supplying "legal highs". The Member will wish to note that through effective partnership working between PSNI and a number of councils, most notably Belfast City Council, all the "head shops" in Northern Ireland have been closed down.

The PSNI were also engaged with local councils in their use of the General Product Safety Regulations 2005 to remove these harmful substances from sale and reduce their availability.

My Department has been working over recent months with organisations across the criminal justice system to ensure readiness for commencement of the legislation. For example, my officials worked with Department of Health and Public Health Agency officials, as well as the PSNI, to develop a pack of material about the new legislation, what it will mean for those who sell the substances, as well as on the harms caused by psychoactive substances. This was distributed across the justice system, including to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships. This co-operation will continue as the legislation is implemented.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister of Justice what steps she will be take in conjunction with the PSNI, the National Crime Agency and HM Revenue and Customs to address the threat posed by organised cross border crime gangs.
(AQW 137/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Law enforcement agencies in Northern Ireland have always worked together, and with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, to tackle the threat posed by organised crime groups. The Organised Crime Task Force, which I chair, provides a forum for the development of priorities and strategies, in addition to resources such as a dedicated analyst to identify key and emerging trends and threats.

A recent and welcome addition to the fight against cross-jurisdictional crime is the new Joint Agency Taskforce which was established following the Fresh Start Agreement. This is jointly chaired by the PSNI and An Garda Síochána and has an operational focus. It has already set key priority areas for action and undertaken a number of operations.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to rebuild Magilligan prison; and when she expects such works to be completed.

(AQW 138/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I am committed to providing a redeveloped prison at Magilligan to enable the Northern Ireland Prison Service to deliver essential programmes to address re-offending behaviour; to meet Disability Discrimination Act standards; and to replace the existing infrastructure, which has outlived its useful life and is expensive and inefficient to staff, maintain and operate.

An outline business case for the Redevelopment of Magilligan Prison was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel in January 2015.

However, project delivery is dependent on the provision of capital funding by the Department of Finance.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to ensure that meaningful sentences are imposed on people convicted of offences against older people.

(AQW 142/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

I know that sentencing for crimes against older and vulnerable people is an area of particular concern, and the Review will look at the appropriateness and effectiveness of the sentencing framework for this particular category of crime.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Justice how she plans to reduce the threat posed to children and young people when they are online.

(AQW 143/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The safety of children and young people when using the internet and electronic technology (e safety) is a major societal concern. The previous Executive recognised the safety of children and young people online as a concern and funded the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) to develop an E-Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland and an accompanying Action Plan. Officials within my Department are represented on the E-Safety Project Board and the draft E-Safety Strategy will be disseminated for public consultation later this year.

My Department, in conjunction with the Policing Board, funds eleven Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSP) across Northern Ireland. PCSP's continue to play a pivotal role in educating our children and young people how to stay safe online, examples of which include:

- Causeway Coast and Glens PCSP – is funding a RADAR programme for all primary schools across the borough which includes e-safety. If full uptake is achieved, this will see approximately 1,700 pupils participate in this training.
- Lisburn & Castlereagh PCSP – in partnership with the PSNI, Lisburn YMCA and a local drama group delivered intergenerational internet safety plays to five post primary schools (years eight, nine and 10) in October 2015. The plays were themed around the dangers of making friends online, grooming and sexting. A total of 1200 pupils attended these events. Each play was also followed by a discussion panel of representatives from the PSNI / Lisburn YMCA and NSPCC.
- Derry and Strabane PCSP – has agreed a budget of £10,000 in its 2016/17 Action Plan to deliver an awareness and education campaign on internet safety, including sexual exploitation, across the council area to schools and youth groups. In 2015/16 this partnership also commissioned 'Spanner in the Works' drama group to deliver 8 performances of the 'Control, Alt, Delete' play highlighting the dangers of the internet. The performances were aimed at young people aged over fourteen. The Derry and Strabane PCSP also supported Shantallow Community Resident's Association to deliver the YES (Youth Educated in Safety) Programme to primary school pupils across the Council area. The events were attended by over 1,000 primary school pupils aged between eight and eleven and included a session on the safe use of the internet.
- North Belfast PCSP – in the 2015/16 financial year, North Belfast PCSP funded Beam Creative Network to deliver an e-safety project (drama and workshops) in two primary schools in North Belfast. It is anticipated that this will be repeated in this financial year.
- Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon PCSP – The 2016/2017 Action Plan reflects internet safety as an ongoing priority. Actions for the 16/17 year include delivering internet safety talks to school pupils a part of the PCSP's Schools Engagement programme and delivering the 'BeeSafe Programme' to primary schools - this features a range of safety awareness workshops delivered by a range of facilitators to P6/7 pupils across the ABC area. 'Keeping Safe Online' booklets will also continue to be disseminated to parents, young people, schools and groups.

- Antrim and Newtownabbey PCSP – is implementing an E-Safety programme as part of its 2016/17 Action Plan.
- Mid and East Antrim PCSP – has delivered 'Ballymena Bee Safe' which raised awareness among young people on a range of issues, including safe use of the internet. Over 400 pupils attended an intense half day information sessions over a three day period in January 2016. The 'Chat Share Think' project also provides internet and social media safety education for post primary school students and parents in Larne. Over 500 participants have been involved in the workshops. The 'Carrickfergus Abuse Protection Programme' provided specialised child protection training to statutory, voluntary and community groups on a range of issues which includes using social media safely and raising awareness of the consequences of social media misuse. Thirty four presentations to P6 and P7 school-age children and six youth

I very much welcome the development of an E-Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will greatly assist in preventing serious crime and protecting young people from harm and exploitation. Moreover, I envisage that a cross-governmental strategic approach together with ongoing delivery of interventions at local level through PCSP's will ensure our children and young people are appropriately educated and equipped to navigate the online world as safely as possible.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total number of employees at HMP Magilligan.
(AQW 158/16-21)

Ms Sugden: There are currently 319 Discipline and Civilian staff directly employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service who work at Magilligan Prison.

There are 217 staff who reside within the Causeway Coast and Glens Council area.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total number of employees at HMP Magilligan that reside in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area.
(AQW 159/16-21)

Ms Sugden: There are currently 319 Discipline and Civilian staff directly employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service who work at Magilligan Prison.

There are 217 staff who reside within the Causeway Coast and Glens Council area.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice whether there has been an increase in transfers from HMP Maghaberry to HMP Magilligan over the last three years; and to outline the reasons for these transfers.
(AQW 160/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The number of prisoners transferred from Maghaberry to Magilligan over the last three years were as follows:-

- 2013 – 648
- 2014 – 710
- 2015 – 633

The number of transfers is determined by the number of available cells at Magilligan. Magilligan does not hold prisoners who are Category A (High risk) as it is a low to medium category prison.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the capability of HMP Magilligan to manage health related prisoner transfers.
(AQW 161/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Transfers from Maghaberry to Magilligan Prison do not include prisoners with significant mental health issues.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for healthcare provision in prison establishments.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service and the South Eastern Trust are committed to providing effective services to vulnerable prisoners.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice whether prisoner transfers from HMP Maghaberry to HMP Magilligan include prisoners with significant mental health issues.
(AQW 162/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Transfers from Maghaberry to Magilligan Prison do not include prisoners with significant mental health issues.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for healthcare provision in prison establishments.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service and the South Eastern Trust are committed to providing effective services to vulnerable prisoners.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice whether she will review the decision to close Ballymena Court House.
(AQW 181/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The decision to close Ballymena courthouse was taken by my predecessor following public consultation in 2015.

My predecessor's decision to rationalise the court estate is now the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court in Belfast. Consequently it is not my intention to proceed with court closures pending the outcome of those proceedings. As the rationalisation of the court estate is now the subject of legal proceedings it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice when the decision was taken to provide a separate entrance for staff and official visitors at HMP Maghaberry.

(AQW 191/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Both staff and official visitors enter the prison through the same gate.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the legal aid costs, including law firm and counsel, in the case of Barbora Batykova in 2010 in the Fermanagh and Tyrone Court Division, from outset to conclusion of the case, broken down by (i) magistrates; and (ii) crown court.

(AQW 192/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Legal Aid was granted to the defendant for representation by Solicitor in the Magistrates' Court proceedings under ICOS number 10/062047.

To date the Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland has not received a claim from the Solicitor firm.

Estimated costs of this case (including VAT) are provided in the table below:

Solicitor Committal Fee	£ 820.00
Travel and mileage	£ 118.20
VAT	£ 187.64
Total	£1,125.84

Legal Aid was granted to the defendant for representation by Solicitor and Junior Counsel in the Crown Court under ICOS number 10/111192.

The total fees paid (including VAT) in relation to the Crown Court proceedings are;

Solicitor	£2,808.17
Junior Counsel	£3,575.00
Total	£6,383.17

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) to outline the procedure in place for prisoners sending letters or making phone calls to external parties; (ii) whether letters and telephone calls are monitored; (iii) what restrictions are in place to prevent prisoners making calls or writing to persons whom they are forbidden from contacting; (iv) whether the same policies or procedures apply to all prison facilities; and (v) to outline the any differences in procedures between facilities.

(AQW 194/16-21)

Ms Sugden:

- (i) Prisoners may call friends, family and others by using the PinPhone system. All numbers are prelisted and checked before calls are authorised. Mail may be sent to any person so long as no concerns are raised.
- (ii) All telephone calls are recorded and are subject to monitoring. All letters are opened and searched and are also subject to monitoring and censoring.
- (iii) All telephone numbers are checked to ensure that no concerns exist; special attention is directed at those Public Protection Arrangements in Northern Ireland (PPANI) cases. Similarly, the same procedures are in place for written communications. In addition, any person may write to the Governor and request that no contact is permitted by a specific prisoner. Prisoners may not contact certain members of the public, e.g. journalists.
- (iv) All prisons in the NIPS estate follow the same processes.
- (v) No differences exist.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice what relationship exists between the Childrens Order and the Relevant Divorce/ Ancillary Relief process when determining residency, contact or care orders taking into account the no delay principle in the Childrens Order.

(AQW 238/16-21)

Ms Sugden: In divorce proceedings, if there are children involved, the court has to be advised of the arrangements made, or proposed, for the children. The court will consider the arrangements and whether to exercise any powers under the Children

(Northern Ireland) Order 1995, even if no application under that Order has been made to it. The court can postpone the granting of a divorce until it has considered the arrangements for the children.

Any court exercising powers under the 1995 Order must have regard to the principles set out in that Order, including the principles that the welfare of the child is the paramount consideration and that delay is likely to be prejudicial to the welfare of the child ("the no delay principle").

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice what process is open to non-resident parents who are in receipt of residency or contact orders within the Children Order that are deliberately not being complied with by the Resident Parent.

(AQW 241/16-21)

Ms Sugden: There are no specific enforcement powers under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 for breach of residence and contact orders. Breach can be dealt through contempt of court proceedings or, more commonly, a summons initiated under general enforcement powers in Article 112 of the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 which gives the court the power to fine or imprison the person breaching the order.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Justice to detail the community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that received funding from her Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 250/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that received funding from my Department, including its Agencies but not its arm's-length bodies, in each of the last five financial years are listed below:

2015-16

- Irish Cave Rescue Organisation
- North West Mountain Rescue Team

2014-15

- None

2013-14

- Devenish Partnership Forum – Positive Peers Youth
- Extern Angling Club
- Fuse Youth

2012-13

- Erne County Commissioner

2011-12

- Belfast Central Mission (BCM) Housing Support
- FUEL INC FIND (Fermanagh Underage Entertainment Life and Fermanagh Information for Needs and Development)

My Department also provides funding to a range of voluntary and community organisations who deliver services across Northern Ireland. Some of these services may be available in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

My Department also provides funding to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships who work with a wide range of bodies including voluntary and community organisations, some of which may be in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 44828/11-15 and AQW 51006/11-16, to detail the total the legal aid costs in this case, broken down by solicitors and counsel.

(AQW 280/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Legal Aid was granted to three defendants for representation by Solicitor and Counsel in the Magistrates' Court under the following ICOS numbers:

- Thomas Ellis – ICOS number 14/020711
- Harry McMahon – ICOS number 14/020713
- David Power – ICOS number 14/020714

The Legal Services Agency has received claims from the legal representatives in respect of the Magistrates' Court proceedings and has paid the following fees in respect of each of the defendants:

Defendant	Legal representative	Profit Costs	VAT	Total
Geoffrey Ellis	Solicitor Junior Counsel	£4,507.93	£901.59	£5,409.52
		£10,873.59	£2,174.72	£13,048.31
Harry McMahon	Solicitor Junior Counsel	£12,557.80	£2,511.56	£15,069.36
		£7,283.10	£1,456.62	£8,739.72
David Power	Solicitor	£3,194.30	£638.86	£3,833.16
Total				£46,100.07

Subsequent to the committal proceedings in the Magistrates' Court, Legal Aid was granted to the three defendants for representation by Solicitor, Senior Counsel and Junior Counsel in the Crown Court under ICOS number 14/020710.

The Legal Services Agency has received claims from legal representatives in respect of the Crown Court proceedings and has paid the following fees in respect of each of the defendants:

Defendant	Legal Rep	Profit Costs	VAT	Disb	Total
Geoffrey Ellis	Solicitor Junior Csl	£2,656.63	£531.33	£1,025.00	£4,212.96
		£3,017.34	£603.47		£3,620.81
Harry McMahon	Solicitor Senior Csl Junior Csl	£4,959.59	£991.92	£35.00	£5,986.51
		£4062.97	£812.59		£4,875.56
		£3,057.86	£611.57		£3,669.43
David Power	Solicitor Junior Csl	£5,435.41	£1,087.08		£6,522.49
		£2,473.11	£494.62		£2,967.73
Total					£31,855.49

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total number of convictions for drink driving offences in the Upper Bann constituency in each of the last five years.

(AQW 312/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Drink driving offences may be prosecuted under the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Departmental databases do not contain information on the location of an offence. Therefore, information in relation to convictions at Craigavon court and Banbridge court (sitting at Newry) has been provided. The latest five year period for which information is available is 2010 – 2014.

Convictions for drink driving offences at Craigavon court and Banbridge court (sitting at Newry), 2010 - 2014

Year	Convictions
2010	269
2011	212
2012	191
2013	187
2014	177

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to convictions which included at least one drink driving offence.
- 2 The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offences specified and to disposals at Magistrates' courts and Crown Court.
- 3 Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to cases currently in the court system in which human trafficking is an element, to detail the accompanying charges, broken down by (i) court level; and (ii) division.

(AQW 348/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The cases currently in the court system in which human trafficking is an element alongside the accompanying charges, broken down by court level and division, are set out in the table below.

Case Number	Charge Number	Court Level	Court Division	Accompanying Charges
1	1	Crown	Antrim	Sex Activity By Adult With Child 13-16yrs
	2			Meet A Child Following Sexual Grooming
	3			Trafficking In UK For Sexual Exploitation
	4			Rape (Offences After 01/02/09)
	5			Child Abduction (By Other Person)
	6			Sexual Assault By Penetration
	7			Sexual Act Penetration With Under 16yr Old
	8			Sexual Act Penetration With Under 16yr Old
2	1	Crown	Belfast	Control Prostitution For a Gain
	2			Trafficking Out Of UK
	3			Conspiracy To Remove Criminal Property
	4			Control Prostitution For a Gain
	5			Removing Criminal Property
3	1	Crown	Belfast	Human Trafficking
	2			Human Trafficking
	3			Human Trafficking
	4			Acquiring Criminal Property
4	1	Crown	Craigavon	Conspiracy To Traffic within The UK
	2			Trafficking Of People Into UK For Exploitation
	3			Trafficking Of People Into UK For Exploitation
	4			Acting As Unlicensed Gangmaster
	5			Trafficking Of People Into UK For Exploitation
	6			Trafficking Of People Into UK For Exploitation
	7			Trafficking Of People Into UK For Exploitation
	8			Enter Arrangement to Acquire Criminal Property
	9			Conspiracy To Convert Criminal Property
	10			Converting Criminal Property
5	1	Magistrate	Craigavon	Human Trafficking
	2			Threats To Kill

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to review the closure of Limavady Courthouse. (AQW 382/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The decision to close Limavady court hearing centre was taken by my predecessor following public consultation in 2012 and ratified by him in February 2016.

My predecessor's decision to rationalise the court estate is now the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court in Belfast. Consequently it is not my intention to proceed with court closures pending the outcome of those proceedings. As the rationalisation of the court estate is now the subject of legal proceedings it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to review the decision to close Ballymena Courthouse. (AQW 385/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The decision to close Ballymena courthouse was taken by my predecessor following public consultation in 2015.

My predecessor's decision to rationalise the court estate is now the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court in Belfast. Consequently it is not my intention to proceed with court closures pending the outcome of those proceedings. As the rationalisation of the court estate is now the subject of legal proceedings it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice what sentencing guidelines are in place for the judiciary for people found guilty of the physical abuse of children.

(AQW 395/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Lord Chief Justice's Sentencing Group has responsibility for oversight of the development of sentencing guidelines. Guidelines for child cruelty offences under the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968 tried summarily have been developed and are published on the Judicial Studies Board website. They can be accessed at:

<http://www.jsbni.com/Publications/sentencing-guides-magistrates-court/Documents/Templates/Cruelty%20to%20person%20under%2016.pdf>

Sentencing in the Crown Court is guided by Court of Appeal judgments in appropriate cases.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many people have been convicted of physically abusing children in each of the last five years; (ii) of what charge they were found guilty; and (iii) what sentence they received in each case.

(AQW 396/16-21)

Ms Sugden: There is no specific offence of physically abusing children in Northern Ireland and convictions datasets held by the Department do not contain details on victim age, so it is not possible to provide an accurate count of the information requested. However, a number of offence descriptions in the Violence Against the Person category do specify the involvement of a child. Information, in an aggregated format, relating to convictions for those offences has been provided in the following tables. The latest 5 year period for which information on convictions is available is 2010 – 2014.

- (i) Persons convicted at court of at least one offence in the Violence Against the Person category where the offence description specifies involvement of a child, 2010 - 2014

Year	Persons convicted
2010	824
2011	904
2012	243
2013	69
2014	33

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to persons convicted for the offences in question, whether or not they were the primary offence at conviction.
 - 2 Some individuals may have had more than one conviction for the offences in question and may have been convicted of more than one of the offences specified as part of the same conviction.
 - 3 Some offences specifying involvement of a child were repealed during the period in question and offence descriptions subsequently used may have been of a more generic nature.
- (ii) Offences in the Violence Against the Person category where the offence description specifies involvement of a child, for which convictions were handed down at courts, 2010 – 2014

Offences

- Abandoning child under 2
- Abandoning child under 16
- Abduction of a child in care
- Aggravated assault on a female or boy under 14 years
- Aggravated assault on a female or boy under 14 years (Repealed for offences after 5 July 2011)
- Assisting a child to stay away from responsible person
- Causing or procuring cruelty to child under 16
- Child abduction (by another person)
- Child abduction (by parent, etc.)
- Common assault on child or young person
- Cruelty to children

- Exposing child under 12 to risk of burning
- Inducing, etc., a child to run or stay away from the responsible person
- Keeping a child away from the responsible person

Note:

- 1 Convictions for all classifications of the offences listed were counted, e.g., incitement, aiding and abetting, permitting, or a substantive offence.

- (iii) Range of penalties handed down for convictions at courts for Offences in the Violence Against the Person category, where the offence description specifies involvement of a child, 2010 – 2014

Disposal Type

- Bound over
- Community sentence
- Conditional/absolute discharge
- Disqualification from working with children
- Fit person order
- Imprisonment
- Monetary penalty
- Sexual Offenders Registration required
- Sexual Prevention Order
- Suspended imprisonment

Note:

- 1 More than one type of disposal may have been handed down as part of any one conviction.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the impact and extent of cross-border criminality along the A1 Dual Carriageway and particularly on the residents of Loughbrickland and Banbridge
(AQW 416/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The fight against cross-border criminality, and the assessment of impact in specific areas, is principally an operational matter for the two police forces and other law enforcement agencies.

More generally, whilst law enforcement in Northern Ireland has always co-operated with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to tackle the threat posed by organised crime groups, the establishment of the new Joint Agency Taskforce, following the Fresh Start Agreement, is enhancing the operational response to cross-border criminality. It has already set key priority areas for action and undertaken a number of operations.

There are, of course, other initiatives against criminality near the border but this is a significant development.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice when preliminary investigations and mixed committals are to be abolished at Magistrates court.
(AQW 467/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Department legislated in the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2015 for the abolition of preliminary investigations and mixed committal. However, during the debate on the Justice Bill, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted to retain preliminary investigations and mixed committals.

The Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2015 provides for a preliminary investigation or a mixed committal to be held where the court directs that it is in the interests of justice to do so. Implementation continues and it is likely that commencement of the committal provisions in the 2015 Act will be during 2017.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Justice how many people were prosecuted, under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, for the offence of harassment, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 486/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The most recent five year period for which information on convictions for harassment offences under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 is available is 2010 – 2014.

Number of convictions for harassment offences under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, 2010 – 2014

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Convictions	123	130	171	172	156

Note:

- 4 Figures relate to convictions which included at least one offence of harassment.
- 5 The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offence specified.
- 6 Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what meetings her Department has held with the PSNI to discuss additional funding for police recruitment.

(AQW 558/16-21)

Ms Sugden: My Department holds monthly finance stocktake meetings with senior officials from the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB), and quarterly Police Resources Group meetings attended by, amongst others, the Deputy Chief Constable and the Chief Executive of the NIPB. The full range of police resource issues, including recruitment, may be discussed at these meetings.

Department for the Economy

Mr McKee asked the Minister for the Economy what business development programmes Invest NI promotes to assist growth in the hospitality sector.

(AQW 4/16-21)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): Subject to meeting Invest NI criteria for intervention, businesses in the hospitality sector may access the full range of Invest NI support.

Invest NI may offer support to help businesses with improving competitiveness, management development, people excellence, marketing, e-commerce and information communication technology. It also provides support by way of information and business advice.

Selective financial assistance by way of capital grant may also be available for the development of new or expansion of existing hotels and certain other accommodation businesses.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the renewable energy support schemes that exist for the (i) domestic; and (ii) non-domestic sectors.

(AQW 7/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) provides non-competitive support to renewable technologies, in both the domestic and non-domestic sectors. It is currently open to new small scale onshore wind projects and non wind technologies.

The Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) provides support for the installation of renewable heat technologies and closed to applications on 29 February 2016.

Existing projects under both the NIRO and the RHI will continue to receive support for up to 20 years.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for the Economy what plans there are to devise a new renewable energy strategy.

(AQW 8/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The future of renewable energy will be considered in the context of the review and refocusing of the Strategic Energy Framework. The Department hopes to issue a public consultation on the review later this year. A Refocused Energy Strategy will then be published as soon as practicable thereafter covering the 2015-20 timeframe.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the role of the regulator in energy generation and distribution.

(AQW 10/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Regulator is the independent body accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly through financial and annual reporting obligations, which is responsible for the licensing of electricity generation and the distribution of electricity and natural gas. The Regulator is also responsible for the enforcement of licence conditions and statutory requirements in relation to those activities. In relation to energy distribution, the Regulator is responsible for setting price controls for monopoly network owners and operators.

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for the Economy what action he is taking to resolve the Bluebox broadband outage in areas such as West Tyrone.

(AQW 100/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The issues raised are of great concern. However, as the telecommunications market is fully privatised and independently regulated, such quality of service issues are a matter for Ofcom, as the communications regulator. My officials have been in contact with Ofcom who are aware of this issue.

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for the Economy to outline his Department's plans to address the deficiency in broadband services in West Tyrone.

(AQW 204/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: In February 2015, my Department awarded a contract to BT for the delivery of the Superfast Roll-out Programme (SRP). Under this contract, it is expected that, by 31 December 2017, access to superfast broadband, with speeds of at least 24 Megabits per second (Mbps), will have been provided to a further 39,000 premises across Northern Ireland. It is expected that a number of these will be in the West Tyrone constituency, however, until the infrastructure has been brought into service, it is not possible to quantify the number or precise location of premises that will benefit.

It is important to recognise that, where fixed-line broadband is not viable, there are other technology alternatives available, including fixed wireless and satellite. With regard to satellite, DfE has a scheme in place, which will subsidise the costs of installing a satellite broadband service from a list of registered providers. Subject to satisfying certain eligibility criteria, customers in West Tyrone with a broadband connection less than 2 Mbps are able to apply for this service. Details of the scheme can be found at: www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/satellite-broadband-support-scheme-northern-ireland

On 9th November 2015, the Prime Minister announced the UK Government's intention to introduce a new Universal Service Obligation (USO) for broadband, with the ambition to give people the right to request an affordable broadband connection, at a minimum speed, from a designated provider, up to a reasonable cost threshold by 2020. The work is being led by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and DfE officials have sought to ensure that NI views are taken into account.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy whether any of the redundancies announced at Seagate in Londonderry were jobs created in 2014 as part of the research and development investment which included £7.8M from Invest NI and the European Regional Development Fund.

(AQW 323/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Seagate has engaged in a consultation process with its employees initially asking for voluntary redundancies across a broad range of departments including Research and Development.

It is therefore not possible at this early stage to determine if anyone directly involved in the R&D HAMR project announced in 2014 will be impacted. However, the company has confirmed that the HAMR project is progressing well and has reinforced to Invest NI its commitment to completing the project in line with the letter of offer.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions his Department and Invest NI have had with Seagate on the company's future production plans at Springtown, Londonderry.

(AQW 324/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Seagate is a key employer in the North West and an important company in the context of the overall Northern Ireland economy. As such Invest NI maintains regular contact with Seagate's management, meeting on at least a quarterly basis, to review progress and to discuss how the company's presence can be maintained and strengthened where possible.

In 2014 Invest NI provided £7.8m under its Grant for R&D scheme against a £34m project that sought to bring research into Heat Assisted Magnetic Recording (HAMR) technology, the latest step change in recording head technology, to Northern Ireland. It is through this type of intervention that Invest NI seeks to help the Springtown facility enhance its strategic importance within the wider Seagate Group and so help secure its presence in Northern Ireland in the future.

Invest NI has been in contact with the company on several occasions since Monday's announcement and will continue to work with management as they implement the redundancy process. Future opportunities to strengthen the company's presence in Northern Ireland will continue to be explored although it is recognised that these may be limited given the pressures within the Hard Disc Drive storage market.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 17 June 2016

Written Answers to Questions

Department for Communities

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Communities to list the local constituencies in the (i) top quintile; (ii) fourth quintile; (iii) third quintile; (iv) second quintile; and (v) bottom quintile of the percentage of economically active population aged 16-64 years claiming Job Seekers Allowance in the UK.

(AQW 135/16-21)

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): My Department does not have access to data in respect of Great Britain constituencies and I am not therefore in a position to answer this question in the format requested.

Briefing Paper Number 7592; Unemployment by Constituency May 2016 was published on 18 May 2016 in the House of Commons Library and provides details of Unemployment by Constituency at April 2016. The data in the Briefing Paper refers to the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or not in work and claiming Universal Credit. As Universal Credit has already been introduced in Great Britain, the number of Jobseeker's Allowance Claimants in Northern Ireland cannot be directly compared with the number of claimants in Great Britain.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Communities to detail the (i) number of people claiming Job Seekers Allowance; (ii) percentage claimant rate; (iii) annual change in numbers; and (iv) the annual percentage change, for the last three years, listed in rank order by constituency.

(AQW 136/16-21)

Mr Givan: The most recently published Jobseeker's Allowance statistics refer to February 2016. The number of claimants; percentage rate; annual change in numbers and the annual percentage change, for the last three years are detailed in the tables below.

Assembly Area	Number			Rate		
	Feb-16	Feb-15	Feb-14	Feb-16	Feb-15	Feb-14
Belfast East	1,860	2,200	2,700	3.2%	3.8%	4.6%
Belfast North	3,330	4,140	5,090	5.3%	6.6%	8.1%
Belfast South	1,960	2,480	2,980	2.6%	3.2%	3.9%
Belfast West	3,250	3,970	4,770	5.5%	6.8%	8.1%
East Antrim	1,660	1,710	2,250	3.0%	3.1%	4.1%
East Londonderry	2,330	2,590	3,240	3.8%	4.2%	5.3%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	1,780	2,130	2,520	2.8%	3.3%	3.9%
Foyle	4,450	4,890	5,500	6.9%	7.6%	8.6%
Lagan Valley	1,510	1,690	2,190	2.4%	2.7%	3.4%
Mid Ulster	1,290	1,640	2,380	2.1%	2.6%	3.8%
Newry And Armagh	1,950	2,590	3,620	2.8%	3.7%	5.1%
North Antrim	1,990	2,180	2,820	3.0%	3.3%	4.2%
North Down	1,290	1,640	1,950	2.4%	3.1%	3.7%
South Antrim	1,350	1,590	2,040	2.2%	2.6%	3.3%
South Down	1,860	2,280	2,970	2.8%	3.4%	4.4%
Strangford	1,680	1,910	2,300	3.1%	3.5%	4.2%

Assembly Area	Number			Rate		
	Feb-16	Feb-15	Feb-14	Feb-16	Feb-15	Feb-14
Upper Bann	2,250	2,670	3,560	3.0%	3.5%	4.7%
West Tyrone	2,330	2,750	3,360	4.1%	4.9%	5.9%
Unknown	270	310	720			
Total	38,360	45,350	56,940	3.4%	4.0%	5.0%

Assembly Area	Annual Change			Percentage Change		
	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014
Belfast East	-340	-500	-260	-15.5%	-18.5%	-8.8%
Belfast North	-810	-950	-400	-19.6%	-18.7%	-7.3%
Belfast South	-520	-500	-350	-21.0%	-16.8%	-10.5%
Belfast West	-720	-800	-630	-18.1%	-16.8%	-11.7%
East Antrim	-50	-540	-600	-2.9%	-24.0%	-21.1%
East Londonderry	-260	-650	-510	-10.0%	-20.1%	-13.6%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	-350	-390	-510	-16.4%	-15.5%	-16.8%
Foyle	-440	-610	-240	-9.0%	-11.1%	-4.2%
Lagan Valley	-180	-500	-380	-10.7%	-22.8%	-14.8%
Mid Ulster	-350	-740	-460	-21.3%	-31.1%	-16.2%
Newry And Armagh	-640	-1,030	-490	-24.7%	-28.5%	-11.9%
North Antrim	-190	-640	-640	-8.7%	-22.7%	-18.5%
North Down	-350	-310	-160	-21.3%	-15.9%	-7.6%
South Antrim	-240	-450	-350	-15.1%	-22.1%	-14.6%
South Down	-420	-690	-520	-18.4%	-23.2%	-14.9%
Strangford	-230	-390	-200	-12.0%	-17.0%	-8.0%
Upper Bann	-420	-890	-420	-15.7%	-25.0%	-10.6%
West Tyrone	-420	-610	-180	-15.3%	-18.2%	-5.1%
Total	-6,990	-11,590	-7,050	-15.4%	-20.4%	-11.0%

The information provided is an Official Statistic. The production of all such statistics is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by the UK Statistics Authority.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the reform of the Housing Selection Scheme.
(AQW 155/16-21)

Mr Givan: Under a commitment made in the Housing Strategy "Facing the Future", a fundamental review of the allocation of social housing in Northern Ireland is being led by the Department. As part of this commitment, independent research was commissioned from the Universities of Ulster and Cambridge, and was published for public comment in December 2013. Departmental proposals are now being prepared, supported by evidence and informed by the independent research. Any proposals for change will be subject to a full public consultation.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities when Welfare Reform will be introduced; and what advice is available for new and existing claimants.
(AQW 156/16-21)

Mr Givan: Welfare Reform will gradually be introduced in Northern Ireland over the next 3 years with the first set of welfare changes having commenced in May 2016.

Changes to how a claimant disputes a social security benefit decision were introduced on 23 May 2016 and the Benefit Cap at a £26,000 level came into effect on 31 May 2016.

Personal Independence Payment will be introduced on 20 June 2016 and will replace Disability Living Allowance for people aged 16 to 64 years. It will be introduced for new claims on 20 June 2016. If someone on Disability Living Allowance reports a change to their mobility or care needs on or after the 20 June 2016, they will also be assessed for Personal Independence Payment rather than Disability Living Allowance.

As part of the Fresh Start Agreement, the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to fund the recommendations of the Evason Report to mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform. These recommendations included a series of supplementary welfare payments to mitigate the most harmful impacts of the welfare changes. My Department has put in place the legislation and operational systems to make payments for claimants impacted by the Benefit Cap and is currently putting in place similar arrangements to support claimants impacted by the introduction of Personal Independent Payment.

The Working Group Report also recommended that additional independent advice services should be put in place to help and support customers through the welfare changes. The Executive made a commitment to provide £8m funding over 4 years to provide the additional services and my Department are currently finalising arrangements with the regional advice organisations to have those additional services in place by August 2015.

The Advice organisations are planning to have a dedicated contact centre to provide help and advice over the phone but with the facility to refer claimants for face to face assistance if necessary. The services will also be underpinned by access to specialist advice organisations.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on his plans to abolish the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and replace it with a regional housing body.

(AQW 157/16-21)

Mr Givan: Since January 2013, the Social Housing Reform Programme has been developing new operating policies and proposals for new structural models for social housing delivery. A Fresh Start included a renewed commitment to social housing structural reform but with a new emphasis on reducing the Departmental Expenditure Limit subsidy pressures. This has required the programme to look again at its work on new structural models and consider all options afresh. This work continues but has not advanced far enough for me to consider any preferred options.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Communities whether he will bring forward a strategy to promote the rights of the LGBT community.

(AQW 179/16-21)

Mr Givan: The good relations strategy, Together: Building a United Community, gives a commitment to publishing a Sexual Orientation strategy. The Stormont House Agreement and the Fresh Start document both state that the Together: Building a United Community will be implemented in full.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.

(AQW 189/16-21)

Mr Givan: The 12 week public consultation on the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer ended on 22 February 2016, with 1,280 responses received.

Responses to the consultation document will help to shape the programme going forward; including the eligibility criteria for the programme.

My Officials are currently carrying out detailed consideration and analysis of the responses received together with all other relevant information; before making recommendations to me on the way forward.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Communities why Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants who have subsequently purchased apartments and continue to pay service charges to the Housing Executive are not entitled to the same level of assistance from the Housing Executive, including access to grant aid schemes, as other tenants who reside in non-apartment properties.

(AQW 201/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Housing Executive has advised that when it sells an apartment to a former tenant, the exterior of the building remains its responsibility to maintain. As such, leaseholders would not require grant aid or assistance for work to the exterior of the building.

Each leaseholder is obliged to pay a service charge which covers their proportion of the total annual cost for the upkeep of the block in which the flats are situated. These costs are calculated in five separate elements:-

- Itemised repairs (including running costs);
- Non itemised repairs
- Management costs
- Improvements (Planned Maintenance)
- Insurance

The leaseholders may continue to access grants under the Home Improvement Grants and/or the Affordable Warmth Scheme with applications being considered subject to the eligibility criteria of the particular scheme. However, the work considered for grant aid will be restricted to the interior of the dwelling.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the communities identified as being 'Small Pockets of Deprivation', (ii) the size of the population affected; and (iii) the funding allocation to support the development of each area, broken down by constituency for 2014-15, 2015-16 & 2016-17.

(AQW 210/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Small Pockets of Deprivation programme is administered on behalf of my Department by NIHE. The table below details the areas designated as Small Pockets of Deprivation and their populations which are an approximate based on electoral wards. Whilst Drumcoo and Glenvarna are designated as SPODs, no applications for funding have been received for either area during the years stipulated.

SPOD area	Population	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17 (to date) (1)	Constituency
Bowtown	826	£16,772.50	£15,000.00	N/A (2)	Strangford
West Winds	583	£30,781.00	£31,981.00	£30,781.00	Strangford
Glen	379	£24,246.00	£23,360.17	£24,246.00	Strangford
Strathfoyle	605	£64,304.40	£76,141.71	£64,304.40	Foyle
Rathgill	691	£69,818.05	£67,335.17	£69,818.05	North Down
Harbour	587	£54,011.00	£54,011.00	£54,011.00	North Down
Benmore	203	£23,268.00	£25,908.00	£23,268.00	Belfast South
Bawnmore	676	£14,130.30	£13,389.09	£14,130.30	Belfast North
White City	303	£7,956.00	£1,640.00	N/A (2)	Belfast North
Carnany(3)	429	£24,125.43	£24,125.43	£24,125.43	North Antrim
Glebeside(3)	370				North Antrim
Castle(3)	403				North Antrim
Sunnylands	320	£22,053.00	23,618.00	£22,053.00	East Antrim
Gortalee	519	£37,980.00	£35,490.43	£37,980.00	East Antrim
Larne Central (Dixon Park/ Tullygarley)	579	£12,419.25	£10,000.00	£11,916.00	East Antrim
Drumcoo	256	N/A	N/A	N/A	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
Glenvarna	316	N/A	N/A	N/A	South Antrim

- (1) 2016/17 figures represent funding awarded @ 31st May 2016. Additional funding may be considered where funds are available.
- (2) Applications currently being processed.
- (3) The 3 Ballymoney SPODs are administered centrally and funding is allocated to the cluster rather than to individual areas.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Communities how many social houses his Department or its agencies plan to build in Upper Bann over the next five years; and the location of each build.

(AQW 224/16-21)

Mr Givan: There are currently 46 social housing units currently classified as "under construction" in the Upper Bann Parliamentary Constituency. The detail of these schemes is included in Appendix 1. Please note that this includes 9 units of Supported Housing.

The Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) is currently formulated on a 3-year basis, so it is not possible to provide plans for new social housing for 2019/20 or 2020/21 at this stage. There are currently 112 social housing units programmed to start on-site in the Upper Bann Parliamentary Constituency as part of the SHDP 2016/17 to 2018/19 (74 units in 2016/17, 28 units in 2017/18 and 10 units in 2018/19). The detail of these schemes is included in Appendix 2. Please note that 33 of the units programmed to start in 2016/17 are classified as Supported Housing.

SHDP schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons e.g. relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning permission. Additional schemes can be added to the SHDP as part of the annual programme

formulation process (housing association bidding round) or through the purchase of Existing Satisfactory / Off-the-shelf properties on an in-year basis.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how he intends to progress debt advice.
(AQW 232/16-21)

Mr Givan: Debt advice in Northern Ireland is funded and commissioned by the Money Advice Service (MAS). MAS has awarded a contract to Citizens Advice NI to deliver debt advice in Northern Ireland from April 2016.

My Department has funded the Housing Rights Service £340k for the 2016/2017 year to deliver the Mortgage Debt Advice Service. This service provides free independent mortgage debt advice to people in Northern Ireland.

Debt advice policy became the responsibility of my Department on 9 May 2016. Officials are now considering how debt policy should be progressed and are determining the need for a debt advice strategy for Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what protections exist for landlords when tenants refuse to pay rent.
(AQW 245/16-21)

Mr Givan: Where a tenant refuses to pay rent in respect of a private tenancy, the landlord can begin eviction proceedings as there may be a breach of the tenancy agreement. Landlords should seek to do this as soon as possible before arrears build up.

Where a private landlord seeks to gain possession of their property there is a process to be followed to legally evict the tenant. The tenant is required to leave the property when the correct notice to quit period has expired. The length of notice to quit depends on the length of the tenancy but is never less than 4 weeks written notice. If a tenant refuses to leave after this time the landlord can only gain possession by obtaining a court order. Once a landlord obtains a possession order from the courts they must apply to the Enforcement of Judgements Office to have it enforced.

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the community and voluntary organisations in South Antrim that received funding from his Department, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 270/16-21)

Mr Givan: Detail of the community and voluntary organisations in South Antrim that received funding from the Department, in each of the last five years, is provided in the attached Annex.

Annex

2011/2012

Languages & Waterways Ireland

- Deaf Answers

RDO Northern

- Farranshane Community Trust

VCD

- Antrim Youth Information and Counselling Centre
- Home-Start Antrim
- Indian Senior Citizens Club
- New Mossley Community Group
- Newtownabbey Senior Citizens' Forum
- Randalstown ARCHES Association Ltd
- St Kevin's Senior Citizens
- The Helping Hand

2012/2013

Languages & Waterways Ireland

- Deaf Answers

RDO Northern

- Grange Youth and Community Group

VCD

- Antrim Youth Information and Counselling Centre
- Ballydonaghy Pipe Band
- Grange Youth and Community Group

- Home-Start Antrim
- Newtownabbey Senior Citizens' Forum
- Randalstown ARCHES Association Ltd
- St Kevin's Senior Citizens

2013/2014**BCCRD**

- County Antrim Boxing IABA

Languages & Waterways Ireland

- Deaf Answers

Limavady Community Development Initiative

- Antrim Reminiscence Group
- Antrim RFC & Hockey Club
- Antrim Youth Information and Counselling Centre
- Ballyclare Family Focus: Ballyclare Family Support & Resource Network
- Burnside and District Community Group
- Families Against Sexual Abuse Trauma (FAST)
- FC Ballynure
- Flute Band Church
- Home-Start Antrim
- Indian Senior Citizens Club
- Mallusk Community Playgroup
- Mens Shed Antrim
- Muckamore Cricket & Tennis Club
- Randalstown RFC
- St Bernards Youth Community Group
- Templepatrick Cricket Club
- The Helping Hand

RDO Northern

- Grange Youth and Community Group

VCD

- Grange Youth and Community Group
- Indian Senior Citizens Club
- Randalstown ARCHES Association Ltd
- St Kevin's Senior Citizens

2014/2015**Languages & Waterways Ireland**

- Croí Éanna
- Deaf Answers

Limavady Community Development Initiative

- Antrim Reminiscence Group
- Antrim Youth Information and Counselling Centre
- Ballymena and Antrim Athletic Club
- Home-Start Antrim
- Indian Senior Citizens Club
- MADD MUSIC
- River Bann and Lough Neagh Association Company
- St Comgalls Youth Centre
- The Helping Hand

RDO Northern

- Grange Youth and Community Group

VCD

- Randalstown ARCHES Association Ltd

2015/2016**Limavady Community Development Initiative**

- Antrim Reminiscence Group
- Antrim Youth Information and Counselling Centre
- Ballyclare Family Focus: Ballyclare Family Support & Resource Network
- Burnside and District Community Group
- Eye Feel Good Outdoors
- Grange Youth and Community Group
- Home-Start Antrim
- Indian Senior Citizens Club
- MADD MUSIC
- Mallusk Harriers
- Mossley Hockey Club
- Muckamore Cricket & Tennis Club
- North West Mountain Rescue Team
- Rathland Care Farm
- River Bann and Lough Neagh Association Company
- Springfarm & District Community Association
- Templepatrick Cricket Club
- The Helping Hand
- World of Owls Centre

RDO Northern

- Grange Youth and Community Group

VCD

- Randalstown ARCHES Association Ltd

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Communities whether he will ensure that the Old Layde graveyard in Cushendall is maintained to the standard required for a heritage site.

(AQW 275/16-21)

Mr Givan: Layd Church ruins are in State Care and therefore the responsibility of my Department; but the graveyard where the church stands is the responsibility of the Causeway Coasts and Glens Borough Council. The member may therefore want to contact the Council on the position of the graveyard.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Communities whether he will reform the current licencing laws for the Easter holiday period.

(AQW 276/16-21)

Mr Givan: In 2012 the Department for Social Development consulted on a wide range of proposed changes to the law regulating the sale and supply of alcohol in Northern Ireland. The consultation proposed modest changes to the permitted opening hours for the Easter holiday period.

My predecessor intended to introduce a Liquor Licensing Bill during the previous Assembly mandate. However, due to competing priorities this was not possible.

I am considering all the issues and will announce my plans in due course.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 55161/11-16, what action has been taken on the Republican Sinn Féin memorial in Lurgan since 3 March 2016; and whether his Department will seek to remove the structure.
(AQW 289/16-21)

Mr Givan: The replacement or removal of symbols such as murals and memorials is a complex and sensitive matter. No one single agency can work on its own to do this. It needs a number of agencies and bodies to work together, as well as involving the public and relevant communities.

The safety of Housing Executive staff and contractors is paramount. Having consulted with the PSNI, the Housing Executive believes that it could not guarantee their safety if an attempt was made to remove this structure.

The Housing Executive will continue to work with those who live on our estates, their representatives and other agencies, to look at an alternative use for these spaces.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities when the Líofo programme will come to an end.
(AQW 306/16-21)

Mr Givan: The position on Líofo is that it is currently under consideration and I will review any contractual commitments before determining the way forward.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities will he review urgently the basis of grant aid to boxing clubs so that those not affiliated to the Irish Athletic Boxing Association can qualify.
(AQW 307/16-21)

Mr Givan: I recognise that the issues facing boxing in Northern Ireland are both complex and challenging. There are complexities associated with the UK Sports Councils' Recognition Policy and challenges around how affiliation to a recognised sport governing body can impact on eligibility for potential funding opportunities for individual clubs.

I understand that a number of boxing clubs made a decision not to re-affiliate to the Irish Athletic Boxing Association last year and that they have been informed by SportNI that, as a result, they no longer meet the criteria for the Boxing Investment Programme.

I can confirm that I have agreed to meet with representatives from the clubs and the Northern Ireland Boxing Association later this month.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what steps he proposes to take to encourage the establishment and recognition of a Northern Ireland-based federation of boxing clubs.
(AQW 308/16-21)

Mr Givan: Sport NI, recognises one Governing Body for each sport across Northern Ireland. This is consistent with the approach applied by the other Sports Councils in England, Scotland and Wales and is aligned to international best practice. Currently the recognised Governing Body for Boxing in Northern Ireland is the Irish Athletic Boxing Association (IABA).

The Recognition Policy to recognise Governing Bodies of Sport belongs jointly to the four UK Sports Councils, which includes Sport NI, an Arms Length Body of my Department. Any change in the UK Sports Councils' Recognition policy would be a matter to be agreed amongst that group.

However, while the establishment of a Northern Ireland based federation of boxing clubs is a matter for the sport to consider, I have agreed to meet with a representative from the Northern Ireland Boxing Association later this month to hear at firsthand the issues facing some boxing clubs in Northern Ireland and will be engaging on this issue.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what steps he proposes to take to ensure athletes can represent either Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom in international events.
(AQW 309/16-21)

Mr Givan: I am committed to ensuring that there is clarity on the issue of representation and that the aspirations of young sports people can be nurtured so that they can reach their full potential and exercise their personal choice with regard to representation at major competitions.

My Department and its Arms Length Body, Sport NI, recognises that it is the personal choice of any athlete from Northern Ireland to choose who they represent.

Through its Recognition Policy, Sport NI requires recognised governing bodies to accommodate this freedom of choice. Sport NI's guidance document for sports organisations, 'Promoting Fair Play in Sport' makes it explicit that no obstacle should be put in the way of those whose preference may be at odds with the general alignment of the Governing Body.

Sport NI is now working to update its 'Promoting Fair Play in Sport' document in order to provide additional guidance for the sports sector on its legislative responsibilities and will be consulting with other Sports Councils, both across the UK and Ireland, and my Department before a final document is published.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for Communities to detail the level of funding that has been provided through the Neighbourhood Renewal scheme to organisations and community groups in Upper Bann in each of the last five years.
(AQW 313/16-21)

Mr Givan: The table below details the level of funding provided through the Neighbourhood Renewal Scheme to organisations and community groups who deliver services across the three Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in the Upper Bann constituency (Brownlow, Lurgan and North West Portadown) in each of the last five years.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Revenue	£1,144,060.91	£1,510,246.00	£2,667,052.00	£1,232,339.35	£1,138,931.70
Capital	£1,113,735.23	£871,691.52	£1,872,052.83	£1,564,571.88	£136,996.15
Totals	£2,257,796.14	£2,381,937.52	£4,539,104.83	£2,796,911.23	£1,275,927.85

Expenditure is influenced by factors such as the population of an area; the historic expenditure and/ or proposed capital investment in an area from other initiatives or mainstream sources, geographical location and proximity to existing services; as well as revenue investment in an area from lead Departments or from other initiatives.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for Communities to detail the criteria that must be met for an organisation to receive Neighbourhood Renewal funding.

(AQW 314/16-21)

Mr Givan: The criterion that must be met for an organisation to receive Neighbourhood Renewal funding is that organisations must demonstrate that projects/programmes:

- meet the objectives of the Neighbourhood Renewal programme;
- directly address the priorities of the Neighbourhood Renewal Areas Action Plans; and
- deliver benefits directly to the residents of and/or the Neighbourhood Renewal Area

All applications for Neighbourhood Renewal funding are subject to a thorough assessment and appraisal process in line with the Northern Ireland Guide to Expenditure, Appraisal and Evaluation and Managing Public Money NI. This process includes an assessment of how projects effectively demonstrate they meet need.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities how many housing units the Northern Ireland Housing Executive manages in the following areas; (i) Belvoir; (ii) Taughmonagh; (iii) Donegall Pass; (iv) Benmore; (v) Annadale Flats; (vi) Killynure; and (vii) Milltown; and to detail this as a percentage of all social housing in these areas.

(AQW 326/16-21)

Mr Givan: The table below, provided by the Housing Executive, shows details of their stock as a percentage of total social housing in the areas: (i) Belvoir; (ii) Taughmonagh; (iii) Donegall Pass; (iv) Benmore; (v) Annadale Flats; (vi) Killynure; and (vii) Milltown.

Social Housing Stock: March 2016

Common Landlord Area	NIHE Stock	Total Social Stock	NIHE Stock as a Percentage of Social Total
Annadale	180	236	76.27
Belvoir	650	669	97.16
Carryduff (Killynure)	79	118	66.95
Donegall Pass	339	438	77.40
Finaghy (Benmore Drive)	377	447	84.34
Milltown-Grays Park	54	90	60.00
Milltown-Shaws Bridge	73	73	100.00
Taughmonagh	377	402	93.78
Total	2129	2473	86.09

Mr Mullan asked the Minister for Communities how he plans to address rural isolation among older people in East Derry.

(AQW 373/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Executive's Active Ageing Strategy was launched in January this year. At the heart of it, is our vision of Northern Ireland being an age friendly region in which people as they get older, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential, with their rights respected and their dignity protected.

I am aware and particularly sensitive to many of the challenges older people in our society face today. As this is an Executive Strategy, all Ministers are committed to its delivery and I will be working closely with many of them as we develop our new PFG to make sure the needs of older people, regardless of where they live, are met.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities to detail his plans to protect and increase funding towards the maintenance of Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock.

(AQW 378/16-21)

Mr Givan: I continue to support the delivery of investment by the Housing Executive in the short-term through its interim investment plan. I have made available £21 million this year for this purpose, which will allow some of the more difficult types of stock, like tower blocks and non-traditional housing, to receive investment.

The Housing Executive has produced an Asset Management Strategy setting out the principles for managing its stock and long term future investment, based on active asset management principles. It is currently developing an operational 10 year investment programme that will be a practical reflection of the principles set out in the Strategy, which it plans to commence from April 2017.

However, I am aware that in the longer term the Asset Commission has identified the need to significantly increase the level of investment being made to Housing Executive homes with £6.7 billion required over the next 30 years, and £2.6 billion in the first 10 years. This is a major challenge as rental income is insufficient to fund the investment required and therefore we will need to consider how this can be addressed.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of claimants of Lone Pensioner Allowance in Upper Bann over the last 5 years.

(AQW 380/16-21)

Mr Givan: The information is not available in the format requested. The Housing Executive has only been recording Lone Pensioner Allowance claimants on an area basis since 1 April 2013. The figures below are snapshots at each of the dates noted detailing how many claimants were in receipt of Lone Pensioner Allowance.

01/04/2013	-	260 claims
01/04/2014	-	269 claims
01/04/2015	-	290 claims
01/04/2016	-	299 claims

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities what provisions are in place to ensure military service leavers that end their service in Great Britain or overseas, and intend to resettle in Northern Ireland and have applied for social housing in Northern Ireland whilst still in service, can defer acceptance of an offer from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive due to their contract constraints without being penalised.

(AQW 399/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Housing Executive has informed me that offers of accommodation are normally made with an expected date of commencement to ensure that empty homes are re-let as quickly as possible to minimise any loss of rental income. Where a member of the Armed Forces who is coming to the end of their service applies to the Housing Executive for accommodation in Northern Ireland, the applicant can be placed on the waiting list with a request to have their application deferred until such time as they are ready to accept a tenancy. If the applicant knows the date that they will be discharged from service then that date can be used as the deferral date. Otherwise, the deferral can be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

Applicants for social housing are allowed up to a maximum of 3 reasonable offers. If an offer of accommodation is made before a service leaver's date of discharge, the applicant should inform the Housing Executive that they are not in a position to take up the tenancy. This would not be treated as a refusal of a reasonable offer and the applicant will be entitled to further offers of accommodation.

My Department has instructed the Housing Executive that no applicant for social housing should be disadvantaged because of their military service and that it should not refuse an application from a serving member of the Armed Forces on the basis that the applicant is living in Ministry of Defence accommodation or is living outside Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail how many claimants per constituency of (i) Employment Support Act and; (ii) Jobseekers Allowance have been sanctioned under conditionality measures.

(AQW 419/16-21)

Mr Givan: The information is not available in the format requested. Data is available for the number of sanctions imposed but cannot be broken down into the number of claimants sanctioned, nor by constituency.

ESA

The table below shows the number of Employment and Support Allowance claimants who have had sanctions imposed for failing to attend or failing to participate in a Work Focused Interview without good cause from October 2014 to December 2015.

Month	Number of Work Focused Interview Sanctions Imposed *
October 2014	64
November 2014	60
December 2014	58
January 2015	43
February 2015	51
March 2015	57
April 2015	25
May 2015	51
June 2015	75
July 2015	74
August 2015	63
September 2015	66
October 2015	42
November 2015	54
December 2015	16

JSA

Information on the number of sanctions is only available from May 2011. All sanctions imposed are as a result of an adverse decision on benefit entitlement. The figure provided from 1st June 2015 is taken from a new recording system (Decision Making and Appeals Case Recorder).

May 2011 – March 2012	6831
April 2012 – March 2013	11546
April 2013 – March 2014	8215
April 2014 – March 2015	5400
April 2015 – May 2015	1403
June 2015 – December 2015	5875

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how the £60 million per year allocated under the Fresh Start Agreement to mitigate tax credits cuts will be reallocated.

(AQW 420/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Fresh Start Agreement covering the four year period 2016-17 to 2019-20 included £240 million for Tax Credit changes, with £60 million allocated each year. The Chancellor introduced his planned changes in the autumn 15 statement and the then Finance Minister, Arlene Foster MLA announced in her Budget 2016-17 statement of 17th December 2015 that £30 million of the £60 million budget for 2016-17 would be re-directed to fund increased spending in Departments. The remaining £30 million was held centrally pending Executive agreement on its use.

The Working Group led by Professor Evason published its Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report on 19 January 2016. This report was approved by the Executive on 21 January 2016 and costed mitigations at a total of £501m over the 4 year period.

The £60million per year previously committed to mitigate Tax Credits will be used by the Executive for a range of mitigation measures over the three year period 2017-18 to 2019-20. These are detailed in Appendix A.

Appendix A

ITEM - Welfare Reform 1	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Total
CARERS- full compensation for one year plus exemption from benefit cap	2	7	7	2	18
Adult ill health ESA-supplementary payments for one year	17	7	0	0	24

ITEM - Welfare Reform 1	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Total
Disability - DLA					
i] payment up to appeal	1	15	14	14	44
ii] 75% if loss £10+ (for one year)	1	10	14	12	36
iii] conflict-related lower rate of PIP (for one year)	0	4	4	6	14
Additions to benefit –Adult Disability Premium (IR benefits) supplementary payments for one year	1	6	12	8	27
BENEFIT CAP- exemption for families	1	8	8	8	25
DISCRETIONARY SUPPORT SCHEME- 50%	8	8	8	8	31
SOCIAL SECTOR SIZE CRITERIA ('BEDROOM TAX') -full mitigation	15	24	26	26	91
SUBTOTAL (£m) Welfare Reform	46	89	93	84	310

ITEM -Tax Credit Mitigation: Universal Credit	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Total
UC Payment flexibilities	5	9	5	5	25
Administration of support for Universal Credit	0	2	2	2	7
Support for Universal Credit	0	35	35	35	105
DISCRETIONARY SUPPORT SCHEME- 50%	8	8	8	8	31
Financial Capability	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	2.7
SUBTOTAL (£m)	14	55	51	51	171

ITEM - Administration	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Total
Administration of mitigation scheme	5	5	5	5	20
SUBTOTAL (£m)	5	5	5	5	20
	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Total
TOTAL (£m)	64	149	149	140	501

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many claimants are (i) affected by the current benefit cap; (ii) will be affected by the benefit cap introduced under the Welfare Reform and Work Act; (iii) have children; and (iv) will receive transitional support for any loss in income up to 2020.

(AQW 421/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Benefit Cap, with a household limit of £26,000, was introduced in Northern Ireland on 31 May 2016.

- (i) There are 529 households in Northern Ireland that may be impacted by the current Benefit Cap.
- (ii) The Welfare Reform and Work Act will reduce the Benefit Cap threshold to £20,000 later this year. It is currently estimated that just under 2,500 households in Northern Ireland may be impacted by this cap.
- (iii) Each of the 529 households contain children. Almost all of the estimated 2,500 households have children, the number of households with no children is in single figures.
- (iv) The Northern Ireland Executive has put arrangements in place to provide financial support for those people impacted by the Benefit Cap. An additional supplementary payment may be available up to 31 March 2020 for households with children.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many current Employment and Support Allowance work-related-activity-group claimants (i) will have their income reduced under the Welfare Reform and Work Act; and (ii) will receive a top-up from the Fresh Start top-up package.

(AQW 422/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Chancellor announced the removal of the Employment and Support Allowance Work-Related Activity Component in his Summer 2015 Budget announcement and these changes are currently planned to be implemented in Northern Ireland on 3 April 2017.

The measure will only affect new claims and therefore there will be no reduction in income for existing claimants because of the removal of the Work Related Activity Component as provided for in the Welfare Reform and Work Order (NI) 2016, which is scheduled to be laid at Westminster later this year.

There are no provisions within the report produced by the Welfare Reform Mitigations working group to make mitigation payments for new claimants who may be affected by the removal of the Work Related Activity Component.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of the allocation of the £135 million top-up for 2016-17 under the Fresh Start Agreement; (i) per benefit; and (ii) per constituency.

(AQW 423/16-21)

Mr Givan: The £135 million top up for 2016/17 allocated under the Fresh Start Agreement consisted of £75 million for Welfare and £60 million for Tax Credits.

Chancellor George Osborne announced in the Autumn 2015 Spending Review that previously announced cuts to tax credits would not go ahead. The £60 million for Tax Credits was not allocated to Department for Communities in 2016/17. The £75 million for Welfare Reform was allocated to Department for Communities in 2016/17.

The Fresh Start Agreement provided for Professor Evason to lead a Working Group to bring forward to the Executive a set of recommendations on how to mitigate the most negative aspects of Welfare Reform.

The Working Group published its report on 19 January 2016 and its recommendations were approved by the Executive on 21 January 2016. Appendix A provides a breakdown of the £64 million requirement identified for 2016/17 against the £75 million Fresh Start allocation.

The allocation is not available broken down by constituency.

Item – Welfare Reform 1	2016/17 (£m)
Carers – full exemption for one year plus exemption from benefit cap	2
Adult ill Health ESA – Supplementary payments for one year	17
Disability – DLA	
i) Payment up to appeal	1
ii) 75% loss £10+ (for one year)	1
Additions to benefit – Adult Disability Premium (IR Benefits) supplementary payments for one year	1
Benefit Cap – Exemption for families	1
DISCRETIONARY SUPPORT SCHEME – 50%	8
SOCIAL SECTOR SIZE CRITERIA ('BEDROOM TAX') – full	15
SUBTOTAL (£m) Welfare Reform	46
Item – Universal Credit	
UC Payment Flexibilities	5
DISCRETIONARY SUPPORT SCHEME – 50%	8
Financial Capability	0.7
SUBTOTAL (£m)	14
ITEM - Administration	
Administration of mitigation scheme	5
SUBTOTAL (£m)	5
TOTAL (£m)	64
FRESH START ALLOCATED FUNDING (£m)	75
TOTAL REDUCED REQUIREMENT (£m)	(11)

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the regulations that govern Mixed Martial Arts and are applicable to local clubs.

(AQW 471/16-21)

Mr Givan: Mixed Martial Arts is not currently a recognised sport. Ulster Amateur Mixed Martial Arts has been established as a company with the intention of putting the necessary structures and governance in place to become a recognised governing body for the sport in Northern Ireland.

Sport NI has provided assistance regarding the recognition policy and the process for an organisation to apply to have a sporting activity recognised and become the recognised governing body for that sport. Ulster Amateur Mixed Martial Arts has indicated its intention to meet the criteria and submit a formal application.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what measures he is taking to address homelessness.

(AQW 482/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is the lead agency for responding to homelessness in Northern Ireland and has certain statutory duties under the Housing (NI) Order, 1988 to individuals or households who present to them as homeless or are threatened with homelessness. These duties extend from advice and assistance to a full accommodation duty depending on an individual's circumstances and vulnerability.

The 2016/17 Homelessness budget funded by my Department and administered by the Housing Executive is over £35.5 million. The funding for the provision of homelessness services is £8.25million and £27.3million provides homeless related support services through the Supporting People programme.

The Housing Executive's strategic approach to dealing with Homelessness is the current Homelessness Strategy, 2012 – 17 which has an overall vision of eliminating long term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2020 and focuses on prevention and early intervention. The Housing Executive is developing a Housing Options model as a key prevention approach for delivering its Homelessness services. The Housing Options Model will examine an individual's circumstances and choices in the widest sense when they seek housing advice to ensure that the housing solution is tailored to the specific needs of the individual with the necessary support provided where appropriate.

The Housing Executive's strategy for tackling homelessness has a stated aim to end the need to sleep rough. Rough sleeping linked to homelessness is a complex issue that goes much further than my Department's responsibilities. It includes general health and social care provision for those sleeping rough, support for alcohol and drug dependency and managing mental health issues. Tackling homelessness linked to rough sleeping requires a number of organisations in the statutory and voluntary sector to work together.

Rough Sleeping in Northern Ireland largely occurs in Belfast and to a lesser extent in Londonderry. In recent years in Belfast there has been a growing visibility of street activity including street drinking, begging and rough sleeping leading to a perception that the need to sleep on the street is on the rise. In 2015 a Belfast Street Needs Audit was commissioned by the Housing Executive to look at rough sleeping. The Housing Executive published the final report earlier this year.

Following the report's findings, two interagency groups have been established, one led by the Housing Executive to address the needs of identified chronic rough sleepers and the other, led by Belfast Community Safety Partnership will address the issues of street begging and street drinking. This work is now underway.

In March 2016, following a number of street deaths in Belfast City Centre, the former Social Development Minister, established an inter-Ministerial sub group with the former Ministers of Health and Justice to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. A subsequent action plan was developed and endorsed by previous NI Executive colleagues.

A number of key actions that are now complete include increasing hours of funded street outreach; extending the crash bed facilities in Belfast and re-examining the access arrangements for homeless hostels. Medium term actions around the availability of treatment and support services for homeless people with complex needs and a potential further roll-out of Housing First wraparound support services for vulnerable people are due to be complete by end March 2017.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the impact on the work of housing associations if they were to be reclassified as public bodies.

(AQW 483/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is currently undertaking an independent review of the classification of Housing Associations in Northern Ireland. The (ONS) decision is expected to be announced in the autumn 2016.

The Department cannot pre-empt the ONS decision.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on plans to apply Local Housing Allowances to the social rented sector.

(AQW 484/16-21)

Mr Givan: I am aware of the Chancellor's announcement in the Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015, which states that the UK Government intends to introduce Local Housing Allowance rules to the social rented sector. Social sector rents have been increasing at faster rate than the equivalent rents in the private sector across Great Britain.

I have asked my Officials to examine social sector and private sector rent levels here, as well as any impacts the introduction of an equivalent measure may have. No decision will be taken until this scoping exercise is complete.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the work being carried out by the Housing Executive at the Dales and Moynes flats in Seymour Hill.

(AQW 488/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Housing Executive has advised that a planned maintenance scheme to complete concrete repairs to the balconies in three blocks at the Dales is due to commence in September. The Housing Executive has previously carried out dry lining to external walls and ceilings in flats on the top floors in response to issues with condensation or dampness. Since March 2016 a further five flats have been dry lined and one is ongoing.

As you are aware the Housing Executive has now developed a Tower Block Strategy to determine the long term future of its tower blocks. The next step for all its remaining tower blocks, including those in the Dales and Moynes, is option appraisal. This is not simply about determining the best way of “fixing up” a particular tower block but will take into account how that tower block will best address housing need in that area in the longer term. The option appraisal programme is now underway and the Housing Executive plans to have the full appraisal programme completed by the end of this year.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) how many families with more than two children will lose Tax Credits / Work Allowances under the new welfare system; (ii) how much on average those families will lose; and (iii) what mitigation his Department has put in place for families expected to be affected by the two child policy.

(AQW 572/16-21)

Mr Givan:

- (i) In 2013/14, there were 33,000 households in Northern Ireland receiving Child Tax Credit for more than two children, with 42,500 children above the proposed two-child cut-off.

This gives an indication of the number of households that could eventually be impacted by this policy as Universal Credit will eventually replace Child Tax Credit and cases that are new awards will be limited to receiving the child element for only two children.

However, existing households on Child Tax Credit who have more than two children will not be affected by the policy and linking rules will ensure that they continue to receive child elements for each of their children if the household moves to Universal Credit.

As the policy will only apply to new births under Child Tax Credit and New Awards to Universal Credit it will take a number of years for the existing stock of protected households to be replaced by households that have been affected by the policy change.

- (ii) The Child Element of Child Tax Credit/Universal Credit is worth £53.20 per week in 2016-17. This rate will be what would have been received for each additional child if the two child policy was not in place, however some cases may be subject to the Tax Credit or Universal Credit taper in which case the total amount of benefit would be reduced due to the income of the household.
- (iii) The member will be aware that the Executive asked Professor Evason to lead a Working Group and to provide the Executive with a set of recommendations on how best to use the available funding detailed in the Fresh Start Agreement to mitigate the worst aspects of Welfare Reform. The Executive accepted her report in full and my department is currently implementing those recommendations in full. There was no funding allocated in the report's recommendations for families expected to be affected by the two child policy.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities for an update on any shared housing schemes planned for South Belfast.

(AQW 626/16-21)

Mr Givan: There are two shared neighbourhood schemes planned for South Belfast. They are the Ravenhill Avenue site and the Embankment site, Ballynafeigh.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of staff in the new councils being paid different rates for undertaking the same duties as staff from the preceeding councils.

(AQW 684/16-21)

Mr Givan: The bringing together of councils as part of local government reform has provided an unprecedented opportunity to deliver improved services to citizens while also increasing efficiency. Councils are autonomous bodies and as such are responsible for agreeing and implementing staff terms and conditions. Local Government reform required the transfer of personnel to new councils and as part of that process staff had their existing terms and conditions protected under Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 as set out in the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014. Any future decisions regarding the potential harmonisation of terms and conditions will be for individual councils to progress.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities what is the status of the budget for cladding and other external and internal works, including fire and safety testing, for the seven towers in the New Lodge area of North Belfast.

(AQW 691/16-21)

Mr Givan: I continue to support the delivery of investment by the Housing Executive in the short-term through its interim investment plan. I have made available £21 million this year for this purpose, which will allow some of the more difficult types of stock, like tower blocks, to receive investment.

Cuchulainn House has already benefitted from over cladding and similar work to a second block in the New Lodge area, Eithne, has now commenced as part of the Housing Executive's interim investment plan. This also includes a CCTV scheme for the blocks which is also currently on site, and a Fire Doors scheme that the Housing Executive has advised is currently programmed to start in the coming weeks.

As you are aware the Housing Executive has now developed a Tower Block Strategy to determine the long term future of its tower blocks. The next step for all its remaining tower blocks, including those in the New Lodge, is option appraisal. This is not simply about determining the best way of "fixing up" a particular tower block but will take into account how that tower block will best address housing need in that area in the longer term. The option appraisal programme is now underway and the Housing Executive plans to have the full appraisal programme completed by the end of this year.

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Communities to outline how he plans to address the long term disparity in economic inactivity between different areas of Northern Ireland to achieve an acceptable level of regional economic balance.

(AQO 52/16-21)

Mr Givan: Following the recent departmental restructuring, ownership of economic inactivity as a key policy priority for the Executive has passed to my Department, the Department for Communities.

The draft Programme for Government Framework, now out for consultation, identifies a reduction in economic inactivity as a key indicator of progress towards a range of outcomes, including Outcome 1: 'we prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy'.

The very specific commitment to reducing economic inactivity is complemented by another key Programme for Government indicator, that of "increasing economic opportunities for our most deprived communities", for which my department also has lead responsibility.

Delivery on these commitments will involve cross Executive working and the involvement of key stakeholders from across every sector of Northern Ireland, given the range of barriers to work faced by those with health conditions and disabilities and those with caring responsibilities, many of whom would like to participate in the labour market. I believe that we can help people make these transitions by putting in place the right conditions and giving them the right support to access work, stay in work and to progress in a job that meets their particular needs.

In recognition of this, my department will develop an action plan to address economic inactivity in collaboration with the Departments for Health, the Economy and Education, as well as the Public Health Agency, Health and Safety Executive and other important stakeholders.

The action plan will seek to build on the last Executive's economic inactivity strategy, "Enabling Success" and it will consider the learning from innovative area based approaches such as the 'Want to Work?' trial run by Derry City & Strabane District Council. 'Want to Work?' involved early and more intensive engagement with new claimants to Employment and Support Allowance in order to identify what support could assist the claimant in moving closer to work. It was local government led, supported by central government, local Health Trust and community partners.

I expect that we will bring forward actions that address both the social and economic issues that need to be tackled in order to address economic inactivity, as well as recognising that a one size fits all approach will not address the disparate reasons for high rates of economic inactivity in different parts of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Condition Management Programme and its implications for patients with Fibromyalgia and Myalgic Encephalopathy.

(AQW 745/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Condition Management Programme (CMP) is a person-centred work-focused, health rehabilitation programme. The key aim of the programme is to help people who are unemployed to manage their health condition and symptoms, improve their confidence and well-being, and in doing so, help improve their chances of making a successful return to work.

The Condition Management Programme is entirely voluntary and is accessed through local Jobs & Benefits offices and JobCentres throughout Northern Ireland. It is primarily aimed at people receiving Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

The Programme is delivered, for the Department for Communities, by experienced multi-disciplinary teams of healthcare professionals from the five Health & Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. The Programme is a great example of cross departmental partnership working and recognises the clear link between good health, well-being and work.

Condition Management Programme targets clients with various health conditions, to support them in their efforts to take up work or make a successful return to the workplace. It is not a treatment programme – it is designed to assist people to manage their condition in the context of work.

The three main targeted conditions are mental ill-health, musculo-skeletal (which includes Fibromyalgia and Myalgic Encephalopathy), and cardio-respiratory. However, examples of other conditions include neurological, cancer, epilepsy, and sensory problems.

During the past six months improvements have been made to the design and delivery of Condition Management Programme aimed at affecting a more flexible service to those accessing the support and better measuring its impact in terms of work outcomes.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what is the contract completion date for the Public Realm Scheme in Ballymena; and whether it is on schedule.

(AQW 781/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Department for Communities has provided funding to assist Mid and East Antrim Borough Council to deliver a major public realm scheme in Ballymena. The public realm scheme commenced in May 2015 and it is programmed to be completed by 28 November 2016. As with all these types of major capital schemes issues may arise that impact on the completion date, however at the present time the Council and its design team remain committed to the stated deadline. Any changes to the works programme must be agreed with the Council as the contracting authority.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what is the contract completion date for the public realm scheme in Portstewart; and how far is it up to schedule.

(AQW 826/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Department for Communities has provided funding to assist Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council to deliver a public realm scheme in Portstewart.

The public realm scheme commenced in January 2016 and was scheduled for completion by 31st May 2016. Whilst part of the scheme was completed on time, work on the promenade has been delayed and is now due to be completed at the beginning of July 2016.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail how many jobs were created from the recent jobs fair held in the Marine Court Hotel, Bangor.

(AQW 927/16-21)

Mr Givan: The recent Job Fair in North Down attracted over 50 employers offering 917 jobs. Just over 800 jobseekers attended and to date, employers have confirmed that they have recruited 81 jobseekers directly as a result of the event. Some employers have yet to confirm how many they recruited and we expect further updates from these employers on completion of their recruitment process.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Communities what additional resources have been made available for the local independent advice network following the introduction of Welfare Reform; and whether any further resources are being made available in the remainder of this financial year.

(AQW 1028/16-21)

Mr Givan: As part of the Fresh Start Agreement, the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to fund the recommendations of the Evason Report to mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform.

The Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report recommended that additional independent advice services should be put in place to help and support customers through the welfare changes. The Executive made a commitment to provide £8m funding over 4 years to provide the additional services. The Department is currently finalising arrangements with the regional advice organisations to have those additional services in place by August 2016, with the relevant funding in-place for the remainder of this financial year.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Communities whether he plans to strengthen legislation on disability as part of a new disability strategy.

(AQO 38/16-21)

Mr Givan: A Strategy to improve the lives of people with disabilities was launched in 2013 and was developed on a rights based approach to fulfil obligations provided for in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

This strategy is underpinned by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, as amended by the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 which provides additional protection for people with disabilities across Northern Ireland.

Although policy responsibility for the Disability Strategy has just recently transferred to my department, I understand the previous administration had no plans to amend the legislation.

The Executive acknowledges the obstacles and challenges faced by people with disabilities in their daily lives. The draft Programme for Government Framework contains 14 strategic outcomes one of which is to – ‘Increase quality of life for people with disabilities’.

If our work on the PFG identifies the need for any new legislation to deliver this outcome, I will of course be happy to consider it at that time.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Communities how many people have received letters informing them that they need to seek alternative accommodation or be subject to the bedroom tax.

(AQO 39/16-21)

Mr Givan: I would like to thank the member for his question and in my answer I would also like to address the question from Mr Girvan (AQO (15) 45/16-21), which also relates to Social Sector Size Criteria.

In the Fresh Start Agreement, the Executive committed to the Social Sector Size Criteria or “Bedroom Tax” not being applied in Northern Ireland. Officials are currently working through options to mitigate the Social Sector Size Criteria to ensure that no household will be financially impacted by the changes in how housing benefit payment is calculated.

The legislation to introduce the mitigation scheme will be brought before the NI Assembly later this year. This will enable the Social Sector Size Criteria to be totally mitigated in Northern Ireland from January 2017.

I am committed to ensuring all households have accurate and timely information about the changes and to assure them that they will see no change in the amount of rent they have to pay. To date neither my department or the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have issued letters informing people that as a result of implementing the Social Sector Size Criteria they need to seek alternative accommodation, or that they will be subject to the Bedroom Tax.

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the redevelopment of Windsor Park.

(AQO 40/16-21)

Mr Givan: The new National Football Stadium at Windsor Park continues to progress well and is nearing the end of its construction phase. The majority of the project was completed in March 2016, delivering an operational stadium with a seated capacity of almost 15,000. The final phase, reconstruction of the West Stand and completion of the Education & Heritage centre, is due to be completed as planned, in September 2016. This will bring seated capacity up to 18,500.

DCAL contributed £28.75 million towards the National Stadium Project, funded from the Regional Stadia Budget. IFA contributed an additional £4 million.

The project will be completed on time and to the agreed budget.

My Department has also invested in the redevelopment of the Olympia Leisure Centre, directly adjacent to Windsor Park, in partnership with Belfast City Council. This project is part of the Council’s Investment in Leisure Transformation, with DCAL contributing £2.75m from the Regional Stadia budget to the total £21.75 million cost of the project. The first phase will complete in November 2016, with final completion in late 2017. On completion, the new leisure centre and sports village at the rear of the West Stand will completely transform the area.

However, the significance of the Regional Stadia Programme goes way beyond construction. Real success will lie in the socio-economic and community benefits that will be realised long after construction, once the three stadia have been completed. My Department’s role is to maximise each and every benefit and to optimise the return on the Executive’s investment in the Regional Stadia Programme.

Significant social clauses have and will continue to be included in the construction contracts for each stadium. The Construction of Windsor Park alone has provided opportunities for 32 Long Term Unemployed (LTU) and 19 apprenticeships. Some of these opportunities have led to full time employment.

In addition, the Department have been working with the three Governing Bodies of GAA, Soccer and Rugby; Belfast City Council and other stakeholders to develop outreach programmes.

One example of this is the emerging “Belfast Community Benefits Initiative” that will deliver extensive programmes of sport, physical activity, mental health initiatives, employment & learning opportunities for a range of groups across Belfast; including those facing social exclusion and those experiencing long-term unemployment.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities how many representatives from his Department will be attending matches in an official capacity at the European Championships in France.

(AQO 41/16-21)

Mr Givan: It was a fantastic achievement by the Northern Ireland team to top their group and to get to the Finals of the European Championships in France. The team performances in the run up to the finals were excellent and to go into the tournament on the back of a 12 game unbeaten run was exceptional.

I look forward to attending a number of their matches in France in my capacity as Minister with responsibility for Sport and adding my personal support and encouragement to the team. I can confirm that a Departmental official will accompany me, in an official capacity, to each of the matches that I am attending.

No other representatives from my Department will be attending any of the tournament matches in an official capacity.

Under the leadership of Michael O'Neill and the backroom staff, and of course the fantastic support from the fans, the team have shown that they can compete with the best. We can all be proud of what they have achieved to date and look forward to enjoying their progress in the finals.

The Team's performance in their first match against a quality Polish side on Sunday night was encouraging and I am sure that their determination and undoubted ability will see them through in the remaining fixtures. Given the belief and determination that exists within the team, there is no doubt, that they are still capable of progressing beyond the group stages.

I am sure that everyone will join with me in recognising the achievements of Michael and his team and wishing them every success in their remaining games.

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Communities whether his Department has any plans to bring forward legislation on sign language.

(AQO 42/16-21)

Mr Givan: My predecessor, the former Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Carál Ní Chuilín, launched a consultation on the Sign Language Framework, which includes policy proposals for legislation on 15th March 2016. The consultation period closes on 4th July 2016 after which I will make a decision based on an analysis of the feedback received, including the feedback provided by many people from the Deaf community, who have been able, for the first time in Northern Ireland, to give their views on a consultation using Sign Language and Facebook.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Communities how he intends to progress the development of the Irish language.

(AQO 43/16-21)

Mr Givan: My Department meets all its obligations towards Irish under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

My Department joint funds the North South Language Body which comprises Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency. Foras na Gaeilge has the statutory responsibility for the promotion of the Irish Language and the Ulster-Scots Agency has responsibility for the promotion of greater awareness and use of Ullans and Ulster-Scots cultural issues.

My Department is currently developing the Irish language through funding for the Gaeltacht Quarter Action Plan and work is ongoing to set up an Irish Language Academy and an Ulster-Scots Institute.

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sexual Orientation Strategy.

(AQO 44/16-21)

Mr Givan: The good relations strategy, Together: Building a United Community, gives a commitment to publishing a Sexual Orientation strategy. The Stormont House Agreement and the Fresh Start document both state that the Together: Building a United Community will be implemented in full.

The Executive agreed a draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21, which included 14 outcomes supported by 42 indicators for change. Included within the outcomes are references to 'a more equal society' and 'a shared society that respects diversity'. These are very high level outcomes that we need to develop supporting actions to deliver against. Detailed work has started with the launch of the Framework for public consultation and I would welcome the views of everyone, including those from the LGB community, as part of that consultation process.

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the implementation of the bedroom tax.

(AQO 45/16-21)

Mr Givan: I would like to thank the member for his question and in my answer I would also like to address the question from Mr Girvan (AQO (15) 45/16-21), which also relates to Social Sector Size Criteria.

In the Fresh Start Agreement, the Executive committed to the Social Sector Size Criteria or "Bedroom Tax" not being applied in Northern Ireland. Officials are currently working through options to mitigate the Social Sector Size Criteria to ensure that no household will be financially impacted by the changes in how housing benefit payment is calculated.

The legislation to introduce the mitigation scheme will be brought before the NI Assembly later this year. This will enable the Social Sector Size Criteria to be totally mitigated in Northern Ireland from January 2017.

I am committed to ensuring all households have accurate and timely information about the changes and to assure them that they will see no change in the amount of rent they have to pay. To date neither my department or the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have issued letters informing people that as a result of implementing the Social Sector Size Criteria they need to seek alternative accommodation, or that they will be subject to the Bedroom Tax.

Department of Education

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education to detail any of the 26 recommendations of the Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme published in January 2013 by Sir Robert Salisbury that have been implemented.

(AQW 20/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Of the 29 published Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme recommendations, 1 recommendation was not accepted and 13 of the remaining 28 recommendations have been implemented in full, as detailed below:

No.	Description
5	The Department of Education should restrict the number of funded initiatives for schools both to minimise administrative costs and effort both at centre and within schools and to encourage greater focus and coherence of approach at school level.
6	The use of earmarked funding by schools should be effectively monitored, with appropriate interventions should expectations not be met.
7	An exit strategy for each funded initiative should be developed prior to its implementation, to alleviate the risk that progress achieved during the initiative will be surrendered upon cessation of the funding stream.
8	The Department of Education should review all current earmarked initiative funding to ensure that earmarked funding is the best approach and that funding would not be better used by being directly delegated to schools via the funding formula.
9	To allow schools to fulfil the requirements of the Entitlement Framework in the short to medium term, the Department of Education should consider extending earmarked entitlement framework funding at its current level for the 2013/14 and 2014/15 financial years.
15	The funding arrangements for Alternative Education Providers should be reviewed. Arrangements to remove funding from mainstream schools following transfer should be assiduously followed (involving not only AWPU funding, but also Special Educational Needs and social deprivation funding), with transfer of this funding to EOTAS budgets.
16	More funding should be directly targeted at pupils from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds. This should be part of core school funding rather than short-term initiatives. A revised funding formula should increase the level of funding spent for social deprivation.
17	Increased funding for socio-economic deprivation should be weighted towards schools with significant concentrations of disadvantage to reflect the negative effects of such concentrations.
20	Social deprivation funding should continue to be allocated using either adjusted Free School Meal eligibility criteria (to increase eligibility at post-primary), or "Ever Free School Meals" criteria.
23	In future, the following principles should underpin the Common Funding Scheme: Sustainable schools should be funded according to the relative need of their pupils, and in a way that enables the effects of social disadvantage to be substantially reduced; Sustainable schools should be funded on a consistent and fair basis, taking full account of the needs of pupils; The formula should support schools in delivering the curriculum; The formula should underpin and reinforce wider education policy and objectives; The formula should be as transparent and comprehensible as possible and predictable in its outcomes.
25 26	The Department of Education should aim to ensure that a future funding formula distributes as much funding as possible according to pupil rather than institutional needs and has the minimum number of factors required to facilitate the distribution of funding in an equitable manner thereby making it as clear as possible why a school receives the funding it does. The Department should consider the implementation of a new funding formula.
28	The balance of funding between primary and post-primary should be kept under review.

Actions are being taken forward on all other recommendations.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the effect on the delivery of education, particularly in areas of social disadvantage, following the recent changes to the payment of National Insurance and Superannuation costs; and whether he has any plans to reduce this burden on schools.

(AQW 111/16-21)

Mr Weir: I am conscious that as a result of real terms reductions to the 2016-17 Executive's Resource Budget, all public services face significant pressures, and that the Resource Budget outcome for Education is particularly challenging with a net cash reduction of £72.1 million from 2015-16.

Schools across all sectors face difficult choices and ongoing challenges to ensure they live within their delegated budgets. Within the overall funding of £1,167.5 million distributed to schools in 2016-17, over £77.5 million is distributed under the Targeting Social Need elements of the Common Funding Formula, to reflect the additional needs of pupils identified as socially disadvantaged or performing below the expected level for their age.

As far as possible, I will strive to protect schools' budgets, within the finite resources made available to my Department. It is my intention to gain a full understanding of the overall 2016-17 Education budget position before I make any funding decisions.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail by area (i) the number of Special Educational Needs (SEN) nursery places requested in 2015-16; (ii) the number of SEN nursery places allocated in 2015-16; (iii) the total the amount of vacant spaces and additional capacity by SEN nursery school in 2015-16 and; (iv) the estimated number of places needed for 2016-17. **(AQW 212/16-21)**

Mr Weir: (i), (ii) and (iv) The table below provides details of nursery places assessed by the Education Authority (EA) as requiring special school nursery placements in 2015/16. Some parents express a preference for a specialist placement; however, the statutory assessment process determines the most appropriate placement.

Children in Special School Nurseries 2015/16

EA Area	(i) No of SEN Nursery Places Requested in 2015-16	(ii) No of SEN Nursery Places Allocated in 2015-16	(iv) No of Special School nursery places potentially needed for 2016-17
Armagh	54	54	62
Ballymena	63	61	62
Belfast	53	53	65*
Dundonald	84	58 initially 71 by year end	95*
Omagh	56	56	60
Total	310	295	344

* The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has a long waiting list for pre-school assessments in its Child Development Clinics. This has resulted and continues to result in very late notifications to the EA and where necessary, referrals to the Educational Psychology Service. Both Dundonald and Belfast Offices anticipate a high number of referrals which are currently pending to progress over the summer.

The EA has advised that vacant spaces depend on the size of the room and the needs of the pupils. Generally, Pupil Teacher Ratio: Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) 6:1; Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) 8:1; and Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) 10:

- (iii) 1 is used. Using this allocation, some nurseries were over-subscribed and one in the Belfast office area was undersubscribed by 3 places and another by one place as a child moved out of the area. However, where there is physical space and less complex pupil needs, historically some legacy boards increased the classroom assistant allocation in special school nurseries to allow more pupils to attend. As pupil needs are becoming more complex, with increasing numbers of pupils with SLD, this is no longer possible/desirable.
- (iv) The estimate of the number of places needed for 2016-17 is subject to regular review. It is too early to provide a final accurate analysis of pupil numbers in 2016/17 as many cases are still pending due to late referrals to Educational Psychology, arising from waiting lists in HSCT Child Development Clinics. The estimate at this stage would suggest a significant increase in comparison to 2015/16.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education on what best practice evidence, consultation with principals and parents and Education Authority processes was the decision to reduce special educational needs nursery provision from full-time to part-time taken. **(AQW 213/16-21)**

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that the primary focus in 2015/16 was to meet its statutory duty to ensure that every pre-school child with assessed SEN accessed a place in an early years' special school setting, if this was required.

The EA took its decision to review pre-school provision in special schools on the basis of increased demand for early years' special school places and to ensure such places are available for those children who need them.

The recommendation for part-time provision to be implemented regionally was approved by the EA's Children and Young People's Services Committee in June 2015 and the Authority advised special school principals of this development in October 2015.

Following this decision and in light of significant concerns raised by parents and special schools, including disquiet about a perceived lack of meaningful engagement with stakeholders, the Authority was instructed to undertake a review of its decision.

At my recent meeting with the EA's Chair, I emphasised the need for meaningful engagement with those directly affected by the decision. The Chair assured me that the review will involve the establishment of a professional practitioner group and a parent stakeholder group.

I will continue to monitor the review's progress closely to ensure that the EA delivers on its commitments.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how many children that requested a Special Educational Needs nursery place did not receive one in 2015-16, include the reason in each case.

(AQW 214/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has acknowledged that, in 2015/16, there were capacity issues for pre-school provision in special schools in some areas. The Authority has advised that it made reasonable adjustments to existing provision, including introducing 2 sessions per day in Tor Bank and Clifton Special schools, to manage the impact of capacity issues.

The EA has indicated that, in its Ballymena office area, less than five pupils did not access early years' placements in special schools that required it, but alternative arrangements were made. In its Dundonald office area, 17 children initially did not access early years' special school placement that required it, but were subsequently placed in Knockevin Early Years Centre in February 2016.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) full-time and (ii) part-time Special Educational Needs nursery placements available, broken down by school or nursery.

(AQW 215/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are over 800 pre-school providers in Northern Ireland. On the basis of parental preference and pupil assessed need, early years' children with SEN can be placed in mainstream nursery settings. Children with a statement of SEN are placed in mainstream settings outside the open enrolment process and these are considered supernumerary admissions. In this regard the information provided in Table 1 is not an allocated number per provision.

Table 1 below provides the breakdown of early years' places in mainstream pre-school settings based on part-time and full-time attendance.

Table 1 - Early years' places in mainstream pre-school settings based on part-time and full-time attendance 1

	Full-Time	Part-Time	Total
Nursery Schools	4,011	1,893	5,904
Nursery Classes	5,195	4,117	9,312
Play Groups	-	7,799	7,799
Day Nurseries	-	917	917
Total places	9,206	1,4726	23,932
	38.47%	61.53%	100%

1 excludes children placed through the statutory assessment process

Early years' children with a statement of SEN, where appropriate, can also be placed in a special school. Due to the variation in hours of attendance across special schools, a clear demarcation of full and part-time cannot be calculated. Table 2 below provides information on special school nursery classes.

Table 2 - Education Authority Pupils in Special School Nursery Classes 2015-16

Office	School	Hours of Attendance	No of Sessions Per Day	No of Pupils
Belfast	Greenwood House	5.0	1	9
Belfast	Harberton	5.0	1	14
Belfast	Mitchell House	5.0	1	7
Belfast	Oakwood	5.0	1	17
Belfast	St Gerard's	5.0	1	4

Office	School	Hours of Attendance	No of Sessions Per Day	No of Pupils
Ballymena	Castle Tower	2.5	2	12
Ballymena	Hill Croft	2.5	2	12
Ballymena	Kilronan	2.5	2	12
Ballymena	Roddensvale	2.5	2	13
Ballymena	Sandelford	2.5	2	12
Dundonald	Brookfield	4.5	1	14
Dundonald	Clifton	2.5	2	14
Dundonald	Knockevin	4.5	1	19
Dundonald	Parkview	4.5	1	16
Dundonald	Tor Bank	2.5	2	16
Armagh	Ceara	2.25	2	11
Armagh	Donard	2.75	1	6
Armagh	Lisanally	2.25	2	8
Armagh	Rathore	2.25	2	16
Armagh	Sperrinview	3.0 2.5	2	12
Omagh	Ardnashee (Upper)	4.75	1	8
Omagh	Ardnashee (Lower)	4.5	1	14
Omagh	Arvalee	4.5	1	7
Omagh	Knockavoe	4.0	1	8
Omagh	Rossmar	4.0	1	8
Omagh	Willowbridge	3.0	2	10

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail the waiting times for support from the Language Communication Team following Educational Psychology assessments in the Western region.

(AQW 244/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that the waiting list in the Western Region can vary from one term to, what is currently an exceptional situation, i.e. four terms. The length of the waiting list is dependent on the number of referrals to the service at any given time and the capacity of the service to meet this demand.

I understand that the EA has experienced recruitment difficulties and has been unable to appoint appropriately skilled and experienced staff to support these children, and that it is planning to carry out a further recruitment exercise in the near future.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the current status of the proposed new build for Dromore High School.

(AQW 304/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are currently no plans for a new school build for Dromore High School.

A potential new build project for the school was submitted by the former Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) for consideration in advance of a Major Capital Investment announcement in June 2014. The proposal was scored under the Department's Protocol which prioritised those schools to be advanced in planning. Unfortunately it did not attract a sufficiently high ranking to be included in the announced list at the time.

At present there are no plans for a further major capital investment announcement; however the school's Managing Authority, the Education Authority (EA), has confirmed that a new site has been purchased and that major capital investment for Dromore High School remains a strategic priority and the school will be submitted for consideration should a future call for potential major capital projects in the post-primary sector be made.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Education to detail the community and voluntary organisations in East Derry that received funding from his Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 336/16-21)

Mr Weir: Details of community and voluntary organisations in East Londonderry that have received funding directly from the Department and indirectly via the Education Authority in each of the last five years are included in the table below.

Funded by the Department of Education

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Aghadowey Pre-School Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Appletree Childcare	√	√	√	√	√
Banagher Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Castlerock Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Crows Nest Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Drumsum Parent and Toddler	√	√	√	√	√
Harpurs Hill Community Early Years	√	√	√	√	√
Lifestart Limavady	√	√	√	√	√
Little Diamonds Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Little Rascals Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Macosquin Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Magilligan Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Orchard Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Portrush Community Pre-School Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Portrush Sea Cadets		√			
Straidarran Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
West Bann Development	√	√	√	√	√

Funded by Education Authority

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
15th Derry CSI	√	√	√	√	√
1st Aghadowey Scouts				√	√
1st Castlerock Scouts	√	√	√	√	√
1st Coleraine BB	√	√	√	√	√
1st Coleraine Scouts	√	√	√	√	√
1st Garvagh BB	√	√	√	√	√
1st Portstewart Scouts	√	√	√	√	√
1st-3rd Portstewart BB	√	√	√	√	√
2nd Coleraine BB	√	√	√	√	√
3rd Coleraine Guides	√	√	√	√	√
5th Coleraine BB	√	√	√	√	√
7th Coleraine Guides	√	√	√	√	√
Aghadowey BB	√	√	√	√	√
Aghadowey Guides	√	√	√	√	√
Aghadowey Pre-School Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Aghadowey YC	√	√	√	√	√
Apple Tree Childcare	√	√	√	√	√

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Ballykelly Boys' Brigade (1st)	√	√		√	√
Ballykelly Community Youth Club	√		√	√	√
Ballykelly District Guide Association	√	√	√	√	√
Ballykelly Girls' Brigade	√	√	√	√	√
Ballykelly Presbyterian Church YC	√	√	√		
Ballysally GB	√	√		√	√
Ballysally Presbyterian YC	√	√	√	√	√
Ballywatt GB	√	√	√		√
Ballywillan CGB	√	√	√	√	√
Ballywillan CLB	√	√	√	√	
Ballywillan GB	√	√	√	√	√
Balteagh Boys Brigade (1st)	√	√		√	√
Balteagh Girls' Brigade	√	√	√	√	√
Balteagh Presbyterian Church Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Banagher Boys' Brigade (1st)	√	√		√	√
Banagher Girls' Brigade	√	√	√		√
Banagher PG	√	√	√	√	√
Benbradagh Community Support				√	√
Benedy Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Bovalley Community Association Youth Group	√	√	√	√	√
Bovevagh Girls' Brigade	√	√	√	√	√
Bovevagh Scouts (1st)				√	√
Burnfoot Community Youth Club		√	√	√	√
Burnside GB	√	√	√	√	√
Castlerock Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Causeway Community Pre-School			√	√	√
Churchlands YC	√	√	√	√	√
Claudy Guides (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Coleraine Army Cadets	√	√	√	√	√
Coleraine Baptist Campaigners	√	√	√	√	√
Coleraine Gateway	√	√	√	√	√
Coleraine Girl Guide Association	√	√	√	√	√
Coleraine RDA	√	√	√	√	√
Coleraine YFC	√	√	√	√	√
Coleraine Youth Group	√	√	√	√	√
Coolessan Community Association	√	√	√		
Craigbane Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Crisim YC	√	√	√	√	√
Crow's Nest Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Cumber /Upper Cumber Youth Club/Council	√			√	
Cumber Upper Youth Groups		√	√	√	√

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Curryrierin YC	√	√			
Derry Scouting Ireland (25th)		√		√	√
Drumachose Boys' Brigade (1sr)	√	√	√	√	√
Drumachose Girls' Brigade(249th)	√	√	√	√	√
Drumahoe Platoon ACF	√	√	√		√
Drumsurn Community Association Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Dunboe BB	√	√	√	√	√
Dunboe GB	√	√	√	√	√
Dungiven Boys' Brigade (1st)				√	√
Dungiven Girls' Brigade (316th)	√	√	√	√	√
Dungiven PG	√	√	√	√	√
Dungiven Young Farmers' Club	√	√	√	√	√
Eglinton ACF	√	√	√	√	√
Eglinton Scout Group	√	√	√	√	√
Enagh Youth Forum				√	√
Faughanvale BB 1st	√	√	√	√	√
Faughanvale Guide Units 1st	√	√	√	√	√
Feeny Community Youth Association				√	√
Foreglen Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Garvagh Community Pre-School Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Garvagh GB	√	√	√	√	√
Garvagh YFC	√	√	√	√	√
Gortnaghey Youth Group	√	√	√	√	√
Greysteel PG	√	√	√	√	√
Hazelbank GB	√	√	√	√	√
Hazelbank YC	√	√	√	√	√
Holy Trinity YC	√	√	√	√	√
Kilrea Community Early Years	√	√	√	√	√
Kilrea Guides	√	√	√	√	√
Kilrea YFC	√	√	√	√	√
Largy Presbyterian Church Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Learmount Drop-In Centre	√	√	√	√	√
Lettershandoney YC	√	√	√	√	√
Limavady Christian Drop-In Centre	√	√	√	√	√
Limavady Baptist Campaigners	√	√	√	√	√
Limavady BB 2nd	√	√	√	√	√
Limavady Boys' Bridage (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Limavady Detachment ACF	√	√	√	√	√
Limavady Girls' Brigade (1st)	√	√	√		√
Limavady Girls' Brigade (2nd)	√	√	√	√	√
Limavady Outreach & Service Team (LOST)				√	√

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Little Acorns Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Little Diamonds	√	√	√	√	√
Little Rascals	√	√	√	√	√
Macosquin BB	√	√	√	√	√
Macosquin Community Pre-School	√	√	√	√	√
Macosquin GB	√	√	√	√	√
Macosquin Youth Fellowship	√	√	√	√	√
Magilligan PG	√	√	√	√	√
Main Street YC	√	√	√	√	√
Millburn Community Association			√	√	√
Millburn Community Pre-School	√	√	√	√	√
Naiscoil Ghleann An Iolair				√	√
Naiscoil Léim an Mhadaidh	√	√	√	√	√
Naiscoil Neachtain	√	√	√	√	√
New Beginnings Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
New Row GB	√	√	√	√	√
Orchard PG	√	√	√	√	√
Park PG	√	√	√	√	√
Phoenix ADHD Project			√	√	√
Playhouse Activity Centre	√	√	√	√	√
Portrush BB	√	√	√	√	√
Portrush Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Portrush Presbyterian GB	√	√	√	√	√
Portrush Sea Cadets	√	√	√	√	√
Portstewart Guides	√	√	√	√	√
Portstewart Presbyterian GB	√	√	√	√	√
Powerhouse YC (Portstewart Baptist Church YC)	√	√	√	√	√
Roe Valley PG	√	√	√	√	√
Roe Valley Scout and Guides	√	√	√	√	√
Roe Valley Scouts (1st)		√		√	√
Roundabout PG	√	√	√	√	√
Sandelford Special School Pre-School			√	√	√
Snatch YC (Ballyrashane)	√		√	√	√
St Anne's Brigin/Guides	√	√	√	√	√
St Canice's CGI Girl Guides	√	√	√	√	√
St Columba's PS Pre-School Group	√	√	√	√	√
St Colum's Pre-School Centre	√	√	√	√	√
St Malachy's Pre-School Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
St Mary's Youth Club (Altinure)	√	√	√	√	√
St Patrick's Girl Guides (Claudy)				√	√
St Theresa's Brigini/Cygnnet	√	√	√	√	√

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
St. Patrick's GB	√	√	√	√	√
Stepping Stones Creche	√	√	√	√	√
Straidarran PG	√	√	√	√	√
Sunshine Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Terrace Row GB	√	√	√	√	√
The Cornerstone YC	√	√	√	√	√
The Dry Arch Centre	√	√	√	√	√
The Glens Community Association	√	√	√	√	√
The House YC	√	√	√	√	√
Watt Fun Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Windyhall YC	√	√	√	√	√

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the use made by the voluntary youth sector of the funding awarded to it by the Education Authority; and whether the sector will continue to receive support from his Department.

(AQW 340/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has statutory responsibility for securing adequate facilities for youth service activities. The Education Authority allocates funding to support a range of voluntary youth sector organisations at both regional and local level. These organisations, and their volunteers, make a significant contribution to the key actions within the local area plans and the Regional Youth Development Plan.

The Chief Inspector's Report for 2012 – 2014 found that the overall effectiveness of 92% of youth provision was evaluated as good or better. This was based on an assessment of both statutory and voluntary sector provision.

I am committed to ensuring that young people can access opportunities for development through youth work, delivered in partnership with the statutory and voluntary sector.

Mr Lyons asked the Minister of Education what support he plans to give to schools in 2016 to alleviate pressure on school budgets as a result of increased salary, national insurance and superannuation contributions.

(AQW 350/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is my intention to give further consideration to the overall 2016-17 Education budget position before I make any funding decisions.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Education to detail the community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that received funding from his Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 351/16-21)

Mr Weir: Details of community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that have received funding directly from the Department and indirectly via the Education Authority & Youth Council Northern Ireland (YCNI), in each of the last five years are included in the table below.

Funded by the Department of Education

Community/Voluntary Group	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
1st Tyrone Scouts	-	-	-	-	√
Acorn Woman's Group	√	√	√	√	√
Bunnahone Bunnies Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Clogher Valley Community Centre	-	√	-	-	-
Dungannon and Cookstown Business Education Partnership	√	√	√	√	-
Fountain NI Ltd	√	-	-	√	-
Kids R Us Cross Community	-	√	√	√	√
Killyman Community Playgroup	√	√	√	√	√
Little Castles Playgroup	-	√	√	√	√

Funded by the Education Authority

Community/Voluntary Group	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Ballinamallard Girls' Brigade	√	√	√	√	√
Ballinamallard Scout Group (1st)	-	√	√	√	√
Bannagh Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Belcoo Youth Club	-	√	√	√	-
Bellanaleck Brownies/Rainbows	√	√	√	√	-
Carrosyl Youth Group	√	√	√	√	√
Cavanacarragh Youth Club	-	√	√	√	√
Cleenish Cross Community Youth Club	-	√	√	√	√
Colebrooke/Cooneen Scout Group (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Collegiate Young Farmers' Club	√	√	√	√	√
Cooneen/Colebrooke/GFS	√	√	√	√	√
Derrygonnelly Scout Group (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Derrygonnelly Youth Club	-	√	-	√	√
Derrylin Girls' Friendly Society	√	√	√	√	√
Devenish Partnership Forum	√	√	√	√	√
Dromore GFS	-	-	-	-	√
Dromore Parish Church Lads Brigade	-	-	-	-	√
Dromore Youth Club	-	-	-	-	√
Ederney Youth Club	√	√	√	√	-
Enniskillen Boys' Brigade (2nd)	√	-	√	√	√
Enniskillen Brownies (1st)	-	-	-	√	√
Enniskillen Girl's Brigade (183rd)	√	√	√	√	-
Enniskillen Guides (1st)	√	√	-	√	√
Fermanagh Scout Group (11th)	-	-	√	√	√
Fermanagh Scout Group (18th)	-	-	-	√	-
Fermanagh Scouts (14th)	-	-	√	√	-
Fermanagh Scouts Lisnaskea (4th)	√	√	√	√	√
Fermanagh Youth Club	√	√	√	√	-
Fermanagh Youth Leaders Council	√	√	√	√	-
Florencecourt Guides (1st)	√	√	√	√	-
Inishmacsaint Girls' Friendly Society	√	√	√	√	√
Inniskilling Scout Group (St Macartan's 1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Irvinestown Boys' Brigade (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Irvinestown Girls' Brigade	√	√	√	√	√
Irvinestown Scouts	√	√	√	√	√
Kesh Young Farmers' Club	√	√	√	√	√
Kilskeery BB	-	-	-	-	√
Kilskeery Youth Club	-	-	-	-	√
Kinawley Scouts	√	√	√	√	√
Lack Church of Ireland Youth Fellowship	√	√	√	√	√

Community/Voluntary Group	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Letterbreen Methodist Girls' Brigade (295th)	√	-	√	√	√
Lisbellaw Girl Guides (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Lisbellaw Young Farmers' Club	√	√	√	√	√
Lisbellaw Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Lisnaskea Guide Association	√	√	√	√	√
Lisnaskea Scout Group (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Magheracross Girls' Friendly Society	√	√	√	√	√
Magheraculmoney Guide Unit (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Magheraculmoney Scouts (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Maguiresbridge Guides (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Monea Guides (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
Mullaghdund Youth Club	-	√	√	√	√
Newtownbutler Brownies (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
NI Girls Brigade Co (183rd)	-	-	-	-	√
North Fermanagh Rangers	√	√	√	√	√
One Way Youth (Brookeborough)	-	√	√	√	√
Pettigo Boys' Brigade	√	√	√	√	√
Pettigo Girls' Brigade	√	√	√	√	√
Ros sorry Scout Group	√	√	√	√	√
Ros sorry Guides (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
St John Ambulance - Enniskillen Cadets Division	√	√	√	√	√
St Joseph's Youth Club	√	√	√	√	-
St Macartan's YC	-	-	-	-	√
St Mary's Youth Club [Newtownbutler]	√	√	√	√	√
St Michael's Guide Unit	√	√	√	√	-
St Michael's Scout Group SI (1st/2nd/3rd Fermanagh)	√	√	√	√	√
Tempo & Clabby Scout Group (1st)	-	-	-	√	√
Tempo & Clabby Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Tempo Guides (1st)	√	√	√	√	√
The Fountain Youth Club	√	√	√	√	√
Trillick & District	-	-	-	-	√
Trillick Parish GB	-	-	-	-	√
Trillick YC	-	-	-	-	√

Funded by the Youth Council NI

Community/Voluntary Group	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Share Discovery Village	√	√	√	√	√

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail the total cost of translation services within his Department in each of the last three years, broken down by language; (ii) how he intends to approach the issue of translating departmental literature; and (iii) how this will impact on the associated costs

(AQW 369/16-21)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The table below details how much the Department has spent on translation services in each of the last three financial years, broken down by language. In addition to this expenditure, during these years the Department has also employed an Irish Language Officer. As the translation of documents forms an integral part of a range of duties carried out by the Irish Language Officer it is not possible to separate out the cost for this work.

Language*	2013/14 £	2014/15 £	2015/16** £
Arabic			833
Basque		374	
Braille		468	
Bulgarian	121		
Cantonese	1,093	140	140
Czech	695		
French	993		
German	993		
Hungarian	979	133	200
Irish	31,414	28,220	19,560
Latvian	1,014	133	200
Lithuanian	979	133	200
Mandarin	1,093	140	210
Polish	2,042	133	250
Portuguese	938	166	310
Romanian	695		125
Russian	695		
Slovak	1,014	133	200
Spanish	993		
Tetum	961		
Thai	786		
Totals	47,498	30,173	22,228

* Translated from or into the language listed.

** Estimated figure, subject to finalisation of 2015/16 account.

- (ii) - (iii) In a constrained financial environment, I am looking closely at the approach to be taken to translation of departmental communications in the future. It is too soon to say how this will impact on costs.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of funding provided through the Youth Intervention Programme to organisations in the Southern Region of the Education Authority, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 402/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has confirmed the levels of funding provided through the Youth Intervention Programme to the Southern Region of the Education Authority.

**Funding for Youth Intervention Programme within the Southern Region of the Education Authority
between 2013-2016**

	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	Total funding per group
Dept of Education Youth Intervention Funding				
Controlled				
Armagh Area Youth Project	3,000			3,000
Bessbrook Youth Engagement Programme		1,186	1,981	3,167
Bessbrook Development Project		2,172		2,172
Brownlow Area Youth Project		2,541	1,912	4,453
Coalisland, Making the Change		2,100		2,100
Drumalane Project	2,510			2,510
Drumgor Youth Centre	2,033	2,459	1,267	5,759
Dungannon Youth Office			1,320	1,320
Fivemiletown Youth Project	1,691			1,691
ENP Youth Forum	2,199			2,199
Forkhill (Ruth Neary)			2,689	2,689
Gortgonis, Coalisland	1,905			1,905
Keady Area Youth Project	2,134		2,575	4,708
Keady/Tandragee Joint Summer Scheme			1,671	1,671
Killeen Youth Group				0
Moy Youth	1,471	966	1,415	3,853
Moy Youth - winter		2,466		2,466
Newtownhamilton	2,689			2,689
Newry Street, Kilkeel	3,032			3,032
Ring of Gullion (Ruth Neary)		2,582		2,582
Swing, Coalisland			728	728
Taghnevan Youth Centre		1,038	1,008	2,047
Tandragee Drop-in	1,978	1,101	1,217	4,296
Tullygally Youth Centre		2,546	2,135	4,681
Warrenpoint Youth Group				0
	24,641	21,158	19,919	65,718

Voluntary				
Bosco/Banbridge	3,000			3,000
BOSS Project		2,868	3,000	5,868
Cabin Club		2,965	3,000	5,965
Carnagat	2,858		1,497	4,355
Clann Éireann		3,000	2,920	5,920
Clann Éireann - winter		2,978		2,978
Darkley Club House	2,151		2,907	5,058
Drop Inn Ministries	2,598			2,598
Drumbeg North & South		2,999		2,999

	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	Total funding per group
Drumgor Detached	2,052		1,783	3,835
Edgarstown Residents' Association			2,672	2,672
Emmanuel Youth	3,137		3,000	6,137
Fuse Youth Ministry	3,041	2,972		6,013
Kingdom Youth Centre		2,670	3,000	5,670
Lurgan Foyer				0
Lurgan YMCA		2,121	2,798	4,919
Magnet		2,897	1,660	4,557
Meadowbrook Residents' Association		2,063	2,916	4,979
North Lurgan Youth Club	2,934			2,934
Parkmore Community Association				0
PLACE				0
Portadown YMCA				0
Portadown YMCA/St Mary's	2,998			2,998
Rathfriland 2nd Choice	1,836			1,836
Rathfriland Elim	3,000	3,000		6,000
REACT	1,710	2,619		4,329
Scotch Street Youth Club		2,998	2,917	5,915
Scotch Street Youth Club - winter		2,578		2,578
Seagoe Youth Group	3,030	2,758	2,281	8,069
Seagoe Youth Group - winter			3,000	3,000
Spring	1,619		1,800	3,419
St Mary's Youth Centre, Portadown		1,310	2,063	3,373
The Reach	3,000	2,977	3,015	8,992
The Reach - winter			3,000	3,000
Y Zone	2,593	2,500	2,851	7,944
Y Zone - winter		2,431		2,431
	41,555	50,705	52,081	144,341

OFMDFM Youth Intervention Funding				
Controlled				
Carnagat, Newry		3,000		3,000
Coalisland, Making the Change		1,202		1,202
Crossmaglen/Silverbridge	3,800			3,800
Drumgor Youth Centre		1,441		1,441
Lurgan Youth Annexe	2,681			2,681
Taghnevan Youth Centre	2,920	2,772	3,221	8,913
Tullygally Youth Centre	3,111	2,260	4,175	9,546
West Armagh Group			2,573	2,573
	12,512	10,675	9,969	33,156

	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	Total funding per group
Voluntary				
Bosco, "Who Are Ya?"			2,691	2,691
BOSS Project	6,000	2,978	6,000	14,978
Cabin Club	5,949	3,000	6,000	14,949
Clann Éireann	5,824	2,993	6,000	14,817
Drop Inn Ministries		2,958		2,958
Drumarg	3,600			3,600
Drumbeg N&S Residents' Association	6,000	2,996	4,444	13,440
ECF Links	4,853	2,991		7,844
Emmanuel Youth			4,005	4,005
Fuse Youth Ministry		3,000	2,964	5,964
Kingdom Youth Centre	4,450			4,450
Lurgan YMCA	2,942	2,946		5,888
Meadowbrook Residents' Association	3,141	3,000	4,866	11,007
PLACE	3,182			3,182
Portadown YMCA		1,775	3,686	5,461
Scotch Street YC			3,313	3,313
SPRING		2,000		2,000
St Mary's Youth Centre, Portadown	2,842	2,635		5,477
The Y Zone			2,886	2,886
YMCA Lurgan			2,916	2,916
	48,783	33,271	49,772	131,825

Total controlled funding per year	37,153	31,834	29,888	
Total voluntary funding per year	90,338	83,976	101,853	
Evaluation	2,392	1,191	0	
Total Intervention	129,883	117,000	131,740	

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of the value and expenditure of the General Schools Budget (i) resources held at centre; and (ii) centrally held resources attributable to schools, in each of the last three years. (AQW 405/16-21)

Mr Weir: The latest Financial Year for which expenditure data is available is 2014-15. Therefore information requested has been provided for the three Financial Years from 2012-13 to 2014-15 and is contained in the table below:

Year		Resources Held at Centre £M	Centrally Held Resources £M
2012-13	Budget	254.1	274.6
	Expenditure	253.0	270.6
2013-14	Budget	239.9	283.2
	Expenditure	239.3	281.6

Year		Resources Held at Centre £M	Centrally Held Resources £M
2014-15	Budget	234.4	289.7
	Expenditure	233.7	287.9

* 2014-15 figures include £4.3m of VAT reimbursement for VGS and GMI schools, this funding was previously allocated via the Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB).

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education (i) to list the projects within his Department's remit for which funds have been ringfenced; (ii) to provide the date for each project on which funding is scheduled to cease; and (iii) whether he will seek to end any projects before their previously set end date.

(AQW 406/16-21)

Mr Weir:

(i) & (ii) The information requested is detailed below.

Projects For Which Funds Have Been Ringfenced	Date On Which Funding Is Scheduled to Cease
Delivering Social Change Shared Education Signature Project	June 2018
North South Collaborative Programme of Work – History and Digital Storytelling	Not Yet Known
Teacher e-portfolio	Not Yet Known
STEM – Teachers' Continued Professional Development	Not Yet Known
Nurture Groups	March 2017
Together: Building a United Community Strategy – RRI Borrowing – Strule Shared Education Campus including Arvalee Special School and Corran, Omagh and Portadown Integrated Primary Schools	March 2017
Shared Education Campuses Programme – Resource Funding	*
Extended Schools Programme – Additional Parenting Strand	No specified end date
Extended Schools Programme – Irish Language Strand	No specified end date
Full Service Schools (Boys' and Girls' Models) – Pilot Programme	No specified end date
Full Service Community Network – Pilot Programme	No specified end date

* Funding to be provided as an in-year Monitoring Round Transfer by The Executive Office.

(iii) I am currently considering the status of all departmental projects.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Department's special measures on the running of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, including improvements in the running of the organisation.

(AQW 413/16-21)

Mr Weir: The General Teaching Council was placed in special measures on 22 December 2015 in response to concerns about governance and staffing issues. As a result, the frequency of oversight of governance and accountability with my Department has increased. The Department also appointed a senior official as interim Accounting Officer and Chief Officer in March 2016.

The Council has recently been reconstituted and the interim Chief Officer has reported that there is a commitment on the part of the Council to address the identified organisational issues. The Council held a dedicated Corporate Governance Workshop on 26 May and, on 13 June 2016, endorsed a revised corporate governance framework and proposals for revised Committee structures to help the organisation to move forward.

My Department continues to keep the situation under review.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education whether he will have discussions with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland regarding their current subscription, including whether it is more appropriate to have a fee proportionate to a teachers salary so that part-time teachers do not pay the same fee as full-time teachers.

(AQW 414/16-21)

Mr Weir: In accordance with the Education (NI) Order 1998, the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) charges fees determined by it, with the approval of the Department. Any decision to review the fee is, therefore, a matter for the Council in the first instance. I understand that the Council has considered this issue and concluded that it is not viable because of the high administrative costs it could incur and the need to keep the fee as low as possible. I have no plans to discuss this issue with the GTCNI at present.

The fee is eligible for tax relief; therefore the actual annual cost to a teacher is approximately £32 which is less than that paid by teachers in other jurisdictions and considerably lower than the fee paid by other professions.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education whether funding will be made available for summer diversionary related schemes in Belfast.

(AQW 437/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has confirmed that funding will be made available for summer diversionary related schemes in Belfast. The EA is currently considering applications for the summer diversionary related schemes and applicants will be notified shortly.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount spent by the Education Authority (and former Education and Library Board areas) on pensions for staff in the statutory youth service, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 442/16-21)

Mr Weir: The amount spent by the Education Authority (and former Education and Library Board areas) on pensions for staff in the statutory youth service, in each of the last five years is as outlined in the table below.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Region					
Belfast	313,337	356,414	442,946	493,302	495,070
North Eastern	353,946	367,256	403,488	455,672	511,327
South Eastern	379,605	358,557	446,477	454,532	445,072
Southern	338,452	336,741	444,879	455,083	504,081
Western	272,160	300,219	357,018	369,996	409,312
Total	1,657,500	1,719,187	2,094,808	2,228,585	2,364,862

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount spent by each Education Authority Area (and former Education and Library Board areas) on (i) full time voluntary youth centres; and (ii) full time statutory youth centres (listed separately) for each of the last five years.

(AQW 443/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has provided the information requested on full time voluntary and full time statutory youth centres for each of the last five years.

I have arranged for the information to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how he plans to address underachievement in the working class protestant community.

(AQW 462/16-21)

Mr Weir: The underachievement in the working class protestant community in particular in relation to Protestant Boys has been the topic of much discussion and debate over recent years. I welcome improvement seen in recent statistics but it is still too low and is an issue I will be considering over the coming months.

This is a societal issue and we all have an important role to play - government departments and agencies, education stakeholders, schools, voluntary and community organisations and parents. One of my key priorities will be to drive more ambitious improvement in every school and in every sector so that more of our young people achieve and progress.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the need to increase childcare provision in West Tyrone.

(AQW 517/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Childcare Strategy aims to assess and address the need for childcare services at the overall, Northern Ireland level.

At the more local level, the Strategy's School Age Childcare Grant Scheme is being delivered by the Childcare Partnerships using the local knowledge of their stakeholder members, including their assessment of local need.

Since its launch in 2014, the Grant Scheme has financially supported some 115 childcare settings and more than 3,000 low cost childcare places.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education on what occasions his Department consults with the (i) planning authorities; and (ii) representatives from all education sectors.

(AQW 522/16-21)

Mr Weir:

- i) The Department engages proactively on an ongoing basis with the Planning Authorities regarding Capital Works undertaken across the schools' estate that may require planning permission. Integrated Consultant Teams that are appointed to each Major Capital Investment project will be tasked under their contract with undertaking early engagement with the Planning Authorities (through the form of Pre-Application Discussions) to seek initial views from the Planners and other key statutory bodies such as Transport NI and NI Water regarding the proposed early conceptual design plans for a new school build and will review designs based on feedback prior to the submission of a formal Planning Application.

The Department has also recently written to all District Councils setting out each of the Department's Major Capital Investment projects in their area and seeking a meeting to discuss how both parties can better work together on all cross-cutting strategic issues.

- ii) The Department engages with representatives across the education sector on matters such as: strategy, policy or programme proposals; draft regulations; proposals for change; and the way forward on particular issues. The Department's latest formal consultations can be found at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/consultations>. Consultation is however not just about the formal documents and responses, it is an ongoing daily process.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to include approved enrolment figures on the Schools + website.

(AQW 523/16-21)

Mr Weir: Work is presently being taken forward to ensure approved enrolment figures are included on the Schools + website. It is intended that this information will be published in tandem with the publication of 2015/16 census information on the site. This information will be published in the coming weeks.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education whether there is an integrated education, Irish Medium or Controlled Schools' Trustee Service.

(AQW 524/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are no specific Trustee Services for integrated or Irish-medium schools. Rather, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta are funded to provide support and advice to the Integrated and Irish –medium sectors on a range of issues; their role will include a level of engagement with the trustees of integrated and Irish-medium schools. In line with the previous Executive's decision, a Controlled Schools Support Council is scheduled to be established by September 2016.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of funding given to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools in years (i) 2013/14; (ii) 2014/15; (iii) 2015/16; and (iv) 2016/17.

(AQW 525/16-21)

Mr Weir: The amount of funding given by my Department to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools in years (i) 2013/14; (ii) 2014/15; (iii) 2015/16; and (iv) 2016/17 is detailed in the table below:

Resource Funding	2012-13 £000s	2013-14 £000s	2014-15 £000s	2015-16* £000s	2016-17 £000s
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)	3,141	3,270	3,693	4,128	3,405

* 2015-16 Figures include CCMS Voluntary Severance Funding of £458k

No Capital funding was provided to CCMS in the financial years in question.

The Resource funding to CCMS in years 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 equates to final expenditure as reported in the Final Outturn.

2015-16 funding figures are based on expenditure reported at Provisional Outturn. CCMS's 2015-16 Resource Accounts are yet to be finalised. Although still subject to potential audit adjustments it is anticipated there will be no significant change to the 2015-16 figures.

2016-17 figures are based on allocations made to date.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of funding given to the Northern Ireland Catholic Commission for Education in (i) 2013/14; (ii) 2014/15; (iii) 2015/16; and (iv) 2016/17.

(AQW 526/16-21)

Mr Weir: My Department does not provide funding as a matter of course to the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education. However, payments totalling £43k have been made to the organisation for services rendered in the 2013-14 financial year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail all capital projects that are (i) currently being completed; and (ii) expected to be completed in the next three years in West Tyrone.

(AQW 541/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes a large number of new builds and one School Enhancement Project (school refurbishment or extension schemes costing between £0.5 - 4m) representing significant investment in the West Tyrone constituency area. Major capital investment projects announced to advance in planning include:-

- Arvalee School and Resource Centre which was announced in June 2012 with associated estimated investment of £10.4m. Construction is well underway and the school is due to open in September 2016.
- The new build for Arvalee forms part of the overall Strule Shared Education Campus (SSEC) Programme involving a total of six new schools and associated shared education facilities to cater for the needs of more than 4,000 pupils. The SSEC involves significant investment into Omagh's post-primary and special education sectors estimated at over £125m. Concept designs for the overall exemplar campus have been developed and a new design team was appointed in November 2015 to oversee the design and construction of the remainder of the campus which remains on schedule to open in September 2020.
- Strabane Academy announced in January 2013 at an estimated cost of £21.5m. Designs for this 700 pupil school are well developed and tender documentation is being prepared to procure the contractor to deliver the construction.
- Omagh Integrated Primary school which was also included in the January 2013 announcement. A new 14 class integrated primary school plus single nursery unit for with estimated costs of £5.7m is progressing well and is expected to commence on site in the summer.
- Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh in Strabane was also announced at this time. A business case for a new seven classroom primary was approved earlier this year with estimated costs of over £3m. Land purchase is underway.
- A new seven class and nursery unit build for Gaelscoil na gCrann Primary School in Omagh was announced in June 2014 an estimated cost of just under £3m. Land purchase is ongoing and an Integrated Design Team has recently been appointed.

Loreto Grammar School in Omagh was successful with an application under the School's Enhancement Programme for essential refurbishment works. The project commenced on site in May 2015 and saw the replacement of old mobile accommodation with a new modular block providing general classrooms, science and music accommodation along with some other general refurbishment work. The scheme had a total approved cost of £2.94m and works completed in March 2016.

All projects that are not contractually committed will be subject to funding being available at the time to permit the project to proceed to tender stage.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the implementation of the Childcare Strategy; (ii) what resources have been allocated for the implementation of the Childcare Strategy; and (iii) how the £12 million funding for the Childcare Strategy will be allocated.

(AQW 555/16-21)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Implementation of the first phase of the Childcare Strategy is progressing well with more than 3,000 low cost childcare places already supported. I hope to bring forward the full version of the Childcare Strategy to my Executive colleagues in the coming months, having taken account of the many consultation responses received, the agreed Programme for Government and the new opportunities that now exist to align childcare with a range of Early Years initiatives.
- (ii) The resources required to implement the full Childcare Strategy will be determined as the Strategy is finalised.
- (iii) The £12 million Executive Childcare Fund is currently being used to deliver the first phase of the Childcare Strategy. To date, some £8.8 million has been allocated to implement its Key First Actions including the School Age Childcare Grant Scheme.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to ensure that all primary school children can read and write when they enter post-primary education.

(AQW 560/16-21)

Mr Weir: Teachers and literacy coordinators in schools play a key role in ensuring that children learn to read and write. Their work to achieve this is supported by my department, the managing authorities, by school leaders and by parents and carers.

The Department is currently engaged in a range of activities which support the development of reading and writing skills. This includes support in the early years through the Sure Start and Pre-School Education Programmes, as well as additional support to primary schools via extended schools and through the Literacy and Numeracy Key Stage 2/3 CPD Project.

As part of the Delivering Social Change agenda, my Department has been working with the Department of Health on the Early Intervention Transformation Programme that seeks to equip, support and empower parents to provide their children with the best start in life.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education whether the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education can assist with the recruitment of principals and vice principals to Controlled Integrated Schools.

(AQW 562/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) performs a representational role for all integrated schools, including controlled integrated schools.

NICIE has no statutory role in relation to the recruitment process within schools; however, it may advise and support integrated schools in relation to identifying the specific needs of the school and the particular criteria that may be included in the person specification to ensure that the successful candidate can meet all the requirements of the post while cultivating the integrated education ethos.

Controlled Integrated schools are required to operate within the provisions of the Education Authority (EA) Teaching Appointments Scheme (2016), and the Board of Governors (BOG) must conduct all business relating to staff appointments in accordance with the relevant Articles of the Scheme for the Management of Controlled Schools (2016).

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education how many children diagnosed with autism, confirmed by an educational psychologist, are receiving (i) the number of hours of recommended support; and (ii) less than the recommended hours of support, including the reasons for these children not receiving the recommended hours.

(AQW 568/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that the diagnosis of children with autism is the responsibility of the Department of Health and is therefore confirmed by Paediatric ASD Services within Trusts. Educational psychologists neither diagnose nor confirm a diagnosis of autism.

Children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs have an entitlement to the level of support as set out in the statement and as agreed with the school. The support may come in the form of additional adult support and/or intervention from EA autism support services. The number of hours is specific to each child and is agreed with the parent and school.

In some cases, if schools have difficulty recruiting adult assistance, a child may receive less than the recommended level. Schools are encouraged to put contingencies in play to meet the need, pending the appointment of the adult assistant.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education how many children with a confirmed medical diagnosis of autism (i) have been assessed by an educational psychologist; and (ii) are awaiting diagnosis by an educational psychologist, broken down by county.

(AQW 569/16-21)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Education Authority has advised that it does not hold this information on a database and a manual file search would be required across the region.
- (ii) If a child has a diagnosis of an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and is referred to Educational Psychology an assessment will be completed. As per response to AQW 568/16-21 the diagnosis of children with autism is the responsibility of the Department of Health and is therefore confirmed by Paediatric ASD Services within Trusts. Educational Psychologists neither diagnose nor confirm a diagnosis of autism.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the progress of a sixth form for Killard House School, Donaghadee; (ii) what meetings have taken place to date; (iii) who in the Education Authority is managing the process; and (iv) whether the development stage will include an open consultation with parents of children already attending Killard House School or parents of children who have the potential to become students of Killard House Schools sixth form.

(AQW 570/16-21)

Mr Weir: Responsibility for the planning of all grant-aided schools rests with the Education Authority (EA). The EA has advised that a meeting took place with representatives of the Board of Governors of Killard House and the principal on 15 April 2016. Officers from the Children and Young People's Services Directorate were in attendance.

Discussions took place regarding the area plan and the proposed recommendation within the area plan to progress towards 3-19 provision in special schools which would include Killard House. The Board of Governors was clear regarding the proposal timeframe for the action plan and recognised that this would, in time, require a development proposal. The statutory development proposal process involves widespread consultation.

Before publication, the Board of Governors, staff and parents of the school concerned must be consulted as well as other schools which may be affected by the proposal. Following publication, there is a statutory two month objection period, during which anyone may provide comments directly to my Department.

The draft area plan for special schools will be subject to public consultation in the autumn once I have approved it for publication.

A senior officer in the EA education and area planning office is leading the process, with input from the Children and Young People's Services Directorate.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education what formula will be used to distribute the superannuation schemes for teachers geographically amongst schools.

(AQW 592/16-21)

Mr Weir: Under the delegated Local Management of Schools funding arrangements, the funding for all school staff salaries, national insurance and superannuation costs, are incorporated within the Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB), distributed to grant-aided schools under the Common Funding Formula arrangements.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the payment of accrued holiday pay for part time music tutors in the Education Authority Western Region.

(AQW 634/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority is currently processing entitlement for music tutors in the Western Region and is working towards the payment of arrears to staff in August 2016 or sooner if possible.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the total number of redundancies planned as a review of the number of bus escorts required by the Education Authority; (ii) the number planned for Omagh and Strabane; (iii) the discussions with parents held as a consultation prior to this decision; (iv) discussions with the Health and Social Care Trusts on the impact on the children of such a decision; (v) the discussions held with the principals of the schools to be effected; (vi) which schools will be effected in Omagh and Strabane; (vii) the anticipated savings in each region; and (viii) the anticipated savings in Omagh and Strabane.

(AQW 638/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that transport services are routinely reviewed to ensure that they best meet the needs of pupils, while remaining as efficient and effective as possible. Due to the reduction of pupils a small number of routes in the Omagh area will no longer be required. This will not impact upon on pupils as they will all be accommodated within existing EA buses that will have accompanying bus escorts. In respect of your specific questions, detailed above, the EA has provided the following information:

- (i) The maximum number of redundancies planned as a review of the number of bus escorts required by the Education Authority is three;
- (ii) a maximum of three redundancies are planned for Omagh and no redundancies are planned for Strabane;
- (iii) there is no requirement to discuss with parents as there will be no detrimental impact to individual pupils arising from any proposed reduction in the number of bus escorts;
- (iv) there is no necessity to have discussions with the Health and Social Care Trusts;
- (v) there is no requirement to discuss with principals of schools as there will be no detrimental impact to pupils;
- (vi) There will be no impact on schools;
- (vii) and (viii) It is not possible to identify precise savings at this stage as the savings will be influenced by individuals identified by the voluntary or compulsory redundancies.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education whether he will instruct the Education Authority to postpone the proposed redundancies effective from 31 August 2016 until all interested parties are consulted; and ensure that no redundancies are effected until a sound business case is established, including any effects on children who may lose their escort.

(AQW 639/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is a matter for the Education Authority (EA), as the employer, to make decisions about staff redundancies and to ensure that the EA meets its obligations to consult relevant parties about the proposals. It is not appropriate for me to become directly involved in such matters.

I have been advised by the EA that transport services are routinely reviewed to ensure that they best meet the needs of pupils, while remaining as efficient and effective as possible. Due to the reduction of pupils a small number of routes in the Omagh area will no longer be required. This will not impact upon on pupils as they will all be accommodated within existing EA buses that will have accompanying bus escorts.

An initial consultation meeting between EA representatives, staff and trade unions took place on Thursday June 9th 2016. Further consultation meetings will take place throughout the process.

The EA seeks to avoid compulsory redundancies where possible and routinely explores other options including redeployment and voluntary severance before considering redundancy. Expressions of interest for voluntary severance have been sought from all current bus escorts.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of applicants that applied for a 2016-17 pre-school place and didn't get their first or second preference place, broken down by Education Authority area.

(AQW 659/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that 93.9% of children received an offer of a funded pre-school place in either their first or second preference (87.4% first preference, 6.5% second preference), while 1,415 children did not receive the offer of a pre-school place in either their first or second preference setting, at Stage One of the pre-school admissions process.

Approximately 23,000 children have been offered a pre-school place, with 99.9% of children, whose parents fully engaged with the admissions process to the end, offered a pre-school place.

Ms Seeley asked the Minister of Education what level of funding he hopes to achieve for children's services in the June monitoring round.

(AQW 675/16-21)

Mr Weir: As part of the June Monitoring Round, which is subject to approval by the Executive, my Department has received funding of £2.3million for the Childcare Strategy the first phase of which was launched in 2013.

Ms Seeley asked the Minister of Education for an update on new builds for (i) St Colms, Twinbrook; (ii) Lismore Comprehensive School, Craigavon; and (iii) Portadown Integrated Primary School.

(AQW 678/16-21)

Mr Weir: Projects for Lismore Comprehensive, Lurgan and Portadown Integrated Primary School form part of the Department's current Major Capital Investment Programme.

There are currently no plans for a new school building for St Colm's High School, Twinbrook. The Department continues to be supportive of the wider Colin Town Centre project however there are significant area planning issues that need to be resolved before any post-primary project could be considered.

In respect of the project for Lismore Comprehensive, a design team has recently been appointed and design work is now underway on a 1,200 pupil new build post-primary school with associated overall estimated investment of £22.8m.

Following the modified approval in December 2015 of a Development Proposal to increase the overall pupil enrolment number of Portadown Integrated Primary School to 406 pupils, there is now a clear position in respect of the size of the school to be built - a 14 class base Primary School and double nursery unit. Work to complete technical feasibility assessments of potential sites which will inform the development of a robust business case is well progressed. This project will bring estimated investment of £5m to the area.

All projects that are not contractually committed will be subject to funding being available at the time to permit the project to proceed to tender stage.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education what plans he has for the Investing in the Teaching Workforce scheme.

(AQW 685/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will take time to consider the detail of the proposed Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme; however, I am mindful of the academic year and the importance of minimising disruption to the delivery of the curriculum to pupils.

Therefore, an Investing in the Teaching Workforce Scheme will not run before the next academic year.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to outline what percentage of pupils in each North Antrim electoral ward attend grammar schools.

(AQW 718/16-21)

Mr Weir: The percentage of pupils resident in each electoral ward in the North Antrim constituency that attend grammar schools in 2015/16 is as follows:

Academy	72.6%
Ahoghill	58.3%
Ardeevin	53.7%
Ballee and Harryville	21.7%

Ballycastle	11.1%
Ballykeel	19.2%
Ballymoney East	38.4%
Ballymoney North	56.3%
Ballymoney South	34.9%
Braidwater	39.8%
Broughshane	59.3%
Castle Demesne	26.6%
Clogh Mills	46.1%
Cullybackey	48.5%
Dervock	46.3%
Dunloy	51.7%
Fair Green	18.2%
Galgorm	67.5%
Giant's Causeway	37.2%
Glenravel	45.8%
Glenwhirry	62.8%
Grange	60.2%
Kells	52.8%
Kinbane	12.5%
Kirkinriola	57.9%
Loughguile and Stranocum	28.8%
Maine	55.1%
Park (Mid and East Antrim)	46.3%
Portglenone	49.6%
Rasharkin	49.4%
Route	49.8%
Slemish	58.8%
Torr Head and Rathlin	11.6%

Source: NI school census

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to outline the percentage of Year 8 pupils entitled to free school meals in each post-primary school in North Antrim.

(AQW 719/16-21)

Mr Weir: The percentage of year 8 pupils entitled to free school meals in 2015/16 in schools in the North Antrim constituency is as follows:

Ballycastle High School	37.9%
Ballymena Academy	6.2%
Ballymoney High School	49.6%
Cambridge House Grammar School	16.4%
Cross and Passion College	30.3%
Cullybackey High School	27.0%
Dalriada School	7.8%

Dunclug College	46.5%
Dunluce High School	52.5%
Our Lady of Lourdes High School	50.0%
Slemish College	27.5%
St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena	13.0%
St Patrick's College Ballymena	45.5%

Source: NI school census

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education what percentage of school leavers achieved at least five GCSE's at grades A* - C or equivalent, including in English and Maths in (i) North Antrim; and (ii) Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 733/16-21)

Mr Weir: The answer is contained in the table below.

Number and percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A* - C (including equivalent qualifications), including GCSE English and Maths, 2010/11 to 2014/15¹

	North Antrim ²		Northern Ireland	
	Number	%	Number	%
2010/11	804	59.2	13,791	59.5
2011/12	791	60.0	13,990	62.0
2012/13	807	62.8	14,303	62.2
2013/14	795	65.6	14,373	63.5
2014/15	929	67.0	14,753	66.0

Source: School Leavers Survey

Notes:

- 1 Data exclude special and independent schools.
- 2 The home postcode of the pupil has been used to determine residency in the North Antrim constituency.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education how many children with a statement of special educational needs are being taught in post-primary schools rather than schools with specialist provision.

(AQW 752/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are 8,685 pupils of post-primary school age with a statement of special educational needs. 6,112 (70.4%) are educated in a mainstream post-primary school. 2,573 (29.6%) are registered with special schools.

Source: NI school census

Notes:

- 1 Figures include pupils at stage 5 on the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice as recorded by the school.
- 2 Post-primary school figures may include pupils that are in learning support centres for some or all of the time.
- 3 Special school figures refer to any pupils attending special schools aged 11 and over on the 1st July 2015.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education to outline who makes the final decision to place a child with a statement of special educational needs in a mainstream school.

(AQW 753/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is the body responsible under special education legislation for identifying, assessing and, in appropriate cases, making provision for children with special educational needs.

The EA must explain to parents the arrangements that allow them to express a preference for a particular grant-aided (mainstream or special) school. The EA must name the parent's preferred choice of school in the child's statement unless:

- (i) The school is unsuitable for the child's age, ability, aptitude or special educational needs; or
- (ii) The child's attendance would be incompatible with the efficient education of other pupils with whom he/she would be educated or the efficient use of resources

The decision to place a child in a mainstream school is based on:

- professional advice, as part of the statutory assessment process;
- parental preference in terms of the school;
- consideration and agreement with the school.

When there is clarity regarding the proposed statement, which includes the named placement, this is ratified by the Education Authority Board.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education how his Department is promoting active travel, including any funding that is available to promote cycling.

(AQW 772/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education (DE) has been involved in discussions with the Department for Infrastructure and the Public Health Agency about the delivery of an enhanced Active Schools Travel Programme. In support of the programme, DE will consider funding the installation of cycle shelters at schools which have participated fully in the programme. This investment would be subject to available budget and assessed against other priorities.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the list of repairs required at St. Columbanus College.

(AQW 790/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has responsibility for maintenance at St Columbanus' College and has provided the following list of repairs required at the school. This list is based on condition surveys carried out between January and November 2015 and identifies the work necessary to bring the school buildings back to the condition they had when they were built.

- Replacement of damaged ceiling/plasterboard;
- Replacement of suspended ceilings/ceiling tiles;
- Recovering of low and high level corridor roofs;
- Repair of all defective fascias and barges;
- Upgrade of internal timber windows to meet safety glazing/fire safety regulations;
- Upgrade of doors to meet current fire safety standards/regulations;
- Replacement of old single-glazed windows with new PVC double glazing;
- Upgrade of toilets;
- Replacement of internal sockets and light fittings;
- Redecoration of school, including mobile classrooms (both external and internal);
- Clean all gutters and downpipes, repair all leaking joints;
- Exterior concrete repairs;
- Replacement of internal timber doors with aluminium;
- Sand and seal floors;
- Replacement carpeting;
- Replacement/levelling of old PVC floor tiles/quarry tiles with new PVC sheets;
- Replacement of floor units, sinks and worktops;
- Raise Staircase handrails to meet safety regulations; and
- Replacement of missing wall tiles in kitchen.

The EA has estimated that the total cost of making good these components is £231,874.00.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the current cost to make all repairs needed for St. Columbanus College, Bangor.

(AQW 791/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has responsibility for maintenance at St Columbanus' College and has provided the following list of repairs required at the school. This list is based on condition surveys carried out between January and November 2015 and identifies the work necessary to bring the school buildings back to the condition they had when they were built.

- Replacement of damaged ceiling/plasterboard;
- Replacement of suspended ceilings/ceiling tiles;
- Recovering of low and high level corridor roofs;
- Repair of all defective fascias and barges;
- Upgrade of internal timber windows to meet safety glazing/fire safety regulations;
- Upgrade of doors to meet current fire safety standards/regulations;
- Replacement of old single-glazed windows with new PVC double glazing;

- Upgrade of toilets;
- Replacement of internal sockets and light fittings;
- Redecoration of school, including mobile classrooms (both external and internal);
- Clean all gutters and downpipes, repair all leaking joints;
- Exterior concrete repairs;
- Replacement of internal timber doors with aluminium;
- Sand and seal floors;
- Replacement carpeting;
- Replacement/levelling of old PVC floor tiles/quarry tiles with new PVC sheets;
- Replacement of floor units, sinks and worktops;
- Raise Staircase handrails to meet safety regulations; and
- Replacement of missing wall tiles in kitchen.

The EA has estimated that the total cost of making good these components is £231,874.00.

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education for an update on the timescale for full implementation of the Education Other Than At School guidance.

(AQW 806/16-21)

Mr Weir: EOTAS provision is now expected to meet the quality standards set out in the Department's 2014 guidance and ETI are already routinely using this to inform their inspections of EOTAS setting. The only area of non-compliance relates to the need for the Education Authority (EA) to undertake a public-procurement tender for any third-party EOTAS services it wishes to buy-in.

The EA is actively working to put in place a single regional EOTAS service with unified operating practices and service delivery. It is also reviewing its own existing EOTAS capacity to determine where supplementary third-party provision will continue to be required. It would be premature and wasteful of resource to proceed to tender until this need is clearly identified and DE sees no advantage in enforcing a deadline in this matter where doing so could have an adverse impact upon the resource efficiency and future operational effectiveness of the EA.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to list the planned capital investment in the Irish medium sector in the next five years.

(AQW 813/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes seven projects in the Irish Medium sector which are set out below. In addition, one £3.7m project to build a new five classroom primary school for Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain in Belfast completed earlier this year.

A project to extend and refurbish Coliaste Feirste, Belfast was announced in June 2012 and is currently on site. The estimated cost of the project is £15.5m and the scheme is due to complete early in 2018.

In January 2013, two projects were announced to advance in planning for Gaelscoil Ui Niell in Coalisland and Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh in Strabane. Both projects will provide seven class primary schools with single nursery units. The project for Gaelscoil Ui Niell has an approved estimated cost of £3.7m and designs are well underway. A business case was approved earlier this year with estimated costs of over £3m for the Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh project and land purchase is underway.

A new seven class and nursery unit build for Gaelscoil na gCrann Primary School in Omagh was announced in June 2014 bringing an estimated investment of just under £3m. Land purchase is ongoing and an Integrated Design Team has recently been appointed. The same announcement included a project for Scoil an Droichid with approved business case estimated costs of £3.85m. A site for this seven class primary school is under consideration.

Finally, the most recent announcement in March 2016 which focused on primary schools, included two projects in the Irish Medium sector for Gaelscoil Aodha Rua in Dungannon and Gaelscoil Eanna in Newtownabbey. Both projects are at the very early stages of planning.

All projects that are not contractually committed will be subject to funding being available at the time to permit the project to proceed to tender stage.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education if he will scope the cost and viability of the introduction of twenty hours per week free pre-school integrated early education and childcare.

(AQW 834/16-21)

Mr Weir: Pre-school education provision for children in their immediate pre-school year ranges from 12.5 hours per week to 22.5 hours, 5 days a week, 38 weeks of the year. Some two fifths of children in their pre-school year are already receiving more than 20 hours per week of funded mainstream pre-school education. It is estimated that it could cost around £15million per year to extend this to all pre-school children.

I will reflect on the need for additional provision, whether pre-school education or integrated pre-school and childcare provision, in the context of my overall considerations in relation to finalising the Childcare Strategy. In so doing, I will naturally take account of the full cost and viability of any such additional provision.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what capital investment is planned for South Belfast in the next five years.
(AQW 842/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes a large number of new builds and School Enhancement Projects (school refurbishment or extension schemes costing between £0.5 - 4m) representing significant investment in the South Belfast constituency area.

In June 2014, three projects were announced to advance in planning. A business case with estimated costs of £3.85m has been approved for Scoil an Droichid. A site for this seven class primary school is under consideration. A new 1,000 pupil post-primary school is being provided for Breda Academy at an estimated cost of £21m. Work is underway to procure an Integrated Design Team for this project. The third major scheme is to refurbish and extend the 'A Block' building at Methodist College. This scheme has an approved estimated cost of £7.1m and is due to start in mid 2017, following the completion of the School Enhancement Project (SEP) which is approved at the same school.

Three SEP projects are underway at present in the area. At Malone Integrated College, a scheme to provide a sports hall and 3G pitch is in design with an approved cost of £3.3m. At Methodist College, a scheme to refurbish the McArthur hall building at an approved cost of £3.65m is due to start on site in July 2016. A project to provide a new 3G pitch and sports hall and to refurbish part of the existing accommodation at Victoria College is currently on site and is due to complete in November 2017 bringing estimated investment of £3.9m.

Finally, Forge Integrated Primary School was included in the first tranche of projects to benefit from the government's Fresh Start Agreement funding package for shared and integrated education announced in March 2016. This project is in the very early stages of planning.

All projects that are not contractually committed will be subject to funding being available at the time to permit the project to proceed to tender stage.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how he will deliver on his promise that no sector in education will be favoured in light of the statutory requirement to encourage and facilitate Irish language and Integrated schools.
(AQW 852/16-21)

Mr Weir: I will treat requests from the different sectors on merit while having due regard to legislative requirements.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline whether he will reform school transfer tests.
(AQW 872/16-21)

Mr Weir: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 511/16-21 tabled by Gerry Mullan MLA and published in the Official Report on 10 June 2016.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Strabane Academy new build.
(AQW 873/16-21)

Mr Weir: Strabane Academy was included in the capital investment statement of 22 January 2013 as one of 22 primary and post primary schools to advance in planning.

A Business Case was approved in January 2014 to build a new post primary school for 700 pupils at an estimated cost of £21.5m.

Design work is well underway and procurement documentation is being prepared to tender for a Contractor to take forward the construction work. The tender report is expected to be submitted towards the end of the year. The programme is currently on track to be on site around spring 2017.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the levels of educational underachievement in West Tyrone, broken down by (i) gender; and (ii) religion, over the last ten years.
(AQW 874/16-21)

Mr Weir: Underachievement is where an individual learner's performance is below what might be expected. Through classroom observation and analysis of formative assessment, teachers are able to use their professional judgement to assess if a pupil is underachieving.

At a system level, summative data is collected which relates to levels of progression and achievements at the end of each key stage. On its own, this information is not a measure of underachievement but it does identify groups which are, on average, experiencing lower levels of achievement than other groups.

At a system level, one of our key academic indicators relates to the proportion of school leavers who achieve at least five GCSEs at A*-C (including equivalents) including GCSEs in English and maths. Our target, published in Count, Read: Succeed – a strategy to improve literacy and numeracy, is that by 2020 70% of school leavers will achieve this threshold.

The latest published data shows that in 2015 66% achieved at this level and, against this benchmark, the proportion of pupils achieving this threshold in West Tyrone is in line with the overall average (66.4%). The table below shows that pupils resident in West Tyrone have performed at or above the Northern Ireland average since 2007/08.

Percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A* - C (including equivalent qualifications), including GCSE English and Maths, 2005/06 to 2014/15¹ – West Tyrone

Year	Total West Tyrone ²	Total NI	(i) Gender		(ii) Religion		
			Boys	Girls	Protestant	Catholic	Other ³
2005/06	47.3	52.6	42.1	52.6	57.1	43.6	52.9
2006/07	51.1	54.2	46.3	56.3	55.9	49.1	63.6
2007/08	58.0	56.3	50.4	65.1	59.9	57.0	66.7
2008/09	61.1	58.4	54.5	67.4	60.2	61.3	65.2
2009/10	62.9	59.0	57.7	68.0	63.4	62.6	65.0
2010/11	61.8	59.5	55.7	67.9	63.0	61.1	69.2
2011/12	64.6	62.0	58.4	70.9	63.3	65.2	61.1
2012/13	63.6	62.2	56.7	70.3	65.3	63.1	58.6
2013/14	64.7	63.5	57.0	73.2	65.2	64.3	71.4
2014/15	66.4	66.0	58.2	75.2	66.1	66.1	79.4

Source: School Leavers Survey

Notes:

- 1 Data exclude special and independent schools.
- 2 The home postcode of the pupil has been used to determine residency in the West Tyrone constituency based on the 2008 Assembly Area boundaries.
- 3 Other includes Other Christian, No religion and Non-Christian.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline the situation in regards to capital new-build programmes for amalgamated schools; particularly for two primary schools in Omagh; St. Colmcille's Primary School and Loreto Convent Primary School.

(AQW 875/16-21)

Mr Weir: The amalgamation of two or more schools does not automatically ensure that the new school will be selected to advance in planning for major capital investment.

A project must first be prioritised by the school's Managing Authority in response to any call for projects to be considered for major capital investment. The Department's 'Protocol for the Selection of Major Works Projects to Proceed in Planning' will then be applied to all projects submitted which includes a 'gateway' check to exclude any projects where uncertainties exist around sustainability, area planning and school size.

Those projects that progress to be scored under the Protocol will latterly be ranked and selection will be subject to the capital budget availability at the time. The Protocol does however provide additional weight to prioritise re-build of schools which have recently been subject to a rationalisation process, particularly those operating on a split site.

A project for Holy Family Primary School (the amalgamation of St Colmcille's and Loreto Convent Primary Schools in Omagh) has not been submitted by the school's Managing Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained School (CCMS), for consideration to date.

The Department's Major Capital Investment Programme currently includes a number of projects that involve amalgamations including:-

- St Clare's Convent Primary School, Newry
- Devenish College, Enniskillen
- St Ronan's College, Lurgan
- Our Lady of Fatima Primary School, Londonderry
- Mary Queen of Peace, Glenravel
- Enniskillen Royal Grammar School

- Devenish College
- St Patrick's Primary School, Belfast
- Holy Evangelist's Primary School, Twinbrook
- Breda Academy, Belfast
- Abbey Community College
- St Killian's College
- The proposed amalgamation of Kilcoan and Mullughdubh Primary Schools to form Islandmagee Primary School
- The proposed amalgamation of St Mary's PS, Moneydarragh PS and St Joseph's in Kilkeel / Annalong.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of public money held in surplus by Voluntary Grammar schools; broken down by (i) school; and (ii) in each of the last three years.

(AQW 917/16-21)

Mr Weir: The ability to carry forward surpluses is embedded in the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements. Schools may carry-forward unspent delegated funding from one financial year to the next. The purposes for which accumulated surpluses may be used are defined within the "Guidance on Financial and Management Arrangements for Controlled and Maintained Schools funded under the Common Funding Scheme".

In June 2011 the Executive agreed the Schools Surplus scheme, which is in respect of controlled and maintained schools only. This allows these schools to either increase or draw down their surpluses. This is funded from a central pot, controlled by the Executive.

As Funding Authority for all controlled and maintained schools the Education Authority (EA) is accountable for the public resources delegated to those individual schools. Each Board of Governors is responsible for the proper financial management of the resources allocated to the school.

Voluntary Grammar (VG) and the Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI) schools are separately identifiable entities in their own right, with the majority operating as companies limited by guarantee and/or charities. Unlike controlled and maintained schools, whose annual funding and outturn position is included within the EA's own Annual Accounts, each VG/GMI school must manage their own financial position. They prepare their own individual annual accounts, which are externally audited. The cumulative surplus/deficit figure for each VG/ GMI school can reflect non-public funds; will be based on their individual accounting policies (e.g. depreciation and investments) and hence cannot be compared on a like-for-like basis with either another VG/GMI school or a controlled and maintained school. In addition, VG/GMI schools do not analyse expenditure, in their accounts, by income stream i.e. public and non public funds. The Department is the Funding Authority for the VG/GMI schools.

If a VG/GMI school has an underspend on its budget, this translates into unspent cash being held in a commercial bank account. If, however, the VG/GMI school overspends its budget, this will result in an overdraft account held with a commercial bank.

Audited accounts for the year ended 31 March 2016 are not yet available from the 50 VG schools and hence the most up to date financial information available relates to the year ended 31 March 2015. At March 2015 the 50 VG schools had a total of £37.8m of cash at bank with £3.4m of overdrafts and £10m of other loans. For the reasons set out above, it is not possible to analyse these amounts between public and non public funds further from the published annual accounts. Hence the amount of public money held in surplus by VG schools is not available.

Mrs S Bradley asked the Minister of Education what oversight arrangements are in place to monitor the expenditure of Targeting Social Need to ensure that children are the direct benefactor of the funding.

(AQW 957/16-21)

Mr Weir: As part of the School Development Planning Process, schools are required to produce a School Development Plan (SDP), a strategic plan for improvement.

As part of that plan schools in receipt of Targeting Social Need (TSN) funding complete a template to provide information on how the funds have been deployed to tackle educational underachievement and to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. These School Development Plans are developed by the school's Board of Governors and monitored by the Education Authority and, in the case of Catholic maintained schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

The process for the collection of information about the use of TSN funding has been reviewed and a revised mechanism for generating a system-wide report on the use of TSN funding is under development.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Catholic maintained special schools; and the number of pupils in each school.

(AQW 961/16-21)

Mr Weir: There is only one Catholic Maintained special school in 2015/16 – St Gerard's Education Resource Centre. It has 225 pupils enrolled.

Source: NI school census

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to outline the circumstances under which a school must submit a development proposal for relocation; and to list the schools that have submitted such a proposal in the last five years.

(AQW 962/16-21)

Mr Weir: A Development Proposal (DP) is required to give effect to a significant change in education provision including the proposed relocation of a school because the proposed change may impact on a school's catchment area for pupil admissions and may also impact on neighbouring schools.

Publication of a DP commences a two month statutory objection period which provides anyone interested in or affected by a proposal with the opportunity to consider and comment on it before a final decision is made.

In the past five years (1 June 2011 to 1 June 2016) the following DPs were published proposing school relocations:

DP No	Date Published	School
223	March 2012	Knocknavoe School and Resource Centre
233	March 2013	Belmont House School
452	January 2016	Gaelscoil an Lonnáin

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how many children requested a special educational needs (SEN) nursery placement in specialist provision for 2016-17; and how many specialist SEN nursery placements are available.

(AQW 968/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that numbers in relation to nursery places in special schools are being reviewed regularly. At this stage, the EA is planning to make provision for at least 344 children in 2016/17 but acknowledges that, as more children are identified, this figure could increase.

There is not a number which defines the upper limits of specialist SEN places as the allocation is based on the needs of the child, the size of the classroom and the complexity of the needs of the group.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what plans does he have to introduce British Sign Language to the school curriculum.

(AQW 970/16-21)

Mr Weir: There is currently no statutory requirement for pupils to learn sign language. However, children should be given opportunities to engage with and demonstrate the skill of communication and to transfer their knowledge about communication concepts and skills to real-life meaningful contexts across the curriculum.

The modes of communication include talking and listening, reading and writing. Effective communication also includes non-verbal modes of communication, wider literacy and the use of multimedia and ICT technologies which may combine different modes. Children are encouraged to become effective communicators by using a range of techniques, forms and media to convey information and ideas creatively and appropriately. Therefore, schools may choose to introduce sign language in this context.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education which schools are currently in formal intervention.

(AQW 976/16-21)

Mr Weir: As at 13 June 2016 the following schools, for which inspection reports have been published, are receiving support to address areas for improvement.

School

- Ballymacward Primary School, Lisburn
- Ballytober Primary School, Bushmills
- Crossroads Primary School, Kilrea
- Culmore Primary School, Londonderry
- Fivemiletown College
- Fleming Fulton Special School
- Killowen Primary School, Rostrevor
- Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn
- Movilla High School, Newtownards
- Mullaghduh Primary School
- Park School and Educational Resource Centre, Belfast
- Rathore School, Newry
- St Brigid's Primary School, Altamuskin
- St John the Baptist Primary School, Belfast
- St Joseph's Primary School, Bessbrook
- St Joseph's Primary School, Holland Drive, Belfast
- St Malachy's Primary School, Belfast
- St Mary's Primary School, Killyleagh
- St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Strathfoyle
- St Tierney's Primary School, Roslea
- Tempo Primary School
- Upper Ballyboley Primary School, Ballyclare

Wellington College, Belfast A list of schools receiving support during the current school year is published on the Department of Education website and may be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/Schools-in-the-formal-intervention-process-201516.pdf>

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what action his Department has taken following the recommendations contained in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the Sustainability of Schools.

(AQW 977/16-21)

Mr Weir: The NIAO report on the Sustainability of Schools was published on 30 June 2015 and included eight recommendations agreed by my Department.

Project governance and management arrangements have been put in place to progress the implementation of the eight recommendations. Seven Project Teams involving relevant Department of Education (DE) staff, Education Authority (EA) and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) representatives have been established.

Progress is monitored by a Programme Board that meets monthly, with quarterly progress reports provided to the DE Board.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools that were closed down in (a) 2013-14; and (b) 2014-15, broken down by management type; and the schools that are due to close in 2015/16.

(AQW 978/16-21)

Mr Weir: The following primary and post primary schools closed in 2013-14 and 2014-15 and are expected to close in 2015/16:

2013/14

Maintained Primary

- 203-2510 Barrack Street Boys' PS
- 503-1301 Clontifleece PS
- 203-6389 St Anne's Girls' PS
- 503-1213 St Clare's Convent PS
- 503-1576 St Colman's Abbey PS

Controlled Secondary

- 321-0233 Ballee Community High
- 121-0266 Orangefield High School

Controlled Special

- 231-0015 Belmont House School
- 231-6525 Foyle View School

2014/15

Controlled Primary

- 101-0269 Avoniel Primary School
- 461-0085 Down High School, Preparatory Department

Maintained Primary

- 203-2277 Craigbrack Primary School
- 503-2693 Crievagh Primary School
- 203-2631 Envagh Primary School
- 203-2265 St Anthony's Primary School
- 203-2600 St Francis of Assisi Primary School
- 403-6081 St Luke's Primary School
- 203-2687 St Macartan's Primary School
- 403-6134 St Mark's Primary School

Controlled Secondary

- 421-0086 Knockbreda High School
- 321-0200 Monkstown Community School
- 321-0279 Newtownabbey Community High School
- 421-0183 Newtownbreda High School

Controlled Grammar

- 341-0033 Coleraine High School

Maintained Secondary

- 223-0254 Immaculate Conception College
- 523-0160 St Brigid's High School
- 523-0070 St Mary's High School
- 523-0088 St Paul's Junior High School

Voluntary Grammar

- 342-0032 Coleraine Academical Institution
- 542-0056 St Michael's Grammar School

2015/16 (Expected)**Controlled Primary**

- 301-0760 Mullaghdubh Primary School

Maintained Primary

- 303-3311 Glenravel Primary School
- 303-0625 St Mary's Primary School, Glenravel
- 203-2712 Gortnagarn Primary School
- 304-0451 Kilcoan Primary School
- 203-2702 Evisk Primary School

Controlled Grammar

- 241-0040 Collegiate Grammar School
- 461-0097 Glenlola Collegiate, Preparatory Department

Voluntary Grammar

- 242-0042 Portora Royal School

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will continue with all aspects of the cross-border collaboration initiated by his predecessor.

(AQW 1042/16-21)

Mr Weir: All Ministers in the Executive have signed up to the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) arrangements. I will participate in the NSMC in Education sectoral format in the agreed areas of cooperation.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether the Dickson Plan will continue in the Craigavon area for schools already signed up to, or waiting to use, this educational model.

(AQO 20/16-21)

Mr Weir: Education is at the core of society. It is important that all of us think carefully of the impact that education makes on the life chances of the pupils we have under our charge; that we strive to be ambitious for all pupils- and that we protect what is working within our system and where lessons are learned, to improve our system.

I offer support and assurance for the continuation of the Dickson Plan system and will be ushering in a period of educational stability on the issue. The Dickson Plan continues to have strong local community support.

My aim is to ensure that there is equality between all sectors. This means that no pupil should be disadvantaged simply because of the badge on their school uniform.

I want a first class education system that delivers in schools that are educationally and financially viable and takes account of the expressed preference of parents for a diverse system of education.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to increase the Pathway Fund.

(AQO 21/16-21)

Mr Weir: Supporting Early Years education is a key priority for the Department of Education, with over £94 million invested in a wide range of non-compulsory early years and childcare programmes including the new Pathway Fund.

In 2016/17 a budget of £2.9 million has been allocated to the Pathway Fund, the same amount of funding that was available to the previous Early Years Fund which it replaced. Pathway Funding is targeted at those settings demonstrating the highest level of need according to the published criteria.

Given the considerable pressure on the Department's budget, it is critical to strike a balance between the evidence of the value of investing in early years services, and the ongoing and competing demands on the entire education system.

The Pathway Fund therefore, prioritises support in areas of disadvantage, where children have additional needs or are at risk of harm; and where there is little or no provision currently.

The Fund has just recently been launched and the first round of applications processed for this year.

As standard practice, the Department will now review the outcome of the first round of Pathway, in order to inform future funding rounds. I do not therefore have any plans to increase Pathway funding at this point.

I want to ensure that those settings, which have not been successful in this round of applications for Pathway funding, can access support and advice on their application and be signposted, where possible to other potential sources of funding.

My Department is also working with the Pre-School Education Advisory Groups in the Education Authority to assess any impact on settings offering funded pre-school places.

Mr Kelly asked the Minister of Education for an update on his recent visit to Coláiste Feirste.
(AQO 22/16-21)

Mr Weir: I was delighted to visit Coláiste Feirste on 2 June 2016 to see the progress on the current major capital project ongoing at the school. This investment of circa £15.5 million will have a positive impact for the school and pupils providing an enhanced educational environment for many years to come.

The main provision within this project will be new sports facilities which will include a sports hall, full size 3G Gaelic pitch and 5 courts.

In addition to the improved provision for the school the investment also provides a boost to the local construction industry.

During my visit I met with staff and pupils and I was very impressed with the level of commitment to the school. I will welcome the opportunity of returning to the school when this project is complete.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to make any changes to grading examinations.
(AQO 23/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is essential that the GCSE grading system in Northern Ireland meets the needs of learners and that our students are not disadvantaged when applying for jobs and university places.

I have raised concerns previously about the system currently in place which is why I have tasked officials to work with the CCEA Regulator to bring forward options for my consideration.

Some changes may be made to the system currently in place to take account of the new grading system in England. However this may not necessarily result in GCSEs offered by CCEA being graded numerically.

I want to consider all the options that may be available. I will do this in the coming weeks and announce my decision as soon as possible.

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to increase spending on early care and childhood development initiatives over the next 5-10 years, in line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and international recommendations.
(AQO 24/16-21)

Mr Weir: A growing body of research recognises that early childhood education and care brings a wide range of benefits, not just immediate benefits for children and their families, but better social and economic development for society.

The Executive's Childcare Strategy, the first phase of which was published in 2013, includes promoting child development as one of its aims. The Strategy has already taken some initial steps towards addressing both the cost and the availability of quality childcare services. This has included allocating some £5.6 million to support more than 3,000 low cost childcare places targeting, primarily, children from disadvantaged families.

I expect to be able to recommend a final version of the Childcare Strategy to my Executive colleagues in the coming months, having taken account of: international recommendations and research; the many consultation responses received during last year's public consultation exercise; the Programme for Government; and the new opportunities that now exist to align childcare with a wide range of Early Years initiatives.

My Department supports a wide range of early years initiatives, including providing a year of funded pre-school education to every child whose family want it and I am pleased to report that uptake for this programme is very high. I am committed to ensuring that funding for this programme is made available to provide sufficient places in response to demand.

In finalising the Childcare Strategy for Executive approval, I will consider the potential options available to enhance both the quality of, and access to, funded early years care and child development initiatives.

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Education how he will address the growing number of children and pupils being diagnosed with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome.
(AQO 25/16-21)

Mr Weir: I acknowledge the increase in the prevalence of autism in school age children and I am committed to ensuring that every child, including those with autism spectrum disorder receives a high quality education that enables them to fulfil their potential.

The responsibility for diagnosis of autism in children rests with the Department of Health; however access to support for pupils with autism is not dependent on a formal health diagnosis.

Funding to the Education Authority ensures that there is a range of educational provision to support children with SEN, including autism. This includes mainstream provision, learning support centres attached to mainstream schools and special school provision. The Authority is working to enhance autism specific learning support centre provision throughout the region.

The Education Authority's Autism Advisory Service provides support to pupils and schools through training and advice to teachers and individual interventions with pupils and also provides support to parents.

In addition my department provides funding to The Middletown Centre for Autism, which has enabled it to expand its programme of direct support and intervention to children with complex autism who are referred to it by the Education Authority and to provide professional and parental training, and research services.

Since the launch of the NI Executive Autism Strategy and Action Plan, my Department has been working closely with the Education Authority and the Middletown Centre for Autism and other departments on implementation of actions. These include delivering training programmes for teachers, educational professionals, youth workers and parents and providing effective support for pupils with autism. Formal arrangements are also in place for collaborative working between the autism services in education and health.

My department will ensure that the Education Authority and the Middletown Centre for Autism continue to deliver effective provision for the growing number of children with autism.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Education to outline his commitment to the preservation of the Dickson Plan in Upper Bann. (AQO 27/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is important that we think carefully of the impact that education makes on the life chances of the pupils we have under our charge; where lessons are learned to improve our system, but that we also protect what is working within our system.

The Dickson Plan has proved very successful in the Upper Bann area with strong local community support. I will offer support and assurance for the continuation of the Dickson Plan system, and will be ushering in a period of educational stability on the issue.

My aim is to ensure that there is equality between all sectors. This means that no pupil should be disadvantaged simply because of the badge on their school uniform.

I want to work to improve the quality of education, the quality of educational attainment work and to close the achievement gap through educationally sustainable and financially viable schools.

Ms Palmer asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the waiting times for children to be assessed and receive a statement of special educational needs. (AQO 28/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is in the interests of all concerned that statutory assessments and statements are made as quickly as possible, having regard to the need for thorough consideration of the issues in individual cases.

Following receipt of a request for a statutory assessment of a child's special educational needs the Education Authority is required, under legislation, to complete the assessment and statementing process in no more than 26 weeks, subject to valid exceptions.

This period of time allows for a detailed assessment to be undertaken with input requested from the child's parents or guardians and a range of educational and health professionals if appropriate.

The Education Authority must carefully consider all requested advice before making its decision about the need for a statement. Therefore any delays in receipt of advice can delay this decision.

My department has been working constructively with the Department of Health to reduce delays in the provision of health advice during the statutory assessment process.

The Education Authority has recently reported that in the majority of cases it is meeting its statutory target, subject to valid exceptions and I will continue to monitor the Education Authority's performance in this regard.

I am aware of the concerns of parents around this issue. Recently, the Department consulted on draft SEN Regulations, which include a proposal to reduce the time taken for statutory assessment from 26 to 20 weeks. The Department will be providing me with an analysis of the consultation responses and I will take a particular interest in this issue.

It would be my intention to decide the way forward regarding the draft Regulations and work with the Education Committee in autumn 2016 on the final content of those Regulations.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education how he intends to restore choice in the examination boards available for students at GCSE level.

(AQO 29/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is essential that the GCSE grading system in Northern Ireland meets the needs of learners and that our students are not disadvantaged when applying for jobs and university places.

I have raised concerns previously about the system currently in place which is why I have tasked officials to work with the CCEA Regulator to bring forward options for my consideration.

Some changes may be made to the system currently in place to take account of the new grading system in England. However this may not necessarily result in GCSEs offered by CCEA being graded numerically.

I want to consider all the options that may be available. I will do this in the coming weeks and announce my decision as soon as possible.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Education whether the Regional Director of the Education Authority will be based in its regional offices or at a location in Greater Belfast.

(AQO 30/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has not yet agreed a future accommodation and regional location strategy.

Having said that, the newly appointed directors in the EA are not regional directors, rather the EA will be organised into directorates with responsibility for the delivery of particular services, however, the Directors are currently based at Forestview, Belfast.

In consultation with Trades Unions, the EA will be developing a location strategy over the next 12 months which will address the matter of the location of its staff and functions. Decisions on the location of staff will be subject to achieving value for money and in line with service requirements. They will also be subject to relevant statutory and policy requirements, including the assessment of equality considerations.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education to outline the actions he plans to take in response to the recent report from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child that recommends children should be able to decide on their own not to attend religious worship in schools.

(AQW 1176/16-21)

Mr Weir: It is for Boards of Governors, in consultation with the school trustees and the principal, to decide the arrangements for collective worship, having regard to the ethos of the school and its registered pupils. Parental consent is required for children to withdraw from Collective Worship and I have no plans to change this at present.

Department of Health

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of doctors that were on duty for the Doctor on Call service in Omagh on each weekend (i) in 2015; and (ii) 2016 to date.

(AQW 184/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): GP Out of Hours services in the Western Trust area are provided by Western Urgent Care across five bases – Altnagelvin, Enniskillen, Limavady, Omagh and Strabane; the Strabane base is operational.

The numbers of doctors on duty each weekend in 2015 and 2016 in Omagh and Strabane are not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. The numbers of GPs on duty in the Omagh and Strabane bases during a typical weekend, during 2015 and 2016 up to 1st June, are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Planned number of GPs on duty during a typical weekend during 2015 and 2016 to date

Out of Hours base	Time	Planned number of GPs
Strabane	08:00-11:00	1
	11:00-16:00	2
	16:00-23:00	1
Omagh	00:00-08:00	1
	08:00-11:00	2
	11:00-14:00	3
	14:00-23:00	2
	23:00-24:0	1

Source: Western Urgent Care

Also, as GPs can work sessions of varying durations during out of hours provision, the number of doctors on duty each weekend would not provide any valuable analysis with regard to service provision. The number of GP hours worked each weekend, with the percentage of planned hours worked, provides a much better indication of service delivery; the numbers of GP hours worked each weekend are shown in Tables 2 and 3 below.

For the Omagh base in 2015, 89.6% (4,053.5 hours) of a total 4,524 planned GP hours were worked. In 2016 to date, 89% (1,697.3 hours) of a total 1,914 planned hours were worked.

For the Strabane base in 2015, 66.7% (1,386.5 hours) of a total 2,080 planned GP hours were worked. In 2016 to date, 63% (552 hours) of a total 880 planned hours were worked.

Table 2: Number of GP hours worked in Omagh and Strabane Out of Hours bases on each weekend in 2015

Week-end (2015)	GP hours worked		Week-end (2015)	GP hours worked		Week-end (2015)	GP hours worked		Week-end (2015)	GP hours worked	
	Omagh	Strabane		Omagh	Strabane		Omagh	Strabane		Omagh	Strabane
3-4 Jan	77.5	35.0	4-5 Apr	82.0	40.0	4-5 Jul	72.5	19.5	3-4 Oct	82.5	20.0
10-11 Jan	82.5	30.0	11-12 Apr	84.0	19.0	11-12 Jul	82.0	40.0	10-11 Oct	73.5	28.0
17-18 Jan	77.0	29.5	18-19 Apr	79.5	29.5	18-19 Jul	67.0	33.0	17-18 Oct	82.5	27.0
24-25 Jan	78.5	40.0	25-26 Apr	80.0	30.0	25-26 Jul	71.5	19.0	24-25 Oct	83.5	24.0
31 Jan-1 Feb	79.5	20.0	2-3 May	79.0	30.0	1-2 Aug	69.0	19.5	31 Oct-1 Nov	71.5	22.0
7-8 Feb	78.5	40.0	9-10 May	82.5	21.5	8-9 Aug	70.5	14.5	7-8 Nov	79.5	24.0
14-15 Feb	79.5	24.5	16-17 May	79.5	24.5	15-16 Aug	79.5	19.5	14-15 Nov	82.5	30.0
21-22 Feb	79.5	19.0	23-24 May	78.0	32.0	22-23 Aug	76.5	33.0	21-22 Nov	76.5	30.0
28 Feb-1 Mar	72.5	20.0	30-31 May	81.5	31.0	29-30 Aug	72.0	21.0	28-29 Nov	79.5	30.0
7-8 Mar	79.5	30.5	6-7 Jun	82.5	29.5	5-6 Sep	76.5	30.0	5-6 Dec	76.5	29.5
14-15 Mar	73.5	20.0	13-14 Jun	79.5	27.5	12-13 Sep	82.5	26.0	12-13 Dec	76.5	26.0
21-22 Mar	74.5	26.0	20-21 Jun	80.5	26.5	19-20 Sep	76.5	28.0	19-20 Dec	79.5	23.0
28-29 Mar	79.5	18.5	27-28 Jun	77.5	25.0	26-27 Sep	82.5	25.0	26-27 Dec	73.0	26.0

Source: Western Urgent Care

Table 3: Number of GP hours worked in Omagh and Strabane Out of Hours bases on each weekend in 2016

Weekend (2016)	GP hours worked		Weekend (2016)	GP hours worked	
	Omagh	Strabane		Omagh	Strabane
2-3 Jan	71.5	40.0	2-3 Apr	76.5	23.5
9-10 Jan	72.5	32.5	9-10 Apr	79.5	30.0
16-17 Jan	83.5	27.5	16-17 Apr	76.5	33.5
23-24 Jan	82.5	35.0	23-24 Apr	73.5	28.0
30-31 Jan	78.5	20.0	30 Apr-1 May	72.8	14.5
6-7 Feb	76.5	30.0	7-8 May	76.5	14.5
13-14 Feb	79.5	14.5	14-15 May	69.5	19.0
20-21 Feb	79.5	19.0	21-22 May	77.5	30.0

Weekend (2016)	GP hours worked		Weekend (2016)	GP hours worked	
	Omagh	Strabane		Omagh	Strabane
27-28 Feb	79.5	30.0	28-29 May	76.0	22.0
5-6 Mar	77.5	17.5			
12-13 Mar	79.5	19.0			
19-20 Mar	76.5	22.0			
26-27 Mar	82.0	30.0			

Source: Western Urgent Care

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health whether the Doctor on Call service in Strabane is operational; and if so, to detail the number of doctors on duty each weekend in (i) 2015; and (ii) 2016 to date
(AQW 185/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: GP Out of Hours services in the Western Trust area are provided by Western Urgent Care across five bases – Altnagelvin, Enniskillen, Limavady, Omagh and Strabane; the Strabane base is operational.

The numbers of doctors on duty each weekend in 2015 and 2016 in Omagh and Strabane are not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. The numbers of GPs on duty in the Omagh and Strabane bases during a typical weekend, during 2015 and 2016 up to 1st June, are shown in Table 1 below.

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Omagh	00:00-08:00	1
	08:00-11:00	2
	11:00-14:00	3
	14:00-23:00	2
	23:00-24:0	1

Source: Western Urgent Care

Also, as GPs can work sessions of varying durations during out of hours provision, the number of doctors on duty each weekend would not provide any valuable analysis with regard to service provision. The number of GP hours worked each weekend, with the percentage of planned hours worked, provides a much better indication of service delivery; the numbers of GP hours worked each weekend are shown in Tables 2 and 3 below.

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Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked		Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked		Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked		Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked	
	Omagh	Strab- ane		Omagh	Strab- ane		Omagh	Strab- ane		Omagh	Strab- ane
3-4 Jan	77.5	35.0	4-5 Apr	82.0	40.0	4-5 Jul	72.5	19.5	3-4 Oct	82.5	20.0
10-11 Jan	82.5	30.0	11-12 Apr	84.0	19.0	11-12 Jul	82.0	40.0	10-11 Oct	73.5	28.0
17-18 Jan	77.0	29.5	18-19 Apr	79.5	29.5	18-19 Jul	67.0	33.0	17-18 Oct	82.5	27.0
24-25 Jan	78.5	40.0	25-26 Apr	80.0	30.0	25-26 Jul	71.5	19.0	24-25 Oct	83.5	24.0

Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked		Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked		Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked		Wee- kend (2015)	GP hours worked	
	Omagh	Strab- ane		Omagh	Strab- ane		Omagh	Strab- ane		Omagh	Strab- ane
31 Jan-1 Feb	79.5	20.0	2-3 May	79.0	30.0	1-2 Aug	69.0	19.5	31 Oct-1 Nov	71.5	22.0
7-8 Feb	78.5	40.0	9-10 May	82.5	21.5	8-9 Aug	70.5	14.5	7-8 Nov	79.5	24.0
14-15 Feb	79.5	24.5	16-17 May	79.5	24.5	15-16 Aug	79.5	19.5	14-15 Nov	82.5	30.0
21-22 Feb	79.5	19.0	23-24 May	78.0	32.0	22-23 Aug	76.5	33.0	21-22 Nov	76.5	30.0
28 Feb-1 Mar	72.5	20.0	30-31 May	81.5	31.0	29-30 Aug	72.0	21.0	28-29 Nov	79.5	30.0
7-8 Mar	79.5	30.5	6-7 Jun	82.5	29.5	5-6 Sep	76.5	30.0	5-6 Dec	76.5	29.5
14-15 Mar	73.5	20.0	13-14 Jun	79.5	27.5	12-13 Sep	82.5	26.0	12-13 Dec	76.5	26.0
21-22 Mar	74.5	26.0	20-21 Jun	80.5	26.5	19-20 Sep	76.5	28.0	19-20 Dec	79.5	23.0
28-29 Mar	79.5	18.5	27-28 Jun	77.5	25.0	26-27 Sep	82.5	25.0	26-27 Dec	73.0	26.0

Source: Western Urgent Care

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9-10 Jan	72.5	32.5	9-10 Apr	79.5	30.0
16-17 Jan	83.5	27.5	16-17 Apr	76.5	33.5
23-24 Jan	82.5	35.0	23-24 Apr	73.5	28.0
30-31 Jan	78.5	20.0	30 Apr-1 May	72.8	14.5
6-7 Feb	76.5	30.0	7-8 May	76.5	14.5
13-14 Feb	79.5	14.5	14-15 May	69.5	19.0
20-21 Feb	79.5	19.0	21-22 May	77.5	30.0
27-28 Feb	79.5	30.0	28-29 May	76.0	22.0
5-6 Mar	77.5	17.5			
12-13 Mar	79.5	19.0			
19-20 Mar	76.5	22.0			
26-27 Mar	82.0	30.0			

Source: Western Urgent Care

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health what plans she has to improve GP practice facilities in (i) Lurgan; and (ii) Donaghcloney; and whether she plans to reinstate the Branch Surgery in Waringstown.

(AQW 221/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: A primary care hub located in Lurgan has been proposed within the Health and Social Care Board's (HSCB) Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) for future investment in primary care infrastructure. This area of work remains under consideration alongside other capital investment priorities subject to future budget availability, confirmation of value for money and affordability. The evaluation of the third party development process utilised in regard to the two Primary Care pathfinder projects in Newry and Lisburn will also inform how primary care infrastructure will be developed going forward.

The HSCB continues to engage with GP practices in Lurgan in relation to immediate premises issues. Currently 2 practices in the Lurgan area have received approval for Improvement Grant funding in 2016/17 to develop their premises.

This ongoing engagement has also included discussions with Donaghcloney Surgery practice in relation to a potential application for a major premises development. Any application will be considered by the HSCB in the context of the Strategic Implementation Plan for Primary Care Infrastructure Development.

The Health and Social Care Board is responsible for commissioning General Practitioner services. The Board has advised that it has no plans to reinstate the branch surgery in Waringstown.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health how many of the thirty five staff (seven per Health and Social Care Trust area) promised in the last mandate to reduce autism diagnosis waiting times; (i) have been recruited; (ii) are currently in post and working to reduce autism diagnosis waiting times; and when the remaining posts will be filled.

(AQW 231/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The additional £2m investment for children's autism services announced earlier this year has been available to Trusts from 1 April 2016 and is currently being applied to address waiting list pressures, pending the finalisation of a new regional service model required to meet current and future demand. The exact details of this model, including the required skill mix in each Trust, will be agreed over the next few months.

In the meantime, some HSC Trusts have commenced the process of appointing staff on a temporary basis and the HSC Board has recently confirmed that Trusts can make permanent appointments provided they can be utilised in line with the new model, once finalised. As with all HSC posts, Trusts are required to follow a robust recruitment process for permanent staff and this can take up to 9 months to complete.

My Department has also taken action to ensure that Trust plans are focused on the need for sustained, demonstrable improvements in waiting times and services for children with autism and their families, and that the robust monitoring of those plans is being prioritised.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of staff that (i) have been disciplined; and (ii) are facing disciplinary action, by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust for breaching the working time directive, in each month of the last three years.

(AQW 255/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust monitors any breaches of the Working Time Directive (WTD) across a 17-week reference period. Details of those who have worked in excess of 60 hours over each particular 17 week period are outlined below. This information does not include those who work in excess of 48 hours per week and have completed a WTR Opt Out Form for same.

Information does not pre-date December 2013 which is the date of introduction of the new Human Resources Pay Travel and Subsistence (HRPTS) system.

17 week reference period	Numbers of staff Breaching WTD - over 60 hours
13 December 2013 - 10 April 2014	9
11 April 2014 - 7 August 2014	9
8 August 2014 - 4 December 2014	9
5 December 2014 - 2 April 2015	8
3 April 2015 - 30 July 2015	9
31 July 2015 - 26 November 2015	11
27 November 2015 - 24 March 2016	10

The Southern Trust has advised that whenever a staff member has been identified as breaching the WTD by working in excess of 60 hours per week, steps are taken initially to address this outside of the disciplinary process i.e. to counsel the staff member about adherence to the WTD. Any further breaches result in informal disciplinary action, followed by formal action.

Records show that in the past 3 years, the following sanctions have been applied for breach of the WTD:-

- November 2014 – informal warning issued
- March 2015 – informal warning issued
- June 2016 – staff member to be issued with informal warning
- June 2016 – two formal disciplinary processes ongoing (breach of Working Time being one element of the matters being managed through the disciplinary process. The Southern HSC Trust remains fully committed to fulfilling its obligations under the Working Time Regulations (NI) 1998.

For some time the Trust has had in place clear guidance for all Trust employees on their roles and responsibilities under the Working Time Regulations, and these are also included in contracts of employment issued to all new appointments. The

Trust also issues an annual notice by global email to remind all managers and employees of their responsibilities under the legislation. The average weekly working hours of all Trust employees are monitored on an ongoing basis over the required 17 week reference period and any breaches are then brought to the attention of the employee and his or her line manager.

The monitoring of average weekly hours includes medical staff in the GP Out of Hours Service, over the 17 week reference period. Where there are breaches the necessary checks and follow up actions are undertaken, which will include ensuring WTR opt out forms have been completed.

When a doctor or any Trust employee breaches the average weekly hours over the 17 week reference period, the Trust will always in the first instance give the doctor or any other employee the opportunity to reduce their average weekly working hours to safe limits before considering the need for any formal disciplinary action.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of Southern Health and Social Care Trust staff that breached the working time directive in each month of the last three years.

(AQW 256/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust monitors any breaches of the Working Time Directive (WTD) across a 17-week reference period. Details of those who have worked in excess of 60 hours over each particular 17 week period are outlined below. This information does not include those who work in excess of 48 hours per week and have completed a WTR Opt Out Form for same.

Information does not pre-date December 2013 which is the date of introduction of the new Human Resources Pay Travel and Subsistence (HRPTS) system.

17 week reference period	Numbers of staff Breaching WTD - over 60 hours
13 December 2013 - 10 April 2014	9
11 April 2014 - 7 August 2014	9
8 August 2014 - 4 December 2014	9
5 December 2014 - 2 April 2015	8
3 April 2015 - 30 July 2015	9
31 July 2015 - 26 November 2015	11
27 November 2015 - 24 March 2016	10

The Southern Trust has advised that whenever a staff member has been identified as breaching the WTD by working in excess of 60 hours per week, steps are taken initially to address this outside of the disciplinary process i.e. to counsel the staff member about adherence to the WTD. Any further breaches result in informal disciplinary action, followed by formal action.

Records show that in the past 3 years, the following sanctions have been applied for breach of the WTD:-

- November 2014 – informal warning issued
- March 2015 – informal warning issued
- June 2016 – staff member to be issued with informal warning
- June 2016 – two formal disciplinary processes ongoing (breach of Working Time being one element of the matters being managed through the disciplinary process. The Southern HSC Trust remains fully committed to fulfilling its obligations under the Working Time Regulations (NI) 1998.

For some time the Trust has had in place clear guidance for all Trust employees on their roles and responsibilities under the Working Time Regulations, and these are also included in contracts of employment issued to all new appointments. The Trust also issues an annual notice by global email to remind all managers and employees of their responsibilities under the legislation. The average weekly working hours of all Trust employees are monitored on an ongoing basis over the required 17 week reference period and any breaches are then brought to the attention of the employee and his or her line manager.

The monitoring of average weekly hours includes medical staff in the GP Out of Hours Service, over the 17 week reference period. Where there are breaches the necessary checks and follow up actions are undertaken, which will include ensuring WTR opt out forms have been completed.

When a doctor or any Trust employee breaches the average weekly hours over the 17 week reference period, the Trust will always in the first instance give the doctor or any other employee the opportunity to reduce their average weekly working hours to safe limits before considering the need for any formal disciplinary action.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) average waiting time; and (ii) longest waiting time for non-emergency spinal surgery; and what action he is taking to reduce these waiting times.

(AQW 257/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: As at 31st March 2016, I can advise that the average waiting time of the patients waiting for inpatient spinal surgery procedures was 23.3 weeks. The longest waiting time was 160.1 weeks.

The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) recognises that further expansion in the spinal service is required. However, there are challenges due to the wider financial position, a recognised deficit of spinal surgeons nationally as well as infrastructure constraints.

In order to minimise the increase in waiting times, HSCB has prioritised the limited non-recurrent funding that is currently available in 2016/17 for elective care to fund Belfast Trust to treat additional spinal patients in specialist spinal surgery centres and continues to work with the Trust to maximise the delivery of funded capacity and ensure the application of good waiting list management practice.

The Board and PHA continue to work with the Trust to address the shortfall in Trauma and Orthopaedic surgeons in Northern Ireland.

In other parts of the UK the shortfall in spinal surgeons is being managed by increasing neurosurgeons numbers and the HSCB is currently exploring this option with the Trust.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health how he will ensure that patients affected by stroke receive timely access to treatment, specialist services and appropriate long term care and support in the community.

(AQW 260/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is fully committed to ensuring that patients here have access to the highest quality stroke care. Since publication of the 2008 Stroke Strategy, over £5 million has been invested in stroke services. There is now a 13% thrombolysis rate which compares favourably with other parts of the NHS and all Trusts have multidisciplinary stroke teams in place in hospital and community settings.

Since 2014, there has been a regional stroke network co-ordinator in post as well as service improvement leads in the 5 Trusts. The regional stroke network has Trust, voluntary sector and user involvement, and continues to improve the service both in an acute setting and in the community.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health how she will ensure that all cancer patients in the Carnlough and Glens area will receive their treatment in Belfast City Hospital and not the Altnagelvin Area Hospital as proposed by the Northern and Western Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 278/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has the responsibility to ensure that all cancer patients in Carnlough and the Glens area receive the best possible service for the diagnosis and treatment of their condition. The local cancer unit for patients in the Northern Trust area is Antrim Area Hospital and that will remain the case. It should be noted that only around 50% of cancer patients require radiotherapy which after autumn 2016 will be provided from two sites; Belfast City Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital. The Northern Trust catchment area for radiotherapy services in Altnagelvin is BT51 to BT57. Carnlough and the majority of the Glens are outside this catchment.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health what action she will be take to address the growing number of prostate cancer patients in East Antrim.

(AQW 279/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Previous research has established that the incidence of prostate cancer in East Antrim was within the range attributable to natural variation and did not meet the criteria to be considered a cancer cluster requiring a specific initiative. Diagnostic and treatment services for prostate across the North, including East Antrim, are commissioned with reference to best available evidence, including NICE guidance on prostate cancer, issued 2014 (CG 175). The treatment options for patients in East Antrim include surgery, radiotherapy and systemic anticancer therapies (SACT). In addition the Health and Social Care Board commissions all of the of specialist cancer drugs for the treatment of prostate cancer which NICE has recommended for use in the NHS.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health whether the Health and Social Care Trusts have an individual or collective policy on accommodating mental incapacity remand prisoners; and what facilities are available to accommodate such prisoners that are regarded as potentially dangerous but unsuitable for a prison environment.

(AQW 281/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The accommodation of prisoners is the policy responsibility of the Department of Justice. Healthcare services across the NI Prison Service are commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and delivered by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

In Northern Ireland there are two regional forensic hospital facilities. The Shannon Clinic at Knockbracken, which is a medium secure Mental Health Hospital and Muckamore Abbey Hospital in Antrim which has a low secure ward for people with a Learning Disability. Both these facilities fall within Belfast HSC Trust remit.

Persons requiring treatment in conditions of high security are transferred to a high secure hospital (HSH) such as Carstairs HSH in Scotland (for males) or Rampton HSH in England (for females).

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health (i) to outline the policy and procedures if a child presents with injuries or discloses abuse; (ii) whether each Health and Social Care Trust has its own policy; (iii) when procedures were last updated or reviewed; and (iv) how the current policy and procedures differ from those in place in 2012.

(AQW 282/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: (i) The regional policy framework for safeguarding children and young people in the North is Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (2016). The policy framework is underpinned by operational policies and procedures relating to child referral and protection processes, The Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures (2005). These documents are supplemented by a range of other guidance including the Protocol for Joint Investigation by Social Workers and Police Officers of Alleged and Suspected Cases of Child Abuse – Northern Ireland (Joint Protocol).

- (ii) All Trusts are expected to adhere to the Regional Child protection Policies and Procedures.
- (iii) The regional policy framework for safeguarding children and young people was published on 25 March 2016, following extensive consultation. Under section 3(1) of the Safeguarding Board Act (NI) 2011, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) has a statutory duty to develop policies and procedures for its member organisations for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. The SBNI is currently updating the Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures, last published in 2005. The Joint Protocol was updated in March 2016.
- (iv) The Regional Policies and Procedures will be updated to reflect changes to policy, legislation and changes in organisational structures since they were last published. They will also have to take account of new, emerging and evolving challenges including child sexual exploitation, digital technologies, female genital mutilation, honour based violence, forced marriage and separated, unaccompanied and trafficked children and young people.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for her assessment of the need for enhanced services at Downe Hospital.

(AQW 290/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Downe Hospital is a vital part of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust's acute hospital network and will continue to deliver essential hospital services now and in the future. The day case, diagnostic and outpatient services have expanded in recent years, most notably in cataract surgery, bowel cancer screening and sexual health services. The hospital has also enhanced services with the development of a Midwife Led Unit and the creation of primary care services on the site. The South Eastern Trust will continue to pursue opportunities for expanded/enhanced services where possible and where it is safe and sustainable to do so. The development of future services should take account of the output of the Expert Panel's report which will be available later this summer.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health when she will visit the Downe Hospital in Downpatrick; and whether she will meet with elected representatives and members of the Down Community Health Committee.

(AQW 291/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: I would be happy to visit the Downe Hospital and speak with elected representatives. The timing and agenda for such a visit is of course a matter for me and the South Eastern Trust to determine.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health how much has been paid in bonuses to health service staff in each of the last five years, broken down by (i) Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) grade.

(AQW 297/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT) is the only Trust operating a bonus scheme. Information on the bonuses paid to its staff over the last four years only is available and is set out in the table below.

Year	BHSCT Bonus Scheme	
	No of Staff	Total Amount
2012/13	60	£32,000
2013/14	60	£34,000
2014/15	60	£29,000
2015/16	60	£35,699

The BHSCT's Bonus Scheme reward its Agenda for Change (AfC) staff employed in the catering department of Knockbracken Foods. The Scheme was introduced in 2001 to achieve combined goals of safety, quality and productivity.

(ii) The table below sets out the grades of staff in receipt of a bonus:

YEAR	BHSCT Bonus Scheme
	Grade of Staff
2012/13	46 AfC Band 1 11 AfC Band 2 3 AfC Band 3
2013/14	46 AfC Band 1 11 AfC Band 2 3 AfC Band 3
2014/15	46 AfC Band 1 11 AfC Band 2 3 AfC Band 3
2015/16	41 x AfC Band 1 16 x AfC Band 2 3 x AfC Band 3

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health for an update on the potential closure of mental health day centres in Belfast.
(AQW 300/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust consultation on the delivery of mental health day services closed on 14 January 2016, following two extensions to the original deadline.

The Trust is currently finalising its post-consultation report and plans to convene a Public Trust Board meeting on 21 June to consider the findings.

The proposals will then be put to the Health and Social Care Board, before referral to me for a final decision. I had the benefit of visiting the Ravenhill Centre on 10 June, and following that have asked that the process is expedited in order to bring certainty to the service users, families and carers involved.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health how she plans to reduce the waiting time for spinal consultations at Musgrave Park Hospital.
(AQW 338/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Belfast Trust is currently experiencing extended delays in waiting times for spinal appointments as demand exceeds the capacity available within the Trust. The Trust has put in place additional clinics aimed at reducing waiting times however it continues to receive a large volume of urgent referrals. All patients continue to be treated in clinical order to ensure those in the greatest of need are prioritised.

The Belfast Trust is also looking at alternate ways of trying to reduce the extended waits.

It is working with commissioners and other Health and Social Care Trusts in order to introduce a new spinal pathway whereby specialist physiotherapist throughout North of Ireland in ICATS services will triage, assess patients, arrange investigations and treat conservatively where appropriate, therefore ensuring only patients who require surgical intervention will see a Spinal Surgeon. It is hoped the waiting time for both urgent and routine spinal assessment will gradually decrease as a result of this new spinal pathway.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health (i) how many patients from each Health and Social Care Trust were sent to the Castle Craig facility in Scotland for intensive tier 4 mental health or drug addiction treatment in each of the last five years; (ii) how many such facilities exist in each local Trust area; (iii) what the capacity is of each unit; (iv) the average waiting time for this service; and (v) whether any negotiations have taken place between her Department and Smarmore Castle in the Republic of Ireland for the use of their facilities.
(AQW 343/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has not funded any patient at Castle Craig in the last five years.
- (ii) There are three such facilities (at Holywell Hospital, the Downshire Hospital, and the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital) and their services are delivered regionally to people from all five Trusts depending on patient need. There are also two independent sector services which will provide tier 4 inpatient rehabilitation services across the region – Northlands in Derry and Carlisle House in Belfast.
- (iii) Holywell Hospital = 10 Beds
Downshire Hospital = 14 Beds
Tyrone and Fermanagh = 8 beds
Total = 32 beds

- (iv) The average waiting time for these facilities is two weeks.
- (v) No negotiations have taken place with Smarmore Castle for the use of the facility.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the establishment of an air ambulance service.
(AQW 366/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Planning for the establishment of the north's first Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) is now underway by my Department and its arms length bodies. I have tasked the Health and Social Care Board and the Ambulance Service with leading on these preparations. This is a major project and it will therefore be some months before the service is in place. I will say more about this when planning has been progressed sufficiently. In the interim the Ambulance Service will continue to respond as appropriate to all calls for assistance.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health whether internal trawls for staff to work in the out-of-hours GP service at the Southern Health and Social Care Trust are resulting in staff breaching the working time directive; and whether staff accepting this internal trawl will face disciplinary action.
(AQW 368/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust monitors any breaches of the Working Time Directive (WTD) across a 17-week reference period. Details of those who have worked in excess of 60 hours over each particular 17 week period are outlined below. This information does not include those who work in excess of 48 hours per week and have completed a WTR Opt Out Form for same.

Information does not pre-date December 2013 which is the date of introduction of the new Human Resources Pay Travel and Subsistence (HRPTS) system.

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The Southern Trust has advised that whenever a staff member has been identified as breaching the WTD by working in excess of 60 hours per week, steps are taken initially to address this outside of the disciplinary process i.e. to counsel the staff member about adherence to the WTD. Any further breaches result in informal disciplinary action, followed by formal action.

Records show that in the past 3 years, the following sanctions have been applied for breach of the WTD:-

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- June 2016 – two formal disciplinary processes ongoing (breach of Working Time being one element of the matters being managed through the disciplinary process. The Southern HSC Trust remains fully committed to fulfilling its obligations under the Working Time Regulations (NI) 1998.

For some time the Trust has had in place clear guidance for all Trust employees on their roles and responsibilities under the Working Time Regulations, and these are also included in contracts of employment issued to all new appointments. The Trust also issues an annual notice by global email to remind all managers and employees of their responsibilities under the legislation. The average weekly working hours of all Trust employees are monitored on an ongoing basis over the required 17 week reference period and any breaches are then brought to the attention of the employee and his or her line manager.

The monitoring of average weekly hours includes medical staff in the GP Out of Hours Service, over the 17 week reference period. Where there are breaches the necessary checks and follow up actions are undertaken, which will include ensuring WTR opt out forms have been completed.

When a doctor or any Trust employee breaches the average weekly hours over the 17 week reference period, the Trust will always in the first instance give the doctor or any other employee the opportunity to reduce their average weekly working hours to safe limits before considering the need for any formal disciplinary action.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health what provisions are in place for military service leavers who end their service in great Britain or overseas to continue their treatment or retain their place on a waiting list if they were to resettle in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 400/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Provision for continuation of health care is offered, on an equitable basis, to all those resettling here, irrespective of their previous occupation.

Patients who move to the North, who are currently on a NHS waiting list waiting for an assessment need to register with a GP before a new referral can be sent to the appropriate Trust. This referral will be viewed as a new appointment and the waiting time will be determined by clinical priority of the patient. Where the patient has already received treatment, the treating surgeon may make prior arrangements to have the care of the patient transferred to a named consultant in here.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health for her assessment on the potential of patches which read blood sugar levels in the treatment of type 1 diabetes which could potentially replace painful finger pricks.

(AQW 408/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Patients with Type 1 Diabetes and a proportion of patients with Type 2 Diabetes are required to test their blood sugars on a regular basis to optimise the dosage of insulin and support the management of their condition. A 12 week public consultation on the Diabetes Strategic Framework closed on 31 May 2016 and responses are currently being analysed.

One of the supporting principles of the Framework is that: "New interventions and technologies, where appropriate and effective, will be used to support treatment and care for people living with diabetes." The introduction of any new intervention into the Health Service will follow formal mechanisms informed by national guidance such as that produced by NICE. That includes any new continuous glucose monitoring systems such as patch-type blood glucose transmitters.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the long term plans for Pinewood Residential Care Home, Ballymena, including its rehabilitation facility.

(AQW 409/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: No final decisions have been made on the proposals for Pinewood residential care home. In November 2015 my predecessor, Minister Hamilton MLA, asked the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) to halt and review the process regarding the review of statutory residential care homes, as a precautionary measure. The HSCB is due to complete its review in June and will advise my Department of the outcome. I will consider the way forward on the review of statutory residential care homes following completion of the HSCB review.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 54332/11-16, to detail (i) the number of day centres for people with learning disabilities broken down by Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) the number of places available in each centre; (iii) the numbers using each centre; and (iv) details of any shortfall in provision where there is a waiting list.

(AQW 411/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is detailed in the attached Annex.

Annex

Trust	Day Centres	Places available at each Centre	Numbers using each Centre	Shortfall in provision where there is a waiting list
Belfast	8	124	124	The Trust does not operate a formal waiting list system for day care but tries to distribute the provision available as equitably as possible or offer alternative arrangements where appropriate.
		44	44	
		135	135	
		35	35	
		145	145	
		80	80	
		24	23	
		50	50	

Trust	Day Centres	Places available at each Centre	Numbers using each Centre	Shortfall in provision where there is a waiting list
South Eastern	14	122	122	The vast majority of service users attend their day centre on a 5 day per week basis. A small number may attend 2 or 3 days. If they want to increase the number of days they attend, their name will be placed on a waiting list for the specific day centre they wish to extend their attendance at.
		23	23	
		45	45	
		54	72	
		82	82	
		71	71	
		50	56	
		17	19	
		20	35	
		150	148	
		60	60	
		10	10	
		25	25	
		18	18	
Southern	10	105	74	It is anticipated that places may reduce in the near future to take account of the increased dependency of those within Centres.
		69	45	
		13	13	
		16	15	
		90	67	
		44	36	
		40	35	
		78	64	
		60	36	
		24	12	
Northern	10	74	73	If the number using the centre is below places available, it does not necessarily indicate vacancies. It may be due to space restrictions for users with complex needs and challenging behaviour which increased from 4.5 m2 per person to 7.5 m2.
		65	62	
		55	51	
		80	69	
		30	27	
		65	58	
		84	69	
		92	79	
		90	73	
55	54			

Trust	Day Centres	Places available at each Centre	Numbers using each Centre	Shortfall in provision where there is a waiting list
Western	29	75	74	There are currently 5 clients on a waiting list for daycare services.
		21	24	
		56	61	
		23	25	
		55	56	
		50	37	
		25	27	
		20	19	
		30	25	
		28	22	
		20	14	
		33	30	
		20	20	
		65	52	
		26	27	
		16	15	
		18	17	
		12	9	
		6	10	
		3	1	
		15	9	
		10.5	14	
		15.5	18	
10	18			
2	3			
12	16			
21	21			
8	6			
1	1			

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Health to detail her departmental priorities for the 2016-2021 Assembly mandate. (AQW 417/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My priorities are:

To Radically reform health care services to ensure it delivers affective outcomes for people with a focus on early intervention and prevention; to address the immediate challenges affecting patients and staff in our acute services; develop all-island networks to tap into the benefits that All Ireland health and social care approaches bring; reduce health inequalities to enable everyone to have the same chance of living a long and healthy life no matter where they live; continue to deliver services to the most vulnerable; and champion mental health.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health to detail the dates in the last twenty years that separated children in care have (i) gone missing; and (ii) were established as having gone missing; and what action was taken in each case. (AQW 424/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: A child in care, or a looked after child, is defined in Article 25 of The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 as a child who is either in the care of the authority, or provided with accommodation by the authority for a continuous period of more than 24 hours. (The authority is a Health and Social Care Trust). The information provided in the table below is based on the analysis by the Health and Social Care (HSC) Board of information provided to it by HSC Trusts. The information relates to the period 2004/05 to the present.

Dates that separated children in care have:

(i) gone missing	(ii) were established as having gone missing
14 December 2008	15 December 2008
22 February 2010	22 February 2010
14 January 2012	14 January 2012
9 January 2013	9 January 2013
14 November 2013	14 November 2013
18 November 2013	18 November 2013
6 December 2013	7 December 2013
19 February 2014	19 February 2014
12 May 2015	12 May 2015

Those who went missing on 9/1/13; 18/11/13; 19/2/14; and 12/5/15 were subsequently found to be adults. While I can confirm that action was taken to recover each child who went missing, in the interest of not exposing any child to risk of harm, I do not intend to put information relating to action taken in each case into the public domain. I will write to the Member separately with the information requested.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the current non-paramedic ambulance staff and paramedic staff vacancies broken down per Health and Social Care Trust area; and (ii) current overtime use of existing non-paramedic and paramedic staff, broken down per Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 448/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The (NIAS) Trust does not carry out recruitment along the HSC Trusts' geographical boundaries. The last available HSC vacancy survey publication is held on the Departmental website at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>. A more up-to-date publication series is planned for the autumn.

NIAS advises that the total ambulance staff overtime pay for the quarter ending 31 March 2016 was £1,419,784. Overtime is generally paid one month in arrears, but some of this total could relate to earlier periods depending on when claims were submitted.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of vacant consultant posts broken down by (i) Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) speciality for the year ended 31st March 2016; and the longest outstanding vacancy.

(AQW 449/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The last available HSC vacancy survey publication is held on the Departmental website at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>. A more up-to-date publication series is planned for the autumn.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of consultants that are being paid but not working due to suspension pending investigation; and the longest period of current suspension.

(AQW 450/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust currently has 2 consultants excluded from work with pay under the Department's Maintaining High Professional Standards Framework.

The longest period of current suspension is 19 months. This involved a criminal investigation which has concluded. The Southern Trust is now undertaking its own investigation.

There are no other consultants being paid but not working due to suspension pending investigation in the remaining Trusts.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health whether she will remove the ban on permanent admissions to (i) Pinewood; and (ii) The Roddens residential care homes.

(AQW 453/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: No final decisions have been made on the proposals for these residential care homes. In November 2015 my predecessor, Minister Hamilton MLA, asked the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) to halt and review the process regarding the review of statutory residential care homes, as a precautionary measure. The HSCB is due to complete its

review in June and will advise my Department of the outcome. I will consider the way forward on the review of statutory residential care homes following completion of the HSCB review.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future status and utilisation of Dalriada Hospital.
(AQW 454/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: There are no plans to change the status or utilisation of Dalriada Hospital.

However a Dalriada Pathfinder project is bringing Health and Social Care organisations together with local community representatives and the voluntary sector to look at ways of integrating health and social care around the expressed needs of frail and vulnerable patients in the Northern Trust area. A Steering Group is co-ordinating the project and engagement with the local community has also commenced to share the vision for the Dalriada Pathfinder.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what actions the Health and Social Care Board is taking to find a GP for Silverbirch medical practice in Bangor.
(AQW 460/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) is responsible for commissioning general practitioner services to meet the needs of the local population. The HSCB is seeking to secure a General Medical Services (GMS) contractor for the Silverbirch Medical Practice in Bangor and in doing so has been in contact with all relevant parties. The HSCB has advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, Pulse Medical Journal, Irish Times, British Medical Journal and Irish Medical Times. The closing date for applications was 20 May 2016. Although information about the practice was requested, no formal applications were received.

Before re-advertising the HSCB has been in discussion with other local practices to discuss potential options. The HSCB met with practices in the area on 8 June 2016 to discuss local solutions for either securing the continuation of the practice, or securing alternative practices for those patients currently registered with the Silverbirch practice.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether the Health and Social Care Board will advertise again for a GP for Silverbirch medical practice in Bangor.
(AQW 463/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) is responsible for commissioning general practitioner services to meet the needs of the local population. The HSCB is seeking to secure a General Medical Services (GMS) contractor for the Silverbirch Medical Practice in Bangor and in doing so has been in contact with all relevant parties. The HSCB has advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, Pulse Medical Journal, Irish Times, British Medical Journal and Irish Medical Times. The closing date for applications was 20 May 2016. Although information about the practice was requested, no formal applications were received.

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Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what contact the Health and Social Care Board and her Department has had with Silverbirch medical practice to try and find a GP for the practice.
(AQW 464/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) is responsible for commissioning general practitioner services to meet the needs of the local population. The HSCB is seeking to secure a General Medical Services (GMS) contractor for the Silverbirch Medical Practice in Bangor and in doing so has been in contact with all relevant parties. The HSCB has advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, Pulse Medical Journal, Irish Times, British Medical Journal and Irish Medical Times. The closing date for applications was 20 May 2016. Although information about the practice was requested, no formal applications were received.

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Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health how many meetings of the governance group on the strategy for exiting prostitution have taken place; and whether the minutes of those meetings can be published.
(AQW 465/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Membership of the governance group responsible for the review of the 'Leaving Prostitution' Strategy and the associated Programme of Assistance and Support has yet to be agreed. It is intended that the first meeting of the governance group will be in autumn 2016.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health (i) how many separated (a) EU national; and (b) non-EU national children have entered Northern Ireland and been identified in each of the last ten years; and (ii) how many of these children disappeared in each year; and (iii) how many remain missing.
(AQW 466/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is set out in the table below. It has been collected and analysed by the Health and Social Care Board and provided by Health and Social Care Trusts. The numbers in the table relate to children either, in the care of, or known to the Health and Social Care Trusts and covers the period 2006/07 to 2015/16.

Financial Year	No of Separated Children who entered Northern Ireland	No. of EU Nationals	No. of Non-EU Nationals	Not Known	No. of Children who went missing	No. of Separated children who remain missing
2006 / 2007	1	0	1	0	0	0
2007 / 2008	0	0	0	0	0	0
2008 / 2009	16	0	15	1	14	13
2009 / 2010	3	0	2	1	2	2
2010 / 2011	3	0	3	0	0	0
2011 / 2012	4	0	4	0	1	1
2012 / 2013	9	2	7	0	4	2
2013 / 2014	10	2	8	0	3	2
2014 / 2015	17	2	15	0	2	0
2015 / 2016	13	0	13	0	0	0
Total	76	6	68	2	26	20

Note that a number of the individuals represented in this table were later found to be adults. HSC Trusts are required to treat individuals presenting as children, as children, until their actual age has been determined. 9 of the total number of separated children included in the table above were later found to be adults. 4 of the separated children who went missing were later found to be adults.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health what investigations have been conducted by (i) her Department; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trusts into the cases of the 8 separated children who went missing from care between 2005 and 2014.
(AQW 468/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: A child in care, or a looked after child, is defined in Article 25 of The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 as a child who is either in the care of the authority, or provided with accommodation by the authority for a continuous period of more than 24 hours. (The authority is a Health and Social Care Trust). Based on information collected and analysed by the Health and Social Care Board and provided by Health and Social Care Trusts, between 2005 and 2014, 8 children went missing after being placed in care; 3 of those were later established to be adults.

Responsibility for the investigation of individual children's cases does not rest with my Department. It is a statutory function, delegated to Health and Social Care Trusts.

While I can confirm that action was taken to recover each child who went missing, in the interest of not exposing any child to risk of harm, I do not intend to put information relating to action taken in each case into the public domain. I will write to the Member separately with the information requested.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the specialist healthcare provision for people diagnosed with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis; and (ii) any plans she has to increase this provision.
(AQW 473/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Specialist healthcare is provided for people diagnosed with ME (otherwise known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) in the Belfast and Northern Health and Social Care Trusts. When a GP makes a diagnosis of ME they may refer the patient to these services, which take the form of supported self-management programmes as recommended by NICE.

The Health and Social Care Board plans, subject to the identification of resources, to extend these services to all Trusts and to appoint a regional Consultant lead to provide advice and guidance to GPs and those delivering Trust services.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health to detail the strategic policy to address the number of miscarriages that take place annually; and what consultation her Department, or Health and Social Care Trusts, have had with women that have miscarried.

(AQW 474/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's Maternity Strategy, 'A Strategy for Maternity Care in Northern Ireland 2012 – 2018', sets out the strategic direction for all maternity care in the North of Ireland. Patient representative groups were fully consulted during the development of the strategy. With regard to my Department's policy on miscarriage: in implementing the Maternity Strategy, the Public Health Agency has developed a commissioning intention and referral pathway, based on NICE guidance, which specifies the approach to development of Early Pregnancy Assessment Services (EPAS) throughout the North of Ireland.

My Department's regional bereavement guidance (Regional bereavement guidance on evidence-based, holistic care of parents and their families after the experience of miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death) has been recently updated and is available on the Department's website: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/bereavement-guidance-after-experience-miscarriage-stillbirth-or-neonatal-death>

It is not possible to provide specific funding information for bereavement services for women, and their families, following miscarriage as support will be provided by midwives, nurses and doctors in Maternity or Gynae wards who are part of the core maternity and gynae service teams in Health and Social Care Trusts. There are five Bereavement Co-ordinators located across the North. The Belfast and South Eastern Trusts also provide dedicated bereavement midwife support to women and their families.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health how much funding her Department provided to Health and Social Care Trusts for bereavement services for women, and their families, following miscarriage; and to detail the nature of the service provided in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 475/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's Maternity Strategy, 'A Strategy for Maternity Care in Northern Ireland 2012 – 2018', sets out the strategic direction for all maternity care in the North of Ireland. Patient representative groups were fully consulted during the development of the strategy. With regard to my Department's policy on miscarriage: in implementing the Maternity Strategy, the Public Health Agency has developed a commissioning intention and referral pathway, based on NICE guidance, which specifies the approach to development of Early Pregnancy Assessment Services (EPAS) throughout the North of Ireland.

My Department's regional bereavement guidance (Regional bereavement guidance on evidence-based, holistic care of parents and their families after the experience of miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death) has been recently updated and is available on the Department's website: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/bereavement-guidance-after-experience-miscarriage-stillbirth-or-neonatal-death>

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Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health whether miscarriages that occur outside hospital are recorded and reported by GPs; and where such information is stored or published.

(AQW 476/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department does not routinely record miscarriages that occur outside hospital and the information requested is therefore not available.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health how many women in each Health and Social Care Trust miscarried in each year from 2010-11 to 2015-16; and how many miscarriages occurred (i) in hospital; and (ii) away from hospital.

(AQW 478/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Information is not collected centrally on the number of women who miscarry in each Health and Social Care Trust; therefore it is not possible to determine the exact number of miscarriages that occurred either in or away from hospital. The number of admissions to hospital with a pregnancy miscarriage recorded is given in the following table by HSC Trust, for each of the last five years (the latest available data).

HSC Trust	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Belfast	562	566	379	403	382
Northern	432	459	390	373	403
South Eastern	477	434	360	388	356
Southern	606	623	646	663	606
Western	480	456	482	409	419
Total	2,557	2,538	2,257	2,236	2,166

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

Note:

The number of pregnancy miscarriages given includes all pregnancy losses from the time of conception until 24 weeks gestation.

Readmissions for retained products of conception following treatment for ectopic pregnancy, hydatidiform mole, other abnormal products of conception or spontaneous abortion have been excluded.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what mental health services are available in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust for people that have suicidal thoughts.

(AQW 480/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: People that have suicidal thoughts have access to the full range of mental health services provided across the Southern Trust area.

Services include:

- Primary Mental Care Services – via referral from GP. Urgent referrals are seen within 10 working days.
- Acute Mental Health Services - liaison services operate through the Emergency Department (ED) and Home Treatment/Crisis Response Services.
- Support and Recovery Services – provided by Community Mental Health Teams.

All of the above services undertake a risk assessment related to a number of presenting factors, including suicidal thoughts. The outcome of the risk assessment informs decisions on the most appropriate intervention and support required for the individual and can include admission to an acute in-patient ward, Home Treatment or signposting to Community/Voluntary services and/or Primary Care.

In addition to statutory mental health services, support is available through programmes funded under Protect Life such as Lifeline 24/7 crisis response service, self harm intervention project, counselling, and bereavement support.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether she will enable the setting up of an epilepsy database to aid targeted treatment, ensure a value for money service and a better quality of life for people living with epilepsy.

(AQW 493/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: At present there are no plans to develop a database specifically for epilepsy patients.

My Department has established a regional group to consider the modernisation of neurological services which includes epilepsy. As part of this work, the Public Health Agency has recently established a regional Neurology Nursing Group. One of its functions is to review the staffing complement for all neurological nurse specialist posts including epilepsy across the North. The group will also consider future models of service delivery, succession planning for staff and administrative capacity within teams.

Planning for epilepsy services is included within the above regional neurology group. My Department is not planning at this stage to establish a working group specifically for epilepsy.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether she will fund an expansion of the number of adult and paediatric epilepsy specialist nurses.

(AQW 494/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: At present there are no plans to develop a database specifically for epilepsy patients.

My Department has established a regional group to consider the modernisation of neurological services which includes epilepsy. As part of this work, the Public Health Agency has recently established a regional Neurology Nursing Group. One of its functions is to review the staffing complement for all neurological nurse specialist posts including epilepsy across the North. The group will also consider future models of service delivery, succession planning for staff and administrative capacity within teams.

Planning for epilepsy services is included within the above regional neurology group. My Department is not planning at this stage to establish a working group specifically for epilepsy.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether she will enable the setting up of an epilepsy working group.

(AQW 495/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: At present there are no plans to develop a database specifically for epilepsy patients.

My Department has established a regional group to consider the modernisation of neurological services which includes epilepsy. As part of this work, the Public Health Agency has recently established a regional Neurology Nursing Group. One of its functions is to review the staffing complement for all neurological nurse specialist posts including epilepsy across the North. The group will also consider future models of service delivery, succession planning for staff and administrative capacity within teams.

Planning for epilepsy services is included within the above regional neurology group. My Department is not planning at this stage to establish a working group specifically for epilepsy.

Ms Mallon asked the Minister of Health how the £2 million investment in autism services announced by her predecessor will be spent, including the number of new staff.

(AQW 497/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The additional £2m investment for children's autism services announced earlier this year has been available to Trusts from 1 April 2016 and is currently being applied to address waiting list pressures, pending the finalisation of a new regional service model required to meet current and future demand. The exact details of this model, including the required skill mix in each Trust, will be agreed over the next few months.

In the meantime, some HSC Trusts have commenced the process of appointing staff on a temporary basis and the HSC Board has recently confirmed that Trusts can make permanent appointments provided they can be utilised in line with the new model, once finalised. As with all HSC posts, Trusts are required to follow a robust recruitment process for permanent staff and this can take up to 9 months to complete.

My Department has also taken action to ensure that Trust plans are focused on the need for sustained, demonstrable improvements in waiting times and services for children with autism and their families, and that the robust monitoring of those plans is being prioritised.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many nurses without European Union status are employed on any term of contract within the Health and Social Care system.

(AQW 504/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: There are currently 207 (183.4 whole-time equivalent) qualified nurses employed by the HSC Trusts who are not citizens of European Union member states. This figure was supplied by the HSC Trusts.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail all capital projects that (i) are currently being completed; and (ii) are expected to be completed in the next three years in West Tyrone.

(AQW 514/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) Capital investment projects which are currently being completed in West Tyrone are;
- Omagh Hospital & Primary Care Complex – Phase 1,
 - Rathview Mental Health Recovery and Rehabilitation Accommodation in Omagh,
 - Bridge repairs within the Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital site, and
 - Medical Record Storage adaptations within the Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital site
- (ii) Future capital investment projects in the constituency will be considered by my Department and the Executive as part of Budget 2017 which will conclude in the autumn.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the Western Health and Social Care Trust's saving plans for 2016-17.

(AQW 515/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western Health and Social Care Trust's 2016/17 savings plans are still under consideration. The plans will be published on the Trust website once finalised.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health how many children and young people have (i) suffered harm; or (ii) died as result of neglect or abuse whilst known to social services in the past ten years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 535/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information for (i) and (ii) is not available centrally and would require HSC Trusts to conduct a manual trawl through hundreds of records.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Health to detail all community and voluntary organisations in East Derry that received core grant funding from her Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 538/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 234/16-21.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of children attending Emergency Departments in Fermanagh and South Tyrone due to (i) mental health issues; and (ii) alcohol or substance abuse.

(AQW 547/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Information on the number of children attending emergency care departments in Fermanagh and South Tyrone due to mental health issues and alcohol or substance abuse is not available.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the procedures ambulance staff follow when transporting patients to Emergency Departments.

(AQW 557/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Patients transported to hospital emergency departments by emergency ambulance are normally taken to the nearest appropriate emergency department. At times other aspects are taken into consideration, for example if a hospital divert is in place, if a healthcare professional has clearly specified a destination emergency department for the patient, or if a patient's presenting clinical condition falls within a specific Ambulance Service protocol such as the management of major trauma.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the average emergency ambulance callout times across all Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 559/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: It is assumed that this question refers to ambulance response times.

My Department's current performance target for ambulance response times states that 72.5% of all Category A (life-threatening) calls be responded to within eight minutes, with no less than 67.5% in any Local Commissioning Group (LCG). Provisional information on the performance against this target is detailed in the table overleaf for each of the last twelve months (April 2015 – March 2016).

Percentage of Category A (Life threatening) Calls Responded to within Eight Minutes, by Local Commissioning Group (2015/16) ^P

Month	Local Commissioning Group (LCG)					Northern Ireland
	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	
Apr-15	64.7%	46.7%	46.3%	48.9%	57.5%	53.5%
May-15	58.7%	42.0%	43.5%	51.1%	53.8%	50.0%
Jun-15	63.8%	47.7%	42.5%	47.0%	61.2%	52.9%
Jul-15	66.7%	47.0%	49.9%	49.5%	59.8%	55.0%
Aug-15	64.2%	46.6%	44.8%	49.0%	57.3%	53.1%
Sep-15	66.1%	47.1%	50.1%	49.9%	60.3%	55.3%
Oct-15	69.1%	48.6%	54.2%	50.6%	56.6%	56.6%
Nov-15	65.3%	48.5%	50.1%	53.9%	59.4%	55.6%
Dec-15	59.3%	39.4%	44.1%	45.8%	58.0%	49.6%
Jan-16	62.2%	44.4%	45.6%	43.0%	59.2%	51.1%
Feb-16	63.4%	47.3%	49.1%	47.5%	57.9%	53.8%
Mar-16	68.3%	47.7%	50.6%	50.8%	57.9%	55.7%

Source: KA34 Departmental Return

P Information is provisional and may be subject to change.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health (i) what records are held by her Department in relation to Marian Vale or The Good Shepherd Sisters Mother and Baby Home, 123 Armagh Rd, Newry, BT35 6PU; (ii) what steps have been taken to obtain the records on the adoption of children born in Northern Ireland to young mothers who were sent to this home which have been sent to the headquarters of the religious order in the Republic of Ireland; (iii) whether there is any record held of the number of children that were born in the Daisy Hill Hospital whilst the mother was resident in this home; and (iv) whether there is any record of stillborn births or subsequent deaths of children born in this establishment.

(AQW 589/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) My Department holds no records relating to Marian Vale or The Good Shepherd Sisters Mother and Baby Home, 123 Armagh Rd, Newry. Records held previously by my Department, in accordance with records management policy, have either been destroyed or passed to the Public Record Office;
- (ii) None on the basis that adoption records of this nature are not held by the Department;
- (iii) Neither my Department nor the Southern Health and Social Care Trust hold a record of the number of children who were born in Daisy Hill Hospital whilst the mother was resident in Marian Vale; and

- (iv) Neither my Department nor the Southern Health and Social Care Trust hold a record of stillborn births or subsequent deaths of children born in this establishment, that is, Marian Vale or The Good Shepherd Sisters Mother and Baby Home, 123 Armagh Rd, Newry.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health to outline the process for employing staff via an expression of interest form which is utilised by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust; and how many staff have been employed via this mechanism during each month of the last five years.

(AQW 594/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has agreed Workforce Controls / Advertising Procedures, which include the use of Expression of Interest (EOI) processes. These were shared with Trade Unions at the time of development.

EOIs enable Trust Managers, in suitable circumstances, to fill some posts internally from a restricted pool of current staff within their Directorates. There are no centrally maintained records of such processes.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health what action is being taken to improve the availability and adequacy of therapeutic interventions for children who have been abused.

(AQW 595/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is committed to providing appropriate therapeutic interventions to support children who have been abused. It is reassuring to note that the Children's Charter published jointly recently by Barnardo's and NSPCC recognises the considerable developments that have been made, in terms of the support and protection of children and young people in the North of Ireland in recent years.

Children and young people who are identified as having been abused or at risk of abuse are subject to the child protection procedures. This includes conducting a child-centred comprehensive assessment of their needs which will cover protection, physical, emotional, behavioural and mental health needs and needs in respect of education and training support.

The Health and Social Care Board has invested in training to increase workforce capacity to support delivery of evidence-based psychological therapies and interventions, including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, psychodynamic therapy, Family Therapy, and Counselling.

The demands on children's services continues to grow, reflected in an increase in the numbers on the Child Protection Register (a 9% increase in 2015/2016) the numbers of Looked After Children and the referrals accepted into child and adolescent mental health services. To respond to the growing demands on children's services, more integrated approaches to service provision and new models of care are being developed, to ensure that services are delivered efficiently and that they are effective in terms of outcomes for children.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health what action is being taken to improve mental health care available for children in care.

(AQW 597/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Mental health services are available and accessible to all children and young people irrespective of their care status. There is a range of service interventions specifically commissioned to support the health and well-being needs of Looked After Children. These include: a dedicated LAC Nurse to ensure effective co-ordination of the overall health needs of LAC, including their emotional and mental health; and LAC Therapeutic Teams which support the emotional and psychological health of Looked After Children, including those transitioning from care regardless of placement setting.

A regional multi-agency Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) model, known as the Stepped Care Model, which promotes evidence-based practice is being implemented to improve services and ensure consistent provision across the North of Ireland. These services respond to children and young people, including LAC, presenting with significant mental health difficulties. In addition, access is available to Beechcroft, a purpose-built 33-bedded CAMHS inpatient unit.

In relation to those at risk of or presenting with child sexual exploitation, Trusts have access to a HSC Board-commissioned Intensive Therapeutic Support Services and funding has recently been provided for the appointment of 2 Drug & Alcohol Workers in each Trust.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health what assurances she can give that she is seeking additional funding for Learning Disability Services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 603/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Western HSC Trust has recently briefed my officials on a historic resourcing deficit in its adult learning disability services. To resolve the issue, the Western Trust has agreed to develop a long term plan, in partnership with local families and carers, to quantify the spending gap and address the current historic resourcing issues in its adult learning disability services. The Trust will be fully supported in this important work by the Health and Social Care Board. It is ultimately for the Western Trust to decide how it funds its individual programmes of care in line with the priority needs of the local community. Although the funding position for Health and Social Care is very challenging, I am committed to ensuring that the HSC as a whole prioritises its resources to meet the needs of the community.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the date and source of the information upon which the decision to lift the ban on gay men donating blood was taken.

(AQW 623/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: In 2016 the secretariat of the expert group on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) advised my Department that, further to the risk assessment that SaBTO considered in 2011, there is significant new evidence that indicates that the change to a 12-month deferral from lifetime deferral for MSM has not increased the risk of a transfusion-transmitted infection for patients receiving a transfusion. The key evidence since the 2011 review is surveillance data published by Public Health England, based on the testing of all blood donations in England, Scotland and Wales.

There is no donor deferral rule for gay men. The donor deferral rule for MSM is based on sexual activity, not sexual orientation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the date and source of all advice received by her Department on the subject of blood donations by gay men since 1 January 2016.

(AQW 624/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: I refer the Member to the answer to AQW623/16-21.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health if she has any plans to (i) establish a perinatal mental health unit; and (ii) increase the budget for perinatal mental health to allow for the establishment of a dedicated staff team.

(AQW 630/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) The Health and Social Care Board has developed outline proposals for the future development of specialist perinatal mental health services, in line with NICE guideline CG192. These proposals include specialist community based services and a regional mother and baby unit.
- (ii) The estimated cost of developing these specialist services is £1.9 million. Future development of these services is subject to additional resources being secured. Funding requirements will be considered alongside a wide range of competing priorities, both during in-year monitoring, and in the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on Strabane Fire Station.

(AQW 632/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The NIFS have completed an extensive public consultation on a proposal to place Wholetime Firefighters in four of its stations, including Strabane Fire Station. Responses from both internal and external stakeholders are currently under consideration before a final decision is reached.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health whether there are any plans to include a miscarriage support strategy as part of maternity services from 2016.

(AQW 635/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's guidance entitled 'Regional Bereavement Guidance on evidence-based, holistic care of parents and their families after the experience of miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death' published in November 2014, updated December 2015, is the support strategy offered to women and their families throughout the time of their loss.

The Guidance is used in conjunction with specific care pathways for pregnancy loss at all gestations and is implemented by all HSC Trusts.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health how her Department, and its arm's-length bodies, support grieving families after the loss of a baby.

(AQW 636/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's guidance entitled 'Regional Bereavement Guidance on evidence-based, holistic care of parents and their families after the experience of miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death' published in November 2014, updated December 2015, explains the support and help offered to women and their families throughout the time of their loss. All HSC Trusts implement this guidance.

Support and guidance is also provided by bereavement co-ordinators within HSC Trusts according to specific needs of families.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Health to detail any research that her department holds on Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.

(AQW 655/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Health and Social Care (HSC) research is carried out in all Trusts, usually in association with universities. There are a great many sources of funding, including Government, charities and industry and there is no restriction on the type of research which may be supported.

The HSC R&D Fund, managed through the Public Health Agency, supports research that focusses on benefits for patients and the population. Funding is provided for the NI Clinical Research Network (NICRN), which involves all Trusts. A clinician who wishes to carry out research on a particular disease or condition may apply to the Network for support to carry the research out.

I am not aware of any local research specifically in relation to Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, although care of patients continues to be informed by best available evidence and national guidelines.

Details on clinical trials in Britain and the north of Ireland are available on the UK Clinical Trials Gateway www.ukctg.nihr.ac.uk

Details on clinical trials across the globe are available on www.clinicaltrials.gov

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Health to detail any research her Department holds on Joint Hyper Mobility Syndrome. (AQW 656/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Health and Social Care (HSC) research is carried out in all Trusts, usually in association with universities. There are a great many sources of funding, including Government, charities and industry and there is no restriction on the type of research which may be supported.

The HSC R&D Fund, managed through the Public Health Agency, supports research that focusses on benefits for patients and the population. Funding is provided for the Northern Ireland Clinical Research Network (NICRN), which involves all Trusts. A clinician who wishes to carry out research on a particular disease or condition may apply to the Network for support to carry the research out.

A systematic review of hypermobility and musculoskeletal pain in children was published in 2012 by researchers based in Queen's University Belfast. (Scand J Rheumatol. 2012 Oct;41(5):329-38). This suggested no association between hypermobility and joint pain in Europeans. I am not aware of other local research in relation to hypermobility syndrome, although care of patients continues to be informed by best available evidence and guidelines.

Details on clinical trials in Britain and the north of Ireland are available on the UK Clinical Trials Gateway www.ukctg.nihr.ac.uk

Details on clinical trials across the globe are available on www.clinicaltrials.gov

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health to detail how many scheduled surgical procedures have had to be cancelled in the last twelve months at (i) Antrim Area Hospital; and (ii) Causeway Hospital due to reasons of staff shortages. (AQW 660/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: For the purpose of answering this question, it is assumed that 'scheduled surgical procedures,' refers to scheduled elective operations, and that 'reasons of staff shortages,' relates to cancellations where either surgeon; anaesthetist; or theatre staff were unavailable.

The number scheduled elective operations cancelled¹ due to staff shortages in Causeway and Antrim hospitals: May 2015- April 2016

Antrim Area Hospital	Causeway Hospital
42	87

Source: P9 Cancelled Operation Information Return

¹ Includes only those operations cancelled on the day of, or up to two days before the planned operation.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the spend on locum doctors per Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 679/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The table below details expenditure on Medical and Dental Locums, by each Health and Social Care Trust, for the 2015/16 financial year.

Trust	2015/2016
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	£7.8m
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	£15.1m
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	£6.1m
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	£4.4m
Western Health and Social Care Trust	£12.9m

Source: HSCTs

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what guidance her Department is issuing to GPs in assisting patients with medical advice and supporting documentation for social security purposes.

(AQW 680/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department for Communities (DfC) has responsibility for the assessment of medical reports prepared for social security purposes. Guidance for healthcare professionals in completing reports and providing documentation in support of social security claims has been produced by that Department and is available on its website at the following link: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/guide-medical-reports>.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether she will introduce any cuts to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service during the next financial year.

(AQW 686/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Financial planning decisions for 2017/18 in respect of my Department have not yet been taken.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for her assessment of the cost of dental treatment through the National Health Service; and how this compares to the cost of similar services in England and Wales..

(AQW 687/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The cost of health service dental treatment in the North of Ireland is based on service fees for each individual clinical item of treatment which is different from England and Wales where the cost of dental treatment is based on the payment of a set fee.

As a result dental treatment costs are not directly measurable or comparable between jurisdictions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the basis of the assessment that there is no health risk in respect of gay men donating blood.

(AQW 713/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: There is no zero-risk blood donor selection policy option.

SaBTO's report of April 2011 - Donor Selection Criteria Review – quantified the risks of HIV infection associated with the lifetime deferral for MSM; a one-year deferral for MSM with no change in compliance by MSM with the deferral rule; and a one-year deferral for MSM with an improvement in compliance by MSM with the deferral rule. The Review concluded that the evidence no longer supported the lifetime deferral.

More recent evidence in the form of surveillance data from England, Scotland and Wales demonstrates that the change to a 12-month deferral from lifetime deferral for MSM has not increased the risk of a transfusion-transmitted infection for patients receiving a transfusion.

There is no donor deferral rule for gay men. The donor deferral rule for MSM has been based on sexual activity, not sexual orientation.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health if she has any plans to review the criteria that those who have received a blood transfusion after 1980 cannot donate blood.

(AQW 717/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is responsible for policies regarding the safety of blood and blood products, within an EU legal framework. In this field the health departments in England, Scotland, Wales and the North of Ireland rely primarily on expert advice provided by the Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) which keeps the evidence under review.

A lifetime ban on people who have received a blood transfusion after 1980 donating blood was introduced in 2004 as one of the measures to reduce the risk of variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (vCJD). There are no plans to review this ban.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health whether the governance group on the strategy for exiting prostitution has been set up; and which Departments or organisations are part of the group.

(AQW 724/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Membership of the governance group responsible for the review of the 'Leaving Prostitution' Strategy and the associated Programme of Assistance and Support has yet to be agreed. It is intended that the first meeting of the governance group will be in autumn 2016.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Health how many people in Upper Bann are diagnosed with MS.

(AQW 725/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Information on the number of people diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis is not available. Information, however, is available on the number of people receiving drug treatment for Multiple Sclerosis, broken down by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust of residence, at the end of each month.

At the end of May 2016, there were 357 people on treatment (337 currently receiving treatment and 20 on treatment suspensions) for Multiple Sclerosis residing within the Southern HSC Trust.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Health what is the average waiting time for MS referrals in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 726/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Reason for referral, or confirmed diagnosis, is not collected for patients waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment. Therefore it is not possible to separately identify patients with Multiple Sclerosis waiting for a first appointment within the Neurology specialty.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the implementation of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Guideline 180, which aims to improve stroke services.

(AQW 732/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: NICE Clinical Guideline CG180 was endorsed by DHSSPS on 7th August 2014.

The HSCB has advised that three Trusts (Belfast, Southern and Western) have provided assurance that the guidance is fully implemented within their respective Trust areas while two other Trusts (Northern and South Eastern) have advised that they each only have to implement one further recommendation to be fully compliant with NICE CG 180.

The HSCB has assessed the issues raised and is engaged with each Trust to work to fully implement NICE CG180.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health what avenues are open to an individual that believes a Guardian ad Litem has misled a Court.

(AQW 749/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: A complaint about the service provided by a Guardian ad Litem should be made to the Complaints Officer, NIGALA, Centre House, 79 Chichester Street, Belfast, BT1 4JE.

Details of NIGALA's complaints policy and procedure is available at: http://www.nigala.hscni.net/pdf/Case_Related_Complaints_Policy_and_Procedure.pdf

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health how her Department is promoting active travel, including any funding that is available to promote cycling.

(AQW 773/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department and the Public Health Agency promote active travel through a range of methods including:

- Public information campaigns.
- 'Changing practices' (through implementation of the Belfast Active Travel Action Plan with the Belfast Strategic Partnership).
- Regional Active School Travel Programme.
- Workplaces – through an Active Travel programme by Sustrans called 'Leading the Way'.
- Cycle to Work schemes.
- Commissioning active travel programmes in local communities.
- Review of the Cycling for Health scheme and related programmes including the 'Sofa to Saddle', 'Festival of Cycling' and a week-long family cycle event at Craigavon Lakes in 2016.
- Funding the Picollo Fondo, a legacy project to the Giro in 2014/15.

With regards to available funding for cycling, existing programmes have been allocated the following funds for upcoming actions:

- Current multimedia physical activity campaign – this has a budget of around £300k.
- Active Schools travel - £200k per year. If further funds become available this will be supplemented to purchase extra resources to support the programme.
- 'Leading the Way' Sustrans Active Travel programme - £178,000 will be allocated over the next two years (2016/19) for Derry City and Strabane District Council, with £213,116 being spent in Belfast over a three year period (2014/17).
- Communities - £593,300 will be allocated over the next three years engaging with 12 communities to support walking and cycling.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future of Bell Gray nursing home in Newtownstewart.

(AQW 776/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Apex Housing Association is an independent provider of nursing home care. Its decision to close Bell Gray was made for business reasons and was taken independently of the Department.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust is making every effort to ensure the smooth transition of residents from their present home to a new home of their choice.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the new mental health unit in Omagh.
(AQW 778/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The business case for the new Mental Health Unit remains under consideration by my Department in liaison with the Western Trust.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to outline what processes are in place to track blood donations in the event of contamination from unsafe donations.
(AQW 782/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Blood Safety Quality Regulations 2005 transpose the European Blood Directive into law in the north of Ireland and Britian. The Regulations require "unambiguous traceability" of 30 years of all blood and blood components from donor to patient and vice versa or final fate if not transfused. All transfusion services therefore have robust procedures in place to ensure traceability is maintained.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to outline what processes are in place to check the veracity of declarations by blood donors as to their sexual history.
(AQW 784/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The health check questionnaire relies on the honesty of the donor to declare any high risk sexual behaviour. Donors are asked a number of questions related to general health, travel, and high risk behaviour which require a yes or no answer. The questionnaire does not ask for a detailed sexual history.

The safety of donated blood depends on two things: donor selection and the testing of blood. Every blood donation is tested for HIV and a number of other organisms. Not even the most advanced tests are 100% reliable, so it is vitally important for every donor to comply with any deferral rules that apply to them.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether the assessment that there is no health risk in respect of blood donations from gay men is dependent on truthful declarations by donors as to their sexual history.
(AQW 785/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: I refer the Member to the answers to AQW 713/16-21 and AQW 784/16-21.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health if there is a shortage of GPs in North Down.
(AQW 793/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Health and Social Care Board is responsible for commissioning general practitioner services to meet the needs of the local population. The Board is currently seeking to identify a contractor to provide primary medical services at a single-handed practice in the North Down area and is working closely with local GPs to ensure the continued provision of general medical services to the population of North Down.

I recognise that GPs right across the north are under pressure. The recent review of GP-led services made a number of recommendations aimed at addressing the pressures on the GP workforce. I will give careful consideration to the findings of that review as I seek to ensure everyone here has access to sustainable, high quality GP services.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of patient numbers in each GP practice in Bangor.
(AQW 794/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: There is a total of 54,853 patients registered with the nine GP practices in Bangor. This total is comprised of:

Practice ID number	Practice Name	Number of patients
253	The Health Centre	7,728
255	The Health Centre	5,384
256	Groomsport Road surgery	5,541
258	The Health Centre	4,963
260	The Health Centre	7,289
264	Silverbirch Medical Centre	2,846
274	Bloomfield Surgery	10,353
280	The Health Centre	5,228

Practice ID number	Practice Name	Number of patients
281	Cleland Park Surgery	5,521
Total		54,853

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Health to detail the waiting lists for children's autism services located in East Derry.
(AQW 795/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: It is assumed that this question refers to the waiting list for specialised intervention following an assessment for autism. This data is collected by Health and Social Care Trust area and is therefore not available for East Derry.

Table 1 overleaf details the waiting list from assessment to specialised intervention for the Northern and Western Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts at 31 March 2016.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Length of Time (Weeks)				Total
	0 - 4	>4 - 8	> 8 - 13	>13	
Northern	106	67	27	17	217
Western	15	15	19	19	68

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health what evidence was available last week regarding the health implications of the donation of blood by gay men which was not available when the lifetime ban was removed in England, Wales and Scotland.
(AQW 799/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: In 2016 the secretariat of the expert group on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) advised my Department that, further to the risk assessment that SaBTO considered in 2011, there is significant new evidence that indicates that the change to a 12-month deferral from lifetime deferral for MSM has not increased the risk of a transfusion-transmitted infection for patients receiving a transfusion. The key evidence since the 2011 review is surveillance data published by Public Health England, based on the testing of all blood donations in England, Scotland and Wales.

There is no donor deferral rule for gay men. The donor deferral rule for MSM has been based on sexual activity, not sexual orientation.

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to building a new health centre for Antrim Town; and what is the estimated capital cost.
(AQW 800/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Plans for a new Health and Care Centre in Antrim are included in the Health and Social Care Board's Strategic Implementation Plan which remains under consideration. Delivery of this facility will be considered alongside other capital investment priorities and will be dependent on future budget availability, value for money and affordability. It is not possible at this stage to identify the capital costs which would be associated with a new health centre in Antrim.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health to detail the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's saving plans for 2016-17.
(AQW 815/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust's 2016/17 savings plans are still under consideration. The plans will be published on the Trust website once finalised.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) why the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has taken the decision to switch staff who are currently paid weekly and fortnightly to monthly payments from September 2016; (ii) how many staff will be affected; and (iii) what consultation was undertaken with affected staff prior to the decision being taken.
(AQW 839/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) Four Trusts, including the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, plan to implement Single Pay Frequency, which will bring their payroll timeframes in line with other Trusts and all other HSC bodies. This is aimed at simplifying payroll processing and reducing administrative costs and the risk of payroll errors across the HSC.
- (ii) 1,680 staff are affected by the change to a single pay frequency within the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.
- (iii) The Southern Trust has been communicating with TUS for several months and communications have recently commenced with affected staff.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Health to outline the progress on the creation of a GP hub in the Lurgan area.
(AQW 859/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Plans for a GP hub in the Lurgan area are included in the Health and Social Care Board's Strategic Implementation Plan which remains under consideration. Delivery of this facility will be considered alongside other capital investment priorities and will be dependent on future budget availability, value for money and affordability. It is not possible at this stage to identify the capital costs which would be associated with a GP hub in the Lurgan area.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Health to outline the plans for the vacated Banbridge Health Centre following the relocation to the new site.
(AQW 860/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Southern HSC Trust no longer requires this building for the delivery of health related service. The disposal process for this Trust property asset is currently underway.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Health what consideration is being given to provide all pregnant women with vitamins, particularly folic acid, similar to the model recently adopted in Scotland.
(AQW 863/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Pregnant women who meet the eligibility criteria for the statutory Healthy Start Scheme are also entitled to free vitamins containing vitamins C, D and folic acid. There are no plans at present to extend eligibility to all pregnant women. However, my officials will continue to monitor developments elsewhere, including the proposed standardised distribution model for vitamin provision in Scotland, when it is introduced.

Ms Lockhart asked the Minister of Health to advise on the availability of the BCG booster vaccine, or the six prick skin test, to improve the immunity for adults who did not receive it as a child.
(AQW 865/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: BCG vaccination is normally recommended for babies, children and adults under the age of 35 who are considered at risk of catching tuberculosis (TB). Adults who did not receive the BCG as a child would not routinely be offered BCG vaccine. Adults considered to be at risk are often given a skin test before they are offered the vaccine to check whether they already have antibodies to TB. The BCG vaccine is not given to anyone over the age of 35, as there is no evidence that it works for people in this age group.

Due to production problems there is currently a shortage of the centrally supplied BCG vaccine used here and in England, Scotland and Wales. This issue is also affecting other European countries. During this period of constrained BCG vaccine supply all Trusts have been issued with guidance to allow them to prioritise those considered most at risk, which are certain children aged 5 and under. Individuals requiring the vaccine for occupational reasons are considered to be the lowest priority at present.

It should be noted that there are relatively low levels of TB in the North and that plans are well advanced to ensure we receive an alternative BCG vaccine to ensure we are able to continue to vaccinate those considered to be the highest priority.
Number of Patients Making Use of GP Surgeries in Portadown.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Health to detail the total number of patients making use of GP surgeries in the Portadown area, in each of the last 12 months.
(AQW 905/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not available. GPs are independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide Primary Medical Services to their patients. Information on patient usage of GP services is not centrally recorded and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Information is available in relation to patient registrations at GP practices. The numbers of patients registered at GP practices in the Portadown area are shown for July 2015, October 2015, January 2016 and April 2016 in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Number of patients registered at GP practices in Portadown, July 2015 – April 2016

Month/Year	Number of patients registered on GP lists in Portadown*
July 2015	44,411
October 2015	44,741
January 2016	44,990
April 2016	45,202

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System

* GP practices in the Portadown area have been defined as those located in Portadown; there are 8 GP practices located in Portadown, all within 'The Health Centre'.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 410/16-21, whether she will consider introducing a system of monitoring that is held centrally detailing people (i) seen in a primary setting; or (ii) dealt with in a hospital setting as a result of the use of psychoactive substances.

(AQW 909/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: While we continually seek to improve our information and data recording in a number of key areas, it is important to bear in mind the policy need and practicality, achievability and resource requirements of any proposals.

In relation to New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), a small number of persons have presented for treatment for this drug category. A small proportion of respondents (0.6%) to the 2014/15 Drug Prevalence Survey reported taking these drugs (including mephedrone) in the last year.

The Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) records information on conditions that are treated in general practice. Misuse of NPS is not a condition that has been reported to us as having been treated in general practice on a frequent basis and therefore there is not a separate category for these substances.

The Hospital Inpatient System records information on all admissions to HSC hospitals in the North. Each admission is categorised by diagnosis group using the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (ICD10), published by the World Health Organisation. At present there are no codes within the ICD10 classification system that can identify patients admitted with a diagnosis of misuse of NPS.

However, any healthcare practitioner can report concerns about trends or harms related to any specific substances through the Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System (DAMIS). In addition, my Department will keep the need to further develop or improve monitoring systems under review on an ongoing basis.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what are the plans for capital investment for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust over the next five years.

(AQW 926/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table lists capital investments which are currently ongoing in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

Project	Value
Ulster Hospital Phase B	£260.5m
Lagan Valley Hospital Site Demolition	£4.0m
Ulster Hospital Decontamination	£1.7m

Future capital investment projects in the Trust will be considered by my Department and the Executive as part of Budget 2017 which will conclude in the autumn.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health to detail the average GP waiting times for each practice in East Antrim over the last three years.

(AQW 932/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not available. As independent contractors, GP practices are responsible for managing their own appointment systems and waiting times.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the downtime statistics for ambulances in January 2016, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 936/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: It is assumed that ambulance downtime refers to the ambulance turnaround time.

Information on ambulance turnaround times detailed in this response refers to the time between an ambulance arriving at the emergency care department and it 'clearing' the location. The crew will remain with the patient until they have been handed over to the relevant clinical personnel within the HSC hospital environment. The ambulance turnaround time includes patient handover and other aspects such as the time to clean and replenish the ambulance for the next call.

Ambulance turnaround times for each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust in January 2016 are detailed in the table below 1:

HSC Trust	< 15 Minutes	15 - 30 Minutes	31 - 45 Minutes	46 - 60 Minutes	61 - 120 Minutes	> 120 Minutes	Total
Belfast	405	1,373	1,680	589	162	8	4,217
Northern	391	1,351	882	166	53	0	2,843
South Eastern	171	640	919	417	188	11	2,346

HSC Trust	< 15 Minutes	15 - 30 Minutes	31 - 45 Minutes	46 - 60 Minutes	61 - 120 Minutes	> 120 Minutes	Total
Southern	308	1,029	685	260	218	26	2,526
Western	357	954	475	186	111	13	2,096
Other locations 2	82	20	7	2	0	0	111
Northern Ireland	1,714	5,367	4,648	1,620	732	58	14,139

Source: Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS)

- 1 The information provided relates to all ambulance journeys, including Health Care Professional (HCP) and routine patient journeys in addition to those resulting from emergency calls.
- 2 Other locations refer to patients who refused to travel and those taken to locations which are not part of an HSC Trust. e.g. Airports, Hospitals in the Republic of Ireland and Independent Hospital/Clinics.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when the results of the scoping paper, undertaken by the Public Health Agency and discussed by the Northern Ireland Screening Committee, on the introduction of the faecal immunochemical test as part of the bowel cancer screening programme will be made public.

(AQW 941/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The scoping paper submitted by the Public Health Agency (PHA) was discussed at the Northern Ireland Screening Committee's meeting held on 13th May 2016. Further information is needed on a number of issues before resource requirements or timescales for possible implementation can be given.

The PHA has been asked to submit an updated paper for discussion at the next NISC meeting which will be in approximately 6 months time. Once this information has been received and assessed, I will make a decision.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for her assessment of access to addiction services.

(AQW 945/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: Through my Department's New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase Two, the Health & Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency commission a full range of alcohol and drug services. These services encompass: information, education and prevention; community support; early intervention; harm reduction/low threshold; and specialist treatment and support.

A number of these services were re-commissioned in July 2015 to ensure they were operating in line with the most up-to-date evidence on effectiveness and to provide greater consistency and accessibility right across the North. A list of all services is available online at: <http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info/services-near-you/>

We continue to review and improve the effectiveness and accessibility of these services. For example, Tier 4 inpatient substance misuse services were reviewed in 2014 and a new regional network is now being embedded, and a review of Tier 3 Community Addiction Services is currently being undertaken by the Health and Social Care Board.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health for an update on proposals for a Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service training centre at Desertcreat.

(AQW 950/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The Outline Business Case (OBC1) was considered and secured approval at the Executive meeting of 10 March 2016. It was further agreed that the development of the option, which included NIFRS training facilities at Desertcreat, could proceed to the next stage. This approval also included an allocation in respect of early works for the Fire and Rescue Service at Desertcreat in advance of the full development and approval of the next stage of the business case.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) the original rationale for siting the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service training centre at Desertcreat; (ii) whether that rationale still applies given that it will no longer be a shared site with the PSNI; and (iii) what alternative sites have been considered.

(AQW 954/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) A detailed assessment of the options for delivering the future training of NIFRS resulted in the original decision to site future training facilities at Desertcreat.
- (ii) The most recent assessment of NIFRS future training requirements is that they continue to be best served through the development of training facilities at Desertcreat
- (iii) The most recent training options assessment included consideration of NIFRS current training facility at Boucher Road, Belfast.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the plans to rebuild Bangor Health Centre.
(AQW 971/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: There are no immediate plans to rebuild Bangor Health Centre. Proposals for a new Health and Care Centre in Bangor are included in the Health and Social Care Board's Strategic Implementation Plan which is still under consideration. Delivery of a new health and care centre in Bangor will have to be considered alongside other capital investment priorities and will be dependent on future budget availability, value for money and affordability.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health to detail the average GP waiting times for each practice in North Antrim over the last five years.
(AQW 997/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is not available. As independent contractors, GP practices are responsible for managing their own appointment systems and waiting times.

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health to outline her Department's plans for capital investment for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust over the next five years.
(AQW 998/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table lists capital investments which are currently ongoing in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Project	Total Value
Ballymena Health Care Centre	£26.0m
Antrim Area Hospital replacement MRI Scanner	£1.5m
Antrim Area Hospital 2nd MRI scanner	£2.9m
Antrim Area Hospital Decontamination	£1.3m
Antrim Area Hospital Adult Orthodontics	£2.0m

Future capital investment projects in the Trust will be considered by my Department and the Executive as part of Budget 2017 which will conclude in the autumn.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Health whether she has plans to further increase GP training numbers.
(AQW 1000/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The recent review of GP-led Primary Care services has made a number of recommendations aimed at addressing the pressures on the GP workforce. I will carefully consider the findings of that review as I seek to ensure everyone here has access to sustainable, high quality GP services.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health for an update on the inter-departmental working group established to consider fatal foetal abnormalities, including its (i) membership; (ii) meeting dates; (iii) terms of reference; and when she expects the group to report its findings.
(AQW 1085/16-21)

Mrs O'Neill: The membership and Terms of Reference of the Working Group were agreed in principle only in the last mandate. The Group did not meet. I want to give the handling of the issue careful and measured consideration and I want to engage women who have experience of dealing with fatal fetal abnormality in the process.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Aiken asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress has been made in providing a dual carriageway spur from the M2 motorway to Belfast International Airport.
(AQW 61/16-21)

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure): I recognise the importance of transport links to our ports and airports.

The implementation of the Department for Infrastructure Strategic Road Improvement Programme has enhanced regional access to Belfast international Airport. The current improvement works to the A26 and the A31 Magherafelt Bypass along with the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme, expected to start later this year, will reinforce this.

In 2014, my Department commissioned a feasibility study to identify potential options to improve strategic links between the M1 and M2/M22 and Belfast International Airport. A number of potential route corridors were examined, several of which will be reviewed in a detailed options appraisal, progression of which is subject to the availability of funding.

No commitment on funding can be given at this time. The next review of the Investment Strategy for the north of Ireland may, however, provide an opportunity for my Department to look at the prioritisation of new schemes. At this time, connections to Belfast International Airport can be considered along with other existing and proposed schemes elsewhere in the north of Ireland.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress has been made in building a relief road around Ballyclare, including a new bridge.
(AQW 62/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: Ballyclare Bypass, or Western Relief Road, including the associated bridge infrastructure, has been identified in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMAP) 2015 as being required to support development proposals in the area. Therefore it is termed as a developer driven road and it is the responsibility of developers to build it.

This is a non-strategic road scheme, which developers will be responsible for delivering as part of the overall development of the area. As such, the Ballyclare Relief Road will not be funded from the public purse and is not programmed for delivery by my Department.

In accordance with the principles of the Regional Transportation Strategy, the major road works programme is concentrated on the Strategic Road Network, which comprises Northern Ireland's busiest roads linking the Belfast Metropolitan Area to the main provincial towns and cities.

I am aware that the Neptune Group has bought this land. My officials will assist where possible, however it has to be borne in mind that there are planning approvals in place and the new developer through his 'due-diligence' for the purchase will be aware of these. The Neptune Group is currently taking forward proposals as approved to develop the lands at the Templepatrick Road end of the Relief Road along with the associated roads infrastructure.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on taxi signage and metering; and to outline any reasons for delays in enforcement.
(AQW 74/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: From 31 May 2016 all Class A and B taxis are required to install and use an approved taximeter and printer and adhere to a new maximum fare. Due to concerns raised with former Minister Durkan regarding the lead in time for the new taximetering requirements, he decided that, until 1 October 2016, in respect of taximeters and printers, enforcement action taken against drivers at the roadside will be limited to education and advice. Similarly when the taxi is being tested, failure to present the taxi with the required taximeter and printer will not be a failure item until 1 October 2016. Enhanced enforcement action relating to these requirements will commence from 1 October 2016. Effectively this gives the industry more time to prepare for the changes taking place.

There are also changes to the roofsign requirements from 31 May 2016. These requirements apply immediately to all new taxis being tested for the first time and on a rolling basis, as they present for vehicle test, for all current taxis.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Infrastructure how he will improve the transport corridor between Banbridge and Craigavon.
(AQW 108/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The prioritisation of investment in transport at a strategic level is directed by the "Ensuring a Sustainable Transport Future: A New Approach to Regional Transportation" strategy. This Strategy outlines high level aims and objectives for transport which align with the Programme for Government and aim to maximise the economic, social and environmental contribution that transport can make to society.

At the highest level the contribution that transport schemes can make to supporting economic growth, enhancing the quality of people's lives and reducing the environmental impact of transport is taken into account when making decisions to prioritise investment.

The extension to Millennium Way in Lurgan started on site on Monday 23 May and I was pleased to visit the site on Thursday 26 May as one of my first engagements as Minister. This road will be a very important link to the Banbridge Road in Lurgan and will improve the transport corridor from Lurgan to Banbridge.

The A26 Craigavon (Lurgan) and A50 Portadown to Banbridge routes are not on the strategic route network. As such, any requests for localised improvements along these routes will be considered and assessed to determine their priority status and allow them to be compared with other proposals competing for inclusion in my Department's Network Development Programme.

Two hourly bus services currently operate on normal working hours between Banbridge and Craigavon. These are service 56 to Lurgan and service 62 to Portadown. Both services link into the Craigavon bus corridor between Lurgan and Portadown, with departures every 15 minutes to Craigavon Hospital and Rushmere Centre.

Translink also continues to work closely with local Council and key attractors in the area (including Craigavon Hospital, Rushmere Centre and Marlborough House) in order to encourage the use of public transport, including the Tax Smart scheme, £2 "off-peak" promotion between Lurgan and Portadown, as well as multi-journey card savings.

The Department has also funded the new bus facility in Banbridge, providing improved facilities for all its customers in the area.

There are regular train services between Newry and Portadown with stops at Scarva and Poyntzpass.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will introduce a new planning policy on the building of solar power farms.

(AQW 154/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: You may be aware of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) which was published in September 2015 by the Department of the Environment. The SPPS provides a strategic planning policy framework for the consideration of a diverse range of renewable energy development proposals, including solar farms. The SPPS broadly reflects the provisions of Planning Policy Statement 18 (PPS 18) 'Renewable Energy' which is currently retained under the transitional arrangements of the SPPS. As such, proposals for solar farm developments are considered on a case by case basis against the policy contained within the SPPS, PPS 18, as well as its supplementary Best Practice Guidance, and all other material considerations.

In addition, the Department of the Environment issued guidance titled 'Case Officer Guidelines for Processing Solar Farm Applications' in July 2015, which gives direction to planning officers dealing with applications for solar farm proposals. In light of the continued interest in renewable energy policy, the former DoE Minister issued a Call for Evidence on the strategic planning policy for Renewable Energy in March 2016. I can advise that 36 responses were received. My officials are currently analysing these responses following which I will then consider the appropriate next steps I wish to take in relation to strategic planning policy for renewable energy.

It is worth noting that under the reformed two-tier planning system, which came into effect on the 1 April 2015, councils are responsible for bringing forward detailed operational planning policies, within their Local Development Plans for a range of land use planning matters, including renewable energy development. In doing so councils must take account of the SPPS and any other policies or advice and guidance issued. However, councils have the flexibility to tailor these policies to local circumstances so that they are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve. Furthermore, whilst my Department has retained responsibility for assessing development proposals which are of regional significance, the majority of planning applications for solar farms are now determined by councils.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 53851/11-16, whether the preliminary St Lucia condition survey report will be made available to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

(AQW 187/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The St Lucia Survey Condition report has been completed. There are no plans to publish it at this time.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the resurfacing of Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee is on a priority list.

(AQW 196/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I can advise the Member that the resurfacing of Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee is not currently on a priority list.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any plans to resurface roads in Donaghadee town centre, including any timescales involved.

(AQW 197/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am pleased to confirm that TransportNI has resurfacing work scheduled for roads within Donaghadee town centre at the locations indicated below.

- 1 Shore Street
- 2 The Parade
- 3 High Street
- 4 Hunter's Lane
- 5 Townhall Lane

This work is being carried out in conjunction with Ards & North Down Borough Council on the back of the recent Public Realm Scheme within the town.

The initial phase of the works at locations 1 and 2 is due to commence on 9 June 2016 with completion due by 1 July 2016.

Locations 3, 4, and 5 are scheduled to commence on 25 July 2016 and will run through August 2016 with the exact timing being subject to Northern Ireland Water works in the town having been completed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on a residents only parking pilot scheme for the Spencer Street area of Holywood, including timescales.

(AQW 198/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am aware of the desire of Holywood residents for controlled parking in their areas to address all-day parking.

The Department is currently focusing its efforts on the implementation of residents' parking schemes in parts of Belfast and in Derry and Antrim.

Unfortunately, I am unable to indicate a timescale when the implementation of any such scheme in the Spencer Street area of Holywood might be taken forward.

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline his Department's plans for delivering the A5 Transport Corridor, including a time line for delivery; and how much funding has been ring-fenced for the A5 in the current financial period.
(AQW 202/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: On 16 February 2016 the then Department for Regional Development (DRD) published for consultation the Notice of Intention to Make Vesting Orders (draft Vesting Orders) for the following phases of the scheme:

- Phase 1A - New Buildings to north of Strabane;
- Phase 1B - south of Omagh to Ballygawley; and
- Phase 2 - north of Strabane to south of Omagh.

The Notice of Intention to Make a Direction Order (draft Direction Order) for the length between New Buildings and Ballygawley and a new Environmental Statement (ES) covering the full extent of the scheme between New Buildings and Aughnacloy were also published at that time. The consultation period extended to 4 April 2016 during which time 972 representations were received. A further consultation was carried out on a revised Non-Technical Summary (NTS) of the Environmental Statement. This commenced on 18 April 2016 and extended to 2 June 2016. A small number of further representations were received during this time.

A Public Inquiry has been programmed for autumn 2016, to be administered by the Planning Appeals Commission, and the Inspectors Report is then expected around May 2017. My Department will then consider the recommendations of this Report in detail before I make a decision on whether to proceed with the scheme and make the necessary statutory Orders (Direction Order, Vesting Order and Stopping-Up Order).

Subject to satisfactory completion of the statutory processes, I am hopeful that construction can commence in late 2017 on Phase 1A (between New Buildings and north of Strabane) in line with the 'A Fresh Start' Agreement.

The Budget 2016-17 agreed by the Executive identifies the A5 Western Transport Corridor as a flagship project and recognises the need to provide funding certainty for such projects over the longer term. As such a sum of £229 million has been allocated to the project up to the end of 2020/21 financial year. This includes an agreed funding package from the Irish Government of £75 million.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the A5 project; including a timeline of when work will begin.
(AQW 220/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: On 16 February 2016 the then Department for Regional Development (DRD) published for consultation the Notice of Intention to Make Vesting Orders (draft Vesting Orders) for the following phases of the scheme:

- Phase 1A - New Buildings to north of Strabane;
- Phase 1B - south of Omagh to Ballygawley; and
- Phase 2 - north of Strabane to south of Omagh.

The Notice of Intention to Make a Direction Order (draft Direction Order) for the length between New Buildings and Ballygawley and a new Environmental Statement (ES) covering the full extent of the scheme between New Buildings and Aughnacloy were also published at that time. The consultation period extended to 4 April 2016 during which time 972 representations were received. A further consultation was carried out on a revised Non-Technical Summary (NTS) of the Environmental Statement. This commenced on 18 April 2016 and extended to 2 June 2016. A small number of further representations were received during this time.

A Public Inquiry has been programmed for autumn 2016, to be administered by the Planning Appeals Commission, and the Inspectors Report is then expected around May 2017. My Department will then consider the recommendations of this Report in detail before I make a decision on whether to proceed with the scheme and make the necessary statutory Orders (Direction Order, Vesting Order and Stopping-Up Order).

Subject to satisfactory completion of the statutory processes, I am hopeful that construction can commence in late 2017 on Phase 1A (between New Buildings and north of Strabane) in line with the 'A Fresh Start' Agreement.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to review the condition of roads across the Ards Peninsula; to details how many roads have unrepaired potholes (as of the end of June 2016); how many roads have been identified for repair and when those repairs will be completed.
(AQW 230/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I can advise the Member that my Department's TransportNI operates a cyclic routine inspection regime on all adopted roads including those within the Ards Peninsula. As such there is no requirement to carry out a review of the condition of the roads across the Ards Peninsula as the inspection regime is ongoing throughout the year.

At this time I am unable to provide details of the number of roads which have unrepaired potholes up to the end of June 2016. I would also point that the number of roads where repairs have been identified is not normally recorded as a separate statistic on our systems.

Under the current reduced level of service due to budgetary constraints, only the highest priority defects are being fixed across the entire road network, including unclassified rural roads. These defects will be repaired within either one calendar day or five working days depending on their severity and depending on the necessary resources being available.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the development of a residents' parking scheme in the Lawrence Hill and Clarence Avenue University area of Derry.

(AQW 242/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I will soon be meeting officials to discuss all issues associated with Residents' Parking in Derry and other towns and cities, before any decisions regarding the way forward are taken.

I am aware of local concerns and will of course consider these, alongside the impact on adjacent residential areas of implementing any scheme.

Mr Smith asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans he has to manage vehicle speeds at the Ryan Park section of the A23 Ballygowan Road.

(AQW 252/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I can advise that my Department has programmed a number of works along the A23 Ballygowan Road to improve general safety and increase driver awareness including the area around Ryan Park.

This work involves new and improved signing and road markings along the route between Manse Road and Ballygowan. Specifically it will include new warning signs in the vicinity of Ryan Park, works to enhance the footway width and upgrade the Street Lighting units between Manse Road and Roselawn cemetery, red carriageway surfacing and SLOW road markings at warning signs, edge of carriageway road markings through Crossnacreevy village and at all crossroads along the route.

While the majority of these works have already been carried out it is anticipated that the remainder will be completed in the near future depending, on weather conditions, but during this financial year.

As you will appreciate, in general, enforcement of speed limits and inappropriate driving is a matter for the PSNI. Should this occur I would encourage residents to report these incidents to the police.

Mr Smith asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans he has to improve the A22 Comber Road.

(AQW 253/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: At this time, due to a reduced budget for minor improvements to the Network, there are no plans to deliver any road improvement schemes on the A22 Comber Road.

Details of my Department's programme of works for the Strangford Constituency can be found in the local council reports published on the DfI website at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/corporatereports>

No resurfacing schemes are planned here during 2016/17 as the carriageway is in a safe and serviceable condition.

A potential sidefilling scheme is being investigated at a location south of Balloo with its implementation subject to land acquisition and the availability of funding.

Mr Smith asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail his plans and timescales for improvements to Portaferry Road.

(AQW 254/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: At this time, due to a reduced budget for minor improvements to the Network, there are no plans to deliver any road improvement schemes on the Portaferry Road. However, my Department is hopeful that at least one resurfacing scheme can be delivered this year on the section of Portaferry Road between Greyabbey and Kircubbin.

Details of my Department's programme of works for individual council areas can be found in the local council reports published on the DfI website at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/corporatereports>

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether his Department breached any requirements of its own planning legislation when it (a) allowed the exploratory drilling for hydrocarbons at Woodburn Forest to be granted permitted development rights by default; (b) failed to screen for environmental effects before deemed consent became established; (c) failed to secure a waste management plan prior to granting permitted development rights; and (ii) why this was allowed to occur.

(AQW 258/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The Woodburn Permitted Development notification to drill an exploratory well under Permitted Development Rights was submitted in accordance with Part 16 of the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 (as amended). In line with this legislation the Department of the Environment was under an obligation to advise the applicant that permitted development rights did not apply within 21 days of receipt of the notification. Where the Department did not respond within 21 days of receipt of a Permitted Development notification, the consent was considered as deemed only where the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Regulation thresholds were not met.

In this case, the InfraStrata proposals for Woodburn, fell within the threshold listed in Schedule 2, Column 1(2)(d) of the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2012 and therefore the proposal required an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Determination to be carried out under the same regulations.

Officials carried out an EIA Determination based on the information provided at that time prior to confirming permitted development rights with the company and concluded that the proposed development did not need to be accompanied by an Environmental Statement.

Permitted development was not "granted by default", had the proposals constituted EIA development, then permitted development rights would have been automatically removed and a full planning application would have been required, notwithstanding the 21 day timeframe set out in the General Development Order.

In terms of the Waste Management Plan, the Department of Environment officials wrote to the planning agents RPS and advised that the development fell within the scope of the Planning (Management of Waste from Extractive Industries) Regulations (NI) 2010 and a Waste Management Plan was required to be submitted for assessment prior to the scheme proceeding.

This information was submitted to the Department of Environment in March 2015 and following the transfer of planning powers in April 2015, Mid and East Antrim Council assessed and approved the Waste Management plan in March 2016 prior to InfraStrata availing of their permitted development rights.

From your input into the debate, you will be aware of the Assembly Motion discussed in the Chamber on Monday 6 June 2016, noting the concerns of Members regarding the application by InfraStrata to drill at Woodburn Forest.

As Minister within the newly formed Department for Infrastructure, I have decided to propose a change to the current legislation on permitted development rights for mineral exploration by removing such rights for oil and gas exploration. In the future, exploration for oil and gas will require the submission of a planning application and will be subject to the full rigours of the planning process, including environmental impact assessment and public consultation. I intend to consult on the legislative change in due course.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will prioritise the rescinding of Part 16 of the Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015.
(AQW 259/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I have decided to propose a change to the current legislation on permitted development rights for mineral exploration by removing such rights for oil and gas exploration. In the future, exploration for oil and gas will require the submission of a planning application and will be subject to the full rigours of the planning process, including environmental impact assessment and public consultation. I intend to consult on the legislative change in due course.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the community and voluntary organisations in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that received funding from his Department, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 266/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: In the last five years Cookstown, Dungannon & Magherafelt Community Transport (CDM) and Fermanagh Community Transport (FCT) have received grant funding from my Department to provide Dial a Lift services in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when his Department plans to resurface the footpaths at Fairfield Park, Bangor.
(AQW 284/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department's TransportNI has no current plans to carry out footway reconstruction work within Fairfield Park, Bangor.

The footways at this location remain in a safe and serviceable condition.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Portavoe Reservoir; and on the discussions with Ards and North Down Borough Council to buy the facility.
(AQW 288/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The sale of surplus reservoirs is an operational matter for Northern Ireland Water (NIW). The company has informed me that discussions had taken place with Ards and North Down Borough Council on acquiring the reservoir.

However, legal proceedings have been issued in the High Court and no decision on the future of the reservoir can be taken until these proceedings are completed.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure when TransportNI will fix the potholes at the junction of Edward Street and Ardglass Road, Downpatrick.

(AQW 293/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The Edward Street Ardglass Road junction area was inspected on 27 May 2016 and five potholes were identified for repair. I am pleased to advise you that these potholes were repaired by 1 June 2016.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action his Department is taking to address Drink-Driving.

(AQW 310/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: New provisions to tackle the harm caused by drink driving were included in the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act (NI) 2016 which completed its passage through the Assembly earlier this year.

The Act makes provision for two new lower drink drive limits, the lowest of which will apply to novice and professional drivers, together with a new graduated penalty regime. There will be no lessening of existing penalties. The Act also provides for new police powers which will increase the likelihood of being stopped and tested and removes the right to opt for a blood or urine sample to replace a breath sample, in circumstances where the breath sample is marginally above the limit. It also ensures that a greater number of drink drivers will complete the drink drive rehabilitation course - designed to make offenders take more responsibility for their actions and reduce the risk of them re-offending.

I want to see these measures introduced as soon as possible but there are, nonetheless, a number of steps to be taken before reaching that point. A consultation on regulations required to implement the new measures concluded on 27 May 2016 and the responses are currently being considered in detail. Other issues critical to the practical application of the new legislation include the availability of appropriate breath testing equipment, as well as a number of necessary changes within the current criminal justice system. My Department is working closely with partner organisations in each of these areas to ensure we have robust procedural and operational systems in place in advance of such significant change. I am confident that, with the continued support of my road safety partners, phased implementation of the new regime will commence later this year.

Aside from changes to legislation my Department is working hard to deliver the drink drive message using the most appropriate platforms available. A new social media campaign was launched in December 2015 to reinforce the message that the only safe level of alcohol when driving is no alcohol. With the proposed introduction of lower drink drive limits, it was appropriate that the Department took the opportunity to anticipate the change in the law. The campaign is aimed at all drivers but particularly at young male drivers who are statistically at the core of this problem as they are more likely to be involved in a serious crash where alcohol is a factor. The campaign will form an important part of this summer's drink drive campaign on social media and will also air on television during July and August.

Collectively, these actions will create an effective deterrent and send out a very clear message to drivers that drink driving will not be tolerated and that offenders will be caught and dealt with appropriately.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when the report into the street lighting pilot scheme in the Banbridge and Craigavon areas will be published; and (ii) what subsequent action will be forthcoming to deal with street lighting problems caused as a result of this pilot scheme.

(AQW 311/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: While it is not intended to publish a formal report on the street lighting LED retrofit project, my officials will be carrying out an assessment of all aspects of the work upon completion. It is expected that this will be completed by the end of the summer, and my Department will be happy to share the findings of that assessment, if requested.

Each issue raised about the project is being individually assessed by my officials to ensure that the lighting complies with the Department's policy for street lighting.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail any plans that his Department has to widen the footpath along Temple Road, Derry.

(AQW 315/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department has identified a 200 metre long stretch of narrow footway on the Temple Road approximately midway between its junction with the A2 Clooney Road and its junction with Westlake.

Proposals to widen the footway at this location are included in the 2016/2017 Local Transport and Safety Measures programme for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. However delivery of the scheme will ultimately depend on successful acquisition of the lands required to allow the widening to take place.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many potholes have been identified on roads in each of the last three years, broken down by council area.

(AQW 341/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: TransportNI do not maintain statistics specifically in relation to potholes. That said the following table provides the number of carriageway surface defects (which includes potholes, cracking, depressions etc) that had been recorded in each of the last three years (1st April to 31st March), by council area.

Council Area	Number of Potholes		
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	7545	5831	5159
Ards and North Down Borough Council	5983	4079	3982
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	25968	17160	18173
Belfast City Council	15836	11634	12260
Causeway Coast and Glens District Council	8358	5990	7671
Derry City and Strabane District Council	15027	9225	8953
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	20099	12235	10200
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	10047	7066	7316
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	9191	6849	7620
Mid Ulster District Council	16955	14672	11636
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	28113	18960	17264

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Infrastructure why traffic restrictions, which were to be enforced in Coalisland earlier this year, have not been instigated; and on what date the decision not to enforce the restrictions was taken.

(AQW 344/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: There are only a limited number of parking restrictions in Coalisland and therefore the Department does not send Traffic Attendants to visit the town. The Department will respond to any valid requests from stakeholders for enforcement in Coalisland but no such requests were received in the last 12 months. The Department has not taken a decision not to enforce the parking restrictions in Coalisland.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the new bus/railway station in Ballymena will be built.

(AQW 356/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: Translink is taking forward a comprehensive feasibility study which needs to be completed before a project business case can be developed.

A tender competition for the design team for the project is due to be carried out in 2016/17 and the feasibility study thereafter.

Until the business case has been completed and funding allocated, it is not possible at this stage to provide a firm completion date.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee was last resurfaced.

(AQW 358/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I can advise the Member that TransportNI has no record of any resurfacing having been carried out on Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee since the estate was built, (circa over 40 years ago).

Mr Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment of the decision to cease operating the Foyle Ferry as of 31 March 2016.

(AQW 371/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department holds no statutory powers in relation to ferry services outwith the North and, as such, it cannot have involvement in either the establishment of such a service, nor its ongoing operation.

That said, I very much welcome the recent announcement by the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council and Donegal County Council confirming a new operator for the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry. The commitment to the continuation of services and the planned vessel improvements by both Councils and the newly appointed operator is commendable and will provide an important economic boost for local communities and tourism in general.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the amount of funding (i) allocated; and (ii) needed for the completion of the A6 project.

(AQW 372/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The indicative funding allocation for the A6 road in the December 2015 Budget Statement, for the period 2016/17 to 2020/1, is £258m. The Department has two major roads projects planned to improve the A6, the Randalstown to Castledawson and Derry to Dungiven dual carriageway projects.

The Randalstown to Castledawson scheme comprises two distinct sections of dual carriageway located either side of the A6 Toome Bypass. A 7.3km section from the end of the M22 to the eastern end of the Toome Bypass and a 7.4km section from the western end of the Toome Bypass to the existing Castledawson Roundabout. The allocations for the A6, set out in the December 2015 Budget Statement, will enable the construction of the full scheme to commence in autumn 2016, subject to final approval of the business case. The cost of this scheme is in the region of £150 million.

The indicative budget for the 2017/18 to 2020/21 period will also allow elements of the 30km A6 Derry to Dungiven dualling scheme to commence in the latter part of this budget period. Work is currently underway to determine the extent of this scheme, including a bypass of Dungiven, which can be delivered within the indicative budget. It is envisaged that priority shall be given to construction from Dungiven towards Derry.

However, it is my intention to seek additional funding to extend the A6 from the Dungiven Bypass to Drumahoe, a total length of 25km.

The current estimate for the scheme is in the range £390m - £420m, however this will be reviewed in the coming months.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the resurfacing of High Street, Holywood.
(AQW 375/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: While my Department's TransportNI has received an improved Capital funding allocation for 2016/17 compared to last year it is still significantly short of what is required to maintain the structural integrity of the road network.

However, I can advise the Member that the resurfacing of High Street, Holywood remains on a list of priority schemes and TransportNI is considering options to find both engineering solutions and funding in order to deliver this worthwhile scheme on the back of the recently completed Public Realm Scheme. A timescale for commencement of the scheme has not yet been set.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on a residents' parking scheme for Holywood.
(AQW 376/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am aware of the desire of Holywood residents for controlled parking in their areas to address all-day parking.

My Department is currently focusing its efforts on the implementation of residents' parking schemes in parts of Belfast and in Derry and Antrim.

Unfortunately, I am unable to indicate a timescale when the implementation of any such scheme in the Holywood area might be taken forward.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure how often the grass verges on the A2 dual carriageway between Bangor and Holywood will be cut in 2016.
(AQW 379/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department's TransportNI is facing budgetary Resource pressures for the 2016/17 financial period which has created an immediate impact on the delivery of routine maintenance services, including grass cutting.

With the available budget it is the intention of my Department's TransportNI to carry out one full cut of grass areas under its maintenance control, with additional cutting of sightlines carried out as required to ensure road safety is maintained.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Infrastructure to what extent the A6 strategic road project has been co-funded by the European Union to date; and to what extent it will be co-funded by the EU in future.
(AQW 390/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: In 2012 the Department for Regional Development secured £1.3m of European co-financing toward the design studies for the A6 Dungiven to Derry dualling project from the Trans-European Networks – Transport (TEN-T) funding programme.

While the TEN-T programme is highly competitive and brings no guarantee of funding, I am determined to secure co-financing for a wide range of infrastructure projects and in moving forward my Department will actively pursue all opportunities to do so.

There are currently no active calls for applications and a new bid would be reliant on matching the project with the specified priorities of future calls. With this in mind, I have asked officials from my Department to begin work to prepare materials and information to support such a bid as and when an appropriate call is announced.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a breakdown of the public expenditure to date on progressing the Dungiven to Derry section on the A6 road project.
(AQW 393/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: To the end of the 2015/16 financial year £15.9 million had been expended on the A6 Derry to Dungiven project. This is made up from £9.9 million on scheme development, £5 million of land costs and £1 million for geotechnical ground investigations.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to improve road safety on the A1 dual carriageway. (AQW 397/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: My Department's TransportNI is currently developing the A1 Junctions Phase 2 proposal, which is estimated to cost in the range £40-£50million.

The proposal involves the construction of four flyover type junctions to facilitate the closing up of all openings in the central median and installation of a continuous central safety barrier between Hillsborough Roundabout and Loughbrickland, improving road safety for all road users on the A1.

The preferred option for the proposal was confirmed late in 2015 and the junctions will be constructed at: Listullycurran Road; Gowdstown Road; Skeltons Road/Drumneath Road; and Waringsford Road.

In addition, the proposal includes the provision of a northbound on-slip at Castlewellan Road at Banbridge, a link between the existing underpass junction at Hillsborough Road, Dromore and Milebush Road and the closing of some minor road junctions along this section of the A1.

A significant amount of development work has already been progressed and the current phase of this work involves the completion of the design and taking the proposal through the statutory procedures, which will likely include a Public Inquiry.

Progression to construction remains subject to the proposal clearing the statutory procedures, having a satisfactory economic appraisal and, given other competing priorities, is dependent on funding being made available in future budget settlements.

A strategy is also being developed to implement incremental improvements in advance of the full proposal. The first such improvement involves the closure of the median at Hillsborough to prevent the right turn movement for southbound traffic into Moira Road and the erection of a central safety barrier between Hillsborough Roundabout and the flyover type junction at Dromore Road, Hillsborough.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the (i) cost; and (ii) location of major capital projects planned for Upper Bann over the next five years. (AQW 398/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: As you will be aware my Department only has confirmation of its capital budget for the current year 2016-17. The Budget process for 2017-21 will be commissioned by Department of Finance in July and I will be considering my priorities and plans for infrastructure across the region, including Upper Bann as part of that process. As such the information provided is focused on those projects commenced or scheduled to commence in 2016-17.

Business Area	Scheme	Estimated Cost (£m)
Transport NI	A99 extension to Millennium Way, Lurgan	6.0
NI Water	Portadown Drainage Area Plan Stage 2	4.6
NI Water	PC15 Watermains Rehabilitation Work Package 8:	2.3
NI Water	Portadown Drainage Area Network Improvements - Meadow Lane and Bann Street	2.7
NI Water	Water Main Infrastructure Investment Methodology Phase 2 Clay Lake Keady Work Package	2.3
NI Water	PC15 Watermains Rehabilitation Work Package 1	0.5
NI Water	Robinsonstown Waste Water Treatment Works Feasibility Study.	1.6
NI Water	Portadown Drainage Area Plan Stage 1	0.9
NI Water	Various Projects Valued under £1m, including Waringfield Sewage Pumping Station, Ballydougan Command Rehabilitation, Seagoe Refurbishment etc.	4.3
Transport	Knockmore – Lurgan Track Rehabilitation	21.8
Transport	Portadown Park & Ride	2.9
Transport	Lurgan Area Track Renewals	4.3
Transport	Lurgan Railway Station Redevelopment	4.0

Business Area	Scheme	Estimated Cost (£m)
Transport	Lurgan Level Crossings Signalling Alterations	2.8

TransportNI

My Department provides details of the schemes on the Department for Infrastructure website, information on Road Improvement Schemes can be found via this link: www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/road-improvement-schemes

Details are also on the ISNI website: <http://www.isni.gov.uk/home/> and the procurement pipeline document <http://www.isni.gov.uk/pipeline/Pipeline.pdf>

TransportNI progresses a number of minor Network Improvements within the Upper Bann area, but the value of each of these projects would be under £250k; additionally TransportNI will progress a programme of Structural Maintenance of the existing road network in the constituency area, this type of expenditure is more cyclical in nature rather than stand-alone project based.

Whilst elements of expenditure can occur in a neighboring constituency area they may benefit more than that area.

NI Water

In addition to the projects included in the table the following average capital expenditure is planned in the South Area:

- £4m Per Annum Waste Water Treatment Base Expenditure in Southern Area
- £2m Per Annum Water Base Expenditure in Southern Area
- £2m Per Annum Waster Water Pumping Station Base in Southern Area

Rivers Agency

Rivers Agency has no immediate capital works programmed in the Upper Bann Area. However it is the Agency's intention to commission a feasibility Study for the Portadown Flood Risk Area, later this year. The study will include investigations into such areas as Ashgrove and Park Road, which have a history of flooding. Further studies are also planned for the Lurgan and Banbridge Flood Risk Areas.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will revise permitted development planning laws to ensure that full-scale or test boring for gas or oil must be carried out under full planning consent.

(AQW 418/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: In the North of Ireland, there are certain permitted development rights under Part 16 of the Schedule to the Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (NI) 2015 for Mineral Exploration, including exploration for oil and gas. They allow certain specified development on land in any period not exceeding four months consisting of drilling boreholes, carrying out seismic surveys or making other excavations, without requiring planning permission.

It is important to note that the temporary permitted development rights for minerals exploration do not allow the commercial extraction of minerals, including oil and gas. Such activity is subject to the full planning application process.

I have decided to propose a change to the current legislation on permitted development rights for mineral exploration by removing such rights for oil and gas exploration. In the future, exploration for oil and gas will require the submission of a planning application and will be subject to the full rigours of the planning process, including environmental impact assessment and public consultation. I intend to consult on the legislative change in due course.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the dualling of the A26 to the Drones Road.

(AQW 440/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am pleased to advise that work has been progressing well on this very worthwhile scheme. Construction of the scheme commenced in April 2015 and currently 60% of the works have been completed.

To date substantial earthworks operations, culvert installations and demolition works to an existing bridge have been carried out. Work has also commenced on all 8 major structures, with 4 of them substantially complete. Carriageway construction is also progressing well and the first major traffic switch was implemented on 27 May 2016, putting traffic onto the new northbound carriageway for the first 2km at the southern end of the scheme.

The work is currently on programme and is expected to be completed by summer 2017.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure what proposals he will be making in regard to planning for non-farming rural dwellers.

(AQW 441/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The Member will be aware of my Department's Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) which was published in September 2015. The SPPS provides a strategic planning policy framework for the consideration of development proposals in the countryside. It consolidates and reflects the provisions of Planning Policy Statement 21 (PPS 21) Sustainable

Development in the Countryside and retains the policy approach to the issue raised in your question. It is worth noting that the provisions of PPS21 are also retained under the transitional arrangements of the SPPS. As such, a wide range of development proposals in the countryside are considered on a case by case basis against the policy contained within the SPPS, PPS 21 and all other material considerations. Whilst my Department has retained responsibility for assessing development proposals which are of regional significance, the vast majority of planning applications for development in the countryside are now determined by councils.

Furthermore, the move to a two tier planning system in April 2015 and the transfer of planning powers to councils provides for a system that is more responsive to the priorities and needs of local people. It provides for a considerable degree of autonomy and flexibility for councils to bring forward detailed operational planning policies in their Local Development Plans, tailored to local circumstances. This includes local policy in relation to development in the countryside. As long as a council's local planning policy takes account of the general thrust of Government policy in respect of development in the countryside then councils are free to develop their own approaches to deal with the local issues they face.

Finally, you may be aware that the former Environment Minister had committed to undertake a review of 'Development in the Countryside' (and 'Renewable Energy') following publication of the SPPS. Calls for Evidence issued in March 2016 and closed on 6 May 2016. My officials are currently analysing all the responses received. When this work is concluded I will then consider the appropriate next steps I wish to take in relation to strategic planning policy for Development in the Countryside and Renewable Energy.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans he has to increase the resources available to his Department's Cycling Unit.

(AQW 444/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am committed to promoting active travel – both walking and cycling – as realistic and viable options for the many shorter journeys that we all make. I want people to have the freedom and confidence to use the bicycle for everyday travel and I want our children and young people to develop healthy active travel habits.

My Cycling Unit is at the forefront of this work and the resources available to it have been increasing. However, it would be a mistake to think that funding for active travel and sustainable transport is limited to the resources made available to one area of my Department. I am keen that we improve infrastructure for active travel and promote it through all our transport interventions and by providing support to Councils for the development of greenways across the north.

The extent of funding in future years will of course be dependent on the outcome of the upcoming Budget process for 2017-21 and I will of course have to consider allocations to cycling together with the other competing priorities across my Department. However, I will certainly look to continue with the increase in investment for cycling and promoting active travel in general.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in instances where a driver is renewing a driving licence and had a disqualification in 1979 for having an excessive proportion of alcohol in their body, whether they now fall into the high risk offender scheme; and do they have to pay the higher fee with the associated medical assessment prior to the renewing of their licence.

(AQW 456/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The High Risk Offender scheme was introduced by the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) on 3 May 2005, only those drivers who have been disqualified by order of a court for one of the specified offences on or after 3 May 2005 will be considered against the High Risk Offender criteria.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the High Risk Offender Scheme applies to everyone disqualified from driving for having an excessive proportion of alcohol in their body prior to 3 May 2005.

(AQW 457/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The High Risk Offender (HRO) scheme was introduced by the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) on 3 May 2005; only those drivers who have been disqualified by order of a court for one of the specified offences on or after 3 May 2005 will be considered against the HRO criteria.

However, as set out in Paragraph 1(c) of Regulation 52 of the Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996, one of the prescribed circumstances for a HRO applies where a person has been disqualified by order of a court for one of the specified offences "on two or more occasions within any period of 10 years", therefore the DVA will consider whether previous convictions are relevant to the "two or more occasions" within the ten year period.

This means disqualifications imposed before May 2005 may have been considered under the HRO criteria when a person applied to have their licence reinstated following disqualification, however consideration of offences could only have been applied to those imposed in the previous ten years, therefore the earliest date for a qualifying offence was May 1995.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the delivery of the flood alleviation scheme in Sicily Park, South Belfast.

(AQW 472/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I have been advised by NI Water that a multi-million pound engineering project to further reduce the risk of internal property flooding in the Sicily Park area has been developed. This scheme aims to contain flood waters within the flood plain of a local watercourse, during extreme rainfall conditions.

The optioneering and development process for this element of work is now complete, and NI Water is progressing the preferred option through the detailed design stage. This stage includes site investigations, obtaining statutory approvals and reaching agreement with a number of property owners and a range of stakeholders, who may be impacted by the proposed construction work.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the rationale for the disposal of a former borehole site in New Forge Lane; and what consideration has been given to the future risks arising from the existing boreholes and buildings on this site.

(AQW 481/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The disused borehole site at Newforge Lane, Belfast was originally used as a raw water source, but was taken out of supply prior to 2006. The sale of this site includes the borehole and a small, single story brick structure (gross area of approximately 27m²). There are no current operational assets for sale.

NI Water has an obligation to dispose of assets for which there is no longer an operational need. In disposing of surplus assets, NI Water must ensure that value for money is achieved and that high standards of propriety are maintained. Upon the sale of any of NI Water's assets, all liabilities, including environmental and health and safety risks, transfer with the property to the new owner.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assurances he can give over the funding for the Broad Road and Greystone Road junction improvements in Limavady.

(AQW 491/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: As you are aware my Department's TransportNI has developed a proposal to provide a roundabout at the junction of the A37 Broad Road and Greystone Road. I am pleased to note your support for this particular scheme and your appreciation of TransportNI staff engagement with you on this matter.

I am sure you will also be aware of the current pressures on capital funding for this and many other worthwhile schemes of this nature. Capital funding for the current budget period is fully allocated.

The progress of this proposal at Broad Road/Greystone Road and other existing and proposed new schemes to the construction phase will be considered further following the outcome of in year monitoring bids or the next Budget period 2017-20.

I trust you find this reply helpful.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure if Transport NI have carried out any road safety surveys on the Scarva Road, Banbridge in regards to the safety of pupils attending St Patrick's College and St Mary's Primary School; and if they have any plans to introduce traffic calming measures in the area.

(AQW 498/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I can advise that the Scarva Road benefits from central hatching and there are red patches and 'SCHOOL' warning signs on the approach to St Patrick's College. I can also advise that there are pedestrian crossing facilities at the nearby signal controlled junction at Scarva Road/Reilly Street which also serves to improve safety for school pupils and the general public in this area.

I am aware that St Patrick's College has prepared a travel plan to aid road safety for pupils attending the school which, if implemented, would be beneficial. You may be aware of proposals to improve St Mary's Primary School, which when completed, will see flashing safe routes to schools signs provided which my Department will programme and maintain when operational.

My Department's TransportNI has not carried out any further assessment on the Scarva Road, Banbridge and given the detail above I was not planning to introduce further measures at this location.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of road traffic collisions in Fermanagh and South Tyrone; and (ii) the roads that the collisions occurred on.

(AQW 505/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: TransportNI receives details of the reported injury road traffic collisions from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) but can only use this information to inform decisions regarding development of works programmes.

The collision information you requested belongs to the PSNI and its Statistics unit, which is located at Lisnasharragh, 42 Montgomery Road, Belfast, BT6 9LD, may be able to assist you with this request.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on (i) the adoption of Nancy's Lane, Strabane by his Department; and (ii) whether potholes will be filled.

(AQW 513/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: Nancy's Lane is over 500m in length with around 180m at the Derry Road end adopted and maintained by TransportNI. The adopted section has recently been inspected by TransportNI officials and was found to be in a satisfactory condition. As a result there are no plans to carry out any road repairs. Maintenance of the unadopted section rests with residents and any repairs are for them to address.

The unadopted section of Nancy's Lane has been the subject of a number of adoption requests over the years and my Department has consistently taken the view that it can only be adopted after it is brought up to an appropriate standard. Responsibility for bringing the road up to an adoptable standard would lie with the residents who have been advised of the standards to be provided before adoption could take place.

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Infrastructure what investment in cycling infrastructure is currently planned for the next five years.

(AQW 550/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: The Bicycle Strategy, published in August 2015, sets out the vision of 'a community where people have the freedom and confidence to travel by bicycle for everyday journeys'. My Department has already started investment in more integrated and coherent cycling routes and it is my aim to invest more in these to encourage more active travel and active lifestyles.

The first five-year Bicycle Strategy Delivery Plan will set out in more detail how I will invest in cycling in the North over the next five years.

However, as you will be aware funding for the period 2017 to 2021 has yet to be agreed and this will be taken forward through the Budget 2016 process. My final plans for cycling and indeed all my Department's activities will be influenced by the outcome of that process and the final budget allocated.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the delivery of a footpath along the Knock Road in Dervock between the village and the Lisconnan Road.

(AQW 581/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I am pleased to inform you that my Department's TransportNI has developed a scheme to provide approximately 200m of footway extending from the current provision on Knock Road towards Lisconnan Road.

It is anticipated that this footway will be completed within the next couple of months.

I trust you will find this information helpful.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for his assessment on the importance of the Down Armagh Rural Transport Partnership in County Armagh and County Down.

(AQW 735/16-21)

Mr Hazzard: I believe it is important to maintain transport options for those living in rural areas, particularly where public transport is limited in scope.

I support the services provided by Rural Community Transport Partnerships (RCTPs) like the Down Armagh Rural Transport (DART). I also recognise that for many people living within rural areas that have a disability or are elderly and have difficulty accessing local basic services, community transport allows those members of the RCTPs to access essential services and to remain independent.

My Department currently provides annual grant assistance to DART and a network of RCTPs across the North and I have no plans to withdraw this support this year.

Department of Justice

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the community and voluntary organisations in East Derry that received funding from her Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 235/16-21)

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): The community and voluntary organisations in East Derry that received funding from my Department, including its Agencies but not its arm's-length bodies, in each of the last five financial years are listed below:

2015-16

- Foyle Search and Rescue
- Glens Community Association

- North West Mountain Rescue Team

2014-15

- None

2013-14

- Bovalley Community Association
- Roe Valley Residents Association
- West Bann Athletic Football Club

2012-13

- Churchlands Golden Gloves Boxing Club
- St Guaire's Sitting Duck's
- Limavady Youths Football Club
- Phoenix ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) Project
- Riding for the Disabled Association

2011-12

- Focus on Family – Waterside Project
- The Glens Community Association
- Patchwork (Ireland)

My Department also provides funding to a range of community and voluntary organisations who deliver services across Northern Ireland. Some of these services may be available in East Londonderry.

My Department also provides funding to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships who work with a wide range of bodies including community and voluntary organisations, some of which may be in East Londonderry.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice how many parents have been subject to contempt of court proceedings for non-compliance with residency or contact orders within the Children Order, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 239/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Although breach of residence and contact orders made under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 can be dealt with by way of contempt of court proceedings, the majority of applications for breach are initiated under enforcement powers in the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. The table below indicates defendants dealt with in the Magistrates' Courts who had at least one charge relating to the breach of a Children / Family order or at least one charge relating to 'contempt of court' specifically for contact or residence.

	Defendants dealt with who had at least one charge relating to 'Breach of Children / Family Order'	Defendants dealt with who had at least one charge relating to 'Contempt of Court' where the charge details indicate that it was in relation to residence or contact orders
2013	133	6
2014	152	3
2015 ^P	140	0

Notes:

Source: Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS)

^P Data are currently provisional and may be subject to change

¹ Complaint codes '20.20.007', '51.20.007', '47.20.004' and '47.20.005'

Data in relation to the breach of a Children's order made in the High Court are recorded as a generic application type on ICOS, therefore it is not possible to disaggregate the data to specifically identify these.

The relationship of the defendant to the child is not recorded on ICOS for criminal cases.

Information on the type of Children / Family order that has been breached is held in a free text field on ICOS, and therefore cannot be easily extracted without a manual trawl of records.

The majority of breach proceedings in family cases involve non-compliance with contact orders, or, less commonly, residence orders, but proceedings may also relate to a breach of other types of order. Information has been provided on defendants found guilty of a breach of children / family order, those found guilty of a breach of contact / residence order specifically and those found guilty of contempt of court specifically in relation to contact or residence.

	Defendants found guilty of at least one charge relating to 'Breach of Children / Family Order' ¹		
Outcome	2013	2014	2015 ^P
Absolute Discharge	2	0	1
Conditional Discharge	2	2	4
Monetary Penalty	2	5	3
Suspended Sentence	0	0	1
Total	6	7	9

Notes:

Source: Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS)

P Data are currently provisional and may be subject to change

1 Complaint codes '20.20.007' and '51.20.007'

Data in relation to the breach of a Children's order made in the High Court are recorded as a generic application type on ICOS, therefore it is not possible to disaggregate the data to specifically identify these.

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	Defendants found guilty of at least one charge relating to 'Breach of Children / Family Order' ¹ where the charge details indicate that the breach was in relation to residence or contact orders			Defendants found guilty of at least one charge relating to 'Contempt of Court' where the charge details indicate that it was in relation to residence or contact orders		
Outcome	2013	2014	2015 ^P	2013	2014	2015 ^P
Absolute Discharge	2	0	1	0	0	0
Conditional Discharge	2	1	4	0	0	0
Monetary Penalty	2	4	2	1	0	0
Total	6	5	7	1	0	0

Notes:

Source: Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS)

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The relationship of the defendant to the child is not recorded on ICOS for criminal cases.

Information on the type of Children / Family order that has been breached is held in a free text field on ICOS, however due to the relatively small numbers involved, a manual exercise was carried out to extract those breaches which related to a contact or residence order specifically.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice how many parents have been subject to court penalties for non-compliance with residency or contact orders within the Children Order, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 240/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Although breach of residence and contact orders made under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 can be dealt with by way of contempt of court proceedings, the majority of applications for breach are initiated under enforcement powers in the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. The table below indicates defendants dealt with in the Magistrates' Courts who had at least one charge relating to the breach of a Children / Family order or at least one charge relating to 'contempt of court' specifically for contact or residence.

	Defendants dealt with who had at least one charge relating to 'Breach of Children / Family Order' ¹	Defendants dealt with who had at least one charge relating to 'Contempt of Court' where the charge details indicate that it was in relation to residence or contact orders
2013	133	6

	Defendants dealt with who had at least one charge relating to 'Breach of Children / Family Order' ¹	Defendants dealt with who had at least one charge relating to 'Contempt of Court' where the charge details indicate that it was in relation to residence or contact orders
2014	152	3
2015 ^P	140	0

Notes:

Source: Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS)

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Outcome	Defendants found guilty of at least one charge relating to 'Breach of Children / Family Order' ¹		
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Absolute Discharge	2	0	1
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	2013	2014	2015 ^P	2013	2014	2015 ^P
Absolute Discharge	2	0	1	0	0	0
Conditional Discharge	2	1	4	0	0	0
Monetary Penalty	2	4	2	1	0	0
Total	6	5	7	1	0	0

Notes:

Source: Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS)

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The relationship of the defendant to the child is not recorded on ICOS for criminal cases.

Information on the type of Children / Family order that has been breached is held in a free text field on ICOS, however due to the relatively small numbers involved, a manual exercise was carried out to extract those breaches which related to a contact or residence order specifically.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether she will review the current proposals to close some courthouses and hearing centres.

(AQW 283/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The decisions on rationalising the court estate were taken by my predecessor following public consultation in 2015.

The decisions in relation to court and hearing centre closures are now the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court in Belfast. Consequently it is not my intention to proceed with any closures pending the outcome of those proceedings. As the rationalisation of the court estate is now the subject of legal proceedings it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of whether the present Childrens Order is fit for purpose in relation to family case (ref 15/095107) ; and will she now refer the matter to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice for urgent review of the operation of the Childrens Order in this case.

(AQW 316/16-21)

Ms Sugden: It is an accepted principle that the courts are completely independent and the application of the law in individual cases is a judicial matter. Therefore it would be inappropriate for me to become involved in, or comment on, any aspect of the application before the court.

Any party to the proceedings or their legal representative can apply to the court to correct an error in a court order. I understand that a respondent in this case has written to the court; the correspondence has been passed to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice for consideration. However, judicial decisions can only be challenged through established legal means such as any available appeal or judicial review procedure.

The estimated costs of the Children's Order private law case (11/103100); and the related public law case (15/095107) are detailed in the tables below:

Childrens Order Private Law case (11/103100)

Cost Type	Estimated Cost
(i) Court (Judiciary and staff costs)	£5,909
(ii) Facilities (e.g. courtroom accommodation)	£1,165
Total	£7,074

Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 and the Civil Legal Services (Disclosure of Information) Regulations (NI) 2015 prohibits the release of legal aid costs.

Public Law Case (15/095107)

Cost Type	Estimated Cost
(i) Court (Judiciary and staff costs)	£700
(ii) Facilities (e.g. courtroom accommodation)	£175
Total	£875

Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 and the Civil Legal Services (Disclosure of Information) Regulations (NI) 2015 prohibits the release of legal aid costs.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice why Childrens Order Private Law case (11/103100) is now before the family court system.

(AQW 317/16-21)

Ms Sugden: It is an accepted principle that the courts are completely independent and the application of the law in individual cases is a judicial matter. Therefore it would be inappropriate for me to become involved in, or comment on, any aspect of the application before the court.

Any party to the proceedings or their legal representative can apply to the court to correct an error in a court order. I understand that a respondent in this case has written to the court; the correspondence has been passed to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice for consideration. However, judicial decisions can only be challenged through established legal means such as any available appeal or judicial review procedure.

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Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 and the Civil Legal Services (Disclosure of Information) Regulations (NI) 2015 prohibits the release of legal aid costs.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice what processes can be used to correct a Court Order (07817396); and will she refer this matter to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice.

(AQW 318/16-21)

Ms Sugden: It is an accepted principle that the courts are completely independent and the application of the law in individual cases is a judicial matter. Therefore it would be inappropriate for me to become involved in, or comment on, any aspect of the application before the court.

Any party to the proceedings or their legal representative can apply to the court to correct an error in a court order. I understand that a respondent in this case has written to the court; the correspondence has been passed to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice for consideration. However, judicial decisions can only be challenged through established legal means such as any available appeal or judicial review procedure.

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Cost Type	Estimated Cost
Total	£875

Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 and the Civil Legal Services (Disclosure of Information) Regulations (NI) 2015 prohibits the release of legal aid costs.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total cost of the Childrens Order Private Law case (11/103100); and the related Public Law Case 15/095107.

(AQW 319/16-21)

Ms Sugden: It is an accepted principle that the courts are completely independent and the application of the law in individual cases is a judicial matter. Therefore it would be inappropriate for me to become involved in, or comment on, any aspect of the application before the court.

Any party to the proceedings or their legal representative can apply to the court to correct an error in a court order. I understand that a respondent in this case has written to the court; the correspondence has been passed to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice for consideration. However, judicial decisions can only be challenged through established legal means such as any available appeal or judicial review procedure.

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Total	£875

Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 and the Civil Legal Services (Disclosure of Information) Regulations (NI) 2015 prohibits the release of legal aid costs.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what engagement her Department has had with the Anti-Slavery Commissioner since he was appointed; and whether she is aware of any research being conducted by the office of the Anti-Slavery Commissioner in to human trafficking in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 345/16-21)

Ms Sugden: My Department has had ongoing engagement with the United Kingdom Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner since his appointment. The Commissioner visited Northern Ireland and met with Department of Justice representatives in January 2015 and January 2016. During these visits he also met with representatives of the NGO Engagement Group on Human Trafficking; the Organised Crime Task Force on Immigration and Human Trafficking; and members of the Justice Committee. The Commissioner was a keynote speaker at a cross-border forum on human trafficking which was co-hosted by my Department and the Irish Department of Justice and Equality in January 2015. He has also participated in a number of awareness raising events in Northern Ireland in which my Department has been involved.

My Department regularly consults the Commissioner to help inform relevant policy and legislative matters, including the development of the 2015/16 Northern Ireland Human Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy; and secondary legislation under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Modern Slavery Act 2015. My Department also provided input to help inform the development of the Commissioner's Strategic Plan for 2015-17.

Whilst I am not aware of any research being conducted by the office of the Commissioner that relates specifically to human trafficking in Northern Ireland, much of the work currently being taken forward by the Commissioner's office will be relevant to the strategic and operational response to trafficking in Northern Ireland. This work includes:

- the initiation of a partnership, in conjunction with the Santa Marta Group, to tackle modern slavery in the fishing industry in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland with a remit to research and improve responses to maritime slavery;
- research to improve our understanding of the journeys and experiences of Vietnamese trafficking victims to the United Kingdom, which will inform the Commissioner's proposals to tackle this phenomenon;
- the development of a pathway for police forces across the United Kingdom to use as a guide when carrying out human trafficking investigations with Romanian police; and
- the development of a piece of research which will help inform United Kingdom and Albanian anti-trafficking efforts.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether she will bring forward legislation facilitating a challenge to sentences handed down at magistrates court, without the requirement for Judicial Review.

(AQW 346/16-21)

Ms Sugden: A defendant can appeal a conviction or sentence imposed in a magistrates' court to the County Court. The prosecution and defence may also avail of a judicial review challenge to the decision of a District Judge where a remedy is available and is refused, or, where a sentence imposed falls outside the sentence range available to the District Judge. I have no plans to legislate to change this process.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister of Justice how the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 will address the challenges caused by drug abuse.

(AQW 401/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Psychoactive Substances Act, which came into force on 26 May 2016, is intended to address the challenges of drug abuse by creating a blanket ban on the production, distribution, sale and supply of psychoactive substances in the United Kingdom.

The Act makes it an offence to produce, supply, offer to supply, possess with intent to supply, import, export or possess in a custodial institution psychoactive substances.

I understand the Home Office has introduced this legislation in line with the Government manifesto commitment to "create a blanket ban on all new psychoactive substances, protecting young people, from exposure to so-called legal highs".

As you noted during the debate on Illegal Drugs on 6 June the impact of psychoactive substances has been felt right across Northern Ireland, and your constituency of Upper Bann is no different. I therefore welcome this legislation as another tool to use against those who peddle drugs in our communities.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether current threat levels are shared with G4S management to ensure the safety of contracted court staff; and whether advice is provided for distribution to G4S staff.

(AQW 469/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service does not comment on security matters.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister of Justice whether she has any plans for a new build for Magilligan prison.

(AQW 512/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I am committed to providing a redeveloped prison at Magilligan to enable the Northern Ireland Prison Service to deliver essential programmes to address re-offending behaviour; to meet Disability Discrimination Act standards; and to replace the existing infrastructure, which has outlived its useful life and is expensive and inefficient to staff, maintain and operate.

An outline business case for the Redevelopment of Magilligan Prison was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel in January 2015.

However project delivery is dependent on the provision of capital funding by the Department of Finance.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what type of recruitment process will be put in place for the (i) Director; and (ii) investigators for the proposed Historical Investigations Unit.

(AQW 527/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Significant preparatory work on the development of a Historical Investigations Unit has been undertaken by my Department. Draft legislation, which still has to be finalised and agreed, will incorporate instructions regarding the appointment, status and duties of the Director, members and staff of the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU). In advance of such agreement it is not possible to be specific on details of appointment arrangements.

During 2015 work was advanced in designing the recruitment process for the Director of the HIU, ensuring that it meets best practice, as set out by the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland. The process was based on merit and promotes objectivity and independence of the office holder. My expectation is that, once the legislative process gets underway, the post will be advertised widely to attract applications from persons of international standing.

The recruitment process for investigatory staff will be taken forward by the Director, to recognised recruitment standards and in compliance with recruitment law. Given the estimated large number of investigatory staff required, recruitment is expected to be progressed through a number of channels including direct recruitment, secondments from police forces across the British Isles, and the use of agencies.

This work will be taken forward in light of agreement on the legacy issues within the Stormont House Agreement.

My departmental officials and I continue to be fully committed to supporting this process.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline how many members of staff will be required for the operation of the proposed Historical Investigations Unit.

(AQW 528/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Recognising the importance of the Historical Investigation Unit's independence, it was proposed that the Director should be recruited at the earliest possible stage, to direct and oversee any staff recruitment. In advance of a political agreement on the way forward regarding the Historical investigations Unit, it is not possible to be precise on possible numbers of appointments.

As a very rough estimate, I would expect something in the order of 250 to 300 staff will be necessary for the HIU to discharge its functions.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what measures she has put in place in anticipation of the proposed Historical Investigations Unit receiving legislative approval.

(AQW 529/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Stormont House Agreement of 2014 provided for the establishment of an Historical Investigations Unit which would investigate outstanding Troubles-related deaths. My Department, working closely with the NIO and in consultation with the Stormont House Implementation Group, had made good progress in preparing the necessary legislation, the draft Stormont House Agreement Bill, for introduction in the Westminster Parliament. In developing this draft legislation, my officials worked closely with key stakeholders, including victims and victims' groups, the Police Service for Northern Ireland and the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland.

The establishment of the Historical Investigations Unit cannot be progressed in advance of political agreement. As the Fresh Start Agreement did not include agreement on dealing with the Past, detailed planning for implementation of the Historical Investigations Unit is currently on hold.

I recognise the importance of reaching agreement on dealing with the Past, both to victims' families and to our wider community. My officials and I stand ready to support the resumption of political talks and to finalise outstanding policy issues necessary to progress the legislation and proceed with establishing the Historical Investigations Unit.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether any individuals (i) serving prison sentences; or (ii) remanded in custody have been identified as potential victims of human trafficking or forced labour; and if such individuals have been identified, what process is then followed by her Department with regard to their individual cases.

(AQW 531/16-21)

Ms Sugden: If a prisoner is identified as a possible victim of a human trafficking or of forced labour offence, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) will be informed for further investigation. Where PSNI has grounds to believe that the person is a potential victim such an offence, and if the individual consents, their case will be referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) where it will be assessed and a conclusive determination made as to whether the individual is a victim of human trafficking or forced labour.

Any prisoners who are referred into the NRM will be eligible for appropriate assistance and support under section 18 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 ("the Act"). The Department of Justice currently funds Migrant Help and Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid to provide assistance and support to adult potential victims of human trafficking and forced labour while their cases are being assessed in the NRM. Where the potential victim is in prison this will be provided within the prison environment according to assessed need.

Where there is a conclusive determination confirming that an individual who has been remanded in custody is a victim of human trafficking or forced labour the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) will consider the case to determine whether the statutory defence under section 22 of the Act applies, or if it does not apply, whether it is in the public interest to prosecute. Where PPS takes a decision not to prosecute the case will be referred back to the court in order to secure the release of the individual from custody.

Where a sentenced prisoner receives a conclusive determination confirming that they are a victim of human trafficking or modern slavery their case should be referred to the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) for consideration. Where appropriate the CCRC will refer the case to the Court of Appeal to have the conviction overturned.

PSNI has confirmed that since the establishment of its dedicated Human Trafficking Unit on 1 April 2015 three individuals who were on remand in prison have been identified by PSNI as potential victims of human trafficking. Two of these cases have been referred to the NRM and one individual declined to be referred to the NRM. A conclusive determination has not yet been reached in either case.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what provision exists for prison officers and former prisoner officers suffering from work-related post traumatic stress disorder; and will she consider introducing a dedicated facility linked with or similar to those operating for armed forces staff.

(AQW 532/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) takes seriously all issues concerning staff with stress related illnesses and has in place a number of interventions to support serving officers. These interventions include a dedicated Staff Welfare Service, access to the Occupational Health Service and a confidential counselling service provided by Carecall. They are provided to staff to supplement the support and treatment available through the Health Service. NIPS does not provide these services to former staff.

There are no current plans to provide a dedicated facility to deal specifically with work related post-traumatic stress disorder.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice what avenues are open to appeal a Court Order when an administrative error has been made and the Courts and Tribunal Service refuse to make the correction following the direction of a High Court Judge; and whether she will refer the matter of Court Order 07817396 to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice.

(AQW 565/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Any party to the proceedings or their legal representative can apply to the court to correct an error in a court order. I understand that a respondent in this case has written to the court; the correspondence has been passed to the Office of the Lord Chief Justice for consideration. However, judicial decisions can only be challenged through established legal means such as any available appeal or judicial review procedure.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice what consultation was undertaken by the PSNI on proposals to stop paper applications for firearm licences and move to online only applications.

(AQW 590/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The process of running the firearm licensing system is an operational matter for the Chief Constable and therefore your questions should be directed to him. Information is also available via the PSNI website at https://www.psnri.police.uk/advice_information/firearms/online-application-information/

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with the PSNI on proposals to stop paper applications for firearm licences and to move to online only applications.

(AQW 591/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The process of running the firearm licensing system is an operational matter for the Chief Constable and therefore your questions should be directed to him. Information is also available via the PSNI website at https://www.psnri.police.uk/advice_information/firearms/online-application-information/

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Justice how many fraud convictions have been secured in each of the last three years, broken down by type of fraud.

(AQW 616/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Fraud offences may be prosecuted under the Theft Act (Northern Ireland) 1969, the Theft (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981, the Computer Misuse Act 1990, the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, the Trade Marks Act 1994, the Criminal Injuries Compensation (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, the Fraud Act 2006, and Common law.

The most recent 3 year period for which information on convictions for fraud offences at courts in Northern Ireland is available is 2012-2014.

Number of convictions for fraud offences at courts, 2012-2014

	2012	2013	2014
Convictions	934	875	670

Note:

1 Figures relate to convictions which included at least one of the offences specified.

- 2 The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offences specified.
- 3 Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.
- 4 Figures relate to cases brought by Public Prosecution Service on behalf of police, government departments and other parties.

Fraud offences are not easily broken down into different types, as many of the offence descriptions are of a generic nature and Departmental prosecutions and convictions databases do not hold information in relation to the circumstances of a crime. To research detail on the types of fraud involved would necessitate a manual search of court records which would incur a disproportionate cost.

Offences included in the figures provided include: Cheating the public revenue, Conspiracy to defraud, Deception with intent to default on liability (pre 2007), Dishonestly retaining a wrongful credit to an account, Engaging in a misleading commercial practice, Failing to declare a change of circumstances (post 7/1/02), False accounting, False accounting – furnishing false information, Fraud by abuse of position, Fraud by failing to disclose information, Fraud by false representation, Fraudulently claiming tax credit, Fraudulent evasion of VAT, Fraudulent trading, Fraudulently using trademark on packaging, Fraudulently using trademark when exposing goods for sale, Furnishing a false VAT return, Making a false declaration with a view to obtain benefits, Making a false statement to obtain benefit, Making false statement to obtain compensation (2002 Order), Obtaining a money transfer by deception, Obtaining pecuniary advantage by deception, Obtaining property by deception, Obtaining services by deception, Obtaining services dishonestly, Procuring execution of valuable security by deception, Unauthorised access to computer material and Using a false instrument with intent to defraud.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the plans to sell the HM Prison Services' Woburn House site, Millisle.

(AQW 617/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The site at Millisle has been declared surplus to the Northern Ireland Prison Service's (NIPS) requirements. Vacant possession was obtained in December 2015.

The Strategic Investment Board are continuing to handle the disposal of the site.

Ards and North Down Borough Council expressed an interest in possible acquisition of the property and are considering their options at present.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Justice whether she will work with the Minister of Finance to resolve the issue of equal pay for PSNI, Department of Justice and Northern Ireland Office personnel.

(AQW 642/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I will be happy to work with the Minister of Finance and other Executive colleagues to resolve this issue. I am sympathetic to and supportive of the staff affected. However, any solution would have to be centrally-driven and centrally-funded. My Department does not have the resources, or the required approvals, to deal with it: it is a matter for the Executive as a whole to agree funding for, if a suitable mechanism can be found.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions for human trafficking-related offences in each of the last five calendar years.

(AQW 652/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The most recent 5 year period for which information on completed prosecutions and convictions at courts is available is 2010 – 2014. During the period in question, offences relating to human trafficking were prosecuted under the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

Number of prosecutions and convictions at courts for human trafficking offences, 2010 – 2014

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Prosecutions	0	3	2	1	4
Convictions	0	0	2	1	1

Note:

- 5 Figures relate to prosecutions and convictions for the offences in question, whether or not they were the primary offence at prosecution or conviction.
- 6 The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offences specified.
- 7 Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

As well as offences specifically identifiable as human trafficking offences, during the years specified, there were convictions secured in Northern Ireland courts for offences such as brothel keeping, controlling prostitution for gain and entering into an arrangement to control criminal property.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 52257/11-16, why is there no specific complement of staff for a safe and effective prison environment.

(AQW 653/16-21)

Ms Sugden: To have a specific complement would disregard the significant differences in respect of a range of factors, including the type of accommodation and the prisoners being held there.

When profiling or re-profiling a residential area the Northern Ireland Prison Service take into account the number of prisoners, the category of prisoner, the layout of the accommodation as well as looking at any physical security measures in place including cameras and alarms.

Regime Delivery Quotas are also in place and give guidance on the type of regime that can be delivered should there not be a full complement of staff on duty.

Prison Governors take decisions on deployment of staff depending on prevailing circumstances and operational needs.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Justice how many people received a custodial sentence under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 for the offence of harassment, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 654/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The most recent five year period for which information on convictions for harassment offences under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 is available is 2010–2014.

Number of convictions resulting in a custodial sentence for harassment offences under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, 2010 – 2014

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Convictions	17	25	23	39	25

Note:

- 8 Figures relate to convictions which included at least one offence of harassment.
- 9 The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offence specified.
10. Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Justice to detail how many people were imprisoned for breaching a restraining order, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 657/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The most recent five year period for which information on convictions which resulted in a custodial sentence for breach of restraining order offences under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 is available is 2010-2014.

Convictions resulting in a custodial sentence for 'breach of restraining order' offences under the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, 2010-2014

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Convictions	2	2	13	12	8

Note:

11. Figures relate to convictions which included at least one count of the offence specified.
12. The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offence specified.
13. Figures relate to initial disposals at court: disposals as a result of appeals are not included.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been prosecuted under Section 4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997.

(AQW 658/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Article 4 of the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 relates to the offence of harassment. Information on the number of convictions for harassment offences in the period 2010 – 2014, the most recent 5 years for which information is available, has been provided in the answer to AQW/486/16-21.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice to outline her plans to speed up the justice system.

(AQW 702/16-21)

Ms Sugden: There are a number of ongoing measures to speed up the justice system. These include:

- reforms with a focus on speeding up Justice as contained in the Justice Act 2015 which include: reform of the summons process and measures to encourage early guilty pleas (effective from 1 April 2016); the introduction of Statutory Case Management (to commence late 2016); and reform of the committal process (to commence during 2017);
- administrative / procedural measures aimed at speeding up justice, which include: application of emerging developments arising from the Indictable Cases Pilot (ICP) in Ards; and the introduction of staged forensic reporting across all offence types and districts; and
- an ongoing review of performance reporting within the criminal justice system.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the introduction of statutory time limits for criminal cases.
(AQW 703/16-21)

Ms Sugden: On 22 December 2015 my Department published a consultation document on how the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 could be amended to provide more flexibility on the type of Statutory Time Limit scheme that could be delivered. The consultation closed on 28 March 2016 and the responses are in the process of being analysed.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice, following a number of recent high profile lenient sentences, how she plans to increase public confidence in the justice system.

(AQW 704/16-21)

Ms Sugden: On 9 June 2016 I announced a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive Review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework including the underlying policy and scope of the unduly lenient sentence provisions.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice to detail the percentage of (i) households; and (ii) adult occupants that were the victims of at least one crime in (i) North Antrim; and (ii) across Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 705/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The table below, based on findings from the Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS), gives (i) the proportion of households that were affected by any household crime and (ii) the proportion of adults (aged 16 and over) who were affected by any personal crime for the years 2010/11 to 2014/15. The table also shows (iii) the proportion of households and their adult occupants who were a victim of at least one NICS crime.

Figures are at the Northern Ireland level; a breakdown by constituency is not available.

**Households / adults victims of crime once or more by crime type (%), Northern Ireland
(2010/11 to 2014/15 interviews)**

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
(i) Any Household Crime	9.9	8.8	8.0	7.2	7.1
(ii) Any Personal Crime	3.4	3.3	3.2	3.0	2.5
(iii) Any NICS Crime	12.6	11.2	10.9	10.0	8.8

Notes:

- 1 The Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) is a representative, continuous, personal interview survey in which people aged 16 and over living in private households in Northern Ireland are asked about their experiences of crime as well as their perceptions of crime-related issues.
- 2 For the crime types covered, the survey provides estimates for crimes affecting the whole household and personal crimes against the respondent only. Household crimes are considered to be vehicle - and other property - related crimes. Respondents are asked whether anyone currently residing in the household has experienced any such incidents within the reference period, for example, criminal damage to a car, the owner of which could be anyone in the household. Personal crimes relate solely to respondents' own experiences, not those of other people in the household, for example, assaults and personal thefts.
- 3 Respondents are asked to recall all relevant incidents in the 12 full calendar months prior to the month of interview.
- 4 The "any NICS crime" rate is calculated treating a household crime as a personal crime. It is the estimated percentage of adults who have been a victim of at least one personal crime or have been resident in a household that was a victim of at least one household crime. Therefore the "any NICS crime" figure is not an addition of the "any household crime" and "any personal crime" rates.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice how many parents have been subjected to contempt of court proceedings for non-compliance with Residency or Contact Orders within the Children Order, in the last five years.

(AQW 706/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Although breach of residence and contact orders made under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 can be dealt with by way of contempt of court proceedings, the majority of applications for breach are initiated under enforcement powers in the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. The table below indicates defendants dealt with in the Magistrates' Courts who had at least one charge relating to the breach of a Children / Family order and those with at least one charge relating to 'contempt of court' specifically relating to contact or residence orders.

Year	Defendants ¹ dealt with who had at least one charge ² relating to 'Breach of Children / Family Order' ⁴	Defendants ¹ dealt with who had at least one charge relating to 'Contempt of Court' ³ where the charge details indicate that it was in relation to a contact or residence order
2011	114	29
2012	129	4
2013	133	6
2014	152	3
2015 ^P	140	0

Source: Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS)

P Data are currently provisional and may be subject to change

1 The relationship of the defendant to the child is not recorded on the Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS) for criminal cases.

2 Relate to charges of 'Breach of Children / Family order',

3 'Contempt of Court' and 'Contempt'.

4 Data in relation to the breach of a Children's order made in the High Court are recorded as a generic application type on the ICOS, therefore it is not possible to disaggregate the data to specifically identify these. For Magistrates' Court cases, information on the type of Children / Family order that has been breached is held in a free text field on ICOS, and therefore cannot be easily extracted without a manual trawl of court records.

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Justice whether she has any plans to introduce legislation to legalise abortion in cases of fatal foetal abnormality.

(AQW 712/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Any decision to introduce legislation in this area is a cross-cutting matter for the Executive. I have yet to establish whether there is sufficient support within the Executive for any such legislative change.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether 50 per cent remission has been abolished in cases of prison committal for fine defaults.

(AQW 722/16-21)

Ms Sugden: At present a person who has been committed to prison for fine default is entitled to a grant of remission.

The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which gained Royal Assent on 12 May 2016, contains a suite of powers to fundamentally reform fine collection and enforcement arrangements in Northern Ireland, including provisions that will remove this entitlement and will require persons who have been imprisoned for fine default to serve the default period in full.

Supporting secondary legislation and guidance material is currently being prepared that will facilitate the coming into operation of the new fine collection and enforcement arrangements in their entirety in early 2017.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether she will order a Serious Case Review into the community management of Daniel Barry McGonnell, to include the post-release monitoring whilst on licence until his conviction and sentence on 4 May 2016 at Dungannon Magistrates Court.

(AQW 723/16-21)

Ms Sugden: This case does not meet the criteria for a Serious Case Review in that the offences for which Mr McGonnell was convicted in May 2016 do not meet the serious violent offence threshold and there are no grounds to suggest that there has been a significant failure in his risk management by statutory agencies whilst on licence.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice to detail the reoffending rate in (i) North Antrim; and (ii) Northern Ireland in each of the last five years.

(AQW 734/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Reoffending rates for Northern Ireland are currently available for three consecutive years 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13, when the overall reoffending rates were 16.7%, 18.7% and 18.5% respectively.

Since the offending-related characteristics of those included in each yearly cohort may differ in extent or severity, great care needs to be taken in making comparison across years. When such factors are taken into consideration, findings suggest that there is no real difference in the rates of reoffending between the 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13 cohorts.

Due to the time delay needed to establish if reoffending has occurred (i.e. up to twelve months for any subsequent offence to have occurred and a further six months for disposal), 2012/13 represents the most up to date information available. It is planned that information on the 2013/14 cohort should become available in summer 2016.

Figures are at the Northern Ireland level; a breakdown by constituency is not available.

Note:

1 The methodology used to compare overall reoffending rates has been published on the DOJ website.

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Justice what consideration she is giving to the request from the Lord Chief Justice to release additional funding to speed up the processing of legacy inquests.

(AQW 808/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I welcome the work the Lord Chief Justice has undertaken and have discussed with him the urgent need for funding to be made available under the terms of the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements. I am committed to making progress on this matter and will be discussing the issue further with Executive colleagues.

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Justice to outline the indicative timetable for the commencement of remaining sections of the Justice Act 2015 and the Justice Act 2016.

(AQW 809/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 is being implemented in phases and many provisions have already commenced.

There are plans in place for the remaining major policy areas to be implemented during the remainder of 2016 and early 2017. These include the single jurisdiction provisions; Victim Statements and the Witness Charter; Violent Offences Prevention Orders; further Live Link enhancements; improvements and updates to jury arrangements; and the introduction of Domestic Violence Protection Notices and Orders. Committal reform will also be implemented later in 2017.

The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which received Royal Assent on 12 May 2016, is similarly being implemented in phases. The majority of the provisions in Part 3 (Miscellaneous Provisions) of the Act were commenced automatically at Royal Assent, including possession of extreme pornography; revenge porn provisions; the new offence of assaulting ambulance workers; the early removal of foreign national prisoners; and reform of firearms licensing arrangements.

There are plans in place to commence the animal welfare provisions later this summer, together with a number of enabling powers to allow supporting secondary legislation and guidance material to be prepared that will facilitate implementation in early 2017 of the new fine collection and enforcement arrangements and the Prison Ombudsman for Northern Ireland provisions.

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Justice to outline any progress on the rationalisation of the Courts estate.

(AQW 810/16-21)

Ms Sugden: The decisions on rationalising the court estate are now the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court in Belfast.

Consequently it is not my intention to proceed with any closures pending the outcome of those proceedings. As the rationalisation of the court estate is now the subject of legal proceedings it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice why there is not an upper tier Charity Tribunal, as in England and Wales, to enable charity volunteers to be able to appeal cases rather than the expense of the High Court; (ii) whether there are any plans for an upper tier tribunal.

(AQW 823/16-21)

Ms Sugden: In England and Wales, several tribunals, including the former Charity Tribunal, were amalgamated into the First-tier Tribunal, from which appeals lie to the Upper Tribunal. In the last mandate, the Department published proposals for the reform of tribunals in Northern Ireland. This will be the subject of further consideration in this mandate, including the arrangements for onward appeals from tribunals.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the report on the disbandment of paramilitary groups; and what actions she will be taking in response.

(AQW 837/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I welcome the Panel's report on the disbandment of paramilitary groups. It is a thorough and comprehensive report and represents a positive way forward in dealing with this challenging issue.

I am now working with Executive colleagues to consider further the recommendations made and our collective response. My Department is coordinating work across all Departments to prepare an action plan, setting out our detailed response to the report, which we intend to publish by end June 2016.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current number of Sexual Offences Prevention Orders in place, broken down by court division.

(AQW 844/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Identification of the current number of Sexual Offences Prevention Orders in place in each court division would require a manual trawl of court records and could only be achieved at disproportionate cost.

The number of Sexual Offences Prevention Orders made over the last five calendar years, by court division, is outlined in the table below:

Number of Sexual Offence Prevention Orders made¹, by County Court Division: 2010 to 2015^P

Division	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015 ^P
Belfast	31	19	40	52	46	18
Londonderry	10	11	18	12	11	6
Antrim	11	12	19	15	12	13
Fermanagh and Tyrone	13	6	11	13	13	11
Armagh and South Down	3	7	14	14	17	12
Ards	12	12	26	28	29	20
Craigavon	11	12	12	14	13	11
Total	91	79	140	148	141	91

Source: Integrated Court Operations System

1 Data exclude SOPO orders made on appeal if a SOPO order was made on the original case.

P 2015 data are currently provisional and may be subject to change.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) how many slavery and trafficking reparation orders have been made since Royal Assent was granted to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015; and (ii) the level of fine or compensation granted in each case.

(AQW 846/16-21)

Ms Sugden: Schedule 2 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 makes provision for courts in Northern Ireland to be able to impose slavery and trafficking reparation orders, under which an offender convicted of an offence under section 1, 2 or 4 of the Act, would be required to pay reparation to his or her victim. As of 31st May 2016, the latest date for which official statistics are available, there have not been any convictions for offences under sections 1, 2 or 4 of the Act and as such, no reparation orders have been made.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 29/16-21, whether she has been made aware of recent incidents in Dungannon Courthouse which occurred in courtrooms and during court hearings, in which assaults occurred, injuries were sustained and in one incidence a member of the public seated in the gallery intervened to restrain one of the attackers; and whether she will provide a detailed report on the incidents in question to the Chief Constable and place a copy in Assembly Library.

(AQW 914/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have been made aware of recent incidents in Dungannon Courthouse and am satisfied that they were handled appropriately by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Prison Service and G4S Secure Solutions (UK) Ltd. In view of this I do not consider it necessary to report these incidents to the Chief Constable.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 396/16-21, whether her Department has conducted any research into, or is aware of a rationale for, the decline in conviction rates in the last five years of persons convicted of at least one offence in the Violence Against the Person category, where the offence description specifies the involvement of a child.

(AQW 944/16-21)

Ms Sugden: As stated in the answer to AQW/396/16-21, there is no specific offence of physically abusing children in Northern Ireland and convictions datasets held by the Department do not contain details on victim age.

During the period covered in the answer provided in response to AQW/396/16-21, one offence, that of 'Aggravated assault on a female or boy under 14 years' was repealed for offences after 5 July 2011. Convictions in relation to this offence made up a large proportion of the numbers reported in response to the previous AQW, particularly in relation to the years, 2010, 2011 and 2012.

The offence had been prosecuted under section 43 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, but this Section was repealed under the Justice Act (NI) 2011, as a consequence of the increase in maximum terms of imprisonment for common assault or battery (s51 of the 2011 Act). The change was originally made at the request of District Judges and commenced on 5/7/11.

The 2011 Act increased the maximum imprisonment term for common assault or battery under section 42 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 to six months and repealed section 43 as a consequence. The change created a simplified framework for assault or battery, allowing for common assault (s43) to be tried on summary conviction, with a penalty of 6 months imprisonment or level 3 fine; or, for more serious assaults, assault occasioning actual bodily harm (s47) can attract 7 year and/or an unlimited fine on indictment (but is also triable summarily).

Subsequent to the legislative change, assaults on children are likely to have been recorded under more generic descriptions, for example, 'common assault', the number of convictions for which saw a substantial rise in the period subsequent to the repeal of the 'Aggravated assault on a female or boy under 14 years' offence.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice to outline the process open to non-resident parents in receipt of residency or contact orders within the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 that are not being complied with by the resident parent.
(AQW 953/16-21)

Ms Sugden: There are no specific enforcement powers under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 for breach of residence and contact orders. Breach can be dealt through contempt of court proceedings or, more commonly, a summons initiated under general enforcement powers in Article 112 of the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 which gives the court the power to fine or imprison the person breaching the order.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice why the review of sentencing policy was not announced in the Assembly Chamber.
(AQW 992/16-21)

Ms Sugden: On 9 June I announced, in response to seven written Assembly Questions, and by way of a press release, the commencement of a review of sentencing policy.

The Assembly Questions, which were tabled for answer on 9 June, necessitated reference to the Review. The restricted timing would not have allowed arrangements to be made for an oral statement.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice to outline the future plans for the Desertcreat site; and what assurances she can give that any future plans will not impact on the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service training centre, should it be located there.
(AQW 1013/16-21)

Ms Sugden: In March this year, the Executive gave approval for the Northern Ireland Community Safety College Programme Board to further develop the preferred option to the second stage of the outline business case (OBC2). The preferred option would see the development, at Desertcreat, of a new Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) training facility. It is envisaged that this would occupy around 35% of the Desertcreat site: ownership of this part of the site would transfer from the Northern Ireland Policing Board to the NIFRS. The remaining 65% would be disposed of.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Justice whether she will consider abandoning her Department's appeal lodged against the Honourable Mr. Justice Horner's ruling on the Human Rights Commission judicial review on abortion.
(AQW 1189/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have considered the legal advice which led to the Departmental appeal and concluded that there are valid concerns in relation to the High Court ruling which need to be addressed by the Court of Appeal.

Department for the Economy

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of Foreign Direct Investment projects in (i) 2011/12; (ii) 2012/13; (iii) 2013/14; (iv) 2014/15; and (v) 2015/16.
(AQW 3/16-21)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy): There were 1,571 Foreign Direct Investment projects supported by Invest NI during the 5 year period, detailed by year as follows: 282 in 2011-12, 368 in 2012-13, 334 in 2013-14, 358 in 2014-15 and 229 in 2015-16.

Mr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy what assessment has been made of the potential financial benefit of removing Air Passenger Duty.

(AQW 9/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Direct long haul APD was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2013 and reduced to zero. This measure costs the Northern Ireland block grant over £2 million per annum but is considered important in helping secure direct connectivity with North America which enhances the Northern Ireland investment proposition.

Economic analysis conducted for the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment by the University of Ulster Economic Policy Centre identified that any reduction in short-haul APD would result in increased passenger numbers using Northern Ireland's airports. However, the report also identified that full abolition of APD would be unlikely to deliver a positive net benefit to the local economy and while there could potentially be a small positive economic impact resulting from a partial reduction in the rate of APD, this would depend on the cost to the public finances. The reduction which HM Treasury would impose on the Northern Ireland Block would be subject to negotiation but if it was in line with HMRC estimates, then the economic benefit would be negative.

The University of Ulster assessment concluded that when the high levels of deadweight and uncertainties around the cost to the block grant are taken into consideration, APD would not be a strong economic development tool. The report indicated that targeted interventions would be a more effective means to induce air route development. The report is publically available to download from: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/air-passenger-duty>.

Any reduction in APD in Northern Ireland alone would result in a reduction to the Block Grant and would have to be paid from our public finances. The tax is imposed and set by the UK Government and the onus is on it to deal with this at a national level. We continue to stress to Westminster that APD is an unfair tax which has an adverse impact upon travellers departing Northern Ireland's airports.

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for the Economy whether he will ensure that Strabane is promoted on future trade missions as a location for potential inward investment

(AQW 92/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Invest NI competes globally to attract inward investment to Northern Ireland as a whole. Northern Ireland is competing with countries, and indeed cities, that are larger than itself and it is therefore important to present our collective strengths if we are to compete successfully.

Invest NI works closely with local councils to help develop their local investment propositions should potential investors visit their areas. It has also offered support and guidance to councils to help develop an FDI app providing information of interest to potential investors.

Where a potential investor indicates particular needs for a project, Invest NI will suggest possible suitable locations to best meet those needs. The investor will then decide which locations to visit, and ultimately where to locate their business.

During 2016-17, Invest NI will deliver a comprehensive programme of almost 60 overseas events, including 17 Trade Missions to countries including Australia, China, USA, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Denmark, Malaysia and Singapore. The main purpose of Trade Missions is to support and encourage Northern Ireland businesses to develop and secure export sales.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what support and guidance his Department provides for (i) pre-start; (ii) start-up; and (iii) business growth for businesses in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

(AQW 389/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Invest NI provides a range of support and practical assistance to entrepreneurs and businesses across Northern Ireland including Fermanagh and South Tyrone. These interventions may be of a financial and non-financial nature.

(i) Pre Start

The Business Support Team provides a centralised service for enquiries from all types of entrepreneurs and businesses across Northern Ireland, giving a range of free advice and guidance.

nibusinessinfo.co.uk is the official online channel for business advice provided in partnership with NI Direct. Businesses and entrepreneurs can avail of a range of advisory assistance on business related topics.

(ii) Start up

Export and Global Start assistance is available to entrepreneurs starting an export focused business or an established business seeking to enter export markets for the first time.

Innovation Vouchers of up to £5,000 enable small and medium sized enterprises to engage with one of the 39 universities, colleges and other publicly funded research organisations to access specialist expertise to provide an innovative solution to a business issue.

The Technical Development Incentive can offer business start-ups 50% support on eligible technical supplier costs up to a maximum grant of £5,000. Areas supported include Intellectual Property (IP), investigating new technologies / processes and product approval / compliance.

The Propel Programme helps put the structure around the company to commercialise the service or product and seek investment. Selective Financial Assistance can be used to help accelerate growth.

Invest NI also provides Access to Finance Programmes via NI Small Business Loan Fund, Techstart NI and Co-Fund NI and equity to grow businesses can be provided by the Growth Loan Fund and Development Funds respectively.

(iii) Business Growth

Growing your Business assistance ranges from Business Health Checks to Leadership and Coaching Programmes including International Selling Courses, Leadership for management training programmes, Property Solutions and Access to Finance.

Business Assistance to help SME's Maximise Efficiencies include ICT Advisory, Energy Efficiency programmes and Productivity improvement.

Product Development programmes include assistance with Design, Intellectual Property, Technical Advice and Research & Development.

International Trade helps develop skills of Marketing and Sales in local SMEs, assists them in researching export market opportunities, and offers the capability to visit foreign markets through Trade Visits and Exhibitions.

Mr McPhillips asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of areas in Fermanagh and South Tyrone that receive an internet service of 1MB or less than 1MB.

(AQW 506/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: My Department does not hold or gather the information requested.

Data on fixed broadband network coverage is collected by Ofcom which makes the information available through its triennial infrastructure reports and subsequent annual updates. The latest report, 'Connected Nations 2015' and associated data downloads can be found at:

<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/infrastructure/connected-nations-2015/>.

Ms Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what steps he will take to ensure higher education institutions provide crèche facilities.

(AQO 49/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Our Universities are autonomous organisations responsible for their own policies, procedures, and the management of their facilities.

Decisions relating to the operation of student services are therefore a matter for the institution.

My Department does, however, fund childcare financial support which is available to students to allow them to access childcare facilities of their choice, including near to their home. This direct student support aligns with my Department's strategy for widening participation in higher education.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on Corporation Tax.

(AQO 50/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: There is now a commitment to establishing a 12.5% Corporation Tax rate from 2018 in Northern Ireland. There has already been significant work undertaken within my Department and Invest NI to ensure that we maximise the opportunity that a lower Corporation Tax rate brings to secure new Foreign Direct Investment and to make it easier for existing businesses to grow.

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for the Economy for his assessment of the recently published 2015 annual tourism statistics.

(AQO 51/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I am very encouraged by the latest tourism statistics published by NISRA, which show that in 2015 tourism generated a total of £760million for Northern Ireland. Of this, £541million was revenue brought into the economy from external markets, making tourism an export sector worth over half a billion pounds.

This represents a healthy increase of 5% in external visitor spend. We welcomed a record number of external visitors last year, up by 5% on 2014 to 2.3million, with visitors from Europe increasing by 17% and Great Britain by 10%.

Our combined visitor number for external and domestic visitors continues at the record level of 4.5million. These latest figures point to continued overall growth in local tourism, a sector which is becoming an increasingly important driver for our economy.

I intend to bring forward a new Tourism Strategy for the next 10 years to build on this momentum and drive growth in this important sector.

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy how he plans to increase employment opportunities for university graduates.

(AQO 53/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: A supply of high quality graduates is vital for economic success. Universities equip students with a distinctive range and high quality of skills and attributes needed for an increasingly competitive international workplace.

In 2013/14, the proportion of Northern Ireland domiciled students leaving our Higher Education Institutions who were in work, due to start work or undertaking further study, six months after graduation, was 91.4%.

Furthermore, with the introduction of a lower rate of Corporation Tax in 2018, forecasts show that there will be an increase in demand for people with higher level skills, particularly those with science, technology, engineering and maths qualifications.

Those people who wish to re-skill into these areas to avail of the opportunities arising from new Foreign Direct Investment companies and existing growing businesses can access a range of bespoke pre-employment training interventions.

My Department, working in conjunction with Invest Northern Ireland through the 'Assured Skills' programme, has put in place interventions that have re-skilled under-employed graduates for graduate level employment in high demand areas such as data analytics, legal services, cyber-security and financial services for companies including Deloitte, Citi, PWC, WhiteHat Security and Axiom Law.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether he plans to discuss, with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, the extension of the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East to encompass local areas.

(AQO 54/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Causeway Coastal Route and the Wild Atlantic Way are both currently promoted alongside each other in Tourism Ireland's marketing campaigns in its twenty three markets overseas. The Causeway Coastal Route and the Wild Atlantic Way are also signposted from each other, inviting visitors to continue their journey.

Work is underway to develop a new Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland that will set out our vision to become an internationally competitive and inspiring destination of which our community is proud. The Strategy will set out the actions needed by government and the industry to develop our product, our experiences and our marketing approach in order to attract more out of state visitors and drive growth in the tourism sector.

To deliver on our strategic objectives, my Department will consider any opportunities to collaborate with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and Tourism Ireland on the marketing of the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East where there are benefits to both jurisdictions in doing so.

Mr McKee asked the Minister for the Economy to outline his plans to incentivise employers to provide more apprenticeships for young people.

(AQO 55/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: ApprenticeshipsNI currently offers an employer incentive ranging from £250 to £1,500, payable to the employer upon participant completion.

We also fund the full costs of the 'off-the-job' training for apprentices aged under 25, with 50 per cent of the training cost available for over 25s in a number of key sectors.

'Securing our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships', published June 2014, articulates the future of Northern Ireland's apprenticeships.

Similarly, 'Generating our Success: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Training, published June 2015, provides direction for a new youth training system at level 2 which will be entitled 'traineeships'.

These strategies offer a step-change to our system and work in the interests of the individual, the employer and the economy, driven by strategic partnership, putting employers at its heart.

Officials are currently reviewing the concept and values of financial incentives to employers in order to encourage their participation.

Apprenticeships will be extended to a wider range of occupational areas and facilitate progression up the skills ladder from level 3, A level, to Higher Level Apprenticeships from Level 4 to Level 8, Doctorate.

Employers provide advice and guidance on all aspects of the new system including involvement in curriculum design and informing appropriate incentives.

The strategy also commits to the establishment of a "central service" to market, promote and support apprenticeship and youth training provision, including a, soon to be piloted, online service to advertise opportunities.

My officials are working to identify delivery options and associated costs in relation to this non-financial support.

It is worth noting that my focus is not solely on increasing numbers. I firmly believe that if we deliver an apprenticeship underpinned by quality, breadth, progression and portability that is valued by employers and raises productivity that an increase in numbers will follow.

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for the Economy what plans his Department has to address the problems of mobile coverage, data roaming and broadband provision in peripheral and border areas.

(AQO 56/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: In relation to mobile coverage, I would advise that my Department has no plans for intervention at present. This is because the UK Government has put in place an agreement with the Mobile Network Operators through which the mobile industry will invest £5 billion in UK infrastructure and increasing coverage by 2017. It is envisaged that mobile not-spots in Northern Ireland will be reduced to 0.3% of the land mass by the time this investment is completed. It is, therefore, appropriate that my Department awaits the outcome of these investments in order to determine if further public intervention is required.

Better coverage should also address the issue of inadvertent data roaming, the additional costs for which will be abolished across the EU by June 2017.

With regard to broadband, my Department is currently managing a contract for delivery of the Superfast Roll-out Programme which, by 31 December 2017, will provide access to superfast broadband, with speeds of at least 24 Megabits per second, to a further thirty-nine thousand premises across Northern Ireland, including in peripheral and border areas.

In addition, under my Department's Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project, which has already improved broadband access for forty-seven thousand premises, the contract with BT has a clawback, gain share, mechanism which compels BT to return part of the investment when adoption of the new service passes beyond the 20% mark in related areas. The final amount will not be known until Autumn when plans can be developed to use any funds owed to help further improve the coverage of faster broadband connectivity across Northern Ireland.

In the meantime, it should be recognised that, where fixed-line broadband is not viable, there are other technology alternatives available, including fixed wireless and satellite.

With regard to satellite my Department has a scheme in place, under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project, which allows consumers with a broadband connection of less than 2 Megabits per second, to access a subsidy towards the cost of having a satellite broadband service installed from a list of registered providers, subject to satisfying certain eligibility criteria. Details of the scheme can be found on the Department's website.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the steps his Department is taking to foster stronger trade links between Northern Ireland and India.

(AQO 57/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The Department and Invest NI are both actively engaged in supporting NI companies to foster trade links with India. Invest NI offers specialist business and marketing advice on India and provides access to finance to support travel to explore the available commercial opportunities and develop business relationships. Invest NI partners with a range of stakeholders to support trade development, including UK Trade & Investment, Belfast City Council and the Honorary Indian Counsel to N Ireland. The support extends to Trade Missions, Exhibitions, workshops and 1:1 consultancy.

Mr Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the establishment of an Enterprise Zone in Coleraine.

(AQO 58/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The pilot Enterprise Zone at Coleraine is focused solely on offering Enhanced Capital Allowances. As part of his Budget statement on 16 March 2016, the Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed that the UK Government will legislate to offer Enhanced Capital Allowances within the pilot Enterprise Zone in Coleraine. HM Treasury has since confirmed that the enabling legislation will be effective from the date of the Budget statement. Formal confirmation of designation timescales has been requested from HM Treasury.

I look forward to seeing the pilot Enterprise Zone implemented in the coming months.

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for the Economy how he plans to improve access to broadband services in rural areas.

(AQO 60/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: My Department is currently managing a contract for delivery of the Superfast Roll-out Programme which, by 31 December 2017, will provide access to superfast broadband, with speeds of at least 24 Megabits per second, to a further thirty-nine thousand premises across Northern Ireland, primarily in rural areas.

In addition, under my Department's Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project, which has already improved broadband access for forty-seven thousand premises, the contract with BT has a clawback, gain share, mechanism which compels BT to return part of the investment when adoption of the new service passes beyond the 20% mark in related areas. The final amount will not be known until Autumn when plans can be developed to use any funds owed to help further improve the coverage of faster broadband connectivity across Northern Ireland.

In the meantime, it should be recognised that, where fixed-line broadband is not viable, there are other technology alternatives available, including fixed wireless and satellite. With regard to satellite my Department has a scheme in place, under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project, which allows consumers with a broadband connection of less than 2 Megabits per second, to access a subsidy towards the cost of having a satellite broadband service

installed from a list of registered providers, subject to satisfying certain eligibility criteria. Details of the scheme can be found on the Department's website.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission whether there are any plans to review the provision of a bar and the sale of alcohol in Parliament Buildings during sitting hours.

(AQW 263/16-21)

Mr Wells (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): There are currently no plans to further review the provision of a bar and the sale of alcohol in Parliament Buildings during sitting hours.

A review of the services provided by all the catering outlets was conducted in 2015 in order to meet budgetary requirements in line with the Assembly Commission SP15+ project.

Specifically, the Members' Bar and Coffee lounge opening hours were reduced daily from 9am to 7pm (Monday to Friday) to 10am to 5pm (Monday to Thursday / Closed Friday).

Traditionally, the sale of alcohol within the Members' Bar is extremely low. By way of example, over the last 6 months, the sale of alcohol within the Members' Bar only represents 5.3% of all food and beverage sales.

Lord Morrow asked the Assembly Commission, under the new Independent Financial Review Panel Determination 2016, what provision is made for the payment of (i) interpreters; and (ii) sign language providers, when working with constituents requiring these services.

(AQW 327/16-21)

Mr Maskey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016 clearly defines the admissible expenditure that may be claimed by Members in operating their constituency offices. Only those expenses detailed in Part 2, Paragraphs 11, 12, 16 or 17 of the Determination may be recovered by a Member. A Member who uses services such as (i) interpreters or (ii) sign language providers are not able to claim the associated costs under the Expenses Part of the Determination unless those services do not exceed £100 in any month and can be reclaimed under paragraph 16 (3) (j) - sundry constituency office operating expenses.

A Member may wish to employ a member of support staff with these skills and recover the costs under Part 4 (Staff Costs) of the Determination. However, there are a number of specific requirements that must be fully complied with to enable recovery and the total costs that may be recovered for support staff are capped £50,000 per annum.

Lord Morrow asked the Assembly Commission what provision is made for the payment of Members' staff travel expenses for out-of-office appointments, particularly constituency house visits and matters of advocacy such as benefits appeal tribunals; and whether Members' staff are expected to meet this expenditure themselves or as acts of goodwill.

(AQW 347/16-21)

Mr Hussey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016 clearly defines the admissible expenditure that may be recovered by Members in operating their constituency offices. Only those expenses, allowances and staff costs detailed in the Determination may be recovered by Members.

Part 3 of the Determination makes provision for a constituency travel allowance and an Assembly travel allowance. There is no separate provision for the recovery of support staff travel costs by a Member. If a Member chooses to reimburse staff for these costs, it would be a matter for the individual Member.

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission how much was paid to the members of the Independent Financial Review Panel in each year of their remit; and to detail the number of hours work for which payment was made.

(AQW 605/16-21)

Mr Dickson (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Independent Financial Review Panel (IFRP) was established in July 2011. The amounts paid to each of the members from that date are shown in Table 1 overleaf. While each member submits a claim based on the number of hours worked and payments are made on this basis, the number of hours claimed is not recorded on the payroll processing system.

It may be helpful to note that the hourly fees currently paid are:

- (i) £49.63 for the Chair of the Panel and
- (ii) £41.75 for each of the other members.

Rates of (i) £47.50 and (ii) £40.00 were payable up to April 2014.

Table 1 – IFRP Fees & Expenses Paid 2011-2016

Year	Panel Member	Fees	Travel	Other	Total
2011/12	Campbell, Eta	£5,880	£229	£84	£6,193
	McCartan, Pat	£9,440	£328		£9,769
	McQuillan, Alan	£8,440	£28		£8,468
	Total 2011/12	£23,760	£585	£84	£24,430
2012/13	Campbell, Eta	£2,340	£251	£40	£2,631
	McCartan, Pat	£3,349	£203	£344	£3,896
	McQuillan, Alan	£1,360			£1,360
	Total 2012/13	£7,049	£455	£384	£7,887
2013/14	Campbell, Eta	£2,640	£84		£2,724
	McCartan, Pat	£3,515	£153		£3,668
	McQuillan, Alan	£1,200			£1,200
	Total 2013/14	£7,355	£237	£0	£7,592
2014/15	Campbell, Eta	£2,740	£151		£2,891
	McCartan, Pat	£7,806	£288		£8,094
	McQuillan, Alan	£3,690			£3,690
	Total 2014/15	£14,236	£439	£0	£14,675
2015/16	Campbell, Eta	£9,534	£324		£9,858
	McCartan, Pat	£16,527	£539		£17,066
	McQuillan, Alan	£13,089			£13,089
	Total 2015/16	£39,150	£863	£0	£40,013
Total fees paid	Campbell, Eta	£23,134	£1,039	£124	£24,297
	McCartan, Pat	£40,636	£1,512	£344	£42,493
	McQuillan, Alan	£27,779	£28	£0	£27,807
	Total	£91,549	£2,579	£469	£94,597

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission what arrangements are in place to acquaint Members with groups that are visiting Parliament Buildings from their constituency.
(AQW 622/16-21)

Mr Wells (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): In order to acquaint Members with groups that are visiting Parliament Buildings from their constituency the front page of AsslSt, the Assembly Commission intranet, displays, on the right hand side of the page, a list of all events and visiting schools for the current day. This can be viewed using the following link: <http://assist/>

Members can also consult all forthcoming Events and school visits using the link situated just below this list on the same page: <http://assist/databases/events/default.aspx>

Furthermore, the NI Assembly Education Service sends a weekly email to party support representatives and independent MLAs detailing education groups for the incoming week. This email is intended to make members aware of groups they might want to meet with in order to increase Member engagement with Education Service groups, and details the group's name, location and numbers, as well as their venue within Parliament Buildings.

The Education Service's Twitter feed (@niaeducation) is updated on a daily basis with information about the groups availing of the education programme on that day. This provides a channel to inform both the public and Members of Education Service groups.

On a monthly basis, Members, via party support, are invited to attend the A-Level MLA Q&A sessions. We endeavour to invite independent MLAs to these events if the visiting group comes from their constituency.

Lord Morrow asked the Assembly Commission (i) to outline what consultations took place with Members' staff and other key stakeholders including trade unions in relations to the Independent Financial Review Panel directives on charges to (a) staff salaries; (b) staff hours; (c) staff mileage; (d) staff pensions; and (e) staff holidays; (ii) to provide copies of all responses of consultations or place same in Assembly Library; and (iii) where no consultation took place or responses exist, to outline any advice given as to how the alterations are deemed legal under employment legislation.

(AQW 649/16-21)

Mr Hussey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission had no role in any consultation that took place in advance of the publication of the Members' (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016. The member may wish to liaise with the Independent Financial Review Panel on this matter.

Lord Morrow asked the Assembly Commission, under the Independent Financial Review Panel determination on the employment of new staff, what provision exists for MLA's who find themselves facing legal challenges by unsuccessful applicants; and whether the MLA or the Assembly is responsible for defending the challenge.

(AQW 720/16-21)

Mr Hussey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016 defines the requirements that must be fully complied with in order for a Member to recover staff costs. This includes the express provision that all employees of a Member must be appointed on merit after having been identified by a fair and open competition.

No provision exists to meet the cost of any challenge to the legality of a recruitment process undertaken by a Member. Any such challenge could only be taken against a Member as the Commission is not a party to the employment relationship between a Member and his or her employee(s).

Mr Swann asked the Assembly Commission what steps are being taken to prevent further damage to the wall coverings at the main door of the Senate Chamber.

(AQW 923/16-21)

Mr Dickson (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Facilities Directorate staff have been trying to prevent any further damage to the wall coverings at the entrance to the Senate Chamber in various ways. The Events staff always ensure that visitors are instructed not to touch the panels when entering or leaving the chamber as do the Ushers during the ad-hoc tours. In addition to this the Education Officers remind all school groups visiting that the panels are not to be touched.

Building Services Branch has been working with NIEA Historic Buildings representatives and others, to try to establish how best to conserve and repair the wall coverings. To date it has proved very difficult to find a solution that is acceptable to the NIEA however it is hoped that some remedial work will take place over the summer.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission to detail the progress being made to ensure the Union flag flies from Parliament Buildings on at least every sitting day.

(AQW 1040/16-21)

Mr Dickson (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Following the Assembly Commission's agreement to review its policy on the flying of the Union flag at Parliament Buildings and to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) to consider the potential equality of opportunity and good relations impacts of any changes to the policy, a full public consultation was held from 27 October 2014 to 2 February 2015.

At its 17 June 2015 meeting, the Commission agreed by majority to adopt one of the report's recommendations to fly the Union flag from Parliament Buildings on designated days as defined by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). This currently equates 18 days per annum, an increase of three days on the previous policy. The 2016 dates are listed at Annex 1. The Assembly Commission could not agree any proposal to fly the Union flag for a greater number of days than eighteen. Following the May election, the new Assembly Commission has yet to hold its first meeting.

Annex 1 – DCMS flag-flying days 2016

9 January	Birthday of the Duchess of Cambridge
20 January	Birthday of the Countess of Wessex
6 February	Her Majesty's Accession
19 February	Birthday of the Duke of York
10 March	Birthday of the Earl of Wessex
14 March	Commonwealth Day
17 March	St. Patrick's Day
21 April	Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen
9 May	Europe Day

2 June	Coronation Day
10 June	Birthday of the Duke of Edinburgh
11 June	Official celebration of Her Majesty's birthday
21 June	Birthday of the Duke of Cambridge
17 July	Birthday of the Duchess of Cornwall
15 August	Birthday of the Princess Royal
13 November	Remembrance Day
14 November	Birthday of the Prince of Wales
20 November	Her Majesty's Wedding Day

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised written answers to questions tabled by Members. The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 10 June 2016

Revised Written Answers

Department of Justice

In this Bound Volume, page WA 44, replace the answer given for AQW 45/16-21 with:

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the framework for local mandatory sentencing for murder, compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 45/16-21)

Ms Sugden (The Minister of Justice): I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework, including the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

In this Bound Volume, page WA 44 replace the answer given for AQW 46/16-21 with:

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQO 2988/11-16, what progress has been made on updating sentencing guidelines for murder cases.

(AQW 46/16-21)

Ms Sugden: I have announced today a Review of Sentencing Policy. This comprehensive review, prompted by periodic concerns raised about sentencing issues, will assess the extent to which current sentencing arrangements meet the objectives of an effective sentencing guidelines mechanism, and consider possible alternative approaches.

The Review will also look at various wider issues within the sentencing framework, including the legislation governing the determination of tariffs following the imposition of life sentences for murder.

Recommendations arising out of the Review will be subject to public consultation.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 12 May 2016

The Assembly met at noon.

1. Notice of First Meeting

In accordance with Standing Order 2(1) the Clerk to the Assembly gave notice that the Assembly will meet, as required by section 31(4) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, in Parliament Buildings on Thursday 12 May 2016 at noon.

The Speaker took the Chair.

2. Undertaking and Roll of Membership

The Speaker outlined the procedure for Members to sign the undertaking, as provided for in the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016, and Roll of Membership. Members signed the undertaking before then signing the Roll and indicating a designation of identity.

The following members designated as Nationalist:

Ms Caoimhe Archibald, Mr Alex Attwood, Mr Cathal Boylan, Ms Michaela Boyle, Ms Sinead Bradley, Ms Linda Dillon, Mr Mark Durkan, Mr Colum Eastwood, Ms Meagan Fearon, Ms Michelle Gildernew, Ms Claire Hanna, Mr Chris Hazzard, Mr Declan Kearney, Mr Gerry Kelly, Mr Seán Lynch, Mr Declan McAleer, Mr Fra McCann, Ms Jennifer McCann, Mr Raymond Mc Cartney, Mr Daniel McCrossan, Mr Barry McElduff, Mr Patsy McGlone, Mr Colin McGrath, Mr Martin McGuinness, Mr Daithí McKay, Mr Oliver McMullan, Mr Justin McNulty, Mr Richie McPhillips, Ms Nichola Mallon, Mr Alex Maskey, Mr Ian Milne, Mr Gerry Mullan, Mr Conor Murphy, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, Mr John O'Dowd, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, Ms Caitriona Ruane, Ms Catherine Seeley, Mr Pat Sheehan.

The following Members designated as Unionist:

Mr Steve Aiken, Mr Andy Allen, Mr Jim Allister, Mr Sydney Anderson, Mrs Rosemary Barton, Mr Doug Beattie, Mr Roy Beggs, Mr Jonathan Bell, Mr Maurice Bradley, Ms Paula Bradley, Mr Keith Buchanan, Mr Thomas Buchanan, Ms Joanne Bunting, Mr Robbie Butler, Mrs Pam Cameron, Mr Alan Chambers, Mr Trevor Clarke, Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson, Mr Sammy Douglas, Mr Gordon Dunne, Mr Alex Easton, Mrs Arlene Foster, Mr Paul Frew, Mr Paul Girvan, Mr Paul Givan, Mrs Brenda Hale, Mr Simon Hamilton, Mr David Hilditch, Mr William Humphrey, Mr Ross Hussey, Mr William Irwin, Mr Danny Kennedy, Mrs Emma Little Pengelly, Ms Carla Lockhart, Mr Philip Logan, Mr Gordon Lyons, Mr Nelson McCausland, Miss Michelle McIlveen, Mr Harold McKee, Mr Adrian McQuillan, Mr Gary Middleton, Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley, Mr Mike Nesbitt, Mr Robin Newton, Mrs Sandra Overend, Mrs Jenny Palmer, Mr Edwin Poots, Mr George Robinson, Mr Alastair Ross, Mr Philip Smith, Mr Christopher Stalford, Mr Mervyn Storey, Ms Claire Sugden, Mr Robin Swann, Mr Peter Weir, Mr Jim Wells.

The following Members designated as Other:

Mr Steven Agnew, Ms Kellie Armstrong, Ms Clare Bailey, Ms Paula Bradshaw, Mr Gerry Carroll, Mr Stewart Dickson, Dr Stephen Farry, Mr David Ford, Mrs Naomi Long, Mr Trevor Lunn, Mr Chris Lyttle, Mr Eamonn McCann.

The sitting was suspended at 12.47pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

3. Speaker's Business – Concluding Remarks

The Speaker made some brief remarks to mark the end of his term in office.

The Speaker confirmed that he was satisfied that all Members who had signed the Roll had taken their seats in accordance with Standing Orders.

4. Election of Speaker

The Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) outlined the procedure for the election of a Speaker under Standing Order 4.

Mrs Arlene Foster nominated Mr Robin Newton as a candidate for the Office of Speaker. Mr Sammy Douglas seconded the nomination. Mr Newton indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

The Speaker (Mr Newton) took the Chair.

5. Election of Deputy Speakers

The Speaker advised that the procedure for election of Deputy Speakers would be the same as that for the election of the Speaker.

Mr Martin McGuinness nominated Ms Caitríona Ruane as Deputy Speaker.

Ms Jennifer McCann seconded the nomination. Ms Ruane indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

Mr Colum Eastwood nominated Mr Patsy McGlone as Deputy Speaker.

Mr Alex Attwood seconded the nomination. Mr McGlone indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

Mr Mike Nesbitt nominated Mr Danny Kennedy as Deputy Speaker.

Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson seconded the nomination. Mr Danny Kennedy indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Question being put that Ms Caitríona Ruane be Deputy Speaker, there was one dissenting voice. Tellers were called for a Division. Two Tellers presented for the Ayes and one for the Noes. In accordance with Standing Order 27(4) the determination of the Assembly was that of the side for which two Tellers had been nominated. The Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

The Question being put that Mr Patsy McGlone be Deputy Speaker, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

The Question being put that Mr Danny Kennedy be Deputy Speaker, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

6. Election of Principal Deputy Speaker

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the election of a Principal Deputy Speaker under Standing Order 5(A).

Mr Martin McGuinness nominated Ms Caitríona Ruane as a candidate for the position of Principal Deputy Speaker of the Assembly. Ms Ruane indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, that Ms Caitríona Ruane be Principal Deputy Speaker of the Assembly, the Motion was **carried** on a cross-community vote (Division).

7. Appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the appointment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as set out in section 16A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44(1).

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley nominated Mrs Arlene Foster as First Minister. Ms Jennifer McCann nominated Mr Martin McGuinness as deputy First Minister.

Mrs Arlene Foster affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Martin McGuinness affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Speaker confirmed that Mrs Arlene Foster and Mr Martin McGuinness had taken up office as First Minister and deputy First Minister respectively.

8. Committee Business

8.1 Motion - Business Committee Membership

Proposed:

That the following shall be appointed to be members of the Business Committee:

- The Speaker (ex officio)
- Mr A Attwood;
- Mr T Clarke;
- Mr S Dickson;
- Mr G Kelly;
- Mr C McGrath;
- Mrs S Overend;
- Ms C Ruane;
- Mr R Swann; and
- Mr P Weir.

The Speaker

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.28pm.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

12 May 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

12 May 2016

Division

Question put, That Ms Caitríona Ruane act as Principal Deputy Speaker.

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 66

Noes: 27

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Other

Mr Lunn

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan, Mr Kelly.

NOES

Unionist

Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr McKee, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Ms Palmer, Mr Smith, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann.

Other

Mr Agnew, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson, Mr Hussey.

Total Votes	93	Total Ayes	66	[71.0%]
Nationalist Votes	28	Nationalist Ayes	28	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	55	Unionist Ayes	37	[67.3%]
Other Votes	10	Other Ayes	1	[10.0%]

The Nomination was **approved** by cross-community vote.

PLEDGE OF OFFICE AS SET OUT IN SCHEDULE 4 TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND ACT 1998

To pledge:

- (a) to discharge in good faith all the duties of office;
- (b) commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means;
- (c) to serve all the people of Northern Ireland equally, and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination;
- (ca) to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future;
- (cb) to participate fully in the Executive Committee, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council;
- (cc) to observe the joint nature of the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister;
- (cd) to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement;
- (ce) to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and to support all efforts to uphold it;
- (cf) to work collectively with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve a society free of paramilitarism;
- (cg) to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality;
- (ch) to call for, and to work together with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve, the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures;
- (ci) to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities;
- (cj) to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism;
- (ck) to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment;

Paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement says:

'We believe that the essential elements of support for law and order include endorsing fully the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system, actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas and actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions, including the Policing Board.'

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 March 2016 - 12 May 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Water and Sewerage Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Road Traffic (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Environmental Better Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) Act 2016

The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Licensing Act (Northern Ireland) Act 2016

The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

S.R. 2016/125 The Licensing (Register of Licences) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).

S.R. 2016/127 The Licensing of Cafés (Register of Licences) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016(Correction Slip) (DSD).

- S.R. 2016/127 The Licensing of Cafés (Register of Licences) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/132 The Licensing of Pavement Cafés (Form of Licence) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/135 The Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/140 The Taxi Licensing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/146 The Construction (Design and Management) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DETI).
- S.R. 2016/148 The Taxis (Taximeters, Devices and Maximum Fares) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/160 The Motor Vehicles (Construction and Use) (Amendment) Regulations 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/169 The River Road, Dunmurry (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/173 The Disabled Persons (Badges for Motor Vehicles) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD)
- S.R. 2016/170 The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DHSSPS).
- S.R. 2016/171 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Charges and Governance) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/172 The Pension Sharing (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/177 The Public Service Pensions (Certification Officer for Northern Ireland) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DFP).
- S.R. 2016/181 The Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty) (Offences) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/182 The Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/185 The Thorburn Road, Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/187 The Weights and Measures (Food) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DETI).
- S.R. 2016/190 The Seed Potatoes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DARD).
- S.R. 2016/191 The Sex Discrimination Order 1976 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (OFMDFM).
- S.R. 2016/192 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Scheme Administration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/193 The Child Support (Deduction Orders and Fees) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/194 The Penalty Fares (Increase) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/196 The Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/197 The Criminal Defence Services (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2016/198 The Criminal Defence Services (Remuneration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2016/200 The Legal Aid for Crown Court Proceedings (Costs) (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2016/201 The Legal Aid for Crown Court Proceedings (Costs) (Amendment No. 2) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).

For Information Only

- S.R. 2016/108 The Debt Relief Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 (Consequential Amendments) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DETI).
- S.R. 2016/126 (C.7) The Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DSD).
- S.R. 2016/136 (C.8) The Justice (2015 Act) (Commencement No .5) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).

- S.R. 2016/138 The Judicial Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2016/145 The Violent Offences Prevention Order (Notification Requirements) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2016/154 The Road Races (Tandragee 100) Order (Northern Ireland) (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/155 The Parking Places on Roads (Coaches) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/156 The Road Races (Cookstown 100) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/159 (C. 10) The Planning (2011 Act) (Commencement No.3) and (Transitional Provisions) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/164 The Driver and Vehicle Agency Trading Fund Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOE).
- S.R. 2016/167 The Prohibition of Left-Hand Turn (Castle Street, Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/168 The Road Races (Croft Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/179 The Road Races (Circuit of Ireland Rally) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/186 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Londonderry) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/199 (C. 12) The Access to Justice (2003 Order) (Commencement No. 9) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2016/202 The Civil Legal Services (Scope) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2016/204 The Waiting Restrictions (Donaghmore) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).
- S.R. 2016/206 The Road Races (Craigantlet Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DRD).

7. Written Ministerial Statements

The Executive's Child Poverty Strategy (OFMDFM).

Legacy of DCAL (DCAL).

8. Consultation Documents

Proposals for New Regulations Concerning Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (EAPC) (DOE).

Application for BSE Negligible Risk Status for Northern Ireland (Cattle) (DARD).

Ecclesiastical Exemption (DOE).

Proposals for a Historic Environment Fund (DOE).

Regulations to Tackle Drink Driving in Northern Ireland (DOE).

Further Improvements to the Approved Driving Instructor (ADI) and Approved Motorcycle Instructor (AMI) Scheme in Northern Ireland (DOE).

Future of Pharmacy Regulation (DHSSPS).

Public Use of the Records (Management and Fees) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DCAL).

2015 Review of Shellfish Water Protected Areas (DOE).

9. Departmental Publications

eHealth and Care Strategy for Northern Ireland (DoH).

Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Amendment) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DFP).

The Government Response to the Consultation on Aids and Appliances and the Daily Living Component of the Personal Independence Payment (DSD).

Miss School = Miss Out A Strategy for Improving Pupil Attendance (DE).

Memorandum on the Thirty Third Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-16: General Report on the Health and Social Care Sector 2012-13 and 2013-14 (DFP).

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2014-2015 (DE).

Retention and Disposal Schedule of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (DCAL).

Southern Education and Library Board Annual Report and Accounts 2014/2015 (DE).

Annual Report on Child Poverty 2014/2015 (OFMDFM).

Delivering Social Change The Executive's Child Poverty Strategy (OFMDFM).

Department of Finance and Personnel Minute on the Direction of Accruing Resources (DFP).

Public Records Office of NI Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Records 2013-2014 (DCAL).

10. Agency Publications

Invest NI Records Retention and Disposal Schedule (DCAL).

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 25 May 2016

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speakers Business

2.1 Royal Assent

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 23 March 2016 to the Water and Sewerage Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; and the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 11 April 2016 to the Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Environmental Better Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; and the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 22 April 2016 to the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; and the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had also been signified on 9 May 2016 to the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; and the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) Act 2016.

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 12 May 2016 to the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Health and Personal Social Services (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Licensing Act (Northern Ireland) Act 2016; the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; and the Land Acquisition and Compensation (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Carál Ní Chuilín and Mr Declan McAleer replace Ms Caitriona Ruane and Mr Gerry Kelly as members of the Business Committee.

Ms C Ruane

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4. Filling of the Office of Minister of Justice

The deputy First Minister nominated Ms Claire Sugden to be Minister of Justice.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Nomination was **approved** by parallel consent (Division).

Ms Claire Sugden affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed that Ms Claire Sugden had taken up office as Minister of Justice.

5. Appointment of Ministers

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Simon Hamilton to be Minister for the Economy.

Mr Simon Hamilton affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Simon Hamilton as Minister for the Economy.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir to be Minister of Finance.

Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir as Minister of Finance.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Peter Weir to be Minister of Education.

Mr Peter Weir affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Peter Weir as Minister of Education.

Mr Mike Nesbitt, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, did not nominate a Member of his party for a ministerial office.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Chris Hazzard to be Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Chris Hazzard affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Chris Hazzard as Minister for Infrastructure.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Miss Michelle McIlveen to be Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Miss Michelle McIlveen affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Miss McIlveen as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Colum Eastwood, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, did not nominate a Member of his party for a ministerial office.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Paul Givan to be Minister for Communities.

Mr Paul Givan affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Paul Givan as Minister for Communities.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mrs Michelle O'Neill to be Minister of Health.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mrs Michelle O'Neill as Minister of Health.

In accordance with Standing Order 45A the Speaker asked the nominating officers of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party if they chose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

Mr Mike Nesbitt, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, confirmed that his party chose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

Mr Colum Eastwood, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, confirmed that his party chose to be recognised as part of the official Opposition.

The Speaker informed the House that he had received correspondence from the First Minister and deputy First Minister advising that, pursuant to the procedure for the appointment of junior Ministers specified in paragraph 3(1) of the determination made by the then First Minister and deputy First Minister on 8 December 1999, as approved by the Assembly on 14 December 1999, Mr Alastair Ross MLA and Ms Megan Fearon MLA had been appointed as junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Alastair Ross affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Alastair Ross as junior Minister.

Ms Megan Fearon affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Megan Fearon as junior Minister.

6. Assembly Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion - Establishment of Statutory Committees

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Orders 46 and 47, this Assembly determines that 9 Statutory Committees shall be established, as follows:

- the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs;
- the Committee for Communities;
- the Committee for the Economy;
- the Committee for Education;
- the Committee for the Executive Office;
- the Committee for the Environment;
- the Committee for Finance;
- the Committee for Health;
- the Committee for Infrastructure; and
- the Committee for Justice.

Terms of reference, quorum and composition of the Committees shall be as prescribed in Standing Orders 48 and 49.

Mr P Weir

Ms C Ruane

Mr R Swann

Mr A Attwood

Mr S Dickson

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.2 Appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees.

The Speaker informed the House that he had received notification from the nominating officer of the Social Democratic and Labour Party advising him that Mr Alex Attwood would serve as nominating officer for the party for the rest of the day's business.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Paul Frew to be Chairperson of the Committee for Justice. Mr Paul Frew indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Paul Frew as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Conor Murphy to be Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. Mr Conor Murphy indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Conor Murphy as Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mrs Emma Little Pengelly to be Chairperson of the Committee for Finance. Mrs Emma Little Pengelly indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mrs Emma Little Pengelly as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

Mr Mike Nesbitt, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated himself to be Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office. Mr Mike Nesbitt indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Mike Nesbitt as Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Barry McElduff to be Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Mr Barry McElduff indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Barry McElduff as Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Ms Paula Bradley to be Chairperson of the Committee for Health. Ms Paula Bradley indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Paula Bradley as Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mr Alex Attwood, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nominated Mr Colum Eastwood to be Chairperson of the Committee for Communities. Mr Colum Eastwood indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Colum Eastwood as Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr William Humphrey to be Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure. Mr William Humphrey indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr William Humphrey as Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Linda Dillon to be Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Ms Linda Dillon indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Linda Dillon as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr David Ford, the nominating officer for the Alliance Party, nominated Mr Chris Lyttle to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Mr Chris Lyttle indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Chris Lyttle as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Mike Nesbitt, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated Mr Steve Aiken to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. Mr Steve Aiken indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Steve Aiken as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy.

In accordance with Standing Order 48 (8) the Speaker informed the House that it would take its ease for ten minutes.

The Speaker resumed business at 1:16pm.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mrs Pam Cameron to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice. Mrs Pam Cameron indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mrs Pam Cameron as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Michelle Gildernew to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities. Ms Michelle Gildernew indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Michelle Gildernew as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Gary Middleton to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health. Mr Gary Middleton indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Gary Middleton as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health.

Mr Alex Attwood, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nominated Ms Claire Hanna as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance. Ms Claire Hanna indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Claire Hanna as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance.

In accordance with Standing Order 48 (8) the Speaker informed the House that it would take its ease for five minutes.

The Speaker resumed business at 1:22pm.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Declan Kearney to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Mr Declan Kearney indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Declan Kearney as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr William Irwin to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure. Mr William Irwin indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr William Irwin as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Mr Mike Nesbitt, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated Mrs Sandra Overend to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office. Mrs Sandra Overend indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mrs Sandra Overend as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office.

6.3 Appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Standing Committees

The Speaker outlined the procedure for the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Standing Committees.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Gordon Lyons to be Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures. Mr Gordon Lyons indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Gordon Lyons as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Cathal Boylan to be Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Mr Cathal Boylan indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Cathal Boylan as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Christopher Stalford to be Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Mr Christopher Stalford indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Christopher Stalford as Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Mike Nesbitt, the nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party, nominated Mr Robin Swann to be Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. Mr Robin Swann indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Robin Swann as Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Mr Declan McAleer to be Chairperson of the Audit Committee. Mr Declan McAleer indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Declan McAleer as Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Adrian McQuillan to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Mr Adrian McQuillan indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Adrian McQuillan as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Alex Attwood, the nominating officer for the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nominated Mr Daniel McCrossan as Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. Mr Daniel McCrossan indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Daniel McCrossan as Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mrs Arlene Foster, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Mr Edwin Poots to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures. Mr Edwin Poots indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Edwin Poots as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Martin McGuinness, the nominating officer for Sinn Féin, nominated Ms Michaela Boyle to be Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The Speaker informed the House that he had received correspondence from Ms Michaela Boyle which indicated her agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Ms Michaela Boyle as Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr David Ford, the nominating officer of the Alliance party, nominated Mr Trevor Lunn to be Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee. Mr Trevor Lunn indicated his agreement to accept the nomination.

The Speaker confirmed the appointment of Mr Trevor Lunn as Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 1.31pm.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

25 May 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

25 May 2016

Divisions

Division

Question put, That Ms Claire Sugden be Minister of Justice.

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 63

Noes: 30

Ayes

Nationalist:

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mrs Pengelly, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCartney and Mr Robinson.

Noes

Nationalist:

Mr Attwood, Mrs S Bradley, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Hanna, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Mullan.

Unionist:

Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr McKee, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Ms Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Other:

Mr Agnew, Ms Bailey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Butler and Mr McCrossan.

Total votes	93	Total Ayes	63	[67.7%]
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	25	[67.6%]
Unionist Votes	54	Unionist Ayes	38	[70.4%]
Other Votes	2	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle.

The Nomination was **approved** by parallel consent.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 13 – 25 May 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

S.R 2016/233 The Jobseeker's Allowance (Extended Period of Sickness) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

For Information Only

S.R 2016/207 (C.14) The Education (1998 Order) (Commencement No. 8) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DE).

S.R 2016/211 (C.15) The Education (1998 Order) (Commencement No. 9) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DE).

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications

Northern Ireland Police Fund Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DoJ).

Review of Permitted Development Rights (DfI).

EnergyWise Scheme Proposals (DfE).
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 31 May 2016

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Committee Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson Nominations

The Speaker informed the House that he had received the resignation of Mr Declan Kearney as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and that the nominating officer of Sinn Féin, Mr Martin McGuinness, had nominated Ms Caoimhe Archibald to fill the vacancy with effect from 27 May 2016.

The Speaker informed the House that he had received the resignation of Mrs Sandra Overend as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office and that the nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Mike Nesbitt, had nominated Mr Danny Kennedy to fill the vacancy with effect from 27 May 2016.

The Speaker informed the House that he had received the resignation of Mr Trevor Lunn as Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee and that the nominating officer of the Alliance Party, Mr David Ford, had nominated Ms Kellie Armstrong to fill the vacancy with effect from 27 May 2016.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 31 May 2016.

*Mr T Clarke
Ms C Ní Chuilín
Mr R Swann
Mr A Attwood
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support (No dissenting voices).

3.2 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Gordon Lyons replace Mr Peter Weir as a member of the Business Committee.

Mr T Clarke

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3.3 Motion - Appointments to the Assembly Commission

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79, the following shall be appointed to be members of the Assembly Commission:

- The Speaker (ex officio)
- Mr J Wells
- Mr A Maskey
- Mr R Hussey
- Mr A Attwood
- Mr S Dickson

Mr T Clarke

Ms C Ní Chuilín

Mr R Swann

Mr A Attwood

Mr S Dickson

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support (*No dissenting voices*).

3.4 Motion - Membership of Statutory Committees

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 49(3), the membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in NIA 1/16-21 be approved.

Mr T Clarke

Ms C Ní Chuilín

Mr R Swann

Mr A Attwood

Mr S Dickson

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in NIA 1/16-21 is as follows:

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs: Ms Linda Dillon (Chairperson); Ms Caoimhe Archibald (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Sydney Anderson; Mr Maurice Bradley; Mr David Ford; Mr Patsy McGlone; Mr Harold McKee; Mr Oliver McMullan; Mr Edwin Poots; Mr George Robinson; Mr Robin Swann.

Committee for Communities: Mr Colum Eastwood (Chairperson); Ms Michelle Gildernew (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Steven Agnew; Mr Andy Allen; Mr Jonathan Bell; Mrs Naomi Long; Mr Fra McCann; Mr Adrian McQuillan; Ms Carál Ní Chuilín; Ms Nichola Mallon; Mr Christopher Stalford.

Committee for the Economy: Mr Conor Murphy (Chairperson); Mr Steve Aiken (Deputy Chairperson); Ms Caoimhe Archibald; Ms Sinead Bradley; Mr Tom Buchanan; Mr Alan Chambers; Mr Gordon Dunne; Dr Stephen Farry; Mr Gordon Lyons; Mr Alex Maskey; Mr Mervyn Storey.

Committee for Education: Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson); Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson); Mrs Rosemary Barton; Mr David Hilditch; Ms Carla Lockhart; Mr Philip Logan; Mr Colin McGrath; Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley; Mrs Sandra Overend; Ms Caitríona Ruane; Ms Catherine Seeley.

Committee for the Executive Office: Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson); Mr Danny Kennedy (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Cathal Boylan; Mrs Pam Cameron; Mr Stewart Dickson; Mr William Irwin; Mr Philip Logan; Mr Seán Lynch; Mr Richie McPhillips; Mr Ian Milne; Mr Christopher Stalford.

Committee for Finance: Mrs Emma Little Pengelly (Chairperson); Ms Claire Hanna (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Jim Allister; Mr Jonathan Bell; Mr Paul Girvan; Mr Ross Hussey; Mr Gerry Mullan; Mr John O'Dowd; Ms Caitríona Ruane; Mr Philip Smith; Mr Jim Wells.

Committee for Health: Ms Paula Bradley (Chairperson); Mr Gary Middleton (Deputy Chairperson); Ms Paula Bradshaw; Mr Robbie Butler; Mr Gerry Carroll; Mr Trevor Clarke; Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson; Mr Mark Durkan; Mr Barry McElduff; Mr Daithí McKay; Ms Catherine Seeley.

Committee for Infrastructure: Mr William Humphrey (Chairperson); Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson); Ms Kellie Armstrong; Mr Alex Easton; Mr Paul Girvan; Mr Declan McAleer; Mr Eamonn McCann; Mr Fra McCann; Mr Daniel McCrossan; Mr Justin McNulty; Mrs Jenny Palmer.

Committee for Justice: Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson); Mrs Pam Cameron (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Alex Attwood; Ms Clare Bailey; Mr Doug Beattie; Mr Roy Beggs; Ms Michaela Boyle; Mr Sammy Douglas; Mr Declan Kearney; Mr Trevor Lunn; Mr Pat Sheehan.

3.5 Motion - Membership of Standing Committees

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 52(3), the membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 2/16-21 be approved.

Mr T Clarke
Ms C Ní Chuilín
Mr R Swann
Mr A Attwood
Mr S Dickson

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 2/16-21 is as follows:

Assembly Executive and Review Committee: Mr Christopher Stalford (Chairperson); Ms Michaela Boyle (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Jim Allister; Mr Alex Attwood; Mrs Brenda Hale; Mr Danny Kennedy; Mr Nelson McCausland; Mr Daithí McKay; Mr Ian Milne; Mr Philip Smith; Mr Jim Wells.

Audit Committee: Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson); Ms Kellie Armstrong (Deputy Chairperson); Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson; Ms Claire Hanna; Mr David Hilditch.

Committee on Procedures: Mr Gordon Lyons (Chairperson); Mr Edwin Poots (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Steven Agnew; Mrs Rosemary Barton; Mr Tom Buchanan; Mr Chris Lyttle; Mr Fra McCann; Mr Colin McGrath; Mr Conor Murphy; Mr Pat Sheehan; Mr Mervyn Storey.

Public Accounts Committee: Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson); Mr Daniel McCrossan (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Robbie Butler; Mr Trevor Clarke; Mr Gordon Dunne; Mr Alex Easton; Ms Michelle Gildernew; Mr Declan Kearney; Ms Carla Lockhart; Mr Trevor Lunn; Mr Oliver McMullan.

Committee on Standards and Privileges: Mr Cathal Boylan (Chairperson); Mr Adrian McQuillan (Deputy Chairperson); Ms Paula Bradshaw; Mr Doug Beattie; Ms Joanne Bunting; Mr Gerry Carroll; Ms Linda Dillon; Mr Sammy Douglas; Mr Seán Lynch; Mr Richie McPhillips; Mrs Emma Little Pengelly.

4. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 10.37am.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

31 May 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 26 – 31 May 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Annual Report of The Lay Observer for Northern Ireland 2015 (DoF).
5. Assembly Reports
Membership of Statutory Committees (NIA 1/16-21) (NIA).
Membership of Standing Committees (NIA 2/16-21) (NIA).
6. Statutory Rules
For Information Only
S.R. 2016/209 The Road Races (Drumhorc Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfI).
S.R. 2016/210 The Road Races (Spamount Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfI).
S.R. 2016/214 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfI).
S.R. 2016/231 The Road Races (Mourne Rally) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfI).
S.R. 2016/232 The Road Races (Cairncastle Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfI).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21 (TEO).
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 6 June 2016

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion – Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 6 June 2016.

*Mr T Clarke
Ms C Ní Chuilín
Mr R Swann
Mr A Attwood
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support (*No dissenting voices*).

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement – Waiting Times

The Minister of Health, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding waiting times, following which she replied to questions.

4. Opposition Business

4.1 Motion – Manufacturing Strategy for Northern Ireland

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for the Economy to commission a manufacturing strategy for Northern Ireland.

*Mr R Swann
Mr S Aiken*

4.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Economy' and insert:

'to include the development of the manufacturing sector in the Executive's new Economic Strategy.'

*Mr M Storey
Mr T Buchanan
Mr G Dunne
Mr G Lyons*

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Ms C Ruane) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** (Division).

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried**.

5. Assembly Business

5.1 Motion – Extension of Sitting on Monday 6 June 2016 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 6 June 2016 be extended to no later than 9.30pm.

*Mr T Clarke
Ms C Ní Chuilín
Mr R Swann
Mr A Attwood
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support (*No dissenting Voices*).

6. Executive Committee Business

6.1 Motion – Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021

Proposed:

That this Assembly takes note of the Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21 as agreed by the Executive on 26 May 2016.

The Executive Office

The Speaker in the Chair.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

7. Private Members' Business

7.1 Motion – Illegal Drugs

Proposed:

That this Assembly acknowledges with grave concern the impact and extent of drug related incidents, crimes and fatalities in our communities; supports the ongoing work carried out by statutory services, the Public Health Agency and the voluntary and community sector; and calls on the Minister of Justice to work alongside the relevant bodies, to bring forward further measures to raise awareness, and to ensure that the criminal justice system is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets.

*Mr P Frew
Mrs P Cameron
Mr S Douglas*

7.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'drug' and insert:

'use and drug related incidents, crimes and fatalities have on individuals, families and our community; supports the ongoing work carried out by statutory services, the Public Health Agency and the voluntary and community sector; and calls on the Executive to work collaboratively alongside the relevant bodies to bring forward further measures to raise awareness about the dangers of drug use, to increase investment in, awareness of, and access to, early intervention services for children and young people as well as adults, and to ensure that the criminal justice system is tough enough to deal robustly with those who are responsible for the menace of drugs on our streets.'

Ms N Mallon

Mr C McGrath

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried**.

7.3 Motion - Protection of Woodburn Forest

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the application by Infrastrata to drill at Woodburn Forest, County Antrim; recognises the concerns of residents in County Antrim over drilling proposals at the forest; and calls on the Executive to ensure that such applications are not approved until assurances are secured against any negative potential impacts on water supply, the environment, tourism and local communities.

Mr O McMullan

Mr G Kelly

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.20pm.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

6 June 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

6 June 2016

Division

Motion: Manufacturing Strategy for Northern Ireland - Amendment

Proposed: Leave out all after 'Economy' and insert:

'to include the development of the manufacturing sector in the Executive's new Economic Strategy.'

Mr M Storey

Mr T Buchanan

Mr G Dunne

Mr G Lyons

The Question was put and the Assembly **divided**:

Ayes 58;

Noes 37.

AYES

Mr Anderson, Ms Archibald, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Fearon, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Lord Morrow, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Easton and Mr Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mrs S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Hanna, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Mullan, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Ms Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Aiken and Mr Swann.

The Amendment was **made**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 1 – 6 June 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-2017 (DoF).
 - Northern Ireland Estimates 2014-2015 – Statement of Excesses for the year ending 31 March 2015 (DoF).
 - Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation Report for the period 1st April 2013 to 31st March 2014 (DoJ).
 - Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Retention and Disposal Schedule (DfC).
 - Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Retention and Disposal Schedule (DfC).
 - The Pensions Regulator - Draft Code of Practice No. 13: Governance and Administration of Occupational Trust-based Schemes Providing Money Purchase Benefits (DfC).
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 June 2016

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Committee Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson Nominations

The Speaker informed the House that he had received the resignation of Mr Declan McAleer as Chairperson of the Audit Committee, and that the nominating officer of Sinn Féin, Mr Martin McGuinness, had nominated Mr John O'Dowd to fill the vacancy with effect from 6 June 2016.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion – Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 7 June 2016.

*Mr T Clarke
Ms C Ní Chuilín
Mr R Swann
Mr A Attwood
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support (*No dissenting voices*).

4. Opposition Business

4.1 Motion – Early Years Development and Pre-School Childcare

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that the experience of children in the early years of life has multiple impacts on development, health and educational achievement; believes that there should be a common, cross-departmental approach to funding, inspection, registration and access to child and family support services; calls on the Minister of Education to develop and bring forward an early education and care act and a care and early childhood development strategy with resourced and supported training, qualifications and a professional development strategy for the entire early years workforce; and further calls on the Minister to bring forward proposals for the provision of free pre-school childcare for children aged three and four years to a minimum of 20 hours per week to be in place in the 2016/17 financial year, and for an increase in provision to 30 hours per week from the 2017/18 financial year.

*Ms C Hanna
Mr A Attwood
Ms N Mallon*

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Ms C Ruane) took the Chair.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion – Economic Strategy

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to focus on creating more and better jobs in Northern Ireland and to bring forward an updated economic strategy alongside the new Programme for Government 2016-21.

*Mr M Storey
Mr T Buchanan
Mr G Lyons
Mr G Dunne*

5.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'creating' and insert:

'high value, highly skilled and highly paid jobs in Northern Ireland and to bring forward an updated economic strategy alongside the new Programme for Government 2016-21, which focuses on achieving a regionally balanced economy.'

*Mr C Eastwood
Ms S Bradley
Mr D McCrossan*

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Ms C Ruane) in the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

5.3 Motion – Continuing Crisis in Hospital Waiting Times

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the continuing crisis in hospital waiting times with 376,382 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, diagnostic test or inpatient treatment as of 31 March 2016; further notes that whilst there has been some limited improvement over recent months, the situation remains considerably worse than twelve months previously; expresses deep concern that the number of outpatients waiting longer than the maximum permitted time increased from 15,000 to 100,000, over 500 per cent, during the duration of the last Assembly term; accepts that targets are set in the interests of quality and safety of patient care and that, with every delay, there is a risk of ailments progressing and patients coming to harm; and calls on the Minister of Health to detail what action she proposes to take to address this unprecedented crisis.

*Mrs J Dobson
Mr R Butler*

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6. Adjournment

Mr Gordon Lyons spoke to his topic regarding Tourism in East Antrim.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy) took the Chair.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.32pm.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

7 June 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 7 June 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

For Information Only

S.R. 2016/188 The Social Security (Reciprocal Agreements) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

S.R. 2016/189 The Social Security (Reciprocal Agreement) (Isle of Man) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

S.R. 2016/195 The Pensions (2015 Act) (Transitional and Transitory Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 13 June 2016

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

- 2.1 **The Speaker congratulated Mr Gordon Dunne MLA and the Chief Executive, Mr Trevor Reaney, on receiving awards from Her Majesty in the Birthday Honours.**

3. Matters of the Day

3.1 **Mass Shooting in Orlando**

Mr Mike Nesbitt made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the mass shooting in Orlando. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3.2 **Death of a Northern Ireland Football Fan in Nice**

Mr Robin Swann made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the death of a Northern Ireland football fan in Nice. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 **Committee Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson Nominations**

The Speaker informed the House that he had received the resignation of Mr William Irwin as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure, and that the nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party, Mrs Arlene Foster, had nominated Mr George Robinson to fill the vacancy with effect from 9 June 2016.

5. Public Petition

5.1 **Public Petition – Save Bellgray Nursing Home, Newtownstewart**

Ms Michaela Boyle was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition regarding Bellgray Nursing Home, Newtownstewart.

6. Assembly Business

6.1 **Motion – Committee Membership**

Proposed:

That Mr William Irwin replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr T Clarke

Mr G Lyons

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.2 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Dr Stephen Farry be appointed as a member of the Business Committee.

*Mr T Clarke
Ms C Ní Chuilín
Mr R Swann
Mr A Attwood
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.3 Motion – Nomination to the Regional Chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

Proposed:

That this Assembly nominates Mr Stewart Dickson to be a full member of the Regional Chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe with effect from October 2016.

*Mr T Clarke
Ms C Ní Chuilín
Mr R Swann
Mr A Attwood
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Ms Ruane) took the Chair.

7. Executive Committee Business

7.1 Motion – Suspension of Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4)

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 June 2016.

Minister of Finance

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support (No dissenting voices).

7.2 Motion - Supply Resolution for the 2014/15 Excess Votes

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £69,281,105.15 be authorised for use by the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, for the year ending 31 March 2015, as summarised in Part II of the 2014-15 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Minister of Finance

7.3 Motion - Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016/17

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,986,369,200, be granted out of the Consolidate Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017; and that resources, not exceeding £8,693,136,600 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 3 (b) and 3 (a) of Table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 as laid before the Assembly on 1 June 2016.

Minister of Finance

A single debate ensued on both motions.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

8. Question Time

8.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness. The junior Minister, Ms Megan Fearon, also answered a number of questions.

8.2 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy) took the Chair.

9. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

9.1 Motion - Supply Resolution for the 2014/15 Excess Votes

Motion - Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016/17

Debate resumed on both motions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion on the Supply Resolution for the 2014-2015 Excess Votes was **carried** with cross-community support (No dissenting voices).

The Question being put, the Motion on the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016/17 was **carried** with cross-community support (Division).

9.2 First Stage – Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21)

A Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31st March 2017; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31st March 2017; to authorise the use of certain excess resources for the year ending 31st March 2015; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

The Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21) passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

The Speaker informed the House that confirmation had been received from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), that the Committee was satisfied that there had been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that the Bill can therefore proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone).

The Assembly adjourned at 5.54pm.

Mr Robin Newton
The Speaker

13 June 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

13 June 2016

Division

Motion - Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2016/17

Minister of Finance

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 56

Noes: 10

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mrs Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr O'Dowd, Mr Robinson.

NOES

Unionist

Mr Allister.

Other

Mr Agnew, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson.

Total Votes	66	Total Ayes	56	[84.8%]
Nationalist Votes	25	Nationalist Ayes	25	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	32	Unionist Ayes	31	[96.9%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

The Motion was **carried** on a cross-community vote.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 8 – 13 June 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Budget (No.2) Bill 2016 (NIA Bill 1/16-21).

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards for 2015-2016 (Commissioner for Standards).

Land and Property Services Trust Statement – Rate Levy Accruals Account; Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DoF).

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees; First Report of Session 2016-2017 (NIA 3/16-21) (ESR).

6. Statutory Rules

S.R. 2016/000 (Draft) The Discretionary Support Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

S.R. 2016/000 (Draft) The Welfare Supplementary Payment (Loss of Disability-Related Premiums) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

S.R. 2016/000 (Draft) The Welfare Supplementary Payment (Loss of Disability Living Allowance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

S.R. 2016/000 (Draft) The Welfare Supplementary Payment (Loss of Carer Payments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfC).

For Information Only

S.R. 2016/242 The Posted Workers (Enforcement of Employment Rights) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 (DfE).

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

Department of Finance Memorandum on the Thirty Seventh Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2016: Invest to Save Funding in Northern Ireland (DoF).

Department of Finance Memorandum on the Thirty Fifth Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2016: Department of Education: Sustainability of Schools (DoF).

10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 June 2016

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Public Petition

2.1 Public Petition – Special Educational Needs Nursery Provision

Mr Chris Lyttle was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition regarding Special Educational Needs Nursery Provision.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement – June Monitoring

The Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, made a statement regarding June Monitoring, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Ms Ruane) took the Chair.

3.2 Second Stage Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21)

Minister of Finance

The Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, moved the Second Stage of the Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Mr Paul Givan.

4.2 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mr Simon Hamilton.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy) took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

5.1 Second Stage Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The sitting was suspended at 5.29pm.

The sitting resumed at 5.43pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy) in the Chair.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21) passed Second Stage with cross-community support (Division).

6. Adjournment

Mr Barry McElduff spoke to his topic regarding the Condition of Rural Roads in West Tyrone.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 9.27pm.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

14 June 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

14 June 2016

Division

Motion - Second Stage Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21)

Minister of Finance

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 46

Noes: 32

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hazzard, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McEiduff, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist

Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Girvan, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McAleer, Mr Robinson.

NOES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mrs S Bradley, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Hanna, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Mr Mullan.

Unionist

Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mrs Dobson, Mr McKee, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Palmer, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Other

Mr Agnew, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms S Bradley, Mr Smith

Total Votes	78	Total Ayes	46	[59.0%]
Nationalist Votes	32	Nationalist Ayes	21	[65.6%]
Unionist Votes	37	Unionist Ayes	25	[67.6%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

The Motion was **carried** on a cross-community vote.

Northern Ireland Assembly

**Papers Presented to the Assembly on
14 June 2016**

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 June 2016

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

- 2.1 **The Speaker informed the House that he had written to the Speaker of the House of Commons, forwarding the condolences of the Assembly to the family and parliamentary colleagues of Jo Cox MP.**

3. Matter of the Day

3.1 **Death of Jo Cox MP**

Mr David Ford MLA made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the death of Jo Cox MP. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 **Motion – Committee Membership**

Proposed:

That Ms Jennifer McCann replace Ms Caitriona Ruane as a member of the Committee for Education.

Ms C Ní Chuilín

Mr D McAleer

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.2 **Motion – Committee Membership**

Proposed:

That Mr Pat Sheehan replace Mr Barry McElduff as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr Barry McElduff replace Mr Pat Sheehan as a member of the Committee on Procedures.

Ms C Ní Chuilín

Mr D McAleer

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement – British Irish Council

The First Minister, Mrs Arlene Foster, made a statement regarding the twenty-sixth summit meeting of the British Irish Council, following which she replied to questions.

5.2 Consideration Stage – Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, moved the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 to 8 stand part of the Bill.

Schedules

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Schedules 1 to 4 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

The Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21) stood referred to the Speaker.

5.3 Motion – The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016

Proposed:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 Motion – Landlord Registration Scheme

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Communities to review urgently the Landlord Registration Scheme to ensure that it can both cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.

Mr A Maskey

Mr F McCann

6.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Delete all after "Scheme" and insert:

'and to introduce the regulation of letting agencies in order to ensure that there is sufficient regulation to cope with this unregulated sector and protect tenants.'

Mr S Dickson

Mrs P Bradshaw

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Ms Ruane) took the Chair.

7. Question Time

7.1 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Miss Michelle McIlveen.

7.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone) took the Chair.

8. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

8.1 Motion – Landlord Registration Scheme (cont'd)

8.2 Amendment (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

8.3 Motion – Proposed Closure of Regional Electoral Offices

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the proposals from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to close regional offices in Ballymena, Banbridge, Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Newtownards and Omagh; believes that this will damage democracy in Northern Ireland, lead to fewer people on the electoral register and to a diminished role for the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in local schools and communities; and calls on the secretary of state, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to retain and fund adequately all regional offices currently under threat of closure.

*Mr P Frew
Mr S Anderson
Mr T Buchanan
Mrs P Cameron*

8.4 Amendment

Proposed:

Delete all after "calls" and insert:

'on the Executive to pursue the transfer of the functions of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, including appropriate funding, to ensure local accountability for the provision of electoral services.'

*Mr D McKay
Ms C Archibald
Ms M Boyle
Mr J O'Dowd*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** (Division).

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.31pm.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

20 June 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 June 2016

Division

Motion – Proposed Closure of Regional Electoral Offices (Amendment)

Proposed:

Delete all after “calls” and insert:

‘on the Executive to pursue the transfer of the functions of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, including appropriate funding, to ensure local accountability for the provision of electoral services.’.

Mr D McKay
Ms C Archibald
Ms M Boyle
Mr J O’Dowd
Mrs M Gildernew

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 35

Noes: 49

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms Archibald, Mr Attwood, Ms Bailey, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mrs S Bradley, Mr Carroll, Ms Dillon, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr E McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrath, Mr McKay, Mr McMullan, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Ms Ruane, Ms Seeley, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Boyle, Mr McKay.

NOES

Mr Aiken, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Logan, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKee, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Palmer, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Smith, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Anderson, Mr Robinson.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 15 – 20 June 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Report of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) for the Two Years Ended 31 December 2015 (DAERA).
 - Managing Legal Aid (NIAO).
 - Contracted Training Programmes (NIAO).
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - S.R. 2016/000 (Draft) The Landlord Registration Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (DfC).
7. Consultation Documents
8. Departmental Publications
 - Department of Finance Memorandum on the Thirty Sixth Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2016 (DoF).
9. Agency Publications
10. Westminster Publications
11. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 June 2016

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

- 2.1 **The Speaker made some brief remarks on the retirement of the Clerk/Chief Executive, Mr Trevor Reaney. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.**

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Further Consideration Stage – Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 1/16-21) stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion – Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes that 42 per cent of premises in rural areas do not have access to the proposed Universal Service Obligation Speed; further notes the urgent need for better provision of broadband and expansion of mobile phone coverage in rural areas; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to develop further proposals to ensure that Northern Ireland has a modern telecommunications network that enables existing businesses to compete and to ensure that all areas are attractive for foreign direct investment including our rural communities.

*Ms S Bradley
Mr C McGrath
Mr G Mullan*

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone) took the Chair

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.2 Motion – Animal Cruelty

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of cases of animal cruelty and the increasing risks with the online sale or transfer of animals; welcomes the action thus far to address issues raised in the Interim Report of the Review of the Implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take further Action to establish an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act to further protect animals from cruelty.

Mrs E Little Pengelly

Mr T Clarke

4.3 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after “Minister of Justice” and insert:

‘to bring forward proposals to enhance animal cruelty protections, including considering further and tougher criminal sanctions and the establishment of an accessible central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences or disqualified from keeping animals under the 2011 Act.’

Mrs E Little Pengelly

Mr T Clarke

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mrs Michelle O’Neill.

5.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Ms Claire Sugden.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Ms Ruane) took the Chair.

6. Private Members’ Business (cont’d)

6.1 Motion - Animal Cruelty (cont’d)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

7. Adjournment

Mr Thomas Buchanan spoke to his topic regarding Broadband Provision for West Tyrone.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.25pm.

Mr Robin Newton

The Speaker

21 June 2016

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 21 June 2016

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Consultation Documents
8. Departmental Publications
9. Agency Publications
10. Westminster Publications
11. Miscellaneous Publications

Department of Finance Memorandum on the Thirty Fourth Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2016: The Northern Ireland Events Company (DoF).

Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland: Annual Report and Accounts (AONI).